

Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics

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The Palais de Tokyo

On the occasion of its opening in 2002, the Palais de Tokyo immediately struck the visitor as different from other contemporary art venues that had recently opened in Europe. Although a budget of 4.75 million euros was spent on converting the former Japanese pavilion for the 1937 World's Fair into a "site for contemporary creation," most of this money had been used to reinforce (rather than renovate) the existing structure.¹ Instead of clean white walls, discreetly installed lighting, and wooden floors, the interior was left bare and unfinished. This decision was important, as it reflected a key aspect of the venue's curatorial ethos under its codirectorship by Jérôme Sans, an art critic and curator, and Nicolas Bourriaud, former curator at CAPC Bordeaux and editor of the journal *Documents sur l'art*. The Palais de Tokyo's improvised relationship to its surroundings has subsequently become paradigmatic of a visible tendency among European art venues to reconceptualize the "white cube" model of displaying contemporary art as a studio or experimental "laboratory."² It is therefore in the tradition of what

1. Palais de Tokyo promotional and Website, "site de création contemporaine," <<http://www.palais-detokyo.com>>

2. For example, Nicolas Bourriaud on the Palais de Tokyo: "We want to be a sort of interdisciplinary *kunstverein*—more laboratory than museum" (quoted in "Public Relations: Bennett Simpson Talks with Nicolas Bourriaud," *Artforum* [April 2001], p. 48); Hans Ulrich Obrist: "The truly contemporary exhibition should express connective possibilities and make propositions. And, perhaps surprisingly, such an exhibition should reconnect with the laboratory years of twentieth-century exhibition practice. . . . The truly contemporary exhibition with its striking quality of unfinishedness and incompleteness would trigger *pars pro toto* participation" (Obrist, "Battery, Kraftwerk and Laboratory," in *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ed. Carin Kuoni [New York: Independent Curators International, 2001], p. 129); in a telesymposium discussing Barbara van der Linden and Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Laboratorium* project (Antwerp, 2000), the curators describe their preference for the word "laboratory" because it is "neutral" and "still untouched, untouched by science" ("Laboratorium is the answer, what is the question?," *TRANS* 8 [2000], p. 114). Laboratory metaphors also arise in artists' conceptions of their own exhibitions. For example, Liam Gillick, speaking about his one-man show at the Arnolfini, Bristol, remarks that it "is a laboratory or workshop situation where there is the opportunity to test out some ideas in combination, to exercise relational and comparative critical processes" (Gillick quoted in *Liam Gillick: Renovation Filter: Recent Past and Near Future* [Bristol: Arnolfini, 2000], p. 16). Rirkrit Tiravanija's

Lewis Kachur has described as the “ideological exhibitions” of the historical avant-garde: in these exhibitions (such as the 1920 International Dada Fair and the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition), the hang sought to reinforce or epitomize the ideas contained within the work.³

The curators promoting this “laboratory” paradigm—including Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barbara van der Linden, Hou Hanru, and Nicolas Bourriaud—have to a large extent been encouraged to adopt this curatorial *modus operandi* as a direct reaction to the type of art produced in the 1990s: work that is open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, often appearing to be “work-in-progress” rather than a completed object. Such work seems to derive from a creative misreading of poststructuralist theory: rather than the *interpretations* of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art *itself* is argued to be in perpetual flux. There are many problems with this idea, not least of which is the difficulty of discerning a work whose identity is willfully unstable. Another problem is the ease with which the “laboratory” becomes marketable as a space of leisure and entertainment. Venues such as the Baltic in Gateshead, the Kunstverein Munich, and the Palais de Tokyo have used metaphors like “laboratory,” “construction site”, and “art factory” to differentiate themselves from bureaucracy-encumbered collection-based museums; their dedicated project spaces create a buzz of creativity and the aura of being at the vanguard of contemporary production.⁴ One could argue that in this context, project-based works-in-progress and artists-in-residence begin to dovetail with an “experience economy,” the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences.⁵ Yet what the viewer is supposed to garner from such an “experience” of creativity, which is essentially institutionalized studio activity, is often unclear.

Related to the project-based “laboratory” tendency is the trend toward inviting contemporary artists to design or troubleshoot amenities within the museum,

work is frequently described in similar terms: it is “like a laboratory for human contact” (Jerry Saltz, “Resident Alien,” *The Village Voice*, July 7–14, 1999, n.p.), or “psycho-social experiments where situations are made for meetings, exchange, etc.” (Maria Lind, “Letter and Event,” *Paletten* 223 [April 1995], p. 41). It should be noted that “laboratory” in this context does not denote psychological or behavioral experiments on the viewer, but refers instead to creative experimentation with exhibition conventions.

3. Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí and the Surrealist Exhibition* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

4. Under Sune Nordgren, the Baltic in Gateshead had three “AIR” (Artist-in-Residence) spaces for artists’ studios, but these were only open to the public when the resident artist chose; often the audience had to take the Baltic’s claim to be an “art factory” on trust. The Palais de Tokyo, by contrast, has up to ten artists in residence at any one time. The Munich Kunstverein, under Maria Lind, sought a different type of visible productivity: Apolonia Sustersic’s conversion of the gallery entrance featured a “work console,” where members of the curatorial staff (including Lind) could take turns manning the gallery’s front desk, continuing their work in public.

5. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999). The Baltic presents itself as “a site for the production, presentation, and experience of contemporary art” through “a heavy emphasis on commissions, invitations to artists, and the work of artists-in-residence” (www.balticmill.com).

such as the bar (Jorge Pardo at K21, Düsseldorf; Michael Lin at the Palais de Tokyo; Liam Gillick at the Whitechapel Art Gallery) or reading lounge (Apolonia Sustersic at Kunstverein Munich, or the changing “Le Salon” program at the Palais de Tokyo), and in turn present these as works of art.⁶ An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas of artist-as-designer, function over contemplation, and open-endedness over aesthetic resolution is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience. As Hal Foster warned in the mid-1990s, “the institution may overshadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star.”⁷ It is with this situation in mind that I focus on the Palais de Tokyo as my starting point for a closer inspection of some of the claims made for “open-ended,” semifunctional art works, since one of the Palais’ codirectors, Nicolas Bourriaud, is also their leading theorist.

Relational Aesthetics

Esthétique Relationnel is the title of Bourriaud’s 1997 collection of essays in which he attempts to characterize artistic practice of the 1990s. Since there have been very few attempts to provide an overview of 1990s art, particularly in Britain where discussion has myopically revolved around the Young British Artists (YBA) phenomenon, Bourriaud’s book is an important first step in identifying recent tendencies in contemporary art. It also comes at a time when many academics in Britain and the U.S. seem reluctant to move on from the politicized agendas and intellectual battles of 1980s art (indeed, for many, of 1960s art), and condemn everything from installation art to ironic painting as a depoliticized celebration of surface, complicitous with consumer spectacle. Bourriaud’s book—written with the hands-on insight of a curator—promises to redefine the agenda of contemporary art criticism, since his starting point is that we can no longer approach these works from behind the “shelter” of sixties art history and its values. Bourriaud seeks to offer new criteria by which to approach these often rather opaque works of art, while also claiming that they are no less politicized than their sixties precursors.⁸

For instance, Bourriaud argues that art of the 1990s takes as its theoretical horizon “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the

6. “Every six months, an artist is invited by the Palais de Tokyo to design and decorate a small space located under the main staircase but placed at the heart of the exhibition spaces: Le Salon. Both a space of relaxation and a work of art, Le Salon offers comfortable armchairs, games, reading material, a piano, a video, or a TV program to those who visit it” (Palais de Tokyo Website [<http://www.palaisdetokyo.com>], my translation). The current premises of Portikus Gallery in Frankfurt feature an office, reading room, and gallery space designed by the artist Tobias Rehberger.

7. Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 198.

8. “Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue” (Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* [Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002], p. 17). Hereafter cited in the text as RA.

assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space” (*RA*, p. 14). In other words, 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. The implication is that this work inverts the goals of Greenbergian modernism.⁹ Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience. Moreover, this audience is envisaged as a community: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective, social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be.

It is important to emphasize, however, that Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy.¹⁰ It is also seen as a response to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization, which on the one hand have prompted a desire for more physical and face-to-face interaction between people, while on the other have inspired artists to adopt a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach and model their own “possible universes” (*RA*, p. 13). This emphasis on immediacy is familiar to us from the 1960s, recalling the premium placed by performance art on the authenticity of our first-hand encounter with the artist’s body. But Bourriaud is at pains to distance contemporary work from that of previous generations. The main difference, as he sees it, is the shift in attitude toward social change: instead of a “utopian” agenda, today’s artists seek only to find provisional solutions in the here and now; instead of trying to change their environment, artists today are simply “learning to inhabit the world in a better way”; instead of looking forward to a future utopia, this art sets up functioning “microtopias” in the present (*RA*, p. 13). Bourriaud summarizes this new attitude vividly in one sentence: “It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows” (*RA*, p. 45). This DIY, microtopian ethos is what Bourriaud perceives to be the core political significance of relational aesthetics.

Bourriaud names many artists in his book, most of whom are European, and many of whom were featured in his seminal exhibition *Traffic* at CAPC Bordeaux

9. This change in mode of address from “private” to “public” has for some time been associated with a decisive break with modernism; see Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility,” *Artforum* (November 1973), pp. 43–53, and “Double Negative: A New Syntax for Sculpture,” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).

10. This is reflected in the number of artists whose practice takes the form of offering a “service,” such as the Berlin-based U.S. artist Christine Hill, who offered back and shoulder massages to exhibition visitors, and who later went on to set up a fully functioning secondhand clothes shop, the Volksboutique, in Berlin and at *Documenta X* (1997).

in 1993. Certain artists are mentioned with metronomic regularity: Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Phillippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Christine Hill, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, and Jorge Pardo, all of whom will be familiar to anyone who has attended the international biennials, triennials, and *Manifestas* that have proliferated over the last decade. The work of these artists differs from that of their better known YBA contemporaries in several respects. Unlike the self-contained (and formally conservative) work of the British, with its accessible references to mass culture, European work is rather low-impact in appearance, including photography, video, wall texts, books, objects to be used, and leftovers from the aftermath of an opening event. It is basically installation art in format, but this is a term that many of its practitioners would resist; rather than forming a coherent and distinctive transformation of space (in the manner of Ilya Kabakov's "total installation," a theatrical mise-en-scène), relational art works insist upon *use* rather than contemplation.¹¹ And unlike the distinctively branded personalities of young British art, it is often hard to identify who has made a particular piece of "relational" art, since it tends to make use of existing cultural forms—including other works of art—and remixes them in the manner of a DJ or programmer.¹² Moreover, many of the artists Bourriaud discusses have collaborated with one another, further blurring the imprint of individual authorial status. Several have also curated each others' work in exhibitions—such as Gillick's "filtering" of Maria Lind's curatorship in *What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2000) and Tiravanija's *Utopia Station* for the 2003 Venice Biennale (co-curated with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Molly Nesbit).¹³ I now wish to focus on the work of two artists in particular, Tiravanija and Gillick, since Bourriaud deems them both to be paradigmatic of "relational aesthetics."

Rirkrit Tiravanija is a New York-based artist, born in Buenos Aires in 1961 to Thai parents and raised in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada. He is best known for

11. For example, Jorge Pardo's *Pier for Skulptur. Projekte Münster* (1997). *Pier* comprised a 50-meter-long jetty of California redwood with a small pavilion at the end. The work was a functional pier, providing mooring for boats, while a cigarette machine attached to the wall of the pavilion encouraged people to stop and look at the view.

12. This strategy is referred to by Bourriaud as "postproduction," and is elaborated in his follow-up book to *Relational Aesthetics*: "Since the early nineties, an ever-increasing number of art works have been created on the basis of preexisting works; more and more artists interpret, reproduce, reexhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural products. . . . These artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work. The material they manipulate is no longer primary." Bourriaud argues that postproduction differs from the ready-made, which questions authorship and the institution of art, because its emphasis is on recombining existing cultural artifacts in order to imbue them with new meaning. See Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002).

13. The best example of this current obsession with collaboration as a model is found in *No Ghost Just a Shell*, an ongoing project by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, who have invited Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, M/M, Francois Curlet, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Joseph, Joe Scanlan, and others to collaborate with them in creating work around the defunct Japanese *manga* character AnnLee.

hybrid installation performances, in which he cooks vegetable curry or pad thai for people attending the museum or gallery where he has been invited to work. In *Untitled (Still)* (1992) at 303 Gallery, New York, Tiravanija moved everything he found in the gallery office and storeroom into the main exhibition space, including the director, who was obliged to work in public, among cooking smells and diners. In the storeroom he set up what was described by one critic as a “makeshift refugee kitchen,” with paper plates, plastic knives and forks, gas burners, kitchen utensils, two folding tables, and some folding stools.¹⁴ In the gallery he cooked curries for visitors, and the detritus, utensils, and food packets became the art



Rirkrit Tiravanija. Untitled (Free). 303 Gallery, New York, 1992. Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

exhibit whenever the artist wasn't there. Several critics, and Tiravanija himself, have observed that this involvement of the audience is the main focus of his work: the food is but a means to allow a convivial relationship between audience and artist to develop.¹⁵

Underlying much of Tiravanija's practice is a desire not just to erode the distinction between institutional and social space, but between artist and viewer; the phrase “lots of people” regularly appears on his lists of materials. In the late 1990s, Tiravanija focused increasingly on creating situations where the audience could produce its own work. A more elaborate version of the 303 Gallery installa-

14. Jerry Saltz, “A Short History of Rirkrit Tiravanija,” *Art in America* (February 1996), p. 106.

15. If one wanted to identify historical precursors for this type of art, there are ample names to cite: Michael Asher's untitled installation at the Clare Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1974, in which he removed the partition between exhibition space and gallery office, or Gordon Matta-Clark's restaurant Food, opened with his artist colleagues in the early 1970s. Food was a collective project that enabled artists to earn a small living and fund their art practice without succumbing to the ideologically compromising demands of the art market. Other artists who presented the consumption of food and drink as art in the 1960s and early '70s include Allan Ruppersberg, Tom Marioni, Daniel Spoerri, and the Fluxus group.

tion/performance was undertaken in *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* (1996) at the Kölnischer Kunstverein. Here, Tiravanija built a wooden reconstruction of his New York apartment, which was made open to the public twenty-four hours a day. People could use the kitchen to make food, wash themselves in his bathroom, sleep in the bedroom, or hang out and chat in the living room. The catalog accompanying the Kunstverein project quotes a selection of newspaper articles and reviews, all of which reiterate the curator's assertion that "this unique combination of art and life offered an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody."¹⁶ Although the materials of Tiravanija's work have become more diverse,



Tiravanija. Untitled 1996 (Tomorrow Is Another Day). Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, 1996. Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

the emphasis remains on use over contemplation. For *Pad Thai*, a project at De Appel, Amsterdam, in 1996, he made available a room of amplified electric guitars and a drumset, allowing visitors to take up the instruments and generate their own music. *Pad Thai* initially incorporated a projection of Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) and subsequent incarnations included a film by Marcel Broodthaers at Speaker's Corner, Hyde Park, London (in which the artist writes on a blackboard "you are all artists"). In a project in Glasgow, *Cinema Liberté* (1999), Tiravanija asked the local audience to nominate their favorite films, which were then screened outdoors at the intersection of two streets in Glasgow. As Janet Kraynak has written, although Tiravanija's

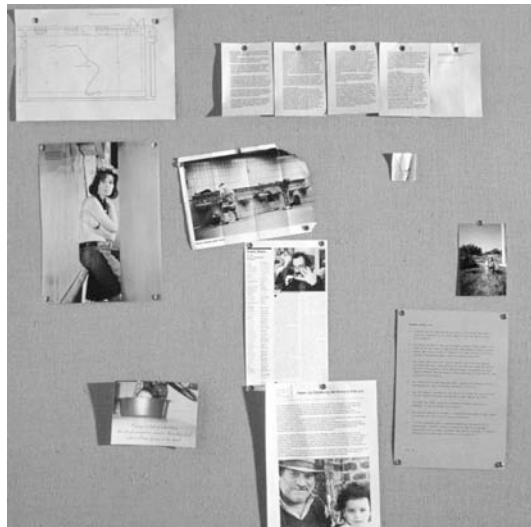
16. Udo Kittelmann, "Preface," in *Rirkrit Tiravanija: Untitled, 1996 (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* (Cologne: Salon Verlag and Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1996), n.p. As Janet Kraynak has noted, Tiravanija's work has occasioned some of the most idealized and euphoric art criticism of recent times: his work is heralded not just as an emancipatory site, free of constraints, but also as a critique of commodification and as a celebration of cultural identity—to the point where these imperatives ultimately collapse, in the institutional embrace of Tiravanija's persona as commodity. See Janet Kraynak, "Tiravanija's Liability," *Documents* 13 (Fall 1998), pp. 26–40. It is worth quoting Kraynak in full: "While Tiravanija's art compels or provokes a host of concerns relevant to the larger domain of contemporary art

dematerialized projects revive strategies of critique from the 1960s and '70s, it is arguable that in the context of today's dominant economic model of globalization, Tiravanija's itinerant ubiquity does not self-reflexively question this logic, but merely reproduces it.¹⁷ He is one of the most established, influential, and omnipresent figures on the international art circuit, and his work has been crucial to both the emergence of relational aesthetics as a theory, and to the curatorial desire for "opened," "laboratory" exhibitions.

My second example is the British artist Liam Gillick, born in 1964. Gillick's output is interdisciplinary: his heavily theorized interests are disseminated in sculpture, installation, graphic design, curating, art criticism, and novellas. A prevailing theme throughout his work in all media is the production of relationships (particularly social relationships) through our environment. His early work investigated the space between sculpture and functional design. Examples include his *Pinboard Project* (1992), a bulletin board containing instructions for use, potential items for inclusion on the board, and a recommendation to subscribe to a limited number of specialist

practices, its unique status in the public imagination derives in part from a certain naturalizing of the critical readings that have accompanied and, to an extent, constructed it. Unlike previous pairings of avant-garde utopianism, in which art merges happily with life, and anti-institutional criticality, in which art objects are constituted in, and as, social spaces, what putatively guarantees the production of uncontaminated social praxis in Tiravanija's work is the unique imprint of the artist, whose generosity both animates the installations and unifies them stylistically. A host of articles have focused on the familial atmosphere of the gallery where he is represented, and other biographical details of his life, rendering a covert equivalence between Tiravanija's work and self. This idealized projection seems to derive from the work itself, as the artist has thematized details of his ethnic background in his installations through references to Thai culture. . . . The artist, repositioned as both the source and arbiter of meaning, is embraced as the pure embodiment of his/her sexual, cultural, or ethnic identity, guaranteeing both the authenticity and political efficacy of his/her work" (pp. 28–29).

17. Ibid., pp. 39–40.



Liam Gillick. *Pinboard Project* (Grey). 1992.
 Courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London.

journals; and *Prototype Erasmus Table #2* (1994), a table “designed to nearly fill a room” and conceived as “a working place where it might be possible to finish working on the book *Erasmus Is Late*” (Gillick’s publication of 1995), but which is also available for use by other people “for the storage and exhibition of work on, under or around it.”¹⁸

Since the mid-1990s, Gillick has become best known for his three-dimensional design work: screens and suspended platforms made of aluminum and colored Plexiglas, which are often displayed alongside texts and geometrical designs painted directly onto a wall. Gillick’s descriptions of these works emphasize their potential use value, but in a way that carefully denies them any specific agency: each object’s meaning is so overdetermined that it seems to parody both claims made for modernist design and the language of management consulting. His 120 x 120 cm open-topped Plexiglas cube *Discussion Island: Projected Think Tank* (1997) is described as “a work that may be used as an object that might signify an enclosed zone for the consideration of exchange, information transfer and strategy,” while the *Big Conference Centre Legislation Screen* (1998), a 3 x 2 meter colored Plexiglas screen, “helps to define a location where individual actions are limited by rules imposed by the community as a whole.”¹⁹

Gillick’s design structures have been described as constructions having “a spatial resemblance to office spaces, bus shelters, meeting rooms and canteens,” but they also take up the legacy of Minimalist sculpture and post-Minimalist installation art (Donald Judd and Dan Graham immediately come to mind).²⁰ Yet

18. Gillick, quoted in *Liam Gillick*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen (Cologne: Oktagon, 2000), p. 36.

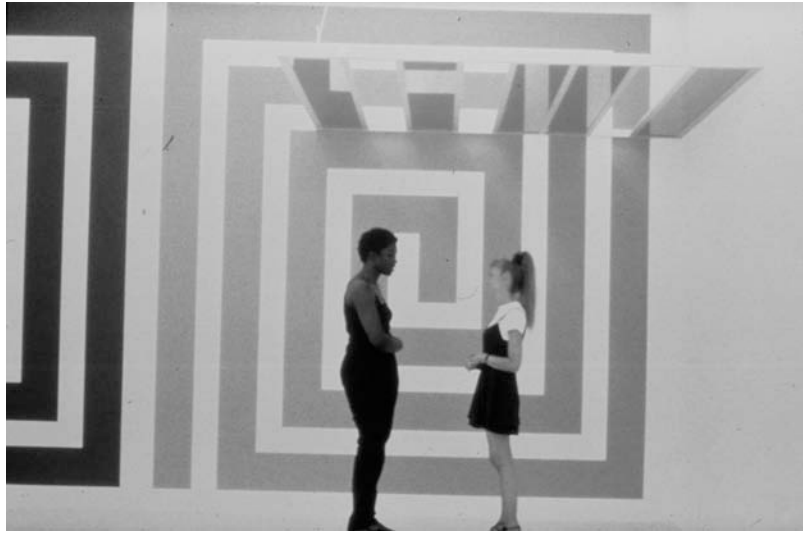
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 81.

20. Mike Dawson, “Liam Gillick,” *Flux* (August–September 2002), p. 63.



Gillick.
Revision/22nd
Floor Wall
Design. 1998.
Courtesy the artist
and Corvi-Mora,
London.

Gillick's work differs from that of his art historical predecessors: whereas Judd's modular boxes made the viewer aware of his/her physical movement around the work, while also drawing attention to the space in which these were exhibited, Gillick is happy for viewers to "just stand with their backs to the work and talk to each other."²¹ Rather than having the viewer "complete" the work, in the manner of Bruce Nauman's corridors or Graham's video installations of the 1970s, Gillick seeks a perpetual open-endedness in which his art is a backdrop to activity. "It doesn't necessarily function best as an object for consideration alone," he says. "It is sometimes a



Gillick. Big Conference Centre Limitation Screen. 1998. Courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London.

backdrop or decor rather than a pure content provider."²² Gillick's titles reflect this movement away from the directness of 1970s critique in their use of ironically bland management jargon: *Discussion Island*, *Arrival Rig*, *Dialogue Platform*, *Regulation Screen*, *Delay Screen*, and *Twinned Renegotiation Platform*.²³ These corporate allusions clearly distance the work from that of Graham, who exposed how apparently neutral architectural materials (such as glass, mirror, and steel) are used by the state and commerce to exercise political control. For Gillick, the task is not to rail against such institutions, but to negotiate ways of improving them.²⁴ A word that he frequently

21. Gillick, *Renovation Filter*, p. 16.

22. Gillick, *The Wood Way* (London: Whitechapel, 2002), p. 84.

23. All of these works were shown in *The Wood Way*, an exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery in 2002.

24. However, it is arguable from Gillick's examples that "improvement" connotes change on just a formal level. In 1997 he was invited to produce work for a Munich bank and described the project as follows: "I identified a problematic dead zone in the building—an oversight by the architects—which I proposed to solve with these screens. These would subtly change the way the space worked. Interestingly, however, my proposal made the architects rethink that part of the building . . . the architects came to a better conclusion about how to resolve their designs, without the need for any art" (Gillick,

uses is “scenario,” and to an extent his entire output is governed by an idea of “scenario thinking” as a way to envisage change in the world—not as a targeted critique of the present order, but “to examine the extent to which critical access is possible at all.”²⁵ It is worth noting that although Gillick’s writing is frustratingly intangible—full of deferral and possibility, rather than the present and actual—he has been invited to troubleshoot practical projects, such as a traffic system for Porsche in Stuttgart, and to design intercom systems for a housing project in Brussels. Gillick is typical of his generation in finding no conflict between this type of work and conventional “white cube” exhibitions; both are seen as ways to continue his investigation into hypothetical future “scenarios.” Rather than determining a specific outcome, Gillick is keen to trigger open-ended alternatives to which others may contribute. The middle ground, the compromise, is what interests him most.

I have chosen to discuss the examples of Gillick and Tiravanija because they seem to me the clearest expression of Bourriaud’s argument that relational art privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality. Tiravanija insists that the viewer be physically present in a particular situation at a particular time—eating the food that he cooks, alongside other visitors in a communal situation. Gillick alludes to more hypothetical relations, which in many cases don’t even need to exist, but he still insists that the presence of an audience is an essential component of his art: “My work is like the light in the fridge,” he says, “it only works when there are people there to open the fridge door. Without people, it’s not art—it’s something else—stuff in a room.”²⁶ This interest in the contingencies of a “relationship between”—rather than the object itself—is a hallmark of Gillick’s work and of his interest in collaborative practice as a whole.

This idea of considering the work of art as a potential trigger for participation is hardly new—think of Happenings, Fluxus instructions, 1970s performance art, and Joseph Beuys’s declaration that “everyone is an artist.” Each was accompanied by a rhetoric of democracy and emancipation that is very similar to Bourriaud’s

Renovation Filter, p. 21). One critic has dismissed this mode of working as “corporate feng shui” (Max Andrews, “Liam Gillick,” *Contemporary* 32, p. 73), drawing attention to the ways in which the proposed changes were primarily cosmetic rather than structural. Gillick would reply that the appearance of our environment conditions our behavior, and so the two are indivisible.

25. Liam Gillick, “A Guide to Video Conferencing Systems and the Role of the Building Worker in Relation to the Contemporary Art Exhibition (Backstage),” in Gillick, *Five or Six* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2000), p. 9. As Gillick notes, scenario thinking is a tool to propose change, even while it is “inherently linked to capitalism and the strategizing that goes with it.” This is because it comprises “one of the key components required in order to maintain the level of mobility and reinvention required to provide the dynamic aura of so-called free-market economies” (Gillick, “Prevision: Should the Future Help the Past?,” *Five or Six*, p. 27).

26. Gillick in *Renovation Filter*, p. 16. As Alex Farquharson has noted, “The operative phrase here is ‘might be possible.’ Whereas Rirkrit can reasonably expect his visitors to eat his Thai noodles, it is unlikely that Liam’s audience will do his reassessing. Instead of real activity, the viewer is offered a fictional role, an approach shared by Gonzalez-Foerster and Parreno” (Alex Farquharson, “Curator and Artist,” *Art Monthly* 270 [October 2003], p. 14).

defense of relational aesthetics.²⁷ The theoretical underpinnings of this desire to activate the viewer are easy to reel off: Walter Benjamin's "Author as Producer" (1934), Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" and "birth of the reader" (1968) and—most important for this context—Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1962). Writing on what he perceived to be the open and aleatory character of modernist literature, music, and art, Eco summarizes his discussion of James Joyce, Luciano Berio, and Alexander Calder in terms that cannot help but evoke Bourriaud's optimism:

The poetics of the "work in movement" (and partly that of the "open" work) sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society. It opens a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art. It poses new practical problems by organizing new communicative situations. In short, it installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art.²⁸

Analogies with Tiravanija and Gillick are evident in Eco's privileging of use value and the development of "communicative situations." However, it is Eco's contention that *every* work of art is potentially "open," since it may produce an unlimited range of possible readings; it is simply the achievement of contemporary art, music, and literature to have foregrounded this fact.²⁹ Bourriaud misinterprets these arguments by applying them to a specific type of work (those that require literal interaction) and thereby redirects the argument back to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception.³⁰ His position also differs from Eco in one other important respect: Eco regarded the work of art as a *reflection* of the conditions of our existence in a fragmented modern culture, while Bourriaud sees the work of art *producing* these conditions. The interactivity of relational art is therefore superior to optical contemplation of an object, which is assumed to be passive and disengaged, because the work of art is a "social form" capable of producing positive human relationships. As a consequence, the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect.

27. Beuys is mentioned infrequently in *Relational Aesthetics*, and on one occasion is specifically invoked to sever any connection between "social sculpture" and relational aesthetics (p. 30).

28. Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work" (1962), in Eco, *The Open Work* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 22–23.

29. Eco cites Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: "How can anything ever *present itself* truly to us since its synthesis is never completed? How could I gain the experience of the world, as I would of an individual actuating his own existence, since none of the views or perceptions I have of it can exhaust it and the horizons remain forever *open*? . . . This ambiguity does not represent an imperfection in the nature of existence or in that of consciousness; it is its very definition" (Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," p. 17).

30. It could be argued that this approach actually forecloses "open-ended" readings, since the meaning of the work becomes so synonymous with the fact that its meaning is open.

Aesthetic Judgment

To anyone acquainted with Althusser's 1969 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," this description of social forms *producing* human relationships will sound familiar. Bourriaud's defense of relational aesthetics is indebted to Althusser's idea that culture—as an "ideological state apparatus"—does not *reflect* society, but *produces* it. As taken up by feminist artists and film critics in the 1970s, Althusser's essay permitted a more nuanced expression of the political in art. As Lucy Lippard has noted, it was in form (rather than content) that much art of the late 1960s aspired to a democratic outreach; the insight of Althusser's essay heralded recognition that a critique of institutions by circumventing them had to be refined.³¹ It was not enough to show that art work's meaning is subordinate to its framing (be this in a museum or magazine); the viewer's own *identification* with the image was deemed to be equally important. Rosalyn Deutsche usefully summarizes this shift in her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (1996) when she compares Hans Haacke to the subsequent generation of artists that included Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine. Haacke's work, she writes, "invited viewers to decipher relations and find content already inscribed in images but did not ask them to examine their *own role and investments* in producing images."³² By contrast, the subsequent generation of artists "*treated the image itself as a social relationship* and the viewer as a subject constructed by the very object from which it formerly claimed detachment."³³

I will return later to the question of identification that Deutsche raises. In the meantime it is necessary to observe that it is only a short step from regarding the *image* as a social relationship to Bourriaud's argument that the *structure* of an art work produces a social relationship. However, identifying what the structure of a relational art work *is* is no easy task, precisely because the work claims to be open-ended. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that relational art works are an outgrowth of installation art, a form that has from its inception solicited the literal presence of the viewer. Unlike the "Public Vision" generation of artists, whose achievements—largely in photography—have been unproblematically assimilated into art-historical orthodoxy, installation art has been frequently denigrated as just one more form of postmodern spectacle. For some critics, notably Rosalind Krauss, installation art's use of diverse media divorces it from a medium-specific tradition; it therefore has no inherent conventions against which it may self-reflexively operate, nor criteria against which we may evaluate its success. Without a sense of what the *medium* of installation art *is*, the work cannot attain

31. I am thinking here of much Conceptual art, video, performance, installation, and site-specific work that expressed its politics by refusing to gratify or collude with the art market, but which remained self-referential on the level of content. See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966–1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. vii–xxii.

32. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 295–96. Italics mine.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

the holy grail of self-reflexive criticality.³⁴ I have suggested elsewhere that the viewer's presence might be one way to envisage the medium of installation art, but Bourriaud complicates this assertion.³⁵ He argues that the criteria we should use to evaluate open-ended, participatory art works are not just aesthetic, but political and even ethical: we must judge the "relations" that are produced by relational art works.

When confronted by a relational art work, Bourriaud suggests that we ask the following questions: "does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?" (*RA*, p. 109). He refers to these questions, which we should ask in front of any aesthetic product, as "criteria of co-existence" (*RA*, p. 109). Theoretically, in front of any work of art, we can ask what kind of social model the piece produces; could I live, for instance, in a world structured by the organizing principles of a Mondrian painting? Or, what "social form" is produced by a Surrealist object? The problem that arises with Bourriaud's notion of "structure" is that it has an erratic relationship to the work's ostensible subject matter, or content. For example, do we value the fact that Surrealist objects recycle outmoded commodities—or the fact that their imagery and disconcerting juxtapositions explore the unconscious desires and anxieties of their makers? With the hybrid installation/performances of relational aesthetics, which rely so heavily on context and the viewer's literal engagement, these questions are even more difficult to answer. For example, *what* Tiravanija cooks, *how* and *for whom*, are less important to Bourriaud than the fact that he gives away the results of his cooking for free. Gillick's bulletin boards can be similarly questioned: Bourriaud does not discuss the texts or images referred to on the individual clippings pinned to the boards, nor the formal arrangement and juxtaposition of these clippings, but only Gillick's democratization of material and flexible format. (The owner is at liberty to modify these various elements at any given time according to personal tastes and current events.) For Bourriaud, the structure is the subject matter—and in this he is far more formalist than he acknowledges.³⁶ Unhinged both from artistic intentionality and consideration of the broader context in which they operate, relational art works become, like Gillick's pinboards, just "a constantly changing

34. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 56. Elsewhere, Krauss suggests that after the late 1960s, it was to a "conceptual-cum-architectural site that art practice would become 'specific,' rather than to any aesthetic medium"—as best exemplified in the work of Marcel Broodthaers (Krauss, "Performing Art," *London Review of Books*, November 12, 1998, p. 18). While I agree to an extent with Krauss on the point of self-reflexive criticality, I am troubled by her reluctance to countenance other ways in which contemporary installation art might successfully operate.

35. See the conclusion to my forthcoming book, *Installation Art and the Viewer* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

36. This is reflected in Bourriaud's discussion of Felix Gonzales-Torres, an artist whose work he considers to be a crucial forerunner of relational aesthetics. Before his death from AIDS in 1996, Gonzales-Torres gained recognition for his emotive reworkings of Minimalist sculpture using piles of sweets and stacks of paper, to which visitors are encouraged to help themselves. Through this work, Gonzales-Torres made subtle allusions to politically charged issues such as the AIDS crisis (a pile of sweets matched the weight of his partner Ross, who died in 1991), urban violence (handgun laws in *Untitled [NRA]* [1991]), and homosexuality (*Perfect Lovers* [1991]). Bourriaud, however, demotes this aspect of Gonzales-Torres's practice in favor of its "structure"—its literal generosity toward the viewer.

portrait of the heterogeneity of everyday life,” and do not examine their relationship to it.³⁷ In other words, although the works claim to defer to their context, they do not question their imbrication within it. Gillick’s pinboards are embraced as democratic in structure—but only those who own them may interact with their arrangement. We need to ask, as Group Material did in the 1980s, “Who is the public? How is a culture made, and who is it for?”

I am not suggesting that relational art works need to develop a greater social conscience—by making pinboard works about international terrorism, for example, or giving free curries to refugees. I am simply wondering how we decide what the “structure” of a relational art work comprises, and whether this is so detachable from the work’s ostensible subject matter or permeable with its context. Bourriaud wants to equate aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of the relationships produced by a work of art. But how do we measure or compare these relationships? The *quality* of the relationships in “relational aesthetics” are never examined or called into question. When Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them,” I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does “democracy” really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?

Antagonism

Rosalyn Deutsche has argued that the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its naturalized exclusions are taken into account and made open to contestation: “Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence.” Deutsche takes her lead from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Published in 1985, Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony* is one of the first books to reconsider Leftist political theory through the lens of post-structuralism, following what the authors perceived to be an impasse of Marxist theorization in the 1970s. Their text is a rereading of Marx through Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Lacan’s understanding of subjectivity as split and decentered. Several of the ideas that Laclau and Mouffe put forward allow us to reconsider Bourriaud’s claims for the politics of relational aesthetics in a more critical light.

The first of these ideas is the concept of antagonism. Laclau and Mouffe argue that a fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly

37. Eric Troncy, “London Calling,” *Flash Art* (Summer 1992), p. 89.

being drawn and brought into debate—in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased. Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order—a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy. It is important to stress right away that the idea of antagonism is not understood by Laclau and Mouffe to be a pessimistic acceptance of political deadlock; antagonism does not signal “the expulsion of utopia from the field of the political.” On the contrary, they maintain that without the concept of utopia there is no possibility of a radical imaginary. The task is to balance the tension between imaginary ideal and pragmatic management of a social positivity without lapsing into the totalitarian.

This understanding of antagonism is grounded in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of subjectivity. Following Lacan, they argue that subjectivity is not a self-transparent, rational, and pure presence, but is irremediably decentered and incomplete.³⁸ However, surely there is a conflict between a concept of the subject as decentered and the idea of political agency? “Decentering” implies the lack of a unified subject, while “agency” implies a fully present, autonomous subject of political will and self-determination. Laclau argues that this conflict is false, because the subject is neither entirely decentered (which would imply psychosis) nor entirely unified (i.e., the absolute subject). Following Lacan, he argues that we have a *failed* structural identity, and are therefore dependent on *identification* in order to proceed.³⁹ Because subjectivity *is* this process of identification, we are necessarily incomplete entities. Antagonism, therefore, is the relationship that emerges between such incomplete entities. Laclau contrasts this to the relationships that emerge between complete entities, such as contradiction (A-not A) or “real difference” (A-B). We all hold mutually contradictory beliefs (for example, there are materialists who read horoscopes and psychoanalysts who send Christmas cards) but this does not result in antagonism. Nor is “real difference” (A-B) equal to antagonism; because it concerns full identities, it results in collision—like a car crash or “the war against terrorism.” In the case of antagonism, argue Laclau and Mouffe, “we are confronted with a different situation: the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution.”⁴⁰ In other words, the presence of what is not me renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and the threat that the other represents transforms my *own* sense of self into something questionable. When played out on a social level, antagonism can be

38. For Lacan, the subject is not equivalent to a conscious sense of agency: “Lacan’s ‘subject’ is the subject of the unconscious . . . inescapably divided, castrated, split” as a result of his/her entry into language (Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* [London: Routledge, 1996], pp. 195–96).

39. “. . . the subject is partially self-determined. However, as this self-determination is not the expression of what the subject *already* is but the result of its lack of being instead, self-determination can only proceed through processes of *identification*” (Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), quoted in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe [London: Routledge, 1996], p. 55).

40. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 125.

viewed as the limits of society's ability to fully constitute itself. Whatever is at the boundary of the social (and of identity), seeking to *define* it also *destroys* its ambition to constitute a full presence: "As conditions of possibility for the existence of a pluralist democracy, conflicts and antagonisms constitute at the same time the condition of impossibility of its final achievement."⁴¹

I dwell on this theory in order to suggest that the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests, since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness. There is debate and dialogue in a Tiravanija cooking piece, to be sure, but there is no inherent friction since the situation is what Bourriaud calls "microtopian": it produces a community whose members identify with each other, because they have something in common. The only substantial account that I can find of Tiravanija's first solo exhibition at 303 Gallery is by Jerry Saltz in *Art in America*, and it runs as follows:

At 303 Gallery I regularly sat with or was joined by a stranger, and it was nice. The gallery became a place for sharing, jocularly and frank talk. I had an amazing run of meals with art dealers. Once I ate with Paula Cooper who recounted a long, complicated bit of professional gossip. Another day, Lisa Spellman related in hilarious detail a story of intrigue about a fellow dealer trying, unsuccessfully, to woo one of her artists. About a week later I ate with David Zwirner. I bumped into him on the street, and he said, "nothing's going right today, let's go to Rirkrit's." We did, and he talked about a lack of excitement in the New York art world. Another time I ate with Gavin Brown, the artist and dealer . . . who talked about the collapse of SoHo—only he welcomed it, felt it was about time, that the galleries had been showing too much mediocre art. Later in the show's run, I was joined by an unidentified woman and a curious flirtation filled the air. Another time I chatted with a young artist who lived in Brooklyn who had real insights about the shows he'd just seen.⁴²

The informal chattiness of this account clearly indicates what kind of problems face those who wish to know more about such work: the review only tells us that Tiravanija's intervention is considered good because it permits networking among a group of art dealers and like-minded art lovers, and because it evokes the atmosphere of a late-night bar. Everyone has a common interest in art, and the result is art-world gossip, exhibition reviews, and flirtation. Such communication is fine to an extent, but it is not in and of itself emblematic of "democracy." To be fair, I think that Bourriaud recognizes this problem—but he does not raise it in relation to the artists he promotes: "Connecting people, creating interactive,

41. Mouffe, "Introduction," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 11.

42. Saltz, "A Short History of Rirkrit Tiravanija," p. 107.

communicative experience,” he says, “What for? If you forget the ‘what for?’ I’m afraid you’re left with simple Nokia art—producing interpersonal relations for their own sake and never addressing their political aspects.”⁴³ I would argue that Tiravanija’s art, at least as presented by Bourriaud, falls short of addressing the political aspect of communication—even while certain of his projects do at first glance appear to address it in a dissonant fashion. Let us return to accounts of Tiravanija’s Cologne project, *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*. I have already quoted curator Udo Kittelman’s comment that the installation offered “an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody.” He continues: “Groups of people prepared meals and talked, took a bath or occupied the bed. Our fear that the art-living-space might be vandalized did not come true. . . . The art space lost its institutional function and finally turned into a free social space.”⁴⁴ The *Kölnischer Stadt-Anzeiger* concurred that the work offered “a kind of ‘asylum’ for everyone.”⁴⁵ But who is the “everyone” here? This may be a microtopia, but—like utopia—it is still predicated on the exclusion of those who hinder or prevent its realization. (It is tempting to consider what might have happened if Tiravanija’s space had been invaded by those seeking genuine “asylum.”)⁴⁶ His installations reflect Bourriaud’s understanding of the relations produced by relational art works as fundamentally harmonious, because they are addressed to a community of viewing subjects with *something in common*.⁴⁷ This is why Tiravanija’s works are political only in the loosest sense of advocating dialogue over monologue (the one-way communication equated with spectacle by the Situationists). The content of this dialogue is not in itself democratic, since all questions return to the hackneyed nonissue of “is it art?”⁴⁸ Despite Tiravanija’s rhetoric of open-endedness and viewer emancipation,

43. Bourriaud quoted in “Public Relations: Bennett Simpson Talks with Nicolas Bourriaud,” p. 48.

44. Udo Kittelmann, “Preface,” in *Rirkrit Tiravanija*, n.p.

45. *Kölnischer Stadt-Anzeiger* quoted in *Rirkrit Tiravanija*, n.p.

46. Saltz muses on this question in a wonderfully blinkered fashion: “. . . theoretically anyone can come in [to an art gallery]. How come they don’t? Somehow the art world seems to secrete an invisible enzyme that repels outsiders. What would happen if the next time Tiravanija set up a kitchen in an art gallery, a bunch of homeless people turned up daily for lunch? What would the Walker Art Center do if a certain homeless man scraped up the price of admission to the museum, and chose to sleep on Tiravanija’s cot all day, every day? . . . In his own quiet way, Tiravanija forces these questions to the forefront, and jimmy’s the lock (so efficiently left bolted by much so-called political art) on the door that separates the art world from everything else.” The “invisible enzyme” that Saltz refers to should alert him precisely to the limitations of Tiravanija’s work and its nonantagonistic approach to issues of public space (Saltz, “A Short History of Rirkrit Tiravanija,” p. 106).

47. Jean-Luc Nancy’s critique of the Marxist idea of community as communion in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) has been crucial to my consideration of a counter-model to relational aesthetics. Since the mid-1990s, Nancy’s text has become an increasingly important reference point for writers on contemporary art, as seen in Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*; chapter 4 of Pamela M. Lee’s *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000); George Baker, “Relations and Counter-Relations: An Open Letter to Nicolas Bourriaud,” in *Zusammenhänge herstellen/Contextualise*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Dumont, 2002); and Jessica Morgan, *Common Wealth* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).

48. As the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported, “No subject is given, yet the artistic context automatically leads all discussions back to the question about the function of art.” Christophe Blase,

the structure of his work circumscribes the outcome in advance, and relies on its presence within a gallery to differentiate it from entertainment. Tiravanija's microtopia gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduces its scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers.⁴⁹

Gillick's position on the question of dialogue and democracy is more ambiguous. At first glance he appears to support Laclau and Mouffe's antagonism thesis:

While I admire artists who construct "better" visions of how things might be, the middle-ground, negotiated territories I am interested in always carry the possibility of moments where idealism is unclear. There are as many demonstrations of compromise, strategy, and collapse in my work as there are clear recipes for how our environment can be better.⁵⁰

However, when one looks for "clear recipes" in Gillick's work, few if any are to be found. "I'm working in a nebulous cloud of ideas," he says, "which are somewhat partial or parallel rather than didactic."⁵¹ Unwilling to state what ideals are to be compromised, Gillick trades on the credibility of referencing architecture (its engagement with concrete social situations) while remaining abstract on the issue of articulating a specific position. The *Discussion Platforms*, for example, do not point to any particular change, just change in general—a "scenario" in which potential "narratives" may or may not emerge. Gillick's position is slippery, and ultimately he seems to argue for compromise and negotiation *as* recipes for improvement. Logically, this pragmatism is tantamount to an abandonment or failure of ideals; his work is the demonstration of a compromise, rather than an articulation of a problem.⁵²

By contrast, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of democracy as antagonism can be seen in the work of two artists conspicuously ignored by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* and *Postproduction*: the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn and the Spanish

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, December 19, 1996, quoted in Rirkrit Tiravanija, n.p. He continues: "Whether this discourse is read on a naïve or a context-educated level—the intermediate level would be the obligatory reference to Duchamp—is a matter of chance and depends on the respective participants. Anyway, the fact that communication in general and a discussion on art in particular takes place, gains a positive value as smallest denominator."

49. Essentially, there is no difference between utopia (societal perfection) and the microtopia, which is just personal perfection to the power of ten (or twenty, or however many participants are present). Both are predicated on exclusion of that which hinders or threatens the harmonious order. This is seen throughout Thomas More's description of Utopia. Describing a troublesome Christian zealot who condemned other religions, the traveler Raphael recounts: "When he'd been going on like this for some time, he was arrested and charged, not with blasphemy, but with disturbance of the peace. He was duly convicted and sentenced to exile—for one of the most ancient principles of their constitution is religious toleration" (Thomas More, *Utopia* [London: Penguin Books, 1965], p. 119).

50. Gillick, *The Wood Way*, pp. 81–82.

51. Gillick, *Renovation Filter*, p. 20.

52. We could even say that in Gillick's microtopia, devotion to compromise *is* the ideal: an intriguing but untenable hypothesis, and ultimately less a democratic microtopia than a form of "third way" politics.

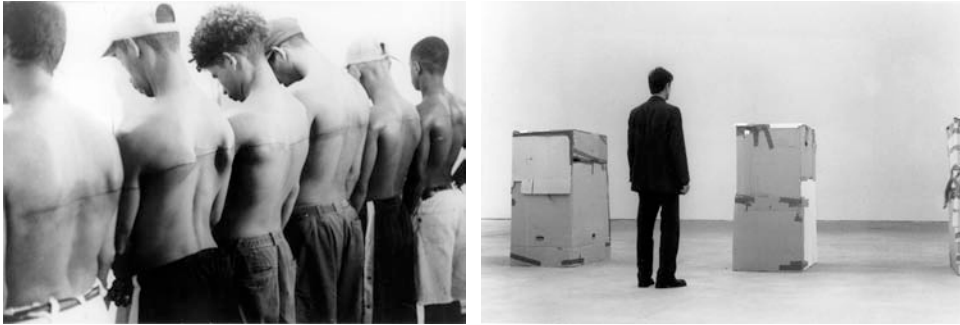
artist Santiago Sierra.⁵³ These artists set up “relationships” that emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation in their art, but do so without collapsing these relationships into the work’s content. The relations produced by their performances and installations are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a “microtopia” and instead *sustains* a tension among viewers, participants, and context. An integral part of this tension is the introduction of collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds, which in turn serves to challenge contemporary art’s self-perception as a domain that embraces other social and political structures.

Nonidentification and Autonomy

The work of Santiago Sierra (born in 1966), like that of Tiravanija, involves the literal setting-up of relations among people: the artist, the participants in his work, and the audience. But since the late 1990s Sierra’s “actions” have been organized around relations that are more complicated—and more controversial—than those produced by the artists associated with relational aesthetics. Sierra has attracted tabloid attention and belligerent criticism for some of his more extreme actions, such as *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People* (2000), *A Person Paid for 360 Continuous Working Hours* (2000), and *Ten People Paid to Masturbate* (2000). These ephemeral actions are documented in casual black-and-white photographs, a short text, and occasionally video. This mode of documentation appears to be a legacy of 1970s Conceptual and body art—Chris Burden and Marina Abramovic spring to mind—but Sierra’s work significantly develops this tradition in its use of other people as performers and in the emphasis on their remuneration. While Tiravanija celebrates the gift, Sierra knows that there’s no such thing as a free meal: everything and everyone has a price. His work can be seen as a grim meditation on the social and political conditions that permit disparities in people’s “prices” to emerge. Now regularly commissioned to make work in galleries throughout Europe and the Americas, Sierra creates a kind of ethnographic realism, in which the outcome or unfolding of his action forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works.⁵⁴

53. However, Hirschhorn was included in the exhibition *GNS* and Sierra in *Hardcore*, both held at the Palais de Tokyo in 2003. See also Bourriaud’s discussion of Sierra in “Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?,” *Beaux Arts* 228 (May 2003), p. 41.

54. Since Sierra moved to Mexico in 1996, the majority of his actions have taken place in Latin America, and the “realism” of their outcome is usually a savage indictment of globalization—but this is not always the case. In *Elevation of Six Benches* (2001) at the Kunsthalle in Munich, Sierra paid workers to hold up all the leather benches in the museum galleries for set periods of time. The project was a compromise, since the Kunsthalle would not let Sierra tear out a wall of their new Herzog & de Meuron gallery for workers to hold up, but Sierra still considered the outcome to be successful “since it reflected the reality of labor relations in Munich. Munich is a clean and prosperous city, and consequently the only people we could find to perform the task at hand were unemployed actors and bodybuilders who wanted to show off their physical prowess” (Sierra, “A Thousand Words,” *Artforum* [October 2002], p. 131).



Santiago Sierra. Left: 250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Paid People. Espacio Aglutinador, Havana, December 1999. Right: Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes. Kunst-Werke Berlin, September 2000. Courtesy Lisson Gallery and the artist.

Interpreting Sierra's practice in this way runs counter to dominant readings of his work, which present it as a nihilistic reflection on Marx's theory of the exchange value of labor. (Marx argued that the worker's labor time is worth less to the capitalist than its subsequent exchange value in the form of a commodity produced by this labor.) The tasks that Sierra requires of his collaborators—which are invariably useless, physically demanding, and on occasion leave permanent scars—are seen as amplifications of the status quo in order to expose its ready abuse of those who will do even the most humiliating or pointless job in return for money. Because Sierra receives payment for his actions—as an artist—and is the first to admit the contradictions of his situation, his detractors argue that he is stating the pessimistic obvious: capitalism exploits. Moreover, this is a system from which nobody is exempt. Sierra pays others to do work for which he gets paid, and in turn he is exploited by galleries, dealers, and collectors. Sierra himself does little to contradict this view when he opines,

I can't change anything. There is no possibility that we can change anything with our artistic work. We do our work because we are making art, and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality. But I don't believe in the possibility of change.⁵⁵

Sierra's apparent complicity with the status quo does raise the question of how his work differs from that of Tiravanija. It is worth bearing in mind that, since the 1970s, older avant-garde rhetorics of opposition and transformation have been frequently replaced by strategies of complicity; what matters is not the complicity, but how we receive it. If Tiravanija's work is experienced in a major key, then Sierra's is most definitely minor. What follows is an attempt to read the latter's

55. Sierra, quoted in *Santiago Sierra: Works 2002–1990* (Birmingham, England: Ikon Gallery, 2002), p. 15.

work through the dual lenses of *Relational Aesthetics* and *Hegemony* in order to tease out these differences further.

It has already been noted that Sierra documents his actions and thereby ensures that we know what he considers their “structure” to be. Take, for example, *The Wall of a Gallery Pulled Out, Inclined Sixty Degrees from the Ground and Sustained by Five People*, Mexico City (2000). Unlike Tiravanija and Gillick, who embrace an idea of open-endedness, Sierra delimits from the outset his choice of invited participants and the context in which the event takes place. “Context” is a key word for Gillick and Tiravanija, yet their work does little to address the problem of what a context actually comprises. (One has the impression that it exists as undifferentiated infinity, like cyberspace.) Laclau and Mouffe argue that for a context to be constituted and identified as such, it must demarcate certain limits; it is from the exclusions engendered by this demarcation that antagonism occurs. It is precisely this act of exclusion that is disavowed in relational art’s preference for “open-endedness.”⁵⁶ Sierra’s actions, by contrast, embed themselves into other “institutions” (e.g., immigration, the minimum wage, traffic congestion, illegal street commerce, homelessness) in order to highlight the divisions enforced by these contexts. Crucially, however, Sierra neither presents these divisions as reconciled (in the way Tiravanija elides the museum with the café or apartment), nor as entirely separate spheres: the fact that his works are realized moves them into the terrain of antagonism (rather than the “car crash” model of collision between full identities) and hints that their boundaries are both unstable and open to change.

56. As Laclau argues, it is this “radical undecidability,” and the decision that has to be taken within this, that is constitutive of a political society. See Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 52–53.



Sierra. *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*. *Arsenale, Venice Biennale, 2001*.
 Courtesy Lisson Gallery and the artist.

In a work for the 2001 Venice Biennale, *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*, Sierra invited illegal street vendors, most of whom came from southern Italy or were immigrants from Senegal, China, and Bangladesh, to have their hair dyed blond in return for 120,000 lire (\$60). The only condition to their participation was that their hair be naturally dark. Sierra's description of the work does not document the impact of his action on the days that followed the mass bleaching, but this aftermath was an integral aspect of the work.⁵⁷ During the Venice Biennale, the street vendors—who hover on street corners selling fake designer handbags—are usually the social group most obviously excluded from the glitzy opening; in 2001, however, their newly bleached hair literally highlighted their presence in the city. This was coupled by a gesture inside the Biennale proper, where Sierra gave over his allocated exhibition space in the Arsenale to a handful of the vendors, who used it to sell their fake Fendi handbags on a groundsheet, just as they did on the street. Sierra's gesture prompted a wry analogy between art and commerce, in the style of 1970s institutional critique, but moved substantially beyond this, since vendors and exhibition were mutually estranged by the confrontation. Instead of aggressively hailing passersby with their trade, as they did on the street, the vendors were subdued. This made my own encounter with them disarming in a way that only subsequently revealed to me my own anxieties about feeling "included" in the Biennale. Surely these guys were actors? Had they crept in here for a joke? Foregrounding a moment of mutual nonidentification, Sierra's action disrupted the art audience's sense of identity, which is founded precisely on unspoken racial and class exclusions, as well as veiling blatant commerce. It is important that Sierra's work did not achieve a harmonious reconciliation between the two systems, but sustained the tension between them.

Sierra's return to the Venice Biennale in 2003 comprised a major performance/installation for the Spanish pavilion. *Wall Enclosing a Space* involved sealing off the pavilion's interior with concrete blocks from floor to ceiling. On entering the building, viewers were confronted by a hastily constructed yet impregnable wall that rendered the galleries inaccessible. Visitors carrying a Spanish passport were invited to enter the space via the back of the building, where two immigration officers were inspecting passports. All non-Spanish nationals, however, were denied entry to the pavilion, whose interior contained nothing but gray paint peeling from the walls, left over from the previous year's exhibition. The work was "relational" in Bourriaud's sense, but it problematized any idea of these relations

57. "The procedure was done in a collective manner inside the closed doors of a warehouse situated in the Arsenale, during the inauguration of that year's Venice Biennale. Although the number of people programmed to take part in this operation was originally 200, it was finally down to 133 due to the increasing arrival of immigrants, making it difficult to calculate with precision how many had already entered the hall. It was then decided to shut down the entrance and calculate the number by a rough count. This caused numerous problems at the door, due to the never-ending flow of people that left or entered" (Sierra, quoted in *Santiago Sierra*, p. 46).



Sierra. Wall Enclosing a Space. Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2003. Left photo: Pablo Leon de la Barra. Right photo: Charles LaBelle.

being fluid and unconstrained by exposing how all our interactions are, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions.⁵⁸

The work of Thomas Hirschhorn (born in 1957) often addresses similar issues. His practice is conventionally read in terms of its contribution to sculptural tradition—his work is said to reinvent the monument, the pavilion, and the altar by immersing the viewer among found images, videos, and photocopies, bound together in cheap, perishable materials such as cardboard, brown tape, and tinfoil. Beyond occasional references to the tendency of his work to get vandalized or looted when situated outside the gallery, the role of the viewer is rarely addressed in writing on his art.⁵⁹ Hirschhorn is well-known for his assertion that he does not make political art, but makes art politically. Significantly, this political commitment does not take the form of literally activating the viewer in a space:

I do not want to invite or oblige viewers to become interactive with what I do; I do not want to activate the public. I want to give of myself, to engage myself to such a degree that viewers confronted with the work can take part and become involved, but not as actors.⁶⁰

Hirschhorn's work represents an important shift in the way that contemporary art conceives of its viewer, one that is matched by his assertion of art's autonomy. One

58. As Laclau and Mouffe conclude, politics should not found itself on postulating an "essence of the social" but, on the contrary, on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every "essence" and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 193.

59. The most substantial example of this approach is Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Cargo and Cult: The Displays of Thomas Hirschhorn," *Artforum* (November 2001). The peripheral location of Hirschhorn's sculptures has on occasion meant that their contents have been stolen, most notably in Glasgow, 2000, before the exhibition had even opened.

60. Hirschhorn, interview with Okwui Enwezor, in *Thomas Hirschhorn: Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), p. 27.

of the presumptions underlying *Relational Aesthetics* is the idea—introduced by the historical avant-garde and reiterated ever since—that art should not be a privileged and independent sphere but instead fused with “life.” Today, when art has become all too subsumed into everyday life—as leisure, entertainment, and business—artists such as Hirschhorn are reasserting the autonomy of artistic activity. As a consequence, Hirschhorn does not regard his work to be “open-ended” or to require completion by the viewer, since the politics of his practice derive instead from *how* the work is made:

To make art politically means to choose materials that do not intimidate, a format that doesn’t dominate, a device that does not seduce. To make art politically is not to submit to an ideology or to denounce the system, in opposition to so-called “political art.” It is to work with the fullest energy against the principle of “quality.”⁶¹

A rhetoric of democracy pervades Hirschhorn’s work, but it is not manifested in the viewer’s literal activation; rather, it appears in decisions regarding format, materials, and location, such as his “altars,” which emulate ad hoc memorials of flowers and toys at accident sites, and which are located in peripheral locations around a city. In these works—as in the installations *Pole-Self* and *Laundrette*, both 2001—found images, texts, advertisements, and photocopies are juxtaposed to contextualize consumer banality with political and military atrocities.

Many of Hirschhorn’s concerns came together in the *Bataille Monument* (2002), made for *Documenta XI*. Located in Nordstadt, a suburb of Kassel several miles away from the main *Documenta* venues, the *Monument* comprised three installations in large makeshift shacks, a bar run by a local family, and a sculpture of a tree, all erected on a lawn surrounded by two housing projects. The shacks were constructed from Hirschhorn’s signature materials: cheap timber, foil, plastic sheeting, and brown tape. The first housed a library of books and videos grouped around five Bataillean themes: word, image, art, sex, and sport. Several worn sofas, a television, and video were also provided, and the whole installation was designed to facilitate familiarization with the philosopher, of whom Hirschhorn claims to be a “fan.” The two other shacks housed a television studio and an installation of information about Bataille’s life and work. To reach the *Bataille Monument*, visitors had to participate in a further aspect of the work: securing a lift from a Turkish cab company which was contracted to ferry *Documenta* visitors to and from the site. Viewers were then stranded at the *Monument* until a return cab became available, during which time they would inevitably make use of the bar.

In locating the *Monument* in the middle of a community whose ethnic and economic status did not mark it as a target audience for *Documenta*, Hirschhorn

61. Ibid., p. 29. Hirschhorn is here referring to the idea of quality espoused by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and other critics as a criterion of aesthetic judgment. I should like to distance my use of “quality” (as in “the *quality* of the relationships in relational aesthetics”) from that alluded to by Hirschhorn.

Thomas Hirschhorn. *Right and facing page*: *Bataille Monument*, Documenta XI, 2002. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.



contrived a curious rapprochement between the influx of art tourists and the area's residents. Rather than make the local populace subject to what he calls the "zoo effect," Hirschhorn's project made visitors feel like hapless intruders. Even more disruptively, in light of the international art world's intellectual pretensions, Hirschhorn's *Monument* took the local inhabitants seriously as potential Bataille readers. This gesture induced a range of emotive responses among visitors, including accusations that Hirschhorn's gesture was inappropriate and patronizing. This unease revealed the fragile conditioning of the art world's self-constructed identity. The complicated play of identificatory and dis-identificatory mechanisms at work in the content, construction, and location of the *Bataille Monument* were radically and disruptively thought-provoking: the "zoo effect" worked two ways. Rather than offering, as the *Documenta* handbook claims, a reflection on "communal commitment," the *Bataille Monument* served to destabilize (and therefore potentially liberate) any notion of community identity or what it might mean to be a "fan" of art and philosophy.

A work like the *Bataille Monument* depends on its context for impact, but it could theoretically be restaged elsewhere, in comparable circumstances. Significantly, the viewer is no longer required to participate literally (i.e., to eat noodles, or to activate a sculpture), but is asked only to be a thoughtful and reflective visitor:

I do not want to do an interactive work. I want to do an active work. To me, the most important activity that an art work can provoke is the activity of thinking. Andy Warhol's *Big Electric Chair* (1967) makes me think, but it is a painting on a museum wall. An active work requires that I first give of myself.⁶²

62. Thomas Hirschhorn, in *Common Wealth*, ed. Morgan, p. 63.

The independent stance that Hirschhorn asserts in his work—though produced collaboratively, his art is the product of a single artist’s vision—implies the readmittance of a degree of autonomy to art. Likewise, the viewer is no longer coerced into fulfilling the artist’s interactive requirements, but is presupposed as a subject of independent thought, which is the essential prerequisite for political action: “having reflections and critical thoughts is to get active, posing questions is to come to life.”⁶³ The *Bataille Monument* shows that installation and performance art now find themselves at a significant distance from the historic avant-garde calls to collapse art and life.

Relational Antagonism

My interest in the work of Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra derives not only from their tougher, more disruptive approach to “relations” than that proposed by Bourriaud, but also from their remoteness from the socially engaged public art projects that have sprung up since the 1980s under the aegis of “new genre public art.” But does the fact that the work of Sierra and Hirschhorn demonstrates better democracy make it better art? For many critics, the answer would be obvious: of course it does! But the fact that this question arises is itself symptomatic of wider trends in contemporary art criticism: today, political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago. This is partly because postmodernism has attacked the very notion of aesthetic judgment, and partly because contemporary art solicits the viewer’s literal interaction in ever more elaborate ways. Yet the “birth of the viewer”

63. Ibid., p. 62.



(and the ecstatic promises of emancipation that accompany it) has not halted appeals to higher criteria, which have simply returned in other guises.

This is not an issue that can be adequately dealt with here. I wish to point out only that if the work Bourriaud considers exemplary of “relational aesthetics” wishes to be considered politically, then we must address this proposition seriously. There is now a long tradition of viewer participation and activated spectatorship in works of art across many media—from experimental German theater of the 1920s to new-wave film and the *nouveau roman* of the 1960s, from Minimalist sculpture to post-Minimalist installation art in the 1970s, from Beuys’s social sculpture to 1980s socially engaged performance art. It is no longer enough to say that activating the viewer *tout court* is a democratic act, for every art work—even the most “open-ended”—determines in advance the depth of participation that the viewer may have with it.⁶⁴ Hirschhorn would argue that such pretenses to emancipation are no longer necessary: all art—whether immersive or not—can be a critical force that appropriates and reassigns value, distancing our thoughts from the predominant and preexisting consensus. The tasks facing us today are to analyze *how* contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the *quality* of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.

It can be argued that the works of Hirschhorn and Sierra, as I have presented them, are no longer tied to the direct activation of the viewer, or to their literal participation in the work. This is not to say that this work signifies a return to the kind of high-modernist autonomy advocated by Clement Greenberg, but rather to a more complicated imbrication of the social and the aesthetic. In this model, the kernel of impossible resolution on which antagonism depends is mirrored in the tension between art and society conceived of as mutually exclusive spheres—a self-reflexive tension that the work of Sierra and Hirschhorn fully acknowledges.⁶⁵

In this light, the motif of obstruction or blockade so frequently found in Sierra’s works is less a return to modernist refusal as advocated by Theodor Adorno than an expression of the boundaries of both the social and the aesthetic after a century of attempts to fuse them.⁶⁶ In his exhibition at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, viewers were confronted with a series of makeshift cardboard boxes, each of which

64. I am reminded of Walter Benjamin’s praise of newspapers because they solicit opinions from their reader (via the letters page) and thereby elevate him/her to the status of a collaborator: “The reader is at all times ready to become a writer,” he says, “that is, a describer, but also a prescriber . . . he gains access to authorship” (Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in Benjamin, *Reflections* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978], p. 225). Even so, the newspaper retains an editor, and the letters page is but one among many other authored pages beneath the remit of this editor.

65. “As the social is penetrated by negativity—that is, by antagonism—it does not attain the status of transparency, of full presence, and the objectivity of its identities is permanently subverted. From here onward, the impossible relation between objectivity and negativity has become constitutive of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 129).

66. The blockade or impasse is a recurrent motif in Sierra’s work, such as *68 People Paid to Block the Entrance to Pusan’s Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea* (2000) or *465 People Paid to Stand in a Room at the Museo Rufino Tamaya, Mexico City* (1999).

concealed a Chechnyan refugee seeking asylum in Germany.⁶⁷ The boxes were an Arte Povera take on Tony Smith's celebrated 6 x 6 foot sculpture *Die* (1962), the work that Michael Fried famously described as exerting the same effect on the viewer as "the silent presence of another person."⁶⁸ In Sierra's piece, this silent presence was literal: since it is against the law in Germany for illegal immigrants to be paid for work, the refugees' status could not be announced by the gallery. Their silence was exaggerated and exacerbated by their literal invisibility beneath the cardboard boxes. In such works, Sierra seems to argue that the phenomenological body of Minimalism is politicized precisely through the *quality* of its relationship—or lack of relationship—to other people. Our response to witnessing the participants in Sierra's actions—be they facing the wall, sitting under boxes, or tattooed with a line—is quite different from the "togetherness" of relational aesthetics. The work does not offer an experience of transcendent human empathy that smooths over the awkward situation before us, but a pointed racial and economic nonidentification: "this is not me." The persistence of this friction, its awkwardness and discomfort, alerts us to the relational antagonism of Sierra's work.

The works of Hirschhorn and Sierra stand against Bourriaud's claims for relational aesthetics, the microtopian communities of Tiravanija, and the scenario formalism of Gillick. The feel-good positions adopted by Tiravanija and Gillick are reflected in their ubiquitous presence on the international art scene, and their status as perennial favorites of a few curators who have become known for promoting their preferred selection of artists (and thereby becoming touring stars in their own right). In such a cozy situation, art does not feel the need to defend itself, and it collapses into compensatory (and self-congratulatory) entertainment. The work of Hirschhorn and Sierra is better art not simply for being better politics (although both of these artists now have equally high visibility on the blockbuster art circuit). Their work acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art ("I am not an animator, teacher or social-worker," says Hirschhorn) and subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society. The model of subjectivity that underpins their practice is not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux. If relational aesthetics requires a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness, then Hirschhorn and Sierra provide a mode of artistic experience more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today. This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other.

67. *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, Kunst-Werke, Berlin, (September 2000). Six workers remained inside the boxes for four hours a day for six weeks.

68. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (Summer 1967), reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 128.



Pierre Huyghe. Streamside Day Follies. Dia Art Foundation, New York, 2003. Photo: Pierre Huyghe. All images courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris and New York, unless otherwise indicated.