

## Notes on participatory aesthetics: reading Bourriaud

The publication of Claire Bishop's book, *Artificial Hells*, brings to public attention a variety of questions having to do with participation and art. In particular, what conception of art or aesthetics makes the most sense in relation to participation? I will offer a few remarks that have as much to do with reading as with visual art practices today. They bear on our readings of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*.

Bourriaud writes: "The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system." (p. 16) "The exhibition is the special place where such momentary groupings may occur, governed as they are by differing principles. And depending on the degree of participation required of the onlooker by the artist, along with the nature of the works and the models of sociability proposed and represented, an exhibition will give rise to a specific 'arena of exchange'. And this 'arena of exchange', must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria, in other words, by analysing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the 'world' it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it." (pp. 17 – 18)

Among the artists he is looking at is Christine Hill. "Christine Hill works as a check-out assistant in a supermarket, organizes a weekly gym workshop in a gallery." (p. 8) Hill, he says, is "driven by the anxiety caused by the feeling of uselessness." (p. 36)

For Bourriaud, the artists' task "is akin to the one that Jean-Francois Lyotard allocated to post-modern architecture, which '*is condemned to create a series of minor modifications in a space whose modernity it inherits, and abandon an overall reconstruction of the space inhabited by humankind.*' [. . .] And what, on the other hand, if this 'condemnation' represented the historical chance whereby most of the art worlds known to us managed to spread their wings, over the past ten years or so? This 'chance' can be summed up in just a few words: *learning to inhabit the world in a better way*, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution." (p. 13)

In his review of Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* Marcus Verhagen says Bishop "feels that most commentators, from the cavalier but influential Bourriaud to the more rigorous Grant Kester, neglect the artistic dimensions of participatory artworks, assessing them with reference to moral and political criteria alone – " ("Past Participating," p. 135, *New Left Review* 85, Jan/Feb 2014)

Whether or not this is a fair assessment of Bishop's text, it is clear from a reading of *Relational Aesthetics* that Bourriaud is not subject to the criticism. According to Verhagen, there is a "critical and art historical failing" that is responsible for, "in Bishop's eyes, a particularly damaging bureaucratic corollary in the widespread tendency to assess these works according to their practical, quantifiable outcomes." (p. 135) *Relational Aesthetics* seems to have been subsumed under the heading given to responsible parties.

If we turn to a text published in *October* and written by Bishop, in the section devoted to *Relational Aesthetics* we can read in her own words how she understands Bourriaud's conception of relational art. She writes that "relational art works seek to establish intersubjective encounters (be these literal or potential) in which meaning is elaborated *collectively* (RA, p. 18) rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption." ("Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, Fall 2004, p. 54)

The term "collectively" does not appear on p 18 of *Relational Aesthetics*. "Art is a state of encounter" Bourriaud says there. Before the page is out he goes on to make reference to an understanding of "the end of art" for which he cites Hubert Damish. "A new game is announced as soon as the social setting radically changes, without the meaning of the game itself being challenged." (pp. 18 – 19) Bourriaud says that in a late essay Louis Althusser employs an idea of a "materialism of encounter" that Bourriaud sees underpinning what he is calling relational aesthetics.

Dubord is an important reference for Bishop, but only incidental for Bourriaud. When she writes that "[e]ven the curator Nicolas Bourriaud, describing relational art of the 1990s, turns to spectacle as his central point of reference," it is important to note that the passage she quotes is from the next-to-last page of his book. "Today, we are in the further stage of spectacular development: the individual has shifted from a passive and purely repetitive status to the minimum activity dictated to him by market forces. [. . .] Here we are summoned to turn into *extras* of the spectacle [. . .]." (quoted in *Artificial Hells*, pp. 11 – 12) The original passage in Bourriaud appears under the heading "Society of extras." In a footnote Bishop adds an additional quotation, this time from p. 18. There something much more fairly called such a central point of reference can easily be discerned.

In the text entitled "Art of the 1990s" in *Relational Aesthetics* Bourriaud uses the expression "society of extras" in relation to Debord's "Society of the Spectacle." However, his point is that new technologies like the internet have given rise to a "collective" desire to "create new areas of conviviality" and open up new ways of engaging with "the cultural object." (p. 26) A few pages later he mentions the Debord again to suggest that, by contrast, "the emphasis put on external relations [relative to art]" is part of a culture in which "the artwork stands up to the mill of the 'Society of the Spectacle.'" (p. 31)

The above use of "collective" could contribute to an explanation of Bishop's perplexing reading of Bourriaud's work. The desire to which Bourriaud referred is indeed said to be "collective," but the art is understood in terms of encounter and game. The emphasis Bishop gives to a particular reading of this use of "collective" seems to be something that characterizes her own thinking more than anything she is reading.

Bourriaud is mentioned again on p. 28 of *Artificial Hells*, where Bishop says that the target of a critique by Jacques Rancière is not the art of interest in her book. Rancière's target is said to be certain arguments of Jean-Francois Lyotard, "together with relational art as theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud." This remark, apart from any questions about its

accuracy, seems to function as part of Bishop's case for asserting that the projects she will discuss "have little to do with" the Bourriaud book. (p. 2) Her strategy, then, seems to be that of classifying art works according to which writer has the strongest claim to them. There are Bourriaud's artists or art works, and then there are Bishop's.

At one point Bishop says that one of her motivations for doing her research was her "frustration at the foreclosure of critical distance in these curatorial narratives," narratives offered to a visiting critic like her by curators "who are often the only ones to witness [a project's] full unfolding – " (*Artificial Hells*, p. 6) It is interesting to think about this concern in relation to Bourriaud's work as a curator. Although Bishop wants to draw a distinction between works that bear on his thinking and works that bear on hers, she also writes that "many of the projects that formed the impetus for this book have emerged in the wake of *Relational Aesthetics* and the debates that it occasioned." Only, "the artists I discuss below are less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of participation as a politicized working process." (p. 2)

Several pages later Bishop says that "the urgency of this *social* task has led to a situation in which socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important *artistic* gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond. While sympathetic to the latter ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyse and compare this work critically *as art* [ . . . ]" (p. 13) In this connection it might be constructive to read Bourriaud, who concludes "Art in the 1990s" by suggesting that "as far as most of the above-mentioned pieces are concerned, their author has no preordained idea about what would happen: art is made in the gallery, the same way that Tristan Tzara thought that 'thought is made in the mouth'." (p. 40) Under such terms, a good deal of the work Kester, for example, discusses would constitute poor participatory art. And the discussions we might be having about aesthetics would take up works or projects in which there is the relevant kind of uncertainty concerning outcomes.

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