

Inclusion and Community: The Problematics of Contemporary Art in the New Democratic Paradigm

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Abstract

Major tendencies in contemporary art appear to be occupied with the exploration of democracy, inclusion and community through the elevation of the role of the audience to the status of an indispensable part of meaning production. Works that embody this dynamic approach within contemporary art include Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* of 1992, the first in the artist's series of transformations of gallery spaces into restaurants, and Tino Sehgal's *This Situation* of 2007, where the empty exhibition space became a site of interaction between audience and a selection of intellectuals. Other instances include Seiko Mikami's *Molecular Clinic 1.0* (1995, Artlab, Tokyo), a work where the participants were free to manipulate the atoms of a virtual spider that lives in the Artlab server, as well as Jeremy Deller's *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* (2009), in which the artist accommodated a series of discussions between the public and experts on the present circumstances in Iraq. In the context of this new type of art production, the audience, transcending even the level of active participation, are rebaptized as 'co-creators.' The present essay will examine the rise of this non-hierarchical, inclusive and democratic paradigm in contemporary art by exploring two hypotheses. Firstly, the new democratic ideal articulated in contemporary practices is not limited to the themes and aesthetics of the actual works of art but resonates deeply with art's new role in a mass democratic, pluralistic, globalized social environment: to turn heterogeneity into culture. Secondly, through close observation of the structure of works exemplifying these tendencies, it will be shown that the new community created by the project of a democratic artworld is one of understated exclusions.

Keywords: relational aesthetics, contemporary art, community, democracy.

In 1998 Nicholas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' (2002a) attempted to capture a transition in the world of art. Departing from conventional artistic production, as defined either by the production of demarcated art objects or spaces of performance, a generation of artists committed to the creation and mediation of social relations through acts of art were given centre stage. Bourriaud's analysis—partial as it was, as it focused primarily on the work of Pierre Huyghe, Maurizio Cattelan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Liam Gillick—sparked a plethora of discussions and gave a new impetus to a panorama of practices engaged in explorations of democracy, community and collaboration. These practices compose major tendencies within what Claire Bishop would subsequently describe as the 'social turn' of art (2006): a wide shift in art production ranging from community-oriented, socially collaborative work to commercially successful, 'institutional' artists. These artistic investigations of the 'interhuman' (Bourriaud 2002b, p.7) do not describe a formal art movement: practices recounted as 'relational' are not tied to a specific aesthetic programme nor disseminate the same aspirations as to their intended effects. This diversity inevitably occludes an all-encompassing account of the entirety of phenomena in question. The present essay examines the rise of this non-hierarchical, inclusive and democratic paradigm in contemporary art practices with regard to its sociohistorical significance as well as the political implications of this vision of community on a typological basis. The foundation of this discussion is the structural incorporation of collective meaning production—across artist and audience—not as a mode of mere interaction but in the form of a platform for participation for an audience that is now elevated to the level of co-creator.

The essence of Rirkrit Tiravanija's makeshift-kitchen works of 1992/1995/2007/2011 (*Untitled: free/still*), which comprise the rearrangement of gallery interiors into lounges and restaurant spaces where visitors can enjoy food given out for free by the artist, does not lie in the architectural transformation that they present the audience with but in the experience of commonality and the social relations produced by interactions of a public framed by these architectures. In Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* of 2003 (Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London) the giant orange globe that represents the sun, and dry ice effects that create an impression of mist, are simply instruments in the creation of a situation that entails the transposition of a theme from the level of banal, everyday interaction into an apocalyptic collective spectacle; it is the instability in the signification of sociality that lies at the heart of the work. Even when the work has a more demarcated material existence, approximating the more conventional sense of an object-based practice or installation, it is often contingent or intentionally understated. In the case of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, his series of 'stacks' works,

which anticipate the flourishing of relational practices, may indeed be understood from the perspective of a minimalist practice on seriality and repetition either in the configuration of sheets of paper on the gallery floor or the rectangle of boiled sweets—*Untitled (Death by Gun)* (1990) and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) respectively. Nevertheless, the works' essence is not confined to or defined by an aesthetic decision governing the arrangement of the multiple objects. Torres's art can be construed as centred around the interaction of the audience members with those objects and among themselves, either as they are confronted with an unfamiliarly direct gesture of generosity and kindness or as they are compelled to deal with issues of freedom and responsibility. The audience, by picking up and keeping the pieces of the works that are at its disposal, affects its form and ultimately threatens -- at least symbolically -- its continuity (Jackson 2011, p.46). Ultimately, it is only through audience's interactions that Torres's object configurations are signified and transformed into meditations on permanence and loss, with materiality forming the pretext that sets this dialogue in motion.

This leads to a new realization: sociality and participation reveal themselves not merely as the substance of works of art but often as their condition; these sociocultural instances are activated as works of art only through the presence and interactions of participants. To make the point even more prominent, the relational work of art ceases being an artwork in the absence of participants, whose presence subsequently valorizes production. Whereas certain works, such as the examples by Gonzalez-Torres examined above, demonstrate an almost transcendental quality in their transfiguration of empty social gestures into elegies, a plethora of practices appear interested solely in the exploration of the communal and specifically a rather idealized notion thereof. In works such as *Exchange of Mental, Physical and Undetected Substances of Known and Un-known Matter During a Period of Four Nights* by Carl Michael von Hausswolff, Andrew M. McKenzie and Ulf Bilting, who invited the audience to a sleep-in for the first nights of the collective exhibition "Interpol" (Färgfabriken, Stockholm, 1996) (Bishop 2012, p.211), as well as Tino Sehgal's *These Associations* (Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2012), which utilized the gallery space as the arena of encounters and confessions between complete strangers, form becomes content. The artistic structure for the experience of community becomes the communal experience of art, in what would appear to be a rather intricate tautology.

According to Bourriaud (2002a), this ostensible purposelessness of arbitrary human interaction— a togetherness devoid of objectives or duration— in an era where subversion of artistic autonomy and aesthetic distance have been long-established conventions of the

artworld in the form of categorical slippages between art and everyday life -- is transmuted into 'microtopias.' This not only speaks of the reifying properties of the art space but, as Bishop correctly identifies, also reveals that the political ('microtopian') in these works lies in the experience of identification between the participants and a feeling of commonness; with commonness being a condition always constructed through certain exclusions (2004, p.67). Nevertheless, while Bishop explores this in her interrogation of the vapid assertion that Rirkrit Tiravanija's Cologne project at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* of 1996 (where the artist built a wooden reconstruction of his New York apartment, made open to the public twenty-four hours a day) served as 'a kind of asylum for everyone' (Kölnischer Stadt-Anzeiger quoted in Bishop 2004, p.68), she neglects one particularly important question. The crux of the problem does not lie so much in what might have happened had Tiravanija's space been invaded by those genuinely in need of asylum, as implied in her analysis, but the reasons why this does not happen. Similarly, when Ellie Harrison used the great hall at the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art to stage a self-organized, communal sleepover (*Dark Days*, Glasgow Museum of Art, 2015) – in a gesture reminiscent of the utilization of state buildings by crisis-stricken populations such as the homeless or refugees during emergency states – it was not the participation of such precarious existences that the successful realization of the project hinged upon. Despite the fact that these works of art aspire to break out of the self-enclosed character of the historical institution through the simulation or re-creation of politically loaded lived experiences, their outreach as activist gestures is very limited.

Relational practices, outside all rhetorical claims, remain entrenched in the sphere of art. Their very existence as organized artistic events entails a number of inherent exclusions. The experience of art, regardless of its thematics, resides ultimately in the sphere of consumption and consumption is self-evidently contingent on economic or social standing. The uniqueness of relational practices, as works of art founded on processes and gestures not easily quantifiable in traditional economic terms, instead of the production of art objects— marked by an inherent use and, therefore, exchange value— complicates this judgement. Bourriaud has argued that relational practices, precisely on the basis of their immateriality, are shielded from total market administration (Bourriaud 2002a, p.42). This perception ultimately originates in Lucy Lippard's contention that the primacy of the abstract, ideational qualities in 1960s-1970s conceptual art over a clearly defined materiality constituted a strategy against commercialization and a subversion of the apparatus of art's commodification: 'Since dealers cannot sell art-as-idea, economic materialism is denied along with physical materialism'

(Lippard and Chandler 1968, cited in Kwon 2010, p.230). Nevertheless, Bourriaud's assertion is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, as Miwon Kwon has demonstrated regarding the conceptual art of 1960-1970, the market inevitably caught up with dematerialized artistic production and incorporated it successfully: the existence of instructions, souvenirs and documentations of conceptual practices testify to their integration in the logic of commodity exchange (Kwon 2010, p.230). Secondly, his argument exhibits a certain blindness to the historical transformation that capitalism has undergone since the 1960s; a transition from the Fordist era to the post-industrial (or post-Fordist) economy that has received significant scholarly attention from numerous social scientists and economists (Harvey 1990; Boltanski 2005; Bell 2008). All analyses converge on the observation that the locus of economic activity has retreated from its concentration in specific locations and focus on the manufacture of physical commodities, and has adopted deterritorialized and immaterial forms. The new model of the economy involves the increase of managerial occupation supplanting skill-related work, as well as the centrality of communication as economic infrastructure (Bell 2008, p.xv-xvii). As Kwon concludes:

Services, information and 'experience' are now quantifiable units of measure to gauge economic productivity, growth and profit. Ideas and actions do not debilitate or escape the market system because they are dematerialized; they drive it precisely because so (Kwon 2010, 230).

What exacerbates the implicit exclusionary character of participatory art is the uniqueness of the mode of its experience. Comprising works that unfold in time and evade objecthood, relational practices introduce a new factor of exclusivity. The ability to participate, as well as the quality of participation, is determined by the number of man-hours that can be spent in the site of art. Finally, the composition of the allegory of community in relational practices is not founded on its traditional properties, but on taste. Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated that taste is neither natural nor inherent, but the externalization of cultural needs, and is to a significant extent a by-product of education and, thus, social class (1984). Therefore the 'relational community' has the capacity to cut across the literal space of the community and reconstruct a new one on the basis of a cultural characteristic. Bourriaud contends that relational practice is the enactment of reality through a different reconfiguration of the material that composes it: the relational artist 'deprograms to reprogram' (2002b, p.72). However, the material used in the relational parallel structure cannot be the same, as an implicit selection on constituency is carried out before the

enactment of the reprogramming. In this sense, the relational community is not an instance of the 'socius' (Bishop 2012, p.207); it is the simulation of a social body.

The cultural character of the feeling of commonality which underlies the experience of relational practices points the discussion in a new direction. Relational practices are part of an artistic/cultural trajectory unfolding throughout the 20th century in the Western world. They belong to a tradition that has systematically challenged certainties around the nature of the artwork, as well as its place in relation to its social and economic environment. This is exemplified in the break with medium-specificity, the exit from the studio and the identification with cultural forms already existing in the sphere of the everyday. Relational practices are moments of a history that has incorporated the questions surrounding the distinction between artist and audience, professional and amateur, and ultimately production and reception into central themes of its own discourse.

This history can be identified in two crucial moments. The first would be the avant-gardist dissolution of the aesthetic construction of art and its subsequent transformation from art-as-object to art-as-event (Ziarek 2005, p.221). Movements such as Futurism and Dadaism in the first half of the 20th century and Conceptual art in the second do not simply underline the new socio-technical framework of art's production and distribution, but also provide platforms to interrogate concepts associated with the aesthetic existence of art, such as content and form. Therefore, the shift towards the post-aesthetic era coincides with the movement toward art-as-event. The 'event' is undetermined, open-ended and physically engaging.

The second moment would be the systematic assault on the mythological status of authorship. In 1967, Roland Barthes contributed to this discussion with the observation that the author does not constitute a creative genius expressing an inner vision but relies on the manipulation of already existent linguistic structures, forming them into narratives within the process of signification. The construction of a text through codes and structures opens up its multiplicity which is nevertheless disrupted by the understanding of the author as origin of the text. Therefore, the multivalence inherent in textual construction can be preserved through the process of meaning production focused on the reader (Barthes 1977, p.142-148). On the other hand, Michel Foucault (1980) redefined the author as a function of discourse subject to textual, sociohistorical analysis, rather than as a role defining the privileged status of a specific individual. The persistence of the author does not simply predetermine reading but is also ideological: Foucault argues that the author's function is the normalization and control of meaning (1980, p.113-118). The rejection of authorship as genius and/or the source of

originality had a profound effect on the artistic practices of the 1980s, which therefore focus on the manipulation of references and citation.

In the context of our contemporary cultural and artistic multiplicity, the once relatively linear relationship between artist, medium and audience has yielded to a more complicated and fluid structure, and the elevation of the role of the audience in relational practices resonates strongly with this transformation. However, considering the fact that contemporary art remains conceptually inaccessible for the biggest part of Western audiences, the democratic aura of relational practices might not signify an artistic vision of democracy, but rather correspond to a process of democratization within the institution itself in order to accommodate the complexity and pluralism of cultural propositions and artistic attitudes in the wake of 20th-century destabilization of aesthetic and authorial certainties (Vassiliou 2012, p.127). This established the reception of work and artist on the basis of the comprehension of certain art-historical conventions and propositions. The flexible and open-ended artistic identity of relational practices could therefore be founded on the realization of the procedural function of the art world and consequently correspond to the restructuring of its inner organization. From that perspective, the non-hierarchical, participatory and interactive nature of contemporary practices would, almost ironically, be revealed to form technical decisions, deriving from the necessities of reason and convention.

Not only can we thus conclude that the democratization of the art world does not necessarily identify with an art of democracy, but also that the experience of community in relational art presupposes the ability to participate in a complicated intellectual and artistic history. The public reception of the collective exhibition 'Trust' (Tramway, Glasgow, 1995) is indicative of this disconnect. Despite the fact that the works on display aimed to inspire intimacy and interpersonal exchange among the audience, as visitors could enjoy tea prepared by Carsten Höller and food cooked by Rirkrit Tiravanija, while Andrea Zittel's *Pit Bed* offered a place to rest, the public's response was largely negative (Relyea 2013, p.132). Critic Clare Henry even wrote that the show was designed to indulge an inner circle from the start (Relyea 2013, p.133). Similarly, Éric Troncy, the curator of the collective show 'No Man's Time' (Villa Arson in Nice, 1991) which included works by future exponents of Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics,' such as Henry Bond, Angela Bulloch, Liam Gillick, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Philippe Parreno, acknowledged the exclusion of a wide audience, admitting that 'while the protagonists may be enthralled by their subject matter, it may prove boring for some of the public' (Troncy 1991, cited in Bishop 2012, p.209). This exclusionary self-referentiality of contemporary practices does not merely challenge the

claim for the non-hierarchical experience inherent in relational art, but also points to a distinct inner circle in the nexus of relationships between artists and public.

The centrality and recurrence of the theme of community, as well as the exploration of the place of the individual in relation to it, cannot be interpreted, however, without examining it in the current context of neoliberal globalization — as, according to George Yúdice (2003), contemporary conditions have affected the character of culture massively. Globalization, a pluralistic environment in which people, cultures and commodities have become internationally mobile, has opened up a wider spectrum of themes to be explored beyond the confines of nation-state specificity and has ultimately shifted the discussion towards the exploration of cultural modes centring around challenges of co-existence and mutual understanding in a diverse multicultural environment (Yúdice 2003, p.11). At the same time, the gradual retreat of traditional state subsidies towards social services, inherent in the reduction of the role of the state in late 20th-century neoliberalism, has created a gap that threatens the social fabric. Arts and culture spending was no exception to these policies. Faced with this legitimization crisis, Western governments actively encouraged the use of art for social melioration in a solution that allowed arts bodies to survive the massive reductions of state expenditures and states to delegate the management of governance problems to the cultural field (Yúdice 2003, p.11-13). In this context, art ceases to be a body of socially cohesive ideologies but is employed in the practical resolution of actual social problems that Western polities are not capable of or interested in solving.

It is not a coincidence that this dialogue became official towards the turn of the 21st century. François Matarasso's 'Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts' (1997), which exerted a significant influence on British cultural policies, advocated the invaluable benefits that the state subsidy of participatory art projects potentially yield on multiple levels. Providing platforms which encourage collective participation in art was argued to successfully infuse individuals with a new confidence on a personal level, to tighten interpersonal relationships— reinforcing thus new types of social cohesion— and, finally, to strengthen people's engagement with their communities in a cost-efficient way (Matarasso 1997, p.74-76). Interestingly, Matarasso's study did not qualify or even hint at a particular type of art as being optimal for the production of these effects; community or professional arts priority appears to be rather situational and context-dependent. It is 'relationship' that is important and not form (Matarasso 1997, p.74); the central feature of his proposition is the act of participation itself. As such, the dissemination of state-sanctioned participatory ideals might constitute only an illusion of social inclusion.

A similar effectiveness imperative appears on the other side of the Atlantic. A 1997 report for the US NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) titled ‘American Canvas’ argued that— in the aftermath of deregulation combined with the rise of a conservative opposition to US art known as the ‘culture wars’— art’s survival lay in the adoption of social and pedagogic goals, well outside its role in the traditional context of culture, ranging from ‘youth programs and crime prevention to job training and race relations’ (Larson 1997, cited in Yúdice 2003, p.11). The ‘American Canvas’ outlined a new paradigm of art in the service of economic development and community in mass democratic societies of the globalized West. Art was clearly assigned with a new role: to consolidate fragmentation and heterogeneity into culture.

Perhaps now, in light of these internal workings— globalization, and the retreat of the state from its historical responsibilities under neoliberalism— the recurrence of the concept of community in relational practices gains some perspective. Nikolas Rose (1996) argued that the delegation of the state’s responsibilities to the private sector signifies the end of its organization on the level of the social, and that the prevalent organizational mode that comes to take its place is the community. According to Rose, the rolling back of the state during recent decades has coincided with the emergence of new types of rationalities that focus on the importance of a familial and communal administration of life in the midst of deregulatory policies (1996, p.327-328). This paradigm shift did not happen overnight, but was the result of a long process of systematic attempts at the redefinition of the subjects of government by political specialists. Eventually, as the deconstruction of the social was collectively internalized, the relation of the individual with society shifted from being one founded on obligation, through state mediation, towards one that stressed individual responsibility in one’s own government (Rose 1996, p.330). This led to the breakdown of the sphere of political self-definition from the social level in various interlocking systems: self, family, community, in a process isomorphic to the ‘de-totalization’ of the territory of government from a single-bounded space across the nation, to the heterogeneity of multiple communities (Rose 1996, p.333).

Once the social gave way to the communal, community was redefined as the site of the administration of individual and collective life -- something which is attested by the relatively recent professionalization of a variety of mechanisms, such as community development programmes and community police (Rose 1996, p.331-332). What was once envisioned as the antidote to metropolitan alienation, symbolizing modern life’s lost authenticity and the need for belonging in contradistinction to the cold bureaucracy of the

state, gradually became the territory of neoliberal governmentality as it furthered its agenda to govern without 'governing society' (Rose 1996, p.327-328). Community, having become a site of state control, undergoes a further rupture mirrored in the constant movement of the government to delegate the solution of systemic problems to individual actors, transforming therefore the nature of economic citizenship into a matter of self-advancement (Rose 1996, p. 340).

From that perspective, relational practices reveal themselves as immensely topical statements in this renegotiation of the social and the communal. Bourriaud contends that at the heart of relational practices lies the exploration of the effects of contemporary governmentality as an attempt to reassemble the fragmentary social units of neoliberalism and create new alternatives (2002a, p.9). Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated, the various socioeconomic and cultural distinctions and exclusions upon which relational practices operate problematize this claim. The question that ultimately persists is whether the relation practices 'microtopias' are moments of resistance against the destruction of the last vestiges of collectivity or instead naturalize the neoliberal administration of the socius, evoking thus a bizarre post-modern Potemkin village while they spectacularize the workings inside communities into a culture imposed on them from above. Perhaps it is this irresolute tension that forms the subject matter of contemporary participatory art as its ambiguity transcends the duality of affirmation and negation and becomes its interpretative topos.

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