

Key Term: Relational Aesthetics

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Until quite recently, the field of aesthetics has been almost exclusively concerned with artistic products rather than artistic processes (Sawyer 149). Scholars as distant as Plato and as recent as Lyotard have all focused upon the tangibles of creativity: books, paintings, and symphonies were, and continue to be, examined for their ideological content, their formal properties, and their intertextual relations. But while product-oriented theories continue to hold sway within the academy, a recent trend initiated by a French gallery curator named Nicolas Bourriaud has arguably reframed the field of aesthetics entirely, even if some would argue that his work shares elements with that of earlier theorists such as John Dewey.¹ Interested in the social formations fostered by art, Bourriaud argues that creative works ought to be “evaluated on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce, or prompt” (qtd in Downey 270). Bourriaud’s theory, known as relational aesthetics, dismisses the notion that artistic value is derived from the private contemplation of an art object; instead, Bourriaud claims that all art works should be understood in terms of the communicative acts and intersubjective relations they necessitate. Meaning and value, according to Bourriaud, are properties defined extrinsically to creative works in a process of collective elaboration (Bishop 54). Or, to put it another way, the idea of artistic process as an isolated act of creation (eventually completed) is replaced with the idea of process as an ongoing,

collective artistic praxis. And as such, relational aesthetics demands a substantial reevaluation of the political and social significance of art in society.

Revising the politics of aesthetics to take into account relational art typically begins with an examination of the specific ways in which art can generate new “model[s] of sociability” (Bourriaud qtd. in Downey 270). Two artists cited by Bourriaud as exemplary of the practice of relational art are Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick. Tiravanija’s work often consists of an installation or a creation that solicits audience participation: he is noted, for example, for works in which he cooks meals for gallery viewers and more generally “erode[s] the distinction between institutional and public space” (Bishop 56). Because there is very little to actually observe in Tiravanija’s work, it is considered to be a clear expression of how “relational art privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality” (Bishop 61). Gillick similarly focuses on the structuring of relationships: his work involves the creation of installations containing objects such as a bulletin board or a table, accompanied by instructions for audience use (58-59). But the more important point in relation both artists is that their works constitute new models for how people interact and enter into dialogue with one another: collaborative activities are established that exist outside of the structure of economic imperatives that mediate many social exchanges. Moreover, distinctions between artist and audience are blurred (56); the “conditions for an exchange” between strangers are created (Bourriaud qtd in Downey 268); and the idea of art as an autonomous object is replaced with the idea of art as a relational process.

Not surprisingly, Bourriaud's theory hasn't escaped criticism and controversy. Anthony Downey, for example, questions the generative social potential of artworks deemed to be relational. If, he argues, relational art is able to create new communicative arrangements between individuals, then it must do so by being autonomous from the system of economic relations that "underwrites" our social world (271). Otherwise, such art would be *reflective* of its context rather than *productive* of it. Yet Downey is not altogether dismissive of relational aesthetics. Rather, he simply points out the lack of evidence in support of somewhat idealistic claims:

[T]he proposition that relational art practices produce unprecedented inter-human relations that are ethically and politically cogent – and beyond the compromised relations that we associate with a neoliberal world order – *needs to be substantiated rather than hypothesized.* (273, emphasis added)

Put another way, Downey is hesitant to assume that relational art produces novel forms of human encounter. He points out that curatorial practices – which are "responsive to market-led, publically funded institutional priorities" (271) – play a huge role in the facilitation of these supposedly new relations, and in total, Downey advocates for a more rigorous analysis of the nature of the interactions prompted by relational art.

Claire Bishop's criticisms of Bourriaud are similar to Downey's in that they focus on the characteristics of the human encounters produced by relational art. She points out that in Bourriaud's theory, "the structure is the subject matter" (64), since no attention is paid to the specific content of the activities that are producing the social relations.

Accordingly, no notice is given to the potential ways in which the structure of relational art is mediated by its content. For example, a consideration of “*what* Tiravanija cooks, *how* and for *whom*” is ignored, despite the fact that such information might be very politically and ethically relevant (64). Moreover, Bishop argues that “[t]he quality of the relationships in “relational aesthetics” are never examined or called into question” (65). The assumption that all relations that foster inclusive dialogue are equivalent and necessarily beneficial is problematic because it neglects to ask anything more about these relations: Why are they being produced? Who is involved? (65)

This line of questioning also allows for an inclusion of improvisatory practices in the discussion of relational art. The collaboration, interaction, and inclusive dialogue that characterize improvisation make it an inherently social activity, and many scholars associated with the ICASP research project have written extensively on the potential for musical improvisation to facilitate social change and the development of new forms of human relations. A good example of such writing can be found in Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin’s introduction to *The Other Side of Nowhere*:

Musical practices in which improvisation is a defining characteristic *are* social practices, envisionings of possibilities excluded from conventional systems of thought and orthodoxies of the imagination (knowing), of relations with others (community), and of relations to the materials of the world around us (instruments). (11)

This and many comparable examples of arguments in favor of the social potential of music suggest that the debates surrounding relational art ought to extend into any

consideration of improvisation as model for political dialogue. Does improvised music truly have generative social potential as a practice that mirrors many of the characteristics of relational art, or is the social promise of improvisation, as Downey might suggest, more an assertion than a demonstrable phenomenon?

Interestingly, scholarly arguments exist to support both positions. In, for example, in an examination of the relation between the social experiences of diasporic communities and the development of intercultural musical collaborations, Jason Stanyek cites an analysis of how intercultural music making accompanied the creation of an seventeenth century plantation community in Jamaica and a unique culture that incorporated elements of highly diverse African ethnicities (103-106). Stanyek's consideration of the collaboration between jazz musicians Chano Pozo and Dizzie Gillespie is also a persuasive account of how improvised music making played an important role in fostering the creation of an intercultural and, more specifically, Pan-African community. Yet some writers caution against claims such as Stanyek's. Alan Stanbridge, another ICASP collaborator, suggests that accounts of the socially transformative power of improvised music rely upon a misguided "[r]omanticization of the [m]argins" (7) – the idea that music such as jazz is only capable of challenging social norms when it exists and is produced outside of the dominant social order. First, Stanbridge points out that jazz has become anything but marginal: corporations use jazz in their commercials; artists like Diana Krall have achieved unprecedented popular success (10); and jazz scholars like George Lewis and Anthony Braxton have become ensconced in mainstream academia (8). Jazz, in other words, has been co-opted by what

is already conventional. Stanbridge does acknowledge that some forms of jazz have remained obscure, but concludes that this marginality “tends to circumscribe rather severely the utopian and far-reaching claims made regarding the development of ‘new social relations’” (10), since the impact of such music is clearly restricted to a tiny portion of any given population. Yet Stanbridge is not altogether dismissive of the possibility of music prompting social change. Rather, he insists that art has “social and political limits” that must be recognized (10), and that a more realistic analysis of the social efficacy of the arts would not be restricted to a specific medium such as improvised music.

Overall, the arguments described above suggest at the very least that improvised music, like relational art more generally, is worthy of consideration as a fertile source for new models of human interaction. And at most, these arguments simply strengthen the proposition that improvisation can instigate social change. But regardless of the extent to which further inquiry confirms the views of either the skeptics or the proponents of relational notions of artistic value, it is clear that the field of aesthetics is unlikely to abandon the examination of process-oriented creative works anytime soon. Platonic notions of what art actually is may be outdated, but the ancient debates surrounding the political role of art, be it improvised or otherwise, continue.

Notes

1. John Dewey's *Art as Experience* is one example of an early work in aesthetics that focuses on the processes associated with experiencing aesthetic pleasure rather than properties of an aesthetic object that prompt this pleasure. The importance of this point is that Bourriaud's work does emerge out of an existing tradition that considers artistic processes.

Works Cited

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