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Relational Aesthetics



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owing essays were originally published in the most part in *Documents sur l'art*, and es', but have been considerably reworked, not here. Others are previously unpublished. This is also rounded off by a glossary, which readers ever a problematic concept rears its head. To t much easier to come to grips with, may we t away to the definition of the word "Art".

Relational form

Artistic activity is a game, whose forms, patterns and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts; it is not an immutable essence. It is the critic's task to study this activity in the present. A certain aspect of the programme of modernity has been fairly and squarely wound up (and not, let us hasten to emphasise in these bourgeois times, the spirit informing it). This completion has drained the criteria of aesthetic judgement we are heir to of their substance, but we go on applying them to present-day artistic practices. The *new* is no longer a criterion, except among latter-day detractors of modern art who, where the much-execrated present is concerned, cling solely to the things that their traditionalist culture has taught them to loathe in yesterday's art. In order to invent more effective tools and more valid viewpoints, it behoves us to understand the changes nowadays occurring in the social arena, and grasp what has already changed and what is still changing. How are we to understand the types of artistic behaviour shown in exhibitions held in the 1990s, and the lines of thinking behind them, if we do not start out from the same *situation* as the artists?

Contemporary artistic practice and its cultural plan

The modern political era, which came into being with the Enlightenment, was based on the desire to emancipate individuals and people. The advances of technologies and freedoms, the

que (Félix Guattari et L'art)" was published by the magazine "L'art et l'écrit" in the catalogue for the 3rd Lyon Triennial, 1995.

decline of ignorance, and improved working conditions were all billed to free humankind and help to usher in a better society. There are several versions of modernity, however. The 20th century was thus the arena for a struggle between two visions of the world: a modest, rationalist conception, hailing from the 18th century, and a philosophy of spontaneity and liberation through the irrational (Dada, Surrealism, the Situationists), both of which were opposed to authoritarian and utilitarian forces eager to gauge human relations and subjugate people. Instead of culminating in hoped-for emancipation, the advances of technologies and "Reason" made it that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth, blindly replace human labour by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques, all through a general rationalisation of the production process. So the modern emancipation plan has been substituted by countless forms of melancholy.

Twentieth century avant-garde, from Dadaism to the Situationist International, fell within the tradition of this modern project (changing culture, attitudes and mentalities, and individual and social living conditions), but it is as well to bear in mind that this project was already there before them, differing from their plan in many ways. For modernity cannot be reduced to a rationalist teleology, any more than it can to political messianism. Is it possible to disparage the desire to improve living and working conditions, on the pretext of the bankruptcy of tangible attempts to do as much-shored up by totalitarian ideologies and naive visions of history? What used to be called the avant-garde has, needless to say, developed from the ideological swing of things offered by modern rationalism; but it is now re-formed on the basis of quite different philosophical, cultural and social presuppositions. It is evident that today's art is carrying on this fight, by coming up with perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models, veering in the direction indicated by Enlightenment philosophers, Proudhon, Marx, the Dadaists and Mondrian. If opinion is striving to acknowledge the legitimacy and interest of these experiments,

this is because they are no longer presented like the precursory phenomena of an inevitable historical evolution. Quite to the contrary, they appear fragmentary and isolated, like orphans of an overall view of the world bolstering them with the clout of an ideology.

It is not modernity that is dead, but its idealistic and teleological version.

Today's fight for modernity is being waged in the same terms as yesterday's, barring the fact that the avant-garde has stopped patrolling like some scout, the troop having come to a cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties. Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes.

The ambition of artists who include their practice within the slipstream of historical modernity is to repeat neither its forms nor its claims, and even less assign to art the same functions as it. Their task is akin to the one that Jean-François 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*". What is more, Lyotard seems to half-bemoan this state of affairs: he defines it negatively, by using the term "condemned". 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. Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist. Althusser said that one always catches the world's train on the move; Deleuze, that "grass grows from the middle" and not from the bottom or the top. The artist dwells in the circumstances the

present offers him, so as to turn the setting of his life (his links with the physical and conceptual world) into a lasting world. He catches the world on the move: he is a *tenant of culture*, to borrow Michel de Certeau's expression². Nowadays, modernity extends into the practices of cultural do-it-yourself and recycling, into the invention of the everyday and the development of time lived, which are not objects less deserving of attention and examination than Messianistic utopias and the formal "novelties" that typified modernity yesterday. There is nothing more absurd either than the assertion that contemporary art does not involve any political project, or than the claim that its subversive aspects are not based on any theoretical terrain. Its plan, which has just as much to do with working conditions and the conditions in which cultural objects are produced, as with the changing forms of social life, may nevertheless seem dull to minds formed in the mould of cultural Darwinism. Here, then, is the time of the "douce utopia", to use Maurizio Cattelan's phrase...

Artwork as social interstice

The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. To sketch a sociology of this, this evolution stems essentially from the birth of a world-wide urban culture, and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena. The general growth of towns and cities, which took off at the end of the Second World War, gave rise not only to an extraordinary upsurge of social exchanges, but also to much greater individual mobility (through the development of networks and roads, and telecommunications, and the gradual freeing-up of isolated places, going with the opening-up of attitudes). Because of the crampedness of dwelling spaces in this urban world, there was, in tandem, a scaling-down of furniture and

objects, now emphasising a greater manoeuvrability. If, for a long period of time, the artwork has managed to come across as a luxury, lordly item in this urban setting (the dimensions of the work, as well as those of the apartment, helping to distinguish between their owner and the crowd), the development of the function of artworks and the way they are shown attest to a growing *urbanisation* of the artistic experiment. What is collapsing before our very eyes is nothing other than this falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art, associated with the feeling of territorial acquisition. In other words, it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through (the "owner's tour" is akin to the collector's). It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion. The city has ushered in and spread the hands-on experience: it is the tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society, that "*state of encounter imposed on people*", to use Althusser's expression³, contrasting with that dense and "trouble-free" jungle which the *natural state* once was, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a jungle hampering any lasting encounter. Once raised to the power of an absolute rule of civilisation, this system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the "encounter" between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning. Let us leave the matter of the historicity of this phenomenon on one side: art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue. One of the virtual properties of the image is its power of *linkage* (Fr. *reliance*), to borrow Michel Maffesoli's term: flags, logos, icons, signs, all produce empathy and sharing, and all generate *bond*⁴. Art (practices stemming from painting and sculpture which come across in the form of an exhibition) turns out to be particularly suitable when it comes to expressing this hands-on civilisation, because it *tightens the space of relations*, unlike TV

and literature which refer each individual person to his or her space of private consumption, and also unlike theatre and cinema which bring small groups together before specific, unmistakable images. Actually, there is no live comment made about what is seen (the discussion time is put off until after the show). At an exhibition, on the other hand, even when inert forms are involved, there is the possibility of an immediate discussion, in both senses of the term. I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time. Art is the place that produces a specific sociability. It remains to be seen what the status of this is in the set of "states of encounter" proposed by the City. How is an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs? Before giving concrete examples, it is well worth reconsidering the place of artworks in the overall economic system, be it symbolic or material, which governs contemporary society. Over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, the work of art represents a social *interstice*. This *interstice* term was used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising, autarkic types of production, etc. 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. This is the precise nature of the contemporary art exhibition in the arena of representational commerce: it creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the "communication zones" that are imposed upon us. The present-day social context restricts the possibilities of inter-human relations all the more because it creates spaces planned to this end. Automatic public toilets were invented to keep streets clean. The same spirit underpins the development of communication tools, while city

streets are swept clean of all manners of relational dross, and neighbourhood relationships fizzle. The general mechanisation of social functions gradually reduces the relational space. Just a few years ago, the telephone wake-up call service employed human beings, but now we are woken up by a synthesised voice... The automatic cash machine has become the transit model for the most elementary of social functions, and professional behaviour patterns are modelled on the efficiency of the machines replacing them, these machines carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, pleasure and squabbling. Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.

When Gabriel Orozco puts an orange on the stalls of a deserted Brazilian market (*Crazy Tourist*, 1991), or slings a hammock in the MoMA garden in New York (*Hamac en la moma*, 1993), he is operating at the hub of "social infra-thinness" (l'inframince social), that minute space of daily gestures determined by the superstructure made up of "big" exchanges, and defined by it. Without any wording, Orozco's photographs are a documentary record of tiny revolutions in the common urban and semi-urban life (a sleeping bag on the grass, an empty shoebox, etc.). They record this silent, still life nowadays formed by relationships with the other. When Jens Haaning broadcasts funny stories in Turkish through a loudspeaker in a Copenhagen square (*Turkish Jokes*, 1994), he produces in that split second a micro-community, one made up of immigrants brought together by collective laughter which upsets their exile situation, formed in relation to the work and in it. 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

der playing a barrel-organ with a
man, Jablonka Gallery, 1990), rats
aurizio Cattelan, poultry rendered
the help of bits of bread soaked
ugged, 1993), butterflies attracted
vases (Damien Hirst, *In and out*
n beings bumping into each other
s for experiments to do with
When Joseph Beuys spent a few
America and America likes me),
tration of his powers, pointing to
nan and the "wild" world. On the
he above-mentioned pieces are
ordained idea about what would
the same way that Tristan Tzara
e mouth".

Space-time exchange factors

Artworks and exchanges

Because art is made of the same material as the social exchanges, it has a special place in the collective production process. A work of art has a quality that sets it apart from other things produced by human activities. This quality is its (relative) social transparency. If a work of art is successful, it will invariably set its sights beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion, and that form of inter-human negotiation that Marcel Duchamp called "the coefficient of art", which is a temporal process, being played out here and now. This negotiation is undertaken in a spirit of "transparency" which hallmarks it as a product of human labour. The work of art actually shows (or suggests) not only its manufacturing and production process, its position within the set of exchanges, and the place, or function, it allocates to the beholder, but also the creative behaviour of the artist (otherwise put, the sequence of postures and gestures which make up his/her work, and which each individual work passes on like a sample or marker). So every canvas produced by Jackson Pollock so closely links the flow of paint to an artist's behaviour, that the latter seems to be the image of the former, like its "necessary product", as Hubert Damisch' has written. At the beginning of art we find the behaviour adopted by the artist, that set of moods and acts whereby the work acquires its relevance in the present. The "transparency" of the artwork comes about from the fact that the gestures forming and informing it are freely chosen or

du Seuil, p. 68.

rialization of the artwork, and Rosalind
in, 1984.

writings: "Qu'est-ce que le réalisme
l'Hacienda, CCC Tours, January 1992.
gue for *Aperto*, Venice Biennial, 1993.

invented, and are part of its subject. For example, over and above the popular icon represented by the image of Marilyn Monroe, the sense of Andy Warhol's *Marilyn* stems from the industrial production process adopted by the artist, governed by an altogether mechanical indifference to the subjects selected by him. This "transparency" of artistic work contrasts, need it be said, with the sacred, and with those ideologies which seek in art the means of giving the religious a new look. This relative transparency, which is an a priori form of artistic exchange, seems intolerable to the bigot. We know that, once introduced into the exchange circuit, any kind of production takes on a social form which no longer has anything to do with its original usefulness. It acquires an *exchange value* that partly covers and shrouds its primary "nature". The fact is that a work of art has no a priori useful function-not that it is socially useless, but because it is available and flexible, and has an "infinite tendency". In other words, it is devoted, right away, to the world of exchange and communication, the world of "commerce", in both meanings of the term. What all goods have in common is the fact that they have a value, that is, a common substance that permits their exchange. This substance, according to Marx, is the "*amount of abstract labour*" used to produce this item. It is represented by a sum of money, which is the "*abstract general equivalent*" of all goods between them. It has been said of art, and Marx was the first, that it represents the "*absolute merchandise*", because it is the actual image of the value.

But what exactly are we talking about? About the art object, not about artistic practice, about the work as it is assumed by the general economy, and not its own economy. Art represents a barter activity that cannot be regulated by any currency, or any "common substance". It is the division of meaning in the wild state-an exchange whose form is defined by that of the object itself, before being so defined by definitions foreign to it. The artist's practice, and his behaviour as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his work. In other words, what he produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.

The subject of the artwork

Every artist whose work stems from relational aesthetics has a world of forms, a set of problems and a trajectory which are all his own. They are not connected together by any style, theme or iconography. What they do share together is much more decisive, to wit, the fact of operating within one and the same practical and theoretical horizon: the sphere of inter-human relations. Their works involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her, and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together.

So they are all working within what we might call the relational sphere, which is to today's art what mass production was to Pop Art and Minimal Art.

They all root their artistic praxis within a *proximity* which relativizes the place of visibility in the exhibition protocol, without belittling it. The artwork of the 1990s turns the beholder into a neighbour, a direct interlocutor. It is precisely the attitude of this generation toward communications that makes it possible to define it in relation to previous generations. Most artists emerging in the 1980s, from Richard Prince to Jeff Koons by way of Jenny Holzer, developed the visual aspect of the media, while their successors show a preference for contact and tactility. They prefer *immediacy* in their visual writing. This phenomenon has a sociological explanation, given that the decade that has just gone by, marked as it was by the recession, turned out to be not very propitious to spectacular and showy undertakings. There are also purely aesthetic reasons for this: the "back to" pendulum came to a halt in the 1980s on movements from the 1960s, and mainly Pop Art, whose visual effectiveness underpins most of the forms proposed by *simulationism*. For better or for worse, our era is identified, right down to its crisis "ambience", with the "poor" and experimental art of the 1970s. This albeit superficial vogueish effect made it possible

to re-view the works of artists like Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, while the success of Mike Kelley recently encouraged a rereading of Californian "Junk Art", from Paul Thek to Tetsumi Kudo. Fashion also creates aesthetic microclimates, the effects of which have repercussions even on our reading of recent history. Otherwise put, the sieve organises the mesh of its net in different ways, and "lets through" other types of works-which, in return, influence the present.

This said, we find ourselves, with relational artists, in the presence of a group of people who, for the first time since the appearance of Conceptual Art in the mid sixties, in no way draw sustenance from any re-interpretation of this or that past aesthetic movement. Relational art is not the revival of any movement, nor is it the comeback of any style. It arises from an observation of the present and from a line of thinking about the fate of artistic activity. Its basic claim-the sphere of human relations as artwork venue-has no prior example in art history, even if it appears, after the fact, as the obvious backdrop of all aesthetic praxis, and as a modernist theme to cap all modernist themes. Suffice it merely to re-read the lecture given by Marcel Duchamp in 1954, titled "The Creative Process", to become quite sure that interactivity is anything but a new idea... Novelty is elsewhere. It resides in the fact that this generation of artists considers inter-subjectivity and interaction neither as fashionable theoretical gadgets, nor as additives (alibis) of a traditional artistic practice. It takes them as a point of departure and as an outcome, in brief, as the main informers of their activity. The space where their works are displayed is altogether the space of interaction, the space of openness that ushers in all dialogue (Georges Bataille would have written: "rift" ("*déchirure*")). What they produce are relational space-time elements, inter-human experiences trying to rid themselves of the straitjacket of the ideology of mass communications, in a way, of the places where alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality are worked out. It is nevertheless quite

clear that the age of the New Man, future-oriented manifestos, and calls for a better world all ready to be walked into and lived in is well and truly over. These days, utopia is being lived on a subjective, everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiments. The artwork is presented as a social *interstice* within which these experiments and these new "life possibilities" appear to be possible. It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows. That is all, but it is quite something. And in any event it represents a much-awaited alternative to the depressive, authoritarian and reactionary thinking which, in France at least, passes for art theory in the form of "common sense" rediscovered. Modernity, however, is not dead, if we acknowledge as modern a soft spot for aesthetic experience and adventurous thinking, as contrasted with the cautious forms of conventionality being defended by our freelance philosophers, the neo-traditionalists ("Beauty" according to the priceless Dave Hickey) and those backward-looking militant such as Jean Clair. Whatever these fundamentalists clinging to yesterday's *good taste* may say and think, present-day art is roundly taking on and taking up the legacy of the 20th century *avant-gardes*, while at the same time challenging their dogmatism and their teleological doctrines. Rest assured that much pondering went into this last sentence: it is simply time to write it down. For modernism was steeped in an "imaginary of contrasts", to borrow Gilbert Durand's term, which proceeded by way of separations and contrasts, readily disqualifying the past in favour of the future. It was based on conflict, whereas the imaginary of our day and age is concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences. These days we are no longer trying to advance by means of conflictual clashes, by way of the invention of new assemblages, possible relations between distinct units, and alliances struck up between different partners. Aesthetic contracts, like social contracts, are abided by for what they are. Nobody nowadays has ideas about ushering in the golden

age on Earth, and we are readily prepared just to create various forms of *modus vivendi* permitting fairer social relations, more compact ways of living, and many different combinations of fertile existence. Art, likewise, is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces.

Space-time factors in 1990s' art

These "relational" procedures (invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments, etc.) are merely a repertory of common forms, vehicles through which particular lines of thought and personal relationships with the world are developed. The subsequent form that each artist gives to this relational production is not unalterable, either. These artists perceive their work from a threefold viewpoint, at once aesthetic (how is it to be "translated" in material terms?), historical (how is to be incorporated in a set of artistic references?) and social (how is to find a coherent position with regard to the current state of production and social relations?). These activities evidently acquire their formal and theoretical marks in Conceptual Art, in Fluxus and in Minimal Art, but they simply use these like a vocabulary, a lexical basis. Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the New Realists all relied on the readymade to develop both their rhetoric about the object, and their sociological discourse. When relational art makes reference to conceptual and Fluxus-inspired situations and methods, or to Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Dan Graham, it is to convey lines of thought which have nothing to do with their own thinking. The real question is more likely this: what are the *right* exhibition methods in relation to the cultural context and in relation to the history of art as it is being currently updated? Video, for example, is nowadays becoming a predominant medium. But if Peter Land, Gillian Wearing and Henry Bond, to name just three artists, have a preference for video recording, they are still not "video artists". This medium merely turns out to be the one best suited to the formalisation of certain activities and projects. Other

artists thus produce a systematic documentation about their work, thereby drawing the lessons of Conceptual Art, but on radically different aesthetic bases. Relational art, which is well removed from the administrative rationality that underpins it (the form of the notarised contract, ubiquitous in the sixties' art), tends to draw inspiration more from the flexible processes governing ordinary life. We can use the term communications, but here, too, today's artists are placed at the other extreme, compared with how artists made use of the media in the previous decade. Where these artists tackled the visual form of mass communications and the icons of pop culture, Liam Gillick, Miltos Manetas and Jorge Pardo work on scaled-down models of communicational situations. This can be interpreted as a change in the collective sensibility. Henceforth the group is pitted against the mass, neighbourliness against propaganda, low tech against high tech, and the tactile against the visual. And above all, the everyday now turns out to be a much more fertile terrain than "pop culture" – a form that only exists in contrast to "high culture", through it and for it.

To head off any polemic about a so-called return to "conceptual" art, let us bear in mind that these works in no way celebrate immateriality. None of these artists has a preference for "performances" or concept, words that no longer mean a whole lot here. In a word, the work process no longer has any supremacy over ways of rendering this work material (unlike Process Art and Conceptual Art, which, for their part, tended to fetishize the mental process to the detriment of the object). In the worlds constructed by these artists, on the contrary, objects are an intrinsic part of the language, with both regarded as vehicles of relations to the other. In a way, an object is every bit as immaterial as a phone call. And a work that consists in a dinner around a soup is every bit as *material* as a statue. This arbitrary division between the gesture and the forms it produces is here called into question, insofar as it is the very image of contemporary alienation: the cannily maintained

illusion, even in art institutions, that objects excuse methods and that the *end* of art justifies the pettiness of the intellectual and ethical means. Objects and institutions, and the use of time and works, are at once the outcome of human relations-for they render social work concrete-and producers of relations-for, conversely, they organise types of sociability and regulate inter-human encounters. Today's art thus prompts us to envisage the relations between space and time in a different way. Essentially, moreover, it derives its main originality from the way this issue is handled. What, actually, is *concretely produced* by artists such as Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Vanessa Beecroft? What, in the final analysis, is the object of their work? To introduce a few comparative factors, we should have to embark upon a history of the use value of art. When a collector purchased a work by Jackson Pollock or Yves Klein, he was buying, over and above its aesthetic interest, a milestone in a history on the move. He became the purchaser of a historical situation. Yesterday, when you bought a Jeff Koons, what was being brought to the fore was the hyper-reality of artistic value. What has one bought when one owns a work by Tiravanija or Douglas Gordon, other than a relationship with the world rendered concrete by an object, which, *per se*, defines the relations one has towards this relationship: the relationship to a relationship?

1. Hubert Damisch, *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, Editions du Seuil, p. 76.

Joint presence The theoretical

The work involved here is enough to give an impression to enable you to form posters. It is sky-blue as a frame. On the edge of the paper. The notice reads *Mirror*, 1990. *Offse* allowed to take one off happens if lots of visitors paper offered to an artist the piece to change involve a "Performance" endowed with a definition displaying its construction *form of its presence* with the convivial of art, as produced and today, to be meaningful contemporary aesthetic extending to our relation death in 1996, the appraisal in order to which it has made a c