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Representing the Artist  
MATX Seminar

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## **Releasing Space:**

### **Relational Aesthetics and The Making of an Artist Removed from the Work**

When Duchamp entered “Fountain” to the *Society of Independent Artists* exhibition in 1917 the art world had to find ways in which they could talk about the work as an original piece of art. Once “Fountain” became contextualized as an object d’art the art world was pressured to delineate the language used to define what is generally consider art. The Duchamp’s urinal opened up the levees of art’s strict and developed definitions but it also challenged the domineering language of the artworld at the time. By presenting his urinal into a exhibition filled with traditional paintings and sculptures Duchamp was able to place the burden of subjectivity not on the creative process but on language. "The urinal is there – it's an invitation. As Duchamp said himself, it's the artist's choice. He chooses what is art. We just added to it."<sup>1</sup>

Very much like Duchamp’s recontextulization of art and the definitions of art contemporary Relational Aesthetics artworks once again ask for us to look at the language used to define what art can be. The Relational Aesthetic artists of the 1990s and 2000s use the job of participation between viewer, artist, and location as the original

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Hensher p. 2-5

moment of creation. Relational Aesthetic artworks call into question the characteristic art; the reliance on an object or performance, the way that object might be created – usually held within the artist studio or taking place in a designated area, and location an art object usually resides – the location designated by either the artist or the art world. While the works by Relational Aesthetics artists vary in degree, from the personal engagement between two people seen in the clocks of Gonzales-Torres, to the staged public interactions of Yoko Ono and Mierle Ukeles to the private living and working spaces becoming public in the works of Corin Hewitt and Maurizio Cattelan, to the community dinners of Rikrit Tiravanija. I want to trace the development of work that calls into question the function of participation and the role that participation place in a non-defined environment. This lineage will outline contemporary artwork, and practice, starting with the Fluxus movement of the 1960s. This paper will suggest that Relational Aesthetic focuses not on the object of an artwork but on the functions consequential to participation. It is also important to state that the Relational Aesthetic movement is not new to art but that it belongs as an extension of Fluxus and Dada languages and should be considered within that context. Unlike its predecessors, Relational Aesthetics liberates the location, the viewing space from the context of art. Relational Aesthetics maks all spaces a possibility to experience an artwork. During this paper I hope to address the role of Relational Aesthetics in recording how artist, viewer, and work become a set for social engagement but that the resulting object of the experience is the collaborative “work” equally created by the artist and the viewer .

In order to address works of art that call into question the role of social participation, the French critic and museum curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term

*Relational Aesthetics*. This new movement of socially conscious artwork, including those by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, addresses a radical transformation of the relationships between artist and artwork. It also opens up the traditional definitions that surround the work of art and the production of that work. While Relational Aesthetics calls into question the relationship between the artist and the work of art, it is important to suggest that this line of questioning is not new. What is new for Relational Aesthetics is the function of the ways in which artists, viewers, environment, and objects participate and interact. Instead of an object based artwork, participation become the key subject to Relational Aesthetics.

For Bourriaud, *Relational Art* is artwork that relies on the social context that highlights the intersection of social situations in which art can be made. In his book Bourriaud describes Relational Art as, “An art taking at its theoretical horizon the realm of human interaction and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”<sup>2</sup> What is critical to Relational Aesthetics is the position the artist takes in relation to the viewer and the object. In many cases Relational Aesthetic artists perform a mundane act, like the 1992 exhibition where Rirkrit Tiravanij prepares Thai food for the exhibition’s visitors, in order to comment on the social situation in which all art is created. While Relational Aesthetics artworks seems ordinary or unqualified to be an artistic experience, Bourriaud’s arguments make room for an art that references the social environment and the process from which all art becomes a commodity. Furthermore, it uncovers that even artists and works of art can become a social good.

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<sup>2</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas p. 14

## **Felix Gonzalez-Torres**

There were large posters of clouds lying on the ground, discarded in the ditch, sitting on park benches, and crinkled up in trashcans? The mall seemed to be filled with little black and white clouds, somewhat mirroring the sky above. The cloud prints were part of a 2003-2004 artwork installation by artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres at The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Once inside the building it was easy to follow the littered hallways back to their source. The remaining posters were neatly stacked on the floor in one of the museum's blank white rooms. The artwork of Felix Gonzalez-Torres questions the role of the art object, along with the traditional relationship between artist, viewer, and exhibition space. Many of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' works reside in public spaces: such as large billboards with photographs of beds, pillows, and used-wrinkled sheets that hover over the viewer; piles of candy sitting on the gallery floor waiting to be consumed by the exhibition visitor; stacks of paper waiting to be stolen and then dispersed into the world.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres' billboards first appeared in metropolitan centers during the 1980 and 1990's. While the content of these billboards spoke to the AIDS epidemic during that time, what was critical was that the art object- images of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's beds – appeared to be both advertisements and public sculpture. These billboard pieces display what looks like a bed left empty from two bodies. While, the large billboards are installed in public viewing many of Gonzalez-Torres's artworks speak to a shared moment between two people, the private. The audience viewing the multiple cloud prints and the billboard installations were not confined to the museum or the traditional exhibition space with white walls and stuffy attendants. Here, the images

either floated above New York Avenues or were carried away under the viewer's arms. The public became participants in the dispersal of and continuation with the aesthetics viewing experience. And, since, the images lead themselves to a multitude of questions that could be experienced in the same fashion with a neighbor and a stranger the experience became a social situation, an interaction and engagement.

Much of the critiques of Relational Aesthetics from proponents and critics like Claire Bishop, Anna Dezeuze, Anthony Downey, Stewart Martin, and Toni Ross, examine its relationship to other 20<sup>th</sup> century art movements, including Dada and Fluxus. The main critique assigned to Relational Aesthetics explores Bourriaud's argument as a reposition of performance or public art from the 1960's. It is easy to see that the appearance of Fluxus happenings can be traced back to Dada sound art and concerts where artists would present artworks as performance plays that included the audience's participation. It is also easy to see that Relational Aesthetics relates to Fluxus in many the same ways that Fluxus recalled Dada. I, on the other hand, propose that Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics deserves to be referenced as a dependent and isolated advancement to both Dada and Fluxus.

While there is something to say for the validity of the wide criticism of Relational Aesthetics and its link to Fluxus, I find that we can look at three ways in which Relational Aesthetics differs from past participatory artworks. The first places the artists into a position where he or she shares in the responsibility to create by questioning the position of artists as producers/managers/geniuses. The second distinction allows social situations, including commerce and capitalism, to be the basis for production and

creation. This distinction focuses on the object as a mode of production and reverses the job of the artist to emphasize how artistic creativity itself is also part of the market condition. The final distinction calls into question the dependence on a “utopian” art experience. In all three of these requirements Relational Aesthetics reveals how works of art are social experiences and must be viewed as such. What is significant to Bourriaud’s line of reasoning is that the work of art is a shared experience and that the object for which art history holds as an original artifact for re-presentation is in many ways both a process of production and an situation for the everyday. Additionally, for Bourriaud, the process of making is in essence the process of living within a shared environment. “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.”<sup>3</sup>

## YOKO ONE

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Traditionally over the last 200-300 years artists have been considered a creator or chief instigator to the development of a work of art. It is not hard to find the hold that originality and authorship has had on the creative world. Artists have become a symptom of mythology and at the same time, through the sales of monographs of artist biographies a product for business. Artists and the works they make are both legend and commodities. Like the artist myth, where genius, talent, or destruction rules, the significance of the creation process through the work also relied on making of a special

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<sup>3</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas p. 22

artistic representation, aka, object. Thus, to get the full quality of the artistic experience the art object remained confined by the artist's studio, where object becomes a document of the studio process and the artist's struggle with the forces tormenting his or her creative energies. During Fluxus performances the artist, usually considered the instigator/composer, asked viewers to convene in a specific area in order to create, documents, and participate in the creation process. This artist, or composer, was at that time still considered to be the sole reason for the event. In many ways Fluxus events still recalled the traditional role of artist as leader and originator of a significant, transformative experience. What Relational Aesthetics uncovers is that the entire process of creation is a function of the social and economic process, that making works of art resembles a service from which a good is produced and that the artist is both product and production.

The romantic view of the creator, whether it is an artists or author, proposes a creative independence to the creation of the art object where artist become an enlightened maker. This definition remained largely unharmed until 1967 when Roland Barthes wrote "The Death of the Author." In this article Barthes suggests that the artist was not the creative genius that we once regarded so highly, but that the author/artist shared responsibility with the social context that gave meaning to the words. Here, in Barthes' argument, society and artist performed together to reveal amended information. Barthes writes, "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a

variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in order for the artwork to be considered a viable object the artwork had formally relied on a specific viewer apparatus and, the museum/gallery environment. In most cases one views works of art in isolated places, a museum, a gallery, a performance hall, special private and public collections, etc. Artworks, according to a market mentality that supports the lifestyle of the art world, require places that are particular for their reserved viewing. Even the performance artists who sought participants for Dada installations or Fluxus happenings required that the viewer’s mindset change a social area in accordance to the events in front of them, that the artists presented their space as a special venue for the performance.

## Mierle Ukeles

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According to Relational Aesthetics artwork can become an interaction, a street occurrence, a social situation, and direct interaction or exchange with the artists. In fact, with works by Relational Aesthetic artists, the viewer becomes integral to the success of the event and at the same time shares in the “knowledge,” or realization of the event. Furthermore, the Relational Aesthetics space is first and foremost a space for social interaction, not a location seeking transformation. So, how is Ukeles’ work different than work by Relational Aesthetic Artists? \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>4</sup> Barthes, Roland p. 146

## Catalan

Opposed to participation, but still calling into question the function of participation, some Relational Aesthetics artworks do not let you play and thus keeps you from interaction. Maurizio Cattelan opened a gallery in New York named *The Wrong Gallery* and had the gallery door locked, keeping any viewer from entering this special viewing space. With Relational Aesthetics works, the viewer is confronted with a realization that they may not be in the correct place in order to participate, that a event might in fact be a party that the viewer just crashed. This is the point for Relational Aesthetics, that the artwork become a common experience and one that is shared with other members of a community, may they be from the arts community or from the general public. Bourriaud writes “Their [Relational Aesthetic artists] works involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together...The artwork of the 1990’s turns the beholder into a neighbor, a direct interlocutor.”<sup>5</sup>

What is central to Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics is the presence of the “everyday.” For Bourriaud the everyday sets the performance outside the realm of creative space and isolates it as part of the daily experience. Here, Bourriaud relies on the widely used art historical term “form” to detach Relational Aesthetics from other Art movements. Instead of a “form” that recalls the composition of an object, alluding to the object “presenceness,” Bourriaud refers to the form of the Relational Aesthetics artwork as the experience and the interaction between participants. The everyday becomes the

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<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas p. 43

“form” of creation; therefore the object under study is the social situation between being and engagement. Bourriaud writes “Our persuasion, conversely, is that form only assumes its texture (and only acquires a real existence) when it introduces human interaction. 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 consciousnesses.”<sup>6</sup> Thus what is left is the form of the relationship, the interaction between participants. With Relational Aesthetics artworks, the event is paramount, the rest of the exhibition only acts as a document of the event. When Rikrit Tiravanija’s Thai dinner came to a close the artist left the utensils where they were for the rest of the exhibition schedule. Therefore, the remaining artifacts become the documents of the production’s experience, referencing the process of consumption. In Tiravianiija’s Thai dinner the experience took place of the art object’s form and the artifacts left over change from being gallery objects to records of commodity and social interaction/ritual.

Questioning viewer participation is not new to art. The varying degrees of participation between artist, artwork, and viewer have been analyzed and addressed throughout the history of art, especially during the 20th century. But, unique to Relational Aesthetics and unlike Fluxus, the finality of the experience, the engagement with the audience, proves to be at the crux of the issues. Relational Aesthetics artists focus on the everyday experience, the situations that may become invisible to daily boredom, like buying groceries, making soup, etc. Take for example the 2008-2009 Whitney Museum of Art exhibition where artist Corin Hewitt moved his life into the

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<sup>6</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas p. 22

museum. In *Seed Stage* Hewitt lived in the gallery for several months, cooking, working, sleeping. Everything Hewitt did was on view, yet the viewers were physically kept away from him by a constructed wall around the artist's life. Once inside the gallery room the viewer was aware of a person on the other side of the wall in front of them, left to their private goings-on. The viewer was not able to watch Hewitt during his day as he was locked inside this living space, guarded by a wall between audience and artist.

For Fluxus, as for most of art history, the object, the performance, the created subject recalls a moment of illumination. This is not the case for Relations Aesthetics. In fact, unlike the performances by Fluxus and Dada artists where the event led to some sort of expected transformation into enlightenment, what is revealed by Relational Aesthetic works is the social condition and the common. At the end of the day the Relational Aesthetic work does not desire utopia, it asks for commonality through engagement with private life in a public way. While Fluxus focused on an "experience" as a goal, Relational Aesthetic looks to an uncovering of the process of living. To end, I will quote Bourriaud, "Art, likewise, is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces."<sup>7</sup>

## Better Conclusion

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<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas p. 46.

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