

Public Relations
An Interview with Nicolas Bourriaud

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For evidence of art's recent love affair with "interactivity" and "connectivity," one need look no further than the pair of digital art surveys currently playing at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. For less literal proof, however, one might consider the recent appointment of Nicolas Bourriaud as codirector, with Jerome Sans, of the newly created Palais de Tokyo contemporary art center in Paris. As a young critic in the '90s, Bourriaud offered one of the earliest readings of the emergent metaphors of artistic production engendered by information culture. The name he coined for his ideas—"relational aesthetics"—would become the title of his first book of criticism in 1997 and one of the more frequently heard catchphrases, at least in Europe, when it came to the practices of artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Maurizio Cattelan, and Vanessa Beecroft, all of whom were included in Bourriaud's 1996 exhibition "Traffic" at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain in Bordeaux.

Relational aesthetics was formulated at an auspicious moment in the technological arc of '90s art. Midway between the critical and socially diffuse ethos of institutional critique at the beginning of the decade and art's full-tilt into entertainment and digital production by decade's end, it might be said that Bourriaud anticipated the future by looking backward. Hardly a techie, Bourriaud was greatly influenced by critical art's focus on the sphere of reception, which had newly privileged questions of site and audience, and on the social network of art itself. By the mid-'90s, however, the artists with whom Bourriaud worked most closely tended to locate their practices not in relation to art's own apparatuses but in the metaphorical (and often literal) spaces colonized by mass media and spectacle culture. In Bourriaud's framework, artists like Tiravanija and Beecroft had become postpolitical producers of cultural services: get people together, give them some terms, provide an experience. Indeed, against the quintessentially late-'90s backdrop of dot-comism and user empowerment, relational aesthetics seems most a product of its time. With Bourriaud's third book, *Post-Production*, due out this fall (Lukas & Sternberg) and the English translation of *Esthétique relationnelle* (les Presses du Reel, 1997) set to appear later this year, I sat down with the curator in February in the start-up-style offices of the Palais de Tokyo to ask him how his ideas are evolving.

BENNETT SIMPSON: How will the Palais de Tokyo differentiate itself from the other museums in Paris that exhibit contemporary art?

NICOLAS BOURRIAUD: The Palais will be the only space devoted exclusively to contemporary art in Paris. We want to be a sort of interdisciplinary kunstverein—more laboratory than museum. [Palais codirector] Jerome [Sans] and I believe that

it's impossible to understand what's going on in contemporary art if you don't address disciplines like music or literature or movies or fashion, but our thinking about this will be driven by art's problematics. The museum will also be open from noon until midnight. Why do museums and art centers copy bankers hours? Besides, we prefer to think of the evening as the best time for our kind of proposals.

BS: The impetus for the Palais seems very much a response to your local context and history.

NB: Yes and no. I don't think it's possible to have national models anymore. We've tried to shift the problem. For us, Paris is just a city where a lot of interesting people live. It's a meeting place, like New York. Our idea is not to sell France, but to situate the Palais in the international circuit from the vantage point of Paris. We prefer to be a kind of satellite—a spot for production and broadcast.

BS: As a critic in the '90s, you began to speak of what you called “relational aesthetics.” Was this a critical strategy, or was it more a reflection of a zeitgeist?

NB: My ideas about relational aesthetics started from observing a group of artists—Rirkrit Tiravanija, Maurizio Cattelan, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Vanessa Beecroft. Relational aesthetics was a critical method, a way of approaching the art of the '90s, as well as a general sensibility that these artists shared. One of the most important ideas for me is what I called the “criterion of coexistence.” Take the example of ancient Chinese and Japanese painting, which always leaves space open for the viewer to complete the experience. This painting is an ellipsis. I like art that allows its audience to exist in the space opened up by it. For me, art is a space of images, objects, and human beings. Relational aesthetics is a way of considering the productive existence of the viewer of art, the space of participation that art can offer.

BS: But isn't any aesthetic experience at least partially “completed” by the viewer or participant? What's different, in terms of practice, about the '90s artists you've mentioned?

NB: Relational aesthetics tries to decode or understand the type of relations to the viewer produced by the work of art. Minimalism addressed the question of the viewer's participation in phenomenological terms. The art of the '90s addresses it in terms of use. Tiravanija once quoted this sentence from Wittgenstein: “Don't look for the meaning of things, look for their use.” One is not in front of an object anymore but included in the process of its construction.

BS: When you first began to write about relational aesthetics in 1995, you were looking at a group of artists that had been responding to a very depressed market and to a field quite open, if painfully so, to self-examination and self-critique. A lot has

changed since then in terms of the market, the economy, and the commercialization of culture. How has your project evolved in response to these changes?

NB: The fact is that the early-'90s crisis in the art market was in many ways a stroke of good luck. Galleries and institutions opened up to unsalable and immaterial kinds of art practice, to projects they would not have considered five years before. Of course, one fears that these artists may have transformed themselves under the pressure of the market into a kind of merchandising of relations and experience. The question we might raise today is, Connecting people, creating interactive, communicative experience: What for? What does the new kind of contact produce? If you forget the “what for?” I’m afraid you’re left with simple Nokia art—producing interpersonal relations for their own sake and never addressing their political aspects.

BS: It’s easy to be cynical about the idea of relationality and connectivity because we heard it so often in the rhetoric of the dot-coms. Do you really think ‘90s artists had an answer to the “What for?”?

NB: Because many artists in the ‘90s dealt with or used some of the crasser aspects of capitalism—Maurizio Cattelan renting his space at the ‘93 Venice Biennale, Jason Rhoades working from a Ferrari—the question of motivation is confusing. But I think that there’s no point in trying to hide behind a romantic or heroic notion of the artist. In my upcoming book *Post-Production*, the idea is that art has definitively reached the tertiary sector—the service industry—and that art’s current function is to deal with things that were created elsewhere, to recycle and duplicate culture. Art production now indexes the service industry and immaterial economy more than heavy industry (as it did with Minimalism). Artists provide access to certain regions of the visible, and the objects they make become more and more secondary. They don’t really “create” anymore, they reorganize. There are two dominant figures in today’s culture: the DJ and the programmer. Both deal with things that are already produced. The common point between relational aesthetics and *Post-Production* is this idea that to communicate or have relations with other people, you need tools. Culture is this box of tools.

BS: “Culture as communication” is a long-standing idea from social anthropology, cybernetics, and semiotics. Culture is always a mediating set of relations. Are these artists doing anything besides pushing at an open door? How is the model of the DJ any different from the familiar models of postmodern pastiche or the tired avant-gardisms of the bricoleur?

NB: I think quotation is no longer an operative value. Quotation only submits one’s work to the authority of History and its “masters.” A DJ doesn’t “quote,” per se. He or she wanders into History and uses previous works according to his or her own needs. This method might be similar to past ones, but the set of values that organizes

it has changed: Nobody cares anymore about signatures as authority markers, we now live in a cultural space of increasingly fluid circulations of signs.

BS: If art relies on the same rhetoric of interactive experience and connectivity as commercial culture, can it expect to be received any differently? Does it forfeit its capacity to be distinct? One wants to maintain some specificity.

NB: Commerce, trading, the market, is a much more important metaphor for art than we like to believe. For my part, I tend to think well of metaphors of commerce and trading. In early civilization, the trader or the merchant was always bringing things from outside culture, from other cultures, into the market at the center of the city. Traders disrupted things, they brought disharmony, difference, new objects and ideas. It's no coincidence that art is dealing with this complex at this point. We have a global culture, dominated by exchange. The problem arises when the market becomes abstract, when you feel that you can have no control over it. This abstraction of the market is something that artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Sylvie Fleury and Gabriel Orozco address in very specific ways.

BS: Of course, the '90s also saw the rise of new media and digital art. Do you see a relationship between this and the more "traditional" kinds of interactive art practice you mention above? Does the former make the latter seem anachronistic?

NB: The indirectness of this correspondence is very important to consider when you think about art's relation to technology. Think about the beginnings of photography. Photography started as something very documentary and academic when it tried to be artistic. The first photographs were still lifes or portraits. This new technique of representation only began to get interesting with the advent of Impressionism. Photography allowed Impressionism to exist, but totally indirectly, by creating a new frame of thought: Suddenly, it was possible to use light, luminous impact, to define forms and represent reality. Today, the way that the Internet changes our frame of mind is not only felt on the Web. Most Internet art is superacademic at this point. At the same time, indirectly, this new technology is what has allowed a Rirkrit Tiravanija to think the way he does.

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