

Since the first article in the corpus that I have built up under the generic title of 'relational aesthetics' and published in the journal *Documents sur l'art* in 1995, a lot of things have changed, and much faster than I thought they would. My thesis arose from the observation of a group of artists whom I frequently visited at the time with great assiduity (from Rirkrit Tiravanija to Pierre Huyghe, from Douglas Gordon to Vanessa Beecroft, including Liam Gillick and Maurizio Cattelan, and not forgetting all those featured at the time in the exhibition *Traffic*), and did no more than display the common denominator between their highly diverse bodies of work.¹ This inter-human sphere and the service industries constitutes the universe to which this generation of artists refers, just as the worlds of consumption and industrial infrastructure did for Pop Art and Minimalism. It is no doubt time to look more closely at the relations between these artworks and the social and economic configuration that allowed them to emerge.

The work of the sociologist Michel Maffesoli asserts that nowadays, "style, the image, no longer has anything to do with the individualism of modernity".² He attempts to decipher the new forms of sociality in postmodern society, with their hedonistic and tactile orientation. "The image", writes Maffesoli, "is a bonding-agent; it creates community, it welds together".³ In his book *Société en réseaux*, Manuel Castells describes the birth of a network-based society in which the fluxes of communication and the technological revolution are radically overturning the structures of work and everyday life.⁴ The incredible growth of the World Wide Web, but also a growing need for bonds and contact, frustrated as this is by an abstract, individualistic society, have prompted artists to explore the field of the inter-human. They are thus inventing models of sociality or modes of communication, drawing, more or less, immateriality on the fluxes that tie us to one another. These relational practices are rooted in the appearance of these new interactive technologies that are threatening to commodify human relations within 'spaces of encounter', but also in the emergence of the tertiary sector and the service industries.

The question I would like to ask today is this: now that the ideology of internet links and continuous contact has come to pervade the globalised economy (Nokia: 'Connecting people'), how much critical radicality is left to work based on sociality and conviviality? Or to mimetic approaches?

At the beginning of the 1990s, a number of artists showed very clearly what society was heading towards. Today, now that they are surrounded by the tide whose rise they predicted, can we still see their works in the same way? The aquatic metaphor is important here: postmodern society is fluid, flexible and enveloping. Those who claim to describe it from the outside are taking themselves for God, not for artists. An artist invents new ways of swimming, he or she does not spend time sitting on the shore deconstructing the wakes of the boats, as if it were somehow possible to step outside human society.

As it happens, at the 1993 *Venice Biennale*, Rirkrit Tiravanija presented a metal gondola full of boiling water, which visitors could take for mixing with their powdered soup before sitting down to eat in the middle of the installation. I can remember the critics wondering if the piece were not a 'performance'. Even though that same year, Christine Hill polished the shoes of visitors to the *Unfair* in Cologne and then gave them a massage. She spoke of art as a socially useful activity. Since the first wave of artists working on the relational sphere (which, let me say this once and for all, is not synonymous with interactivity or conviviality); a new generation has appeared. Though hardly distinct in terms of time frame, it confirms the perception that there is a new worldview which is radically different from that of preceding generations.

In 2000 Surasi Kusolwong took part in the *Kwangju Biennale* with an environment made up of monochrome mattresses (*Happy Kwangju*), on which candidates for a massage were kindly asked to lie down. In 2001 Alicia Framis exhibited a minimal structure in dark wood, inside which only women were allowed to entrust their bodies to a masseur.

Copies? No, massage is used here rather like a colour, as a tool that underlines rather than attenuates the difference between these works that all emerged from the relational sphere. The world of work offers artists a reservoir of forms, forms that are as flexible and manipulative as the elements used by Felix Gonzalez-Torres or the 'Arte Povera' materials that serve as supports for pieces by Maurizio Cattelan. A hurried observer would see only repetition. One needs to look more closely to realise what is emerging here is a new vocabulary, one analogous to Minimal Art and that takes the *socius* as its base.

When invited to the *Venice Biennale*, Maurizio Cattelan hired out his space to a cosmetics company (*Lavorare e un brutto mestiere*, 1993). Business is a material. Fabrice Hybert is campaigning for an 'artistic use of the economy'. In 1995 Pierre Huyghe set up the *Association des Temps libérés (Freed Time Society)*, and Svetlana Heger and Plamen Dejanov rented out their labour to BMW for the year 1999. Is this mimicry? A fascination with the absolute power now represented by the economy, which is as invisible, abstract and holistic as God Himself? There is only one question that can help us decide: What is it for? What is the purpose of using the forms of business, of taking human relations as a model? Art is not merely a trade dedicated to producing forms; it is an activity whereby these forms come to articulate a project. Liam Gillick blends modernist abstractions with corporate scenography, reconstituting the invisible links between the avant-garde and the transformations of the global economy, between Sony and contemporary video art. His *Negotiation Platform* is not a pretext, an object for producing conviviality, but a cognitive tool. Because it included objects to be handled, actors and extras, the type of exhibition that emerged in the 90s generated a new problematic, that of the coexistence of humans, objects and forms, which generates a specific meaning.

The exhibition becomes one big film set (a "film without a camera", as Philippe Parreno put it), a set in which we can mount our own sequences of meanings. In the titles of his works, Rirkrit Tiravanija always includes the words "lots of people", indicating that they are an integral part of it all. The forms that he presents to the public do not constitute an artwork until they are actually used and occupied by the people who thus become both the walk-ons and passengers of the exhibition. "I am not a customer", wrote Liam Gillick.

The private view is the crucial moment in the exhibition's emergence as scenario. Felix Gonzalez-Torres installed a go-go dancer on the sculpture at *Post Human*, 1993; with *Jenny Happy*, Carsten Holler exhibited a young girl wearing red contact lenses; Pierre Joseph scatters "living characters to be reactivated", around his exhibitions, later replacing these with a photograph of the same people in action; Vanessa Beecroft presents groups of young women, motionless amidst the visitors-cum-voyeurs. Criterion of coexistence: how do we cohabit with forms? And with the characters delegated by the artist to inhabit them? Kendell Geers, for example, proposes ways of using contemporary images, thereby confronting us with their utter strangeness, our incapacity to live with them.

The interview has become an artistic form. Countless works are the result of an encounter or a questionnaire. The videos of Rebecca Bournigault, the photos of Tracey Moffat, the works of Gitte Villesen, Monica Bonvicini or Christian Jankowski, all work on the basis of the encounter with others. Joseph Grigely's materials are the tools that enable him to communicate with other people. When Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster produces her works in collaboration with the 'memory' of her respondents (*Daughter of a Taoist*, at the Esther Schipper Gallery) or invites visitors to draw their childhood memories at her little consultancy booths, the role that she assigns to the public is not that of beholder but of analyser.

Artists seek interlocutors. Since the public is a somewhat unreal entity within the economy of contemporary art this interlocutor is usually brought into the production process itself as a result of a phone call, an advertisement or a chance encounter. The meaning of the work emerges from the movement linking the signs put out by the artist (Tiravanija), but also from the collaboration of individuals within the exhibition space. As Karl Marx wrote, "reality is none other than the result of what we do together". The relational aesthetic integrates this reality.

What for? (art after the homepage).

The criticism commonly levelled at these relational practices generally concerns just this transposition: if the idea is to produce alternative forms of social bonds, why confine yourself to galleries and art centres? The aesthetic content of



these artistic propositions must be judged formally, by translating into lived experience, the space modelled or imagined by the artist. It would be absurd to judge the social and political content of a work while stripping it of its aesthetic value, as if forms were neutral. Relational practices are not a kind of 'social' or 'sociological art'. Rather, they aim at the formal construction of space-time entities that may be able to elude alienation, the division of labour, the commodification of space and the reification of life. We could thus say that the exhibition constitutes an interstice, which sometimes reproduces or uses the very forms of our alienation. Philippe Parreno's exhibition, *Werktsche*, 1994, produced on Sunday 1 May in Cologne, thus gathered leisure activities around the image of their diametrical-opposite, the factory assembly line.⁵ The artist didn't deny the dominant form of social relations, but put them into perspective using the specific means of art, which is neither more nor less alienated than what surrounds it. It is important to understand, therefore, that the convivial environments, encountered here and there, do not, if the artists are aware of what they are doing, represent an end in themselves. They bring into play this great, "What's it for?" which marks the true dividing line between entertainment and artistic praxis. For Tiravanija or Parreno, the use value of conviviality is combined with its exhibition value within the framework of an artistic project.

The enemy clearly designated by the important artists of the present period is the generalisation of supplier-customer relations to all levels of human existence, from work to living space and taking in all the tacit contracts that determine our private life. The failure of the modernist project can be seen in the commodification of human relations in the poverty of political alternatives and in the devaluation of work as a factor for the improvement of daily life.

As both Guy Debord and Henri Lefebvre remarked, we are experiencing an irremediable pauperisation, that of lived experience. How can you expect anyone to believe that it would be beneficial to go back to aesthetic values based on tradition, technical mastery, respect for historical conventions and the petty individual ownership of 'creation'? When you want to kill democracy, you start out by muzzling experimentation and you end up accusing freedom of having rabies. The political value of the relational aesthetic lies in two very simple observations: social reality is the product of negotiation and democracy is a montage of forms. Whatever the artist's degree of awareness, every artistic practice secretes and transposes social values, bringing them to bear on the individual or the collective. The role of the art critic is to take these forms apart, to clarify their content.

Psychiatrist, David Cooper, explained that 'madness' is not 'inside' a person (as if it were a foreign body), but inside the system of relations in which that person participates.⁶ Art must work to expose these systems and to produce machines for subjectivity in opposition to 'mass-media machine processing' and its levelling instruments. What has been ground down by the machine of

community must be re-singularised. And this work implies the constitution of temporary subject groups, or micro-communities, the modelling of alternative modes of sociality and the appropriation of industrial production and economic structures.

That is what the relational aesthetic is about, the emphasis on a parallel engineering, on open forms based on the affirmation of the trans-individual.

¹ *Traffic* at CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, 1995.

² See Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1996.

³ Maffesoli, *The Time of Tribes*.

⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture: First Volume, The Rise of the Network Society*, London: Blackwell, 1996, revised edition 2000.

⁵ Philippe Parreno, *Werktsche* at Schipper & Krome, Cologne, 1994.

⁶ See Dr. David Cooper, *The Language of Madness*, London: Penguin Books, 1980.