From Relational Aesthetics - Nicolas Bourriaud (1998)

Relational form

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

Contemporary artistic practice and its cultural plan

The modern political era, which came into being with the Enlightenment, was based on the desire to emancipate individuals and people. The advances of technologies and freedoms, the decline of ignorance, and improved working conditions were all billed to free humankind and help to usher in a better society. There are several versions of modernity, however. The 20th century was thus the arena for a struggle between two visions of the world: a modest, rationalist conception, hailing from the 18th century, and a philosophy of spontaneity and liberation through the irrational (Dada, Surrealism, the Situationists), both of which were opposed to authoritarian and utilitarian forces eager to gauge human relations and subjugate people. Instead of culminating in hoped-for emancipation, the advances of technologies and "Reason" made it

that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth, blindly replace human labour by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques, all through a general rationalisation of the production process. So the modern emancipation plan has been substituted by countless forms of melancholy.

Twentieth century avant-garde, from Dadaism to the Situationist International, fell within the tradition of this modem project (changing culture, attitudes and mentalities, and individual and social living conditions), but it is as well to bear in mind that this project was already there before them, differing from their plan in many ways. For modernity cannot be reduced to a rationalist teleology, any more than it can to political messianism. Is it possible to disparage the desire to improve living and working conditions, on the pretext of the bankruptcy of tangible attempts to do as much-shored up by totalitarian ideologies and naive visions of history? What used to be called the avant-garde has, needless to say, developed from the ideological swing of things offered by modern rationalism; but it is now re-formed on the basis of quite different philosophical, cultural and social presuppositions. It is evident that today's art is carrying on this fight, by coming up with perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models, veering in the direction indicated by Enlightenment philosophers, Proudhon, Marx, the Dadaists and Mondrian. If opinion is striving to acknowledge the legitimacy and interest of these experiments, this is because they are no longer presented like the precursory phenomena of an inevitable historical evolution. Quite to the contrary, they appear fragmentary and isolated, like orphans of an overall view of the world bolstering them with the clout of an ideology.

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

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

The ambition of artists who include their practice within the slipstream of historical modernity is to repeat neither its forms nor its claims, and even less assign to art the same functions as it. Their task is akin to the one that Jean-Francois Lyotard allocated to post-modem architecture, which "*is condemned to create a series of minor modifications in a space whose*

modernity it inherits, and abandon an overall reconstruction of the space inhabited by humankind" . What is more, Lyotard seems to half-bemoan this state of affairs: he defines it negatively, by using the term "condemned". And what, on the other hand, if this "condemnation" represented the historical chance whereby most of the art worlds known to us managed to spread their wings, over the past ten years or so? This "chance" can be summed up in just a few words: *learning to inhabit the world in a better way*, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution.

Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realties, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist. Althusser said that one always catches the world's train on the move; Deleuze, that "grass grows from the middle" and not from the bottom or the top. The artist dwells in the circumstances the present offers him, so as to turn the setting of his life (his links with the physical and conceptual world) into a lasting world. He catches the world on the move: he is a *tenant of culture*, to borrow Michel de Certeau's expression'. Nowadays, modernity extends into the practices of cultural do-it-yourself and recycling, into the invention of the everyday and the development of time lived, which are not objects less deserving of attention and examination than Messianistic utopias and the formal "novelties" that typified modernity yesterday. There is nothing more absurd either than the assertion that contemporary art does not involve any political project, or than the claim that its subversive aspects are not based on any theoretical terrain. Its plan, which has just as much to do with working conditions and the conditions in which cultural objects are produced, as with the changing forms of social life, may nevertheless seem dull to minds formed in the mould of cultural Darwinism. Here, then, is the time of the "dolce utopia", to use Maurizio Cattelan's phrase...

Artwork as social interstice

The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. To sketch a sociology of this, this evolution stems essentially from the

birth of a world-wide urban culture, and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena. The general growth of towns and cities, which took off at the end of the Second World War, gave rise not only to an extraordinary upsurge of social exchanges, but also to much greater individual mobility (through the development of networks and roads, and telecommunications, and the gradual freeing-up of isolated places, going with the opening-up of attitudes). Because of the crampedness of dwelling spaces in this urban world, there was, in tandem, a scaling-down of furniture and objects, now emphasising a greater manoeuvrability. If, for a long period of time, the artwork has managed to come across as a luxury, lordly item in this urban setting (the dimensions of the work, as well as those of the apartment, helping to distinguish between their owner and the crowd), the development of the function of artworks and the way they are shown attest to a growing *urbanisation* of the artistic experiment. What is collapsing before our very eyes is nothing other than this falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art, associated with the feeling of territorial acquisition. In other words, it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through (the "owner's tour" is akin to the collector's). It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion. The city has ushered in and spread the hands-on experience: it is the tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society, that "*state of encounter imposed on people*", to use Althusser's expression, contrasting with that dense and "trouble-free" jungle which the *natural state* once was, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a jungle hampering any lasting encounter. Once raised to the power of an absolute rule of civilisation, this system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the "encounter" between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning. Let us leave the matter of the historicity of this phenomenon on one side: art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue. One of the virtual properties of the image is its power of *linkage* (Fr. *reliance*), to borrow Michel Maffesoli's term: flags, logos, icons, signs, all produce empathy and sharing, and all generate *bond*. Art (practices stemming from painting and sculpture which come across in the form of an exhibition) turns out to be particularly suitable when it comes to expressing this

hands-on civilisation, because it *tightens the space of relations*, unlike TV and literature which refer each individual person to his or her space of private consumption, and also unlike theatre and cinema which bring small groups together before specific, unmistakable images.

Actually, there is no live comment made about what is seen (the discussion time is put off until after the show). At an exhibition, on the other hand, even when inert forms are involved, there is the possibility of an immediate discussion, in both senses of the term. I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time. Art is the place that produces a specific sociability. It remains to be seen what the status of this is in the set of "states of encounter" proposed by the City. How is an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?

Before giving concrete examples, it is well worth reconsidering the place of artworks in the overall economic system, be it symbolic or material, which governs contemporary society. Over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, the work of art represents a social *0*. This *interstice* term was used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising, autarkic types of production, etc. The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system. This is the precise nature of the contemporary art exhibition in the arena of representational commerce: it creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the "communication zones" that are imposed upon us. The present-day social context restricts the possibilities of inter-human relations all the more because it creates spaces planned to this end. Automatic public toilets were invented to keep streets clean. The same spirit underpins the development of communication tools, while city streets are swept clean of all manners of relational dross, and neighbourhood relationships fizzle. The general mechanisation of social functions gradually reduces the relational space. Just a few years ago, the telephone wake-up call service employed human beings, but now we are woken up by a synthesised voice... The automatic cash machine has become the transit model for the most

elementary of social functions, and professional behaviour patterns are modelled on the efficiency of the machines replacing them, these machines carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, pleasure and squabbling. Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.

When Gabriel Orozco puts an orange on the stalls of a deserted Brazilian market (*Crazy Tourist*, 1991), or slings a hammock in the MoMA garden in New York (*Hamoc en la moma*, 1993), he is operating at the hub of "social infra-thinness" (1'inframince social), that minute space of daily gestures determined by the superstructure made up of "big" exchanges, and defined by it. Without any wording, Orozco's photographs are a documentary record of tiny revolutions in the common urban and semi-urban life (a sleeping bag on the grass, an empty shoebox, etc.). They record this silent, still life nowadays formed by relationships with the other. When Jens Haaning broadcasts funny stories in Turkish through a loudspeaker in a Copenhagen square (*Turkish Jokes*, 1994), he produces in that split second a micro-community, one made up of immigrants brought together by collective laughter which upsets their exile situation, formed in relation to the work and in it. The exhibition is the special place where such momentary groupings may occur, governed as they are by differing principles. And depending on the degree of participation required of the onlooker by the artist, along with the nature of the works and the models of sociability proposed and represented, an exhibition will give rise to a specific "arena of exchange". And this "arena of exchange", must be judged on the basis of aesthetic criteria, in other words, by analysing the coherence of its form, and then the symbolic value of the "world" it suggests to us, and of the image of human relations reflected by it. Within this social interstice, the artist must assume the symbolic models he shows. All representation (though contemporary art *models* more than it represents, and fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom) refers to values that can be transposed into society. As a human activity based on commerce, art is at once the object and the subject of an ethic. And this all the more so because, unlike other activities, *its sole function is to be exposed to this commerce.*

Art is a state of encounter.

Relational aesthetics and random materialism

Relational aesthetics is part of a materialistic tradition. Being "materialistic" does not mean sticking to the triteness of facts, nor does it imply that sort of narrow-mindedness that consists in reading works in purely economic terms. The philosophical tradition that underpins this *relational aesthetics* was defined in a noteworthy way by Louis Althusser, in one of his last writings, as a "materialism of encounter", or random materialism. This particular materialism takes as its point of departure the world contingency, which has no pre-existing origin or sense, nor Reason, which might allot it a purpose. So the essence of humankind is purely trans-individual, made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms which are invariably historical (Marx: the human essence is the set of social relations). There is no such thing as any possible "end of history" or "end of art", because the game is being forever re-enacted, in relation to its function, in other words, in relation to the players and the system which they construct and criticise. Hubert Damisch saw in the "end of art" theories the outcome of an irksome muddle between the "end of the game" and the "end of play". A new game is announced as soon as the social setting radically changes, without the meaning of the game itself being challenged'. This *inter-human game* which forms our object (Duchamp: "*Art is a game between all people of all periods*") nevertheless goes beyond the context of what is called "art" by commodity. So the "constructed situations" advocated by the Situationist International belong in their own right to this "game", in spite of Guy Debord who, in the final analysis, denied them any artistic character. For in them, quite to the contrary, he saw "art being exceeded" by a revolution in day-to-day life. Relational aesthetics does not represent a theory of art, this would
imply the statement of an origin and a destination, but a theory of form.

What do we mean by *form*? A coherent unit, a structure (*independent entity of inner dependencies*) which shows the typical features of a world. The artwork does not have an exclusive hold on it, it is merely a subset in the overall series of existing forms. In the materialistic philosophical tradition ushered in by Epicurus and Lucretius, atoms fall in parallel formations into the void, following a slightly diagonal course. If one of these atoms swerves off

course, it "*causes an encounter with the next atom and from encounter to encounter a pile-up, and the birth of the world*"... This is how forms come into being, from the "deviation" and random encounter between two hitherto parallel elements. In order to create a world, this encounter must be a lasting one: the elements forming it must be joined together in a form, in other words, there must have been "*a setting of elements on one another (the way ice 'sets'*)". "Form can be defined as a lasting encounter". Lasting encounters, lines and colours inscribed on the surface of a Delacroix painting, the scrap objects that litter Schwitters' "Merz pictures", Chris Burden's performances: over and above the quality of the page layout or the spatial layout, they turn out to be *lasting* from the moment when their components form a whole whose sense "holds good" at the moment of their birth, stirring up new "possibilities of life". All works, down to the most critical and challenging of projects, passes through this viable world state, because they get elements held apart to meet: for example, death and the media in Andy Warhol. Deleuze and Guattari were not saying anything different when they defined the work of art as a "block of affects and percepts". Art *keeps together* moments of subjectivity associated with singular experiences, be it Cezanne's apples or Buren's striped structures. The composition of this *bonding agent*, whereby encountering atoms manage to form a word, is, needless to say, dependent on the historical context. What today's informed public understands by "keeping together" is not the same thing that this public imagined back in the 19th century. Today, the "glue" is less obvious, as our visual experience has become more complex, enriched by a century of photographic images, then cinematography (introduction of the sequence shot as a new dynamic unity), enabling us to recognise as a "world" a collection of disparate element (installation, for instance) that no unifying matter, no bronze, links. Other technologies may allow the human spirit to recognise other types of "world-forms" still unknown: for example, computer science put forward the notion of program, that inflect the approach of some artist's way of working. An artist's artwork thus acquires the status of an ensemble of units to be re-activated by the beholder-manipulator. I want to insist on the instability and the diversity of the concept of "form", notion whose outspread can be witnessed in injunction by the founder of sociology, Emile Durckheim, considering the "social fact" as a "thing"... As the artistic "thing" sometime offers itself as a "fact" or an ensemble of facts that happens in the time or space, and

whose unity (making it a form, a world) can not be questioned. The setting is widening; after the isolated object, it now can embrace the whole scene: the form of Gordon Matta-Clark or Dan Graham's work can not be reduced to the "things" those two artist "produce"; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures... The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line.

Form and others' gaze

If, as Serge Daney writes, "*all form is a face looking at us*", what does a form become when it is plunged into the dimension of dialogue? What is a form that is essentially *relational*? It seems worth while to discuss this question by taking Daney's formula as a point of reference, precisely because of its ambivalence: as forms are looking at us, how are we to look at them?

Form is most often defined as an outline contrasting with a content. But modernist aesthetics talks about "formal beauty" by referring to a sort of (con)fusion between style and content, and an inventive compatibility of the former with the latter. We judge a work through its plastic or visual form. The most common criticism to do with new artistic practices consists, moreover, in denying them any "formal effectiveness", or in singling out their shortcomings in the "formal resolution". In observing contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk of "formations" rather than "forms". Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise.

There are no forms in nature, in the wild state, as it is our gaze that creates these, by cutting them out in the depth of the visible. Forms are *developed*, one from another. What was yesterday regarded as formless or "informal" is no longer these things today. When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it, and through it.

In the novels of polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, we see how each individual generates his own form through his behaviour, his way of coming across, and the way he addresses others.

This form comes about in the borderline area where the individual struggles with the Other, so as to subject him to what he deems to be his "being". So, for Gombrowicz, our "form" is merely a relational property, linking us with those who reify us by the way they see us, to borrow a Sartrian terminology. When the individual thinks he is casting an objective eye upon himself, he is, in the final analysis, contemplating nothing other than the result of perpetual transactions with the subjectivity of others.

The artistic form, for some, side-steps this inevitability, for it is publicised by a *work*. Our persuasion, conversely, is that form only assumes its texture (and only acquires a real existence) when it introduces human interactions. The form of an artwork issues from a negotiation with the intelligible, which is bequeathed to us. Through it, the artist embarks upon a dialogue. The artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum. Here we are at the opposite end of this authoritarian version of art which we discover in the essays of Thierry de Duve, for whom any work is nothing other than a "sum of judgements", both historical and aesthetic, stated by the artist in the act of its production. To paint is to become part of history through plastic and visual choices. We are in the presence of a prosecutor's aesthetics, here, for which the artist confronts the history of art in the autarky of his own persuasions. It is an aesthetics that reduces artistic practice to the level of a pettifogging historical criticism. Practical "judgement", thus aimed, is peremptory and final in each instance, hence the negation of dialogue, which, alone, grants form a productive status: the status of an "encounter". As part of a "relationist" theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its "environment", its "field" (Bourdieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice.

As Daney suggested, form becomes "face" through the effect of this invention of relations. This formula, needless to add, calls to mind the one acting as the pedestal for Emmanuel Levinas' thinking, for whom the face represents the sign of the ethical taboo. The face, Levinas asserts, is "*what orders me to serve another*", "*what forbids me to kill*". Any "inter-subjective relation" proceeds by way of the form of the face, which symbolises the responsibility

we have towards others: "*the bond with others is only made as responsibility*", he writes, but don't ethics have a horizon other than this humanism which reduces inter-subjectivity to a kind of inter-servility? Is the image, which, for Daney, is a metaphor of the face, only therefore suitable for producing taboos and proscriptions, through the burden of "responsibility"? When Daney explains that "*all form is a face looking at us*", he does not merely mean that we are responsible for this. To be persuaded of as much, suffice it to revert to the profound significance of the image for Daney. For him, the image is not "immoral" when it puts us "in the place where we were not", when it "takes the place of another". What is involved here, for Daney, is not solely a reference to the aesthetics of Bazin and Rossellini, claiming the "ontological realism" of the cinematographic art, which even if it does lie at the origin of Daney's thought, does not sum it up. He maintains that form, in an image, is nothing other than the representation of desire. Producing a form is to invent possible encounters; receiving a form is to create the conditions for an exchange, the way you return a service in a game of tennis. If we nudge Daney's reasoning a bit further, form is the *representative* of desire in the image. It is the horizon based on which the image may have a meaning, by pointing to a desired world, which the beholder thus becomes capable of discussing, and based on which his own desire can rebound. This exchange can be summed up by a binomial: someone shows something to someone who returns it as he sees fit. The work tries to catch my gaze, the way the new-born child "asks for" its mother's gaze. In *La Vie commune*, Tzvetan Todorov has shown how the essence of sociability is the need for acknowledgement, much more than competition and violence'. When an artist shows us something, he uses a transitive ethic which places his work between the "look-at-me" and the "look-at-that". Daney's most recent writings lament the end of this "Show/See" pairing, which represented the essence of a democracy of the image in favour of another pairing, this one TV-related and authoritarian, "Promote/receive", marking the advent of the "Visual". In Daney's thinking, "*all form is a face looking at me*", because it is summoning me to dialogue with it. Form is a dynamic that is included both, or turn by turn, in time and space. Form can only come about from a meeting between two levels of reality. For homogeneity does not produce images: it produces the visual, otherwise put, "looped information".