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SHORT ARTICLE

The “Relations” of Relational Aesthetics within Altermodernity: Revisiting the Case of Nicolas Bourriaud

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Nicolas Bourriaud evokes Deleuze throughout his writings (“Relational Aesthetics”, “Postproduction” and “The Radicant”), yet he has been severely criticized by critics on the left (Claire Bishop, Stewart Martin among others) for confining art to the gallery system. As a curator he has amassed significant influential power that is part of the global networked gallery system as presented by his influential idea of ‘altermodern.’ This essay will review Bourriaud’s stance in relation to a Deleuzian approach to creativity as to what art can ‘do,’ and compare this to the approach taken by Nato Thompson referred to as ‘living as form,’ which offers similar claims. The essay will then end with the author’s own take called ‘an avant-garde without authority,’ as developed in a recent book on ‘designer capitalism,’ which tries to sort out perhaps another ‘line of flight’ as to where 21st century aesthetics might take us.

When it comes to the field of visual art, with its global gallery system and ties to the capitalist market place, the influential curator, Nicolas Bourriaud presents an interesting challenge for the ethico-political agenda forwarded by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially when it comes to the all encompassing aesthetic and a ‘people yet to come.’ Bourriaud has curated a number of influential exhibitions and has written four thin but influential books — *Relational Aesthetics*, *Postproduction*, *The Radicant*, *Altermodern* — where the names of Deleuze and Guattari are prominently alluded to and occasionally mentioned throughout, especially Guattari rather than Deleuze. Bourriaud’s understanding of subjectivity is grounded in Guattari’s theory as a network of relations.

If Deleuze and Guattari were serious in their generosity of having their concepts used as a tool kit, then Bourriaud has certainly done this at the disdain of Deleuzian scholars, notably Eric Alliez, and influential scholars of aesthetics like Jacques Rancière, who also has no love for Deleuze and considers him a rival, as well as a number of prominent critical post-Marxist art theorists, such as John Roberts who question Bourriaud's position concerning participatory and community art. Bourriaud has been vehemently challenged by Claire Bishop (*Artificial Hells*) and Grant Kester (*The One and the Many*). Both are also at odds with one another as to the direction participatory art should take. Added to this complex assemblage is Nato Thompson's socially engaged art forming perhaps yet another dimension to the broad question of participatory art's role within the confines of neoliberal global capitalism. What interests me here are two questions that I will try to work out. The first is merely to show what is at stake in this worry over Bourriaud from a larger question as to what art might and should be doing at this particular historical moment from a Deleuze|Guattarian perspective of control societies, and two: what then could be a line of flight out of this historical problematic we are facing? This essay ends on what is 'relational' from a Deleuzian perspective.

Bourriaud presents one of a growing number of influential curators who are engaged in an 'educational or pedagogical turn,' that is shaping the audience into a savvy participatory public with a particular agenda in mind specific to an exhibition's theme or a nation's desire. Other would include Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Daniel Birnbaum, Connie Butler, Suzanne Cotter, Bice Curiger, Okwui Enwezor, Massimiliano Gioni, and Bob Nickas. Power has been transferred from critics and artists to curators who shape what art 'is,' through the global circuits of power held by numerous national museums of contemporary art. They are the new knowledge brokers, shaping the scene through the influential Documenta exhibition and Biennales.

In the late 1990s Bourriaud published his theory of *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), a concept he had showcased through an exhibition called *Traffic* held at the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux in 1996. Under this rubric he included what appear to be a heterogeneous collection of artists: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Félix González-Torres, Philippe Parreno, Carsten Höller, Henry Bond, Pierre Huyghe and Liam Gillick. The basic idea was that their aesthetic "consisted of judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations they represent, produce and promote" (Bourriaud, 1992, p.112). According to Bourriaud, this was a theory of 'form' rather than 'art,' wherein art becomes a process, a flow, and the plane of consistency that forms, becomes whatever happens between artists, the process and the audience turned public participants. Relational artists value the process over any final object, and the common space where such subjectivity is produced. Relational art is said to create micro-communities or micro-utopias, a "culture of friendship," that in effect promote conviviality to intervene in the alienation of capitalist exchange relationships. So, it appears that these are happenings at the molecular level. Bourriaud promotes an affirmative art form where, albeit confined to gallery situations, it is an attempt to negate the existence of forms of social antagonism through temporal means. According to him, this is an updating of Situationism, for relational aesthetics is also an intervention in everyday life. According to Bourriaud, it is an art of the 'social interstice' that describes exchange spaces that are exclusionary of the capitalist economic context (barter and autarkic production). Use value supplants exchange value, he maintains. So, has Bourriaud opened up a 'smooth space' in the gallery system then, by opening up 'everyday life' within its striated space? Tiravanija cooks in the gallery, while Carsten Höller sets up slides and swings for visitors to experience different speeds of acceleration and he even

set up a hotel room for two at the Guggenheim to spend the night in for anyone who wished to pay. Is this to be celebrated or should we scoff at this ironic ploy. This seems to be the dilemma.

“One day, perhaps, this century will be known as Deleuzian,” was the supposed anti-platonic compliment given by Foucault (1977, p.165), which looking at the scene of art, seems to have been verified in ways that worry those who still believe in their ethico-political agenda. The 21st century is not spiritual or dialectical; it is empiricist and materialist, pragmatic and performative, heterogeneous and machinic, chaotomic and rhizomatic, hypercomplex and hypercapitalist. It enables Slavoj Žižek (2004) to get his jabs in at Deleuze and Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their *New Spirit of Capitalism* to confirm that Deleuze|Guattari support capitalist’s invigorated capitalism mainly via the creative industries. As in the case of Bourriaud, the Spinozian dictum as to ‘what a body can do’ so often heard, becomes Bourriaud’s ethical encounter based on an unquestioned ‘goodness’ of “genuine authentic relationships with the world” (Bourriaud, 1998, p.13), which itself is based on an ongoing dialogue and openness in the name of liberation, democracy and emancipation. However, the ‘quality’ of the interactions that Bourriaud promotes is entirely dismissed. Whereas the historical avant-garde tried to integrate art into the “Lebenswelt”, Bourriaud incorporates everyday life into art, a reversal that is not without its consequences. Subjectivity, understood as inter-human relations, with relational artists providing the viewer with an operational concept of art as a producer of a better society through the means of building experimental social grounds where renewed relationships can be imagined, is not as appealing as it first appears. The call for a ‘better way of life’ becomes interchangeable with the contemporary shopping mall as the museum becomes transformed and continually evolves into an edutainment industry as national, state and local government support is slowly withdrawn. Between 1992 and 2002 the amount of shopping space in a typical US museum increased by almost 10 times the amount of gallery space. In every which way this so-called ‘affective turn’ has penetrated the arts through and through. Aesthetics is now replaced with aisthesis, the autonomy of our experience in relation to art, which ‘captures’ the intrinsic or pre-subjective unconscious body. Translated into capitalist sensibility, this means the promotion of the “experience industry,” the selling of ‘an experience’ for profit dollars.

Against Bourriaud’s rhetorical claims of art overcoming capitalist alienation, critics like Eric Alliez and Hal Foster, point out that relational aesthetics abets and supports what one can call this ‘experience industry’, the new shift of capitalism where the core notions are the same as that of relational aesthetic: connectivity, flexibility, adaptability, mobility, openness of network and so on, the third spirit of capitalism as developed by the creative industries where relationships are the core value, as is having ‘an experience.’ This is, of course, the ‘society of control’ Deleuze and Guattari identified late in their lives. The point is how far does one take this relationality? The other direction is one of relational agonism and the rupture of experience, by artist such as Santiago Sierra, Thomas Hirschhorn, the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera (*Generic Capitalism*) and Francis Alÿs (*When Faith Moves Mountains*), art that ‘exposes habituated assumptions’. But the worry is the appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari in the name of creativity that is of concern. What is the productive desire of these works?

In his *Postproduction* book, Bourriaud calls on the same group of artists, claiming that the book forms an extension of relational aesthetics by maintaining that artists have become DJs, Web surfers and semionauts, who are in the business of using the artistic archive to engage in constant innovation. In this vision art is a game where the participation is a never-ending performative of sign manipulation, brokers of designer capitalism as I call it. Here the

appropriation of the machinic aesthetic is in full swing. Conceptual art becomes posthuman, reduced to a code that can be initiated or not by anyone, anywhere in any place whatsoever. Here innovation can easily be seen as a form of modulation where the model or copy is no longer at issue; difference (however slight) returns with repetition, and we have the ‘processual becoming’ that Deleuze developed in 68. There are now many artists working with data, the archive, what has become known as appropriation art. David Joselit, in his *After Art*, is quite explicit that this is basically how the service industry aesthetic operates where the museum and gallery curators are the creative managers.

If this is not enough, Bourriaud’s last book *The Radicant*, an aesthetic of globalization, draws the name from botany, describing a plant like ivy which develops its roots as it is moving along, rather than being rooted in a single location. That this conceptualization tags the ‘rhizome’ of Deleuze|Guattari should be readily apparent. Based on an exhibition called *Altermodern*, the radicant art practices celebrates the wandering nomadic artist who refused to be identified with any fixed identity, in favour of a series of journeys. Again, the references to the nomadism of Deleuze|Guattari should be apparent, even though the term ‘nomadism’ is what should be contested. The idea is that artists should capture globalized ‘fluxes’, movements of capital, and the repetition and distribution of information in order to make visible its ‘furtive forces.’ By presenting this reality as an arbitrary ‘construct’ (and here we can think of Deleuze’s ‘powers of the false’), artists can suggest other ways of living. In this sense they are ‘altermodern’ in the same way that some movements describe themselves as being alter-globalisation, or an alternative to globalization. Such nomadism follows the post-production thesis; Bourriaud’s account privileges translation and transfer, the way signs are coded into chains of signification that link one medium with another, or one place with another — as in hybridization, in a potentially endless series of reversals, extension and declensions. Artists can be like symbolic analysts, engineers of information, and symbols for living. Are they design bureaucrats, ambassadors of good will, fully involved in an ‘ethics of translation’, or is this group of global trotting artists that Bourriaud mentions, privileged in moving seamlessly through and with the flows of capitalism, like CEO businessmen? When compared to immigrants and asylum seekers, the answer seems obvious. Yet, the question of translation is another nod to ‘becoming’ Other, the fold within the self of that which is strange, outside and foreign. We are close to Paul Ricoeur here as well.

In his reply to Rancière’s attack on his position, Bourriaud this time maintains that the ontology of crossing borders and precariousness pervades the foundation of contemporary aesthetics. Not mentioning the work of Paolo Virno nor Maurizio Lazzarato, Bourriaud distinguishes three patterns in precarious aesthetics: transcoding, flickering and blurring. None of these characteristics are articulated in anything but a cryptic way. We have already mentioned transcoding; flickering seems to be the instant of art as a singular character, a present that passes, tantalizing Deleuzian but no mention of a crystalline image of the split between past and future. Flickering comes across as the impact or force of the artwork in the here and now as a singular event. Blurring seems to be an aesthetic of a permanent zoom; each image is indiscernible, again tantalizingly close to claiming image as movement in Bergsonian sense, yet also calling on the ‘becoming’ of the image that cannot be framed. It all sounds like pop-Deleuze or something as such. However, more Guattari is stressed than Deleuze.

The way Bourriaud uses the term “precariousness” seems to be stretched so as to equate it with “the powers of the false.” “The world in which we live in,” says Bourriaud, “is a pure construct, a mise-en-scène, a montage, a composition, a story and the function of art to analyse

it and re-narrate it, and adapt it in images by any other means (2009a, p.36).” Art and politics are two fictional accounts of this reality. Bourriaud ends his reply to Rancière sounding very Deleuzian in terms of art’s affirmative and creative agenda that supports a precarious ontology. Art is to open channels of speech that are ‘blocked’ by the media and invent alternative modes of sociability, create or recreate connections between distant signs, and represent the abstractions of global capitalism through concrete singularities. All this rhetoric has been challenged. His notion of precariousness doesn’t apply to the artists he mentions, their artwork is indeed authorized. The translation which his cadre of artists are engaged in are primarily globetrotters, as are the heterogeneity of signs that are brought together, like art dealers who sell on the international market only a sense of ‘Japaneseness’ or ‘Africaness’, ‘Nativeness.’ They all know that ‘culture and nationality’ are floating signifiers. So it seems that the relations of relational aesthetics merely confirm the way immaterial labour works today, not to open new forms of life, but to profit from them. In a rhetorically ‘punning sense’: “What then is Left?” What direction is left for art today?

The Deleuzian Response

What is ‘relational’ for Deleuze when it comes to art? It is not, as it is in Bourriaud (despite his rhetoric) representational. Drawing from David Hume, Deleuze reiterates that relations are exterior to their terms; the ‘internal’ properties of the composing parts do not explain the relations, which constitute a whole (Deleuze, 2004, p. 163). For Deleuze, a work of art is an assemblage (*agencement*). The original French term has the meaning of putting together, the joining together of different parts, fitting, assembling, or making a *mise-en-scène*. This is a ‘flat ontology’ where assemblages are composed of pre-individual singularities. There is a consistency within an artistic assemblage that keeps heterogeneous elements together, which is immanent to the singularity of the ‘work’ itself. Yet, this consistency of an artistic assemblage, which gives it a singularity has nothing to do with an ‘outside,’ offering a resemblance that would act as its foundation. No representational relations are ‘snuck’ in as with Bourriaud. Rather, an art assemblage registers an intensity rather than an identity. It stands on its own. It is an immanent image that does not refer to any ‘higher’ transcendent principle of organization. Deleuze tells us that art is simulacra. As mere appearances or artifice they act as ‘signs.’ Art forces us to think. Art appears as a ‘problem’ that is generative of an Idea, Idea written with a capital ‘I’ refers to a transcendental virtual realm of differences. A work of art is an encounter with difference instead of a recognition of the same; as an assemblage it deterritorializes, and (for Deleuze) works against clichés (Deleuze, 2003, p.63). Rather than art being a question of recognition, it should be a question of an encounter as to what it ‘is’? Art is “a being of sensation,” which uses percepts and affects to examine the conditions of real experience. Because art concerns sensation, it appears at first that Bourriaud’s championing of relational aesthetics addresses life’s self-actualization in vitalist terms. The artist restores the ‘lived’ vitality through his|her work, as Bourriaud maintains ‘relational’ artists were doing. They were filling in the gap left by a technologically alienated world. Art was restoring ‘life’, maintaining an organicism of the ‘flesh’, so to speak. But this is very anti-Deleuzian. Deleuze pursued a ‘passive vitalism’ (Colebrooke, 2010) rather than the active vitalism of Henri Bergson and William James, for example, which Bourriaud, in the name of Deleuze|Guattari, does. Deleuze conceived of art as addressing, not the lived, but undifferentiated life that attests to the autonomy of sensation. Affects and precepts of art belong neither to the spectator nor the artist, but arose from the virtual realm, the realm of the ‘unlived’ indeterminate life; what Deleuze

called “a life,” the indefinite article (a) referring to specificity as well as to the universality of the inhuman realm.

Art happens when content becomes expressive; but there is nothing ‘relational’ between content and its expression; the visible and the articulable are two different ‘forms’ of dispersion. They have no immediate connection or resemblance. The form of content never exits prior to the form of expression. This is to say there is no claim of signifier (expression) to signified (content). Rather the way they interact with one another is to produce different assemblages. Art, for Deleuze and Guattari has its territorial beginning in animality: a bird arranges (composes) the elements of its milieu, thus effecting the emergence of expressive qualities out of the material components of its arrangement. So it is the composition of the material that forms an expressive territory — this is the diagrammatic dimension of the art-assemblage. It is the ‘relational’ dimension of art that remains in the real virtual realm, which enables us to understand the relationship between discrete things and superindividual structures. This enables art to de- and reterritorialize, giving us a new sensation.

Bourriaud’s gesture is ultimately a phenomenological one in the guise of a Deleuzian call for art to perform a work of difference that expresses a transcendental Idea. The authenticity of art, for Bourriaud, is located within the relations of the process; the work carries the unity within the artist’s ‘lived’ experience. It is a principle of unification, a liberation from life enslaved by technology. Deleuze, in contrast insists on multiplicity where there is no one primordial life that we all share that provides the bedrock of ‘our’ shared existence as human beings — ‘Life is difference’. It is untotalizable; the sum of the relations of ‘to-affect’ and ‘to-be-affected’ exceeds the human. It includes the organic and the non-organic life, which constitutes the becoming of the world. Affect is the relational. It is a displacement of a particular quality from its context through expression. The experience of art means being exposed to the art-functions of an assemblage. Unlike the usual anthropocentric claims that an artwork is a unique gesture of the artist’s intention (conscious or unconscious), the artwork is positioned as a membrane through which the virtual and actual vibrate through it, back and forth at various speeds. Art is not the subjective experience of the audience. If it presents a ‘world,’ this is a perspective permeated by affects. The radical relationality that Deleuze calls for is the recognition that the diagrammatic power (as *puissance*, not *pouvoir* — the productive and energetic potential) of an art assemblage is to produce new affects. It is the virtual forces that generate the new that is to be creatively actualized — ‘Art is an abstract machine’. The aim of art is to divert force into matter. It is a materialist-vitalist orientation, or passive vitalism, quite opposed to the representational and organ-isational image of thought that Bourriaud insists is Deleuzian. There is a ‘will to art’ (*Kunstwollen*) that radically decenters what is ‘human’ through the recognition of a *chaosmosis* — creation emerging from destruction, which (taken from Nietzsche) is characterized the ethics of *amor fati*. Chaos always spills into life, quite different than mere conviviality.

How to ‘compose’ and how to ‘break’ is the question of art. Deleuze asks how to break with the common sense, with the ‘common good’, with what is ‘human all too human’ that is captured again and again through clichés or narcissistic egoism, which seems rampant in the artists Bourriaud forwards with such gusto: Maurizio Cattelan’s artistic pranks, Carsten Höller’s antics that enhance gallery goer’s private experiences and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s cooking exhibitions meant to further conviviality. This is a just the opposite for the demand that Deleuze makes on art. It is a construction of a living world of sensations, but one which reaches out to ‘a life’ that characterized as *zoe* rather than *bios*. As an abstract machine, art creates by ‘breaking

down,’ to become something else that forms the new. “Works are developed around or on the basis of a fracture they can never succeed in filling” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 195). Relational aesthetics, Deleuzian style, is the eternal return of difference as becoming — a permanent process of dissolution of the self, the fracturing of an ‘I’ as an affirmation of ‘life’ which always has death already enfolded within it.

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