

# Arty Party

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- *Relational Aesthetics* by Nicolas Bourriaud, translated by Matthew Copeland  
Les Presses du réel, 128 pp, €9.00, March 2002,  
ISBN 2 84066 060 1
- *Postproduction* by Nicolas Bourriaud, translated by Jeanine Herman  
Lukas and Sternberg, 88 pp, US \$19.00, October 2001,  
ISBN 0 9711193 0 9
- *Interviews: Volume I* by Hans Ulrich Obrist  
Charta, 967 pp, US \$60.00, June 2003, ISBN 88 8158 431 X

In an art gallery over the last decade you might have happened on one of the following. A room empty except for a stack of identical sheets of paper – white, sky-blue, or printed with a simple image of an unmade bed or birds in flight – or a mound of identical sweets wrapped in brilliant coloured foil, the sweets, like the paper, free for the taking. Or a space where office contents were dumped in the exhibition area, and a couple of pots of Thai food were on offer to visitors puzzled enough to linger, eat and talk. Or a scattering of bulletin boards, drawing tables and discussion platforms, some dotted with information about a famous person from the past (Erasmus Darwin or Robert McNamara), as though a documentary script were in the making or a history seminar had just finished. Or, finally, a kiosk cobbled together from plastic and plywood, and filled, like a homemade study-shrine, with images and texts devoted to a particular artist, writer or philosopher (Léger, Carver or Deleuze). Such works, which fall somewhere between a public installation, an obscure performance and a private archive, can also be found outside art galleries, rendering them even more difficult to

decipher in aesthetic terms. They can nonetheless be taken to indicate a distinctive turn in recent art. In play in the first two examples – works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and by Rirkrit Tiravanija – is a notion of art as an ephemeral offering, a precarious gift (as opposed to an accredited painting or sculpture); and in the second two instances (by Liam Gillick and by Thomas Hirschhorn), a notion of art as an informal probing into a specific figure or event in history or politics, fiction or philosophy. Although each type of work can be tagged with a theoretical pedigree (in the first case, ‘the gift’ as seen by Marcel Mauss, say, or in the second ‘discursive practice’ according to Michel Foucault), the abstract concept is transformed into a literal space of operations, a pragmatic way of making and showing, talking and being.

The prominent practitioners of this art draw on a wide range of precedents: the everyday objects of Nouveau Réalisme, the humble materials of Arte Povera, the participatory strategies of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica and the ‘institution-critical’ devices of Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke. But these artists have also transformed the familiar devices of the readymade object, the collaborative project and the installation format. For example, some now treat entire TV shows and Hollywood films as found images: Pierre Huyghe has reshot parts of the Al Pacino movie *Dog Day Afternoon* with the real-life protagonist (a reluctant bank-robber) returned to the lead role, and Douglas Gordon has adapted a couple of Hitchcock films in drastic ways (his *24 Hour Psycho* slows down the original to a near-catatonic running time). For Gordon, such pieces are ‘time readymades’ – that is, given narratives to be sampled in large image-projections (a pervasive medium in art today) – while Nicolas Bourriaud, a co-director of the Palais de

Tokyo, a Paris museum devoted to contemporary art, champions such work under the rubric of 'post-production'. This term underscores secondary manipulations (editing, effects and the like) that are almost as pronounced in such art as in film; it also suggests a changed status of the 'work' of art in the age of information which has succeeded the age of production. That we are now in such a new era is an ideological assumption, but even so, it's true that in a world of shareware, information can appear as the ultimate readymade, as data to be reprocessed and sent on, and some of these artists work, as Bourriaud says, 'to inventory and select, to use and download', to revise not only found images and texts but also given forms of exhibition and distribution.

One upshot of this way of working is what Gordon describes in Obrist's book as a 'promiscuity of collaborations', in which the Postmodernist complications of originality and authorship are pushed beyond the pale. Take a collaborative work-in-progress such as *No Ghost Just a Shell*, led by Huyghe and Philippe Parreno. A few years ago they found out that a Japanese animation company wanted to sell some of its minor characters; they bought one such person-sign, a girl named Annlee, and invited other artists to use her in their work. Here the artwork becomes a 'chain' of pieces: for Huyghe and Parreno, *No Ghost Just a Shell* is 'a dynamic structure that produces forms that are part of it'; it is also 'the story of a community that finds itself in an image'. If this collaboration doesn't make you a little nervous (is the buying of Annlee a gesture of liberation or of serial bondage?), consider another group project that adapts a readymade product to unusual ends: in this work, Joe Scanlan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Gillick, Tiravanija and others show you how to customise your own

coffin from Ikea furniture; its title is *DIY, or How to Kill Yourself Anywhere in the World for under \$399*.

The tradition of readymade objects, from Duchamp to Damien Hirst, is often mocking of high art or mass culture or both; in these examples it is mordant about global capitalism as well. Yet the prevalent sensibility of the new work tends to be innocent and expansive, even ludic – again an offering to other people and/or an opening to other discourses. At times a benign image of globalisation is advanced (it is a precondition for this very international group of artists), and there are utopian moments, too: Tiravanija, for example, has organised a ‘massive-scale artist-run space’ called ‘The Land’ in rural Thailand, designed as a collective ‘for social engagement’. More modestly, these artists aim to turn passive viewers into a temporary community of active interlocutors. In this regard Hirschhorn, who once worked in a Communist collective of graphic designers, sees his makeshift monuments to artists and philosophers as a species of passionate pedagogy – they evoke the agit-prop kiosks of the Russian Constructivists as well as the obsessive constructions of Kurt Schwitters. Hirschhorn seeks to ‘distribute ideas’, ‘radiate energy’ and ‘liberate activity’ all at once: he wants not only to familiarise his audience with an alternative public culture but to libidinise this relationship as well. Other artists, some of whom were trained as scientists (such as Carsten Höller) or architects (Stefano Boeri), adapt a model of collaborative research and experiment closer to the laboratory or the design firm than the studio. ‘I take the word “studio” literally,’ Gabriel Orozco remarks, ‘not as a space of production but as a time of knowledge.’ ‘A promiscuity of collaborations’ has also meant a promiscuity of installations: installation is the default format, and exhibition the

common medium, of much art today. (In part this tendency is driven by the increased importance of huge shows: there are biennials not only in Venice but in São Paulo, Istanbul, Johannesburg and Gwangju.) Entire exhibitions are often given over to messy juxtapositions of projects – photos and texts, images and objects, videos and screens – and occasionally the effects are more chaotic than communicative. Nonetheless, discursivity and sociability are central concerns of the new work, both in its making and in its viewing. ‘Discussion has become an important moment in the constitution of a project,’ Huyghe comments, and Tiravanija aligns his art, as ‘a place of socialisation’, with a village market or a dance-floor. ‘I make art,’ Gordon says, ‘so that I can go to the bar and talk about it.’ Apparently, if one model of the old avant-garde was the Party à la Lenin, today the equivalent is a party à la Lennon.

In this time of mega-exhibitions the artist often doubles as curator. ‘I am the head of a team, a coach, a producer, an organiser, a representative, a cheerleader, a host of the party, a captain of the boat,’ Orozco says, ‘in short, an activist, an activator, an incubator.’ The rise of the artist-as-curator has been complemented by that of the curator-as-artist; maestros of large shows have become very prominent over the last decade. Often the two groups share models of working as well as terms of description. Several years ago, for example, Tiravanija, Orozco and other artists began to speak of projects as ‘platforms’ and ‘stations’, as ‘places that gather and then disperse’, in order to underscore the casual communities they sought to create. Last year Documenta 11, curated by an international team led by Okwui Enwezor, was also conceived in terms of ‘platforms’ of discussion, scattered around the world, on

such topics as 'Democracy Unrealised', 'Processes of Truth and Reconciliation', 'Creolité and Creolisation' and 'Four African Cities'; the exhibition held in Kassel, Germany, was only the final such 'platform'. And this year the Venice Biennale, curated by another international group headed by Francesco Bonami, featured sections called 'Utopia Station' and 'Zone of Urgency', both of which exemplified the informal discursivity of much art-making and curating today. Like 'kiosk', 'platform' and 'station' call up the Modernist ambition to modernise culture in accordance with industrial society (El Lissitzky spoke of his Constructivist designs as 'way-stations between art and architecture'). Yet today these terms evoke the electronic network, and many artists and curators fall for the Internet rhetoric of 'interactivity', though the means applied to this end are usually far more funky and face-to-face than any chat room on the Web.

The forms of these books by Bourriaud and Hans Ulrich Obrist, the chief curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, are as telling as the contents. The Bourriaud texts are sketchy – brief glosses of projects that use 'post-production' techniques and seek 'relational' effects, while the Obrist tome is diffuse, with nearly a thousand pages of conversation with figures such as Jean Rouch and J.G. Ballard as well as the artists in question – and this is only Volume I. (Ballard lets fly with a sharp aperçu: 'The psychological test is the only function of today's art shows,' he says with the Young British Artists in mind, 'and the aesthetic elements have been reduced almost to zero.' He means it as a compliment.) The Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler once proposed to photograph everyone in the world; the peripatetic Obrist seems to want to talk to everyone (many of his interviews take place on planes). As with

some of the art discussed in the book, the result oscillates between an exemplary work of interdisciplinarity and a Babelian confusion of tongues. Along with the emphasis on discursivity and sociability, there is a concern with the ethical and the everyday: art is ‘a way to explore other possibilities of exchange’ (Huyghe), a model of ‘living well’ (Tiravanija), a means of being ‘together in the everyday’ (Orozco). ‘Henceforth,’ Bourriaud declares, ‘the group is pitted against the mass, neighbourliness against propaganda, low tech against high tech, and the tactile against the visual. And above all, the everyday now turns out to be a much more fertile terrain than pop culture.’

These possibilities of ‘relational aesthetics’ seem clear enough, but there are problems, too. Sometimes politics are ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society, as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world. Hirschhorn sees his projects as ‘never-ending construction sites’, while Tiravanija rejects ‘the need to fix a moment where everything is complete’. But surely one thing art can still do is to take a stand, and to do this in a concrete register that brings together the aesthetic, the cognitive and the critical. And formlessness in society might be a condition to contest rather than to celebrate in art – a condition to make over into form for the purposes of reflection and resistance (as some Modernist painters attempted to do). The artists in question frequently cite the Situationists, but, as T.J. Clark has stressed, the Situationists valued precise intervention and rigorous organisation above all things. ‘The question,’ Huyghe argues, ‘is less “What?” than “To whom?” It becomes a question of address.’ Bourriaud also sees art as ‘an

ensemble of units to be reactivated by the beholder-manipulator'. In many ways this approach is another legacy of the Duchampian provocation, but when is such 'reactivation' too great a burden to place on the viewer, too ambiguous a test? As with previous attempts to involve the audience directly (in some abstract painting or some Conceptual art), there is a risk of illegibility here, which might reintroduce the artist as the principal figure and the primary exegete of the work. At times, 'the death of the author' has meant not 'the birth of the reader', as Barthes speculated, so much as the befuddlement of the viewer.

Furthermore, when has art, at least since the Renaissance, *not* involved discursivity and sociability? It's a matter of degree, of course, but might this emphasis be redundant? It also seems to risk a weird formalism of discursivity and sociability pursued for their own sakes. Collaboration, too, is often regarded as a good in itself: 'Collaboration is the answer,' Obrist remarks at one point, 'but what is the question?' Art collectives in the recent past, such as those formed around Aids activism, were political projects; today simply getting together sometimes seems to be enough. Here we might not be too far from an artworld version of 'flash mobs' – of 'people meeting people', in Tiravanija's words, as an end in itself. This is where I side with Sartre on a bad day: at least in galleries and museums, hell is other people.

Perhaps discursivity and sociability are in the foreground of art today because they are scarce elsewhere. The same goes for the ethical and the everyday, as the briefest glance at our craven politicians and hectic lives might suggest. It's as though the very idea of community has taken on a utopian tinge. Even an art audience cannot be taken for granted but must be conjured up



every time, which might be why contemporary exhibitions often feel like remedial work in socialisation: come and play, talk, learn with me. If participation appears threatened in other spheres, its privileging in art might be compensatory – a pale, part-time substitute. Bourriaud almost suggests as much: ‘Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond.’ Only when he’s at his most grim does he hit home: ‘The society of spectacle is thus followed by the society of extras, where everyone finds the illusion of an interactive democracy in more or less truncated channels of communication.’

For the most part these artists and curators see discursivity and sociability in rosy terms. As the critic Claire Bishop suggests, this tends to drop contradiction out of dialogue, and conflict out of democracy; it is also to advance a version of the subject free of the unconscious (even the gift is charged with ambivalence, according to Mauss). At times everything seems to be happy interactivity: among ‘aesthetic objects’ Bourriaud counts ‘meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention’. To some readers such ‘relational aesthetics’ will sound like a truly final end of art, to be celebrated or decried. For others it will seem to aestheticise the nicer procedures of our service economy (‘invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments’). There is the further suspicion that, for all its discursivity, ‘relational aesthetics’ might be sucked up in the general movement for a ‘post-critical’ culture – an art and architecture, cinema and literature ‘after theory’.

London Review of Books Vol.25 No 23 4 December 2003  
pp.21-22. 2670 words