

Art as a Medium for ACTION

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Foreword by Dr Jonas Tinius

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Foreword:

The Charitable Relation

In the late 1990s, the French curator and art historian Nicolas Bourriaud elaborated a new theory to understand practices of political art, which had emerged in that decade. The works he sought to understand were 'participatory', 'site-specific', and 'research-based', dealing with questions about intersubjective encounters and 'everyday sociality'. He termed this new form of art 'relational aesthetics'. In his programmatic book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), he defines 'relational (art)' as:

A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space. (113)

Relational art practices did not emerge out of a vacuum. They reacted to fundamental social changes in the late twentieth century. 'These days', Bourriaud writes in his book, 'the social bond has turned into a standardised artefact' (9). In Western capitalist society today, Bourriaud suggests, 'human relations are no longer "directly experienced"' (ibid.). For contemporary artists, he argues, 'the most burning issue' is whether 'it is still possible to generate relationships with the world' (ibid.). Bourriaud was therefore struck by a number of contemporary artists whose work tried to experiment with the ways in which we can relate, creating what he calls 'hands-on utopias' (ibid.).

These 'everyday micro-utopias' (31) constructed by relational artists differ notably from the avant-garde experiments of the 1960s and those efforts to imagine a different society. The utopias developed by political artists today, Bourriaud suggests, are no longer about grand revolutions in the world, but about a small-

scale and pragmatic 'learning to inhabit the world in a better way' (ibid.). Put in another way, 'the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist' (ibid.). Therefore, the 'substrate' of this new art 'is formed by intersubjectivity' (15). Intersubjectivity, in Bourriaud's view, is not merely a means to an end. 'Being-together', 'the "encounter" between beholder and picture', or quite simply the 'collective elaboration of meaning' are the actual focus and *telos* of relational art practices today (ibid.). Relational art, he writes, 'is a state of encounter' (18). Relational art practices are seen to be different because they 'tighten the space of relations' (15-16); they are 'moments of sociability' (33).

Bourriaud's observations are political. Relational art practices are not just disengaged gatherings entirely devoid of critical reflection. According to him, 'the first question we should ask ourselves when looking at a work of art is: Does it give me a chance to exist in front of it, or, on the contrary, does it deny me as a subject, refusing to consider the Other in its structure?' (57). Bourriaud raises a fundamental political question about relational art, namely the extent to which it produces or inhibits relations between people, whether through actual encounters or imagined ties, such as through a charitable donation or an imagined community. This is important since participatory artforms can also produce very powerful forms of semantic oppression or faux-social cohesion, where one should engage in critical dialogue, or even 'artificial hells' of forced interaction, as Claire Bishop (2012) puts it. The moral obligation to give and charity events might appear in this light, too. What strikes Bourriaud in the work

The outline for a new art paradigm proposed in *Relational Aesthetics* has been subjected to numerous critiques from practitioners and scholars, most notably by Claire Bishop. She noted that the artistic practices described by Bourriaud insufficiently address 'the divided and incomplete subject of today' (2004: 79). She suggests that when we look at political art today, we ought to consider the kinds of relations they engender. Who is the subject or actor, and what kinds of encounters are produced through art today? If for contemporary artists 'it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows' (45), then how can the relations we cultivate through theatre meaningfully continue beyond a performance into the future?

The exhibition *Art as a Medium for ACTION* addresses these core questions and criticisms about relational aesthetics. Based on a research process and extensive interview preparation, the exhibition is as much reflection on, as it is a product of, encounters. Asking how art might inspire social or political transformations, the surveys and focus group meetings did not take the emotional reactions to artworks for granted, but allowed viewers to engage with them. If one of the fundamental questions of relational art is — ‘Does it give me a chance to exist in front of it, or, on the contrary, does it deny me as a subject, refusing to consider the Other in its structure?’ — then the process of audience-interaction, which took place prior to the exhibition, addressed just that.

The works presented in the exhibition continue to ask the very challenging questions about the actual impact of artworks on communities, and also the form of artworks as communities. Suzanne Lacy's pioneering performance art piece *Three Weeks in May* (1977), which documented and represented reported rape cases in Los Angeles, drawing statements on to the environment and urban landscape in which they took place, is a powerful challenge to our perception of communities. How do we see our

neighbours or those we pass by in the street when, waiting for the bus, you read in red spray paint: '2 WOMEN WERE RAPED NEAR HERE MAY 9 MAY 21'? Lacy's revisiting of the project in 2012, *Three Weeks in January: End Rape in Los Angeles*, takes this challenge to our perception of communities from the past into the present: no longer confined and filed as an archived art project long finished, her quest continues to confront the urban landscape and those that constitute its social fabric. Collaborating with the Los Angeles Police Department, she added reported rape cases to a map on a daily basis, reminding us of the pervasive and continued presence of community violence. Lacy's work therefore picks up the important criticism raised by Claire Bishop: if relational art must also address the divided and incomplete subject of today rather than to celebrate happy moments of encounter, then she does clearly just that.

Willie Baronet's overwhelming and open-ended installation *WE ARE ALL HOMELESS* (1993-present) brings a second aspect of the exhibition to the fore: the charitable relation. Composed of over 1,200 bought homeless signs, Baronet plays on the relation between gift-giver and recipient.



Willie Baronet with the signs he collected for WE ARE ALL HOMELESS, photographed by Ted Mase

By purchasing the signs, some of which were asking for gifts ranging from 'anything' or a 'blessing' to 'a home', sometimes offering 'shitty advise' [sic!] for \$1, Baronet at once undermines and addresses the charitable relation of a gift. He offers a kind of remuneration for acquiring the signs, yet also clearly appropriates these calls for help, turning the very personal encounters with an individual into a nameless wall calling for help. Nonetheless, the viewer is implicated in the charitable mural, having to rethink his or her relation to acts of giving, to neighbours, to a community of exhibition-visitors.

The most remarkable aspect of the exhibition, however, is yet to come. *Art as a Medium for ACTION* asks viewers for a pledge or a donation, thus extending the 'micro-utopian' community in the exhibition to a possible set of encounters and relations in an uncertain future. The relations it prompted people to reflect on in the first phase of the project, and the encounters it provoked and exhibited in the second stage, culminate in an actual act of giving. Yet, as an essay in this catalogue points out, gift-giving does not constitute a stable intersubjective relation; it is primarily an interaction. The more enduring and sustainable relation created is one of empathy. As the catalogue puts it, 'part of the power of art ... might lie in its ability to show us the things we ordinarily choose not to see; and feelings of guilt, empathy, and hopelessness might be the beginnings of renewed hopefulness'.

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