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RELATIONAL AESTHETICS: CREATIVITY IN THE INTER-HUMAN SPHERE

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Relational Aesthetics: Creativity in the Inter-Human Sphere

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Relational Art was first described as an art movement in Nicolas Bourriaud's catalogue for the exhibition *Traffic* in 1995, and in an eponymous book in 1998. He observed that contemporary artists were shifting the focus of their work away from creating objects of spectacle to interaction with viewers through dialogue. Examination of a sample of representative artists' work demonstrates a wide variety of applications that variously include objects. Inclusion of objects in relational artwork raises important theoretic considerations about the definition of the genre and its application to specific artworks.

In the thesis artwork, WORKS WHEN, Carl Patow engages individuals in Richmond, Virginia, in conversations, documenting the location of their neighborhood and recording observations they make about their neighborhoods on polychrome tiles. The collected tiles are formed into "communities" on a floor map of the city. The work includes both conversation and objects in its creation, realization and exhibition. In doing so, *WORKS WHEN* is both an example of Relational Aesthetics and an expansion of its scope as a genre.

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Relational Aesthetics: Creativity in the Inter-Human Sphere

Introduction

The relationship between artist, artwork and spectator has fascinated philosophers and theorists for centuries. Is human belief and behavior sufficiently influenced by art spectatorship alone? Plato believed that spectatorship was insufficient and that every member of the community should be a participant, not a spectator, in the theater.[1] To this day, the nature of the interface between artist and spectator continues to be debated. Relational aesthetics seeks to reestablish the primacy of engagement of the public with the creation of the artwork by recognizing that conversation, discussion and sharing ideas can be considered as art in itself.

Literature Review and Analysis

Nicolas Bourriaud, a curator and art critic, observed in the mid-1990s that spontaneous social relations appeared to be disappearing in society or were restricted to formulaic interactions in areas of consumption, such as pubs, coffee shops and galleries. "These days", he writes, "the social bond has turned into a standardized artifact."[2] He observed that artists of the time were beginning to integrate into their art structural arrangements to generate relationships between people. He coined the phrase "Relational Aesthetics" (or "Relational Art") to recognize that open-ended conversations could, in themselves, be considered as art. He defines relational art as[3]:

> A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.

The object of Relational Aesthetics is to explore art that concerns itself with creating encounters of moments of sociability within artist defined "communication zones" for non-scripted social interactions.[4] To quote Bourriaud from the original catalogue of the *Traffic* exhibition[5] at CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux,

> "Their works highlight social methods of exchange, interactivity with the onlooker within the aesthetic experience proposed to him/her, and communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools for linking human beings and groups to one another. So they are all working within what we might call the relational realm. They all pitch their artistic praxis in a proximity which, without belittling the visuality factor, relativizes its place in the

[1] Jacque Ranciere. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Gregory Elliott, trans. Verso, London, New York. 2009. 5.

[2] Nicolas Bourriaud. *Relational Aesthetics.* Dijon: Les Presses du réel. 2002 (1998). 9.

[3] Nicolas Bourriaud. 2002. 113.

[4] *Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of 'relational aesthetics' may give designers a new set of tools*. Eye magazine. Spring 2006. http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/part-of-the-process. accessed 09.04.2018.

[5] Michael Kelly, ed. *Relational Aesthetics*. Encyclopedia of Aesthetics (2 ed.) Oxford University Press. 2014. http://oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199747108.001.0001/acref-970199747108-e-618?print. accessed 09.25.2018.

exhibition's protocol. The work of art of the 1990s turns the onlooker into a neighbor and interlocutor. It is precisely the attitude of this generation towards communications which helps to define it in relation to previous generations."[6]

Bourriaud's definition is broad, and in its expansiveness can create confusion about Relational Aesthetics' place among other related art forms. In particular, participatory art, performance art and performative art occupy definitional spaces that may, or may not, be considered as relational art.

Claire Bishop, in her book, Installation Art, opens the section on Relational Aesthetics with the following paragraph.[7]

The French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (b.1965) regards Gonzolez-Torres's work as exemplary of what he terms 'relational aesthetics', artistic practices of the 1990s that take as their theoretical horizon 'the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space', In other words, the works of Art that Bourriaud categorizes as 'relational' seek to set up encounters between people in which meaning is elaborated *collectively* rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption. The audience of this work is therefore envisaged as plural: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situations in which viewers are addressed as a collective, social mass; moreover, in many of these works we are given the structure to create a community, however temporary or utopian this might be.

The paragraph is illuminating, in that it reveals the breadth of Bourriaud's understanding of relational art. On the one hand, Bourriaud embraces Gonzolez-Torres' work, for example his 'candy spills', as relational art, acknowledging that the work is experienced largely by individual viewers experiencing the work. And at the other extreme, Bishop describes one function of relational art is to set up situations to create communities of viewers. Critical to both situations, individual engagement and group interaction, is the requirement that the work "set up encounters between people" as distinguished from objects or spectacle. "The audience of this work is therefore envisaged as plural: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer…" In my reading, plural can be as limited as two individuals. This is an important distinction as related to my thesis artwork. Many of the encounters are between two people (myself and one other), or small groups of two to four people. The question has been raised, can artwork that engages only two individuals be considered relational?" Bourriaud's embracing 'candy spills' and Bishop's description leads me to believe that two individuals, as well as many individuals, can engage in relational art.

Another term, participatory art, is frequently encountered in discussion of interactive artworks. Participatory art is a term that describes a form of art that directly engages the

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[6] Nicolas Bourriaud. *Traffic: Space-times of the Exchange*. May Revue, 2012. http://www.mayrevue.com/en/traffic-espaces-temps-de-lechange/ accessed 12.11. 2018.
[7] Claire Bishop. *Installation Art.* Routledge, New York. 2005. 116.

audience in the creative process so that they become participants in the event.[8] The number of individuals is not material to the definition. Perhaps Bourriaud's most well-known critic is Claire Bishop, an Anglo-American art historian and theorist. In the first sentence of the introduction to her book, *Participation*,[9] notes that participation is present with activation of the individual (for example as viewer in a so-called interactive installation) or as part of a social dimension of participation (which is the subject of her anthology). In my view, the two terms can overlap depending on the artwork under consideration.

Some examples to consider, based on the above definitions:

Situation	Number of Participants	Proposed Designation
The artist and a participant have a conversation about an issue of social importance	2	Relational Art and Participatory Art
The artist and 10 participants have a conversation about an issue of social importance	11	Relational Art and Participatory Art
10 participants have a conversation about an issue of social importance	10	Relational Art and Participatory Art
Participants throw crumbs on a carpet for an actress costumed as Melania Trump to vacuum	1 or more	Participatory Art Not Relational Art
A viewer spends time observing a painting.	1 or more	Not Participatory Not Relational

The terms performance art and performative art are also important to consider in this context. Performance artworks are created through actions performed by the artist or other participants, which may be live or recorded, spontaneous or scripted.[10] The term performativity describes the interdependent relationship between certain words and actions – as when a word or sentence implies an action.[11]

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[8] Tate Term. *Participatory Art.* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/participatory-art. accessed 4. 6. 2019.

[9] Claire Bishop. *Participation.* Whitechapel; Gallery, London, MIT Press.2006. 10.

[10] Tate Term. *Performance Art.* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/performance-art. accessed 4. 6. 2019.

[11] Tate term. *Performativity.* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/performativity. accessed 4. 6. 2019.

Some examples to consider:

Situation	Number of Participants	Designation
Horses and riders show skills at the Vienna Riding School	Variable	Performance
Mounted policemen exercise crowd control with verbal commands during an artwork at a museum event	Variable	Performance and Performative

One challenge for relational art is creating a capacity to become performative. That is, to what extent does relational art activate the participants and result in social change? How can relational art extend its influence beyond interhuman communication to changes in social constructs, government policies, belief systems and individual actions? Because relational art is inherently an inter-human activity, extending into the realm of social action seems a natural progression. The artist's intent for a relational work, however, may, or may not, include agency for social change within the work.

The thesis artwork, WORKS WHEN, is based on conversations between individuals and the artist and conversations of small groups with the artist. As part of the experience, the participants discuss their neighborhoods, that is, aspects of their environment that function for them and aspects they perceive as needing improvement. As a result of the conversation, documentation of the location of their neighborhood and the issue they identified is created. Using the above definitions, I believe the thesis artwork work can be characterized as relational and as performance art. It is not performative. It does engage participants in considering a social issue of contemporary importance, that is, the qualities of the communities in which we live. In that sense, it is a work of social practice. In its design, it is meant to create a neutral and safe sphere for any resident of the city to participate in mutual creation of an artwork that has its genesis the neighborhoods where participants live.

Relational Aesthetics and the Object

By definition, Relational Aesthetics describes artistic practice that, by advancing intersubjective artwork, simultaneously advances objectless art. Bourriaud places emphasis on proximity, togetherness and the social network in describing relational art. The audience experiences a constructed social communal event. Importantly, the experience is not dependent on a private contemplation of an object of art but is the result of an intersubjective collective engagement. In reducing the centrality of the object and creating a social experience, relational art elevates the democratization of artistic practice, a trend that was apparent as early as the

1960s.[12] Gullar[13] and Buren,[14] for example, deeply considered the role of the object and its inevitable presence in art.

It has been suggested that the roots of Bourriaud's artistic observations can be found in the sculpture of Tony Smith and Richard Serra in the 1960s.[15] The resemblance to relational art lies in the goal of viewer participation by walking around, through and within the large-scale sculptures of these two artists. The sculptures invite viewers, through confrontation, to consider the economic, political and environmental forces at work in the surroundings.

One feature that sets relational art apart is that the viewer must be present for relational art to exist. In Bourriaud's words, "relational art privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality." One of the artists in his seminal exhibition, Liam Gillick, put it this way, "My work is like the light in the fridge, it only works when there are people there to open the fridge door. Without people, it's not art - it's something else - stuff in the room."[16] Relational artwork is inherently social.

A related aspect of relational aesthetics is the democratization of art, as all viewers are included as equal participants in the artwork. Bourriaud observed that "artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments" that work toward creating "hands-on utopias."[17] Bourriaud envisions the artist-viewer interactions as "micro-utopias" and in so doing expands the relational artistic practice into the political sphere. Ne notes:

> How is it possible to transform the world from scratch and rebuild a society which would be totally different? I think that it is totally impossible and what artists are trying to do now is to create micro-utopias, neighborhood utopias, like talking to your neighbor, just what's happening when you shake hands with somebody. This is all super political when you think about it. That's micro-politics.

When viewed through the lens of critical theory, Bourriaud's form of social exchange also raises interesting questions about the value of relational art. By reducing the significance of art objects in the production of relational art, Bourriaud creates a social interstice that theoretically disengages from capitalistic exchange, creating an art of social autonomy. On closer examination, however, the argument appears to have several flaws relating to the nature of the object and its relationship to capitalism. Martin points out that Bourriaud has made an error in his understanding of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism.[18]

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[12] Kelly, op cit.

[13] Ferreira Gullar. "*Theory of the Non-Object,*" 1959.

[14] Daniel Buren, excerpts from "*Beware!*" ("Mise en garde!"), in Konzeption/Conception, translated by Charles Harrison and Peter Townsend (Leverkusen: Stadtischer Museum, 1969); Reprinted in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings, Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., University of California Press,1996.

[15] Ivy Cooper. "*Being Situated in Recent Art: From the "extended Situation" to "Relational Aesthetics*". Janus Head. 336. https://userpages.umbc.edu/~kmarmo1/grad14/jac/test.pdf..

[16] Liam Gillick. *Liam Gillick, Renovation Filter: Recent Past and Near Future*, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, UK, 8 October – 23 December 2000. 16.

[17] Bourriaud, op cit.

[18] Martin. 2007. 378.

> Capitalist exchange value is not constituted at the level of objects, but of social labor, as a measure of abstract labor. It is the commodification of labour that constitutes the value of 'objective' commodities.... Bourriaud partakes of a common form of political fetishism which thinks that the eradication of the 'objectivity' of the commodity eradicates capitalistic exchange.

In fact, detailed examination of relational artworks created by a variety of artists reveals capitalist exchange, sometimes provided giveaways and in other instances explicitly identified in the process or title of the work.[19]

Bourriaud's concept of relational art is not without its critics. The academic and philosophical underpinnings of Bourriaud's book, *Relational Aesthetics*, are considered by some to be soft, which leaves the approach open to criticism. The book is considered by some critics to lack comprehensiveness and clarity of thought. For example, while Bourriaud recognized several specific artists in practice at the time of its writing,[20] many earlier artists who created similar works were not similarly identified.

Some contemporary philosophers have also been critical of the use of conversations as an art medium. The French philosopher Jacques Ranciere questioned whether relocating conversations to a gallery setting, that is, to a space reserved for "art objects" defines the conversations as "art".[21] One related criticism is that the gallery experiences speak largely to privileged art gallery audiences while at the same time suggesting that relational art is outside the typical capitalist producer/consumer model.[22]

In Bishop's article, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"[23] she examines closely the work of two artists identified by Bourriaud as being representational of the movement. Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick both participated in Bourriaud's seminal exhibition *Traffic*. Using their art as a starting point for analysis of Bourriaud's premise, she systematically raises probing questions about their commitment to the fundamentals of relational art. She questions the quality of the relationships that are part-and-parcel of the relational art experience and suggests that the absence of friction in the dialogue creates a falsely harmonious micro-utopia.[24] Without friction in the dialogue, she doubts the value of the narratives as recipes for improvement. In her opinion, "In such a cozy situation, art does not feel the need to defend itself, and it collapses into

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[19] Martin, 380.

[20] Stewart Martin. *Critique of Relational Aesthetics*. Third Text, 21(40) July 2007. 369-386.

[21] Jacques Ranciere. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2009.

[22] Eli Robb. *Guest Editor's Statement: Perspectives on Relational Art. Public Art Dialogue.* 2013, 3(2), 137-140. https://caa.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21502552.2023.827853. accessed 12.14. 2018.

[23] Claire Bishop. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. October 110, Fall 2004, 65.

[24] Bishop. 69.

compensatory (and self-congratulatory) entertainment."[25] Liam Gillick, in a response, disagrees on a number of counts.[26]

In the case that relational art exists outside the gallery, and incorporates the voice of the community members, it has been observed that it may create a false sense of inclusion, that ultimately dilutes community agency. Bishop notes that:

> Here we come upon an ideological function of relational art that has been concealed so far: it is the provision of an 'ersatz' social space by using the virtual property of the image to create a bond between the ruling regime and the people – rather than a real intervention in the political space by confronting the dominant relations of power and production. The scandal, if you like, is that through this simulation of a sphere of openness and respect, cultural forces mobilize the people to – as David Harvey stated – 'act against their own desire'.(9) Once included in this sphere where all the parties – project developers, local government, and the people – freely negotiate their respective desires, people can no longer choose to politicize their frustrations.[27]

Representative Artists

Bourriaud's exhibition *Traffic* included artists that have become synonymous with the movement. Many of the same artists have been represented in at least two additional Relational Art curated exhibitions since then: *Touch, Relational Art from the 1990s to Now* (curated by Bourriaud) and *Theanyspacewhatever*, curated by Nancy Spector at the Guggenheim Museum in 2008. Among those artists are Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Miltos Manetas, Philippe Parreno, Jorge Pardo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Fabrice Hyber, Jason Rhoades and Tino Sehgal.

The artist who is perhaps most closely associated with the movement is Rirkrit Tiravanija. Fundamentally, his work is about bringing people together, most often through meals prepared in galleries.[28] His series began in 1990 with *Pad Thai* served at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York, and the artwork was recreated at other venues with variations in the menu. His food offerings rejected traditional art objects altogether, although the argument can be made that the food itself served as an object. His comment was, "it is not what you see that is important but what takes place between people." In 2005 he created, in the Serpentine Gallery in London, two mirror image full-scale replicas of his apartment. He invited viewers to participate

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[25] Bishop. 79.

[26] Liam Gillick. *Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"*. http://www.c-cyte.com/OccuLibrary/Texts-Online/Gillick_Resp_to_Bishop.pdf. accessed 12.11.2018.

[27] Let Art Save Democracy BAVO. *Regimes of Representation: Art & Politics Beyond the House of People*. Bucharest, January 11, 2007.
http://www.museumofconflict.eu/singletext.php?id=32. accessed December 20, 2018

[28] Emma Allen. *"Following Rirkrit Tiravanija's recipe for success"*. ArtNews.
https://www.artnews.com/2012/03/13/curry-up. accessed 9.4. 2018.

in activating the spaces, in any way they desired. He was featured in the 2008-2009 Guggenheim *Theanyspacewhatever* exhibition.

Liam Gillick is also closely associated with the movement. Gillick creates Plexiglas structures that walk the line between architecture and installation. He uses the visual language of minimalist art challenging the viewer to reflect on the nature of controlled corporate environments and signage.[29] Unlike Tiravanija, Gillick's works do not rely on conversation as a medium. Whether his constructions fit the definition of relational art is debatable, even though they may result in conversations.

Peter Huyghe's closest association with Relational Art is his 2003 artwork *Streamside Day*. He devised a celebration for the new community of Streamside Knolls in the Hudson River Valley, New York that included a parade, costumes, a speech by the mayor, and fireworks. He defined the process but left the implementation to the community.[30] Interestingly enough, in his more recent works he has completely abandoned the idea that gaze is important to art.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Ross),* a candy pile from 1991, is a variant on viewer participation, as it is not reliant on conversation, but functions when viewers remove candy from the work. They are participatory, and without the viewers as participants the work does not exist. Here the relationship is silent, not conversational, and is only activated with viewer participation.

Carsten Höller often encourages active viewer participation in his projects. In doing so, he calls into question the very idea of the art object – static, immutable and declared by the artist to be "finished" – and investigates instead the possibility of "unsaturated" artworks that are unfinished and require the presence of the audience to approximate completion.[31] For example, in *What Is Love?*, presented in 1994, Höller installed a phone and an answering machine in the exhibition space, and left messages on different phone booths set around the city, inviting people to call the toll-free number 1-800-w-h-a-t-i-s-l-o-v-e to share their opinions on the concept of love.[32]

The practices of several of the artists, while included in the original exhibition, are focused on spectacle more than the relational aesthetics. These include Vanessa Beecroft and Maurizio Cattelan.

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[29] Alex Greenberger. *Liam Gillick on His Uncompromisingly Intellectual Art*. Artspace. Jan 9, 2014. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/liam_gillick-51868 accessed 12.18. 2018.

[30] *The Work of Pierre Huyghe.* Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas Texas. http://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/art/nasher-prize/laureates/laureate?id=46.
 accessed 9.3. 2018.

[31] Glen Helfand. "*Touch: Relational Art from the 1990s to Now*". Art Forum. https://www.artforum.com/picks/touch-relational-art-from-the-1990s-to-now-3750. accessed 9.3. 2018.

[32] Carsten Holler. *Doubt.* Catalogue. 7 April – 31 July 2016 https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/psi-dotcom-prd/HangarBicocca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CH_Librino_E. accessed 12.18. 2018.

Other Artists and Relational Art Practice

Since the original description of the movement and the *Traffic* exhibition, many artists have engaged in creating works that could be considered to be relational art but may not be specifically identified as being included in the genre. The following are selected examples of artworks, that for various reasons might be considered to be inclusive of relational aesthetics principles and practices. The artists may, or may not, consider their work to be influenced by relational aesthetics, and are included here as personal selections of potential examples of further applications of the movement's principles.

Thomas Hirschhorn (b. 1957) used relational aesthetic principles in his art that highlights underlying social antagonisms.[33] For example, in "Documenta 11," held in Kassel, Germany, in 2002, Hirschhorn worked with locals in a nearby low-income, immigrant neighborhood to erect a temporary cardboard and wood building that served as a site for com-munity debates on the writings of French philosopher Georges Bataille. The building served as a site, outside the traditional gallery environment, for conversation, an example of Bourriaud's democratization of art through dialogue.

Suzanne Lacy is a performance artist who has engaged the public in Los Angeles since the 1970s with many projects of social importance, especially to children and teens. *The Roof Is On Fire*, a public art work, featured over 400 students from Oakland high schools in cars on a rooftop garage, discussing issues of importance to themselves (sex, dating, violence, relationships). Some 1,000 audience members roamed among these cars and "eavesdropped" on the teens deep in conversation. The conversations, although unscripted, were the product of months of research and soul searching by participating teenagers.[34] As conversation was the essence of the work, I would consider it as an example of relational art.

John Freyer (a member of my graduate committee) describes his practice as the engagement with "accidental" audiences for art, whether from an interaction with his mobile pour-over coffee station serving "Recovery Roast" coffee, or stopping for an ice cold glass of water on hot days on the streets of Richmond, Doha, New York City, Chicago, or Iowa City. He notes, "Initially, participants in my projects are unaware of their involvement in a social practice art work."[35] Conversations with those in recovery, their relatives or friends, are central to his 2018 artwork, *Fifty/Fifty Conversations from the Other Side*. "A lot of my work is about creating a space for people to be in conversation. Pour-over coffee takes time."[36]

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[33] *What Is Relational Aesthetics? Here's How Hanging Out, Eating Dinner, and Feeling Awkward Became Art.* Artspace. 9.6. 2018.
https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/what-is-relational-aesthetics-54164
[34] Suzanne Lacy. *The Oakland Projects.* https://theoaklandprojects.wordpress.com/ accessed 12.11. 2018.
[35]John Freyer. (Personal website). https://sites.google.com/vcu.edu/johndfreyer/research accessed 12.1. 2018.
[36] *Coffee bike helps rams in recovery stay on the road to wellness.* VCU, July 14, 2016.
https://vcu.exposure.co/coffee-bike-helps-rams-in-recovery-stay-on-the-road-to-wellness.
accessed 12.1. 2018.

The Anderson Gallery restaged an installation by Wafaa Billal entitled, "The Things I Could Tell" in which a US military member stands in uniform behind a precariously tilted wall. In the original presentation at ArtSpace in San Antonio, Texas, in 1915, the soldier stood silently.[37] At the Anderson Gallery in 2017, a soldier and his wife stood behind the wall, but not silently. They engaged in conversation with viewers. Aside from the wall, there were no objects in that part of the installation, although the area was suffused with blue light. The work, as presented in Richmond, VA, is conversation. By way of Billal's constructing the situation in which the viewer, as participant, and the soldier, as protagonist, find themselves conversing in a gallery, the work includes Bourriaud's observations that relational art "privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality".
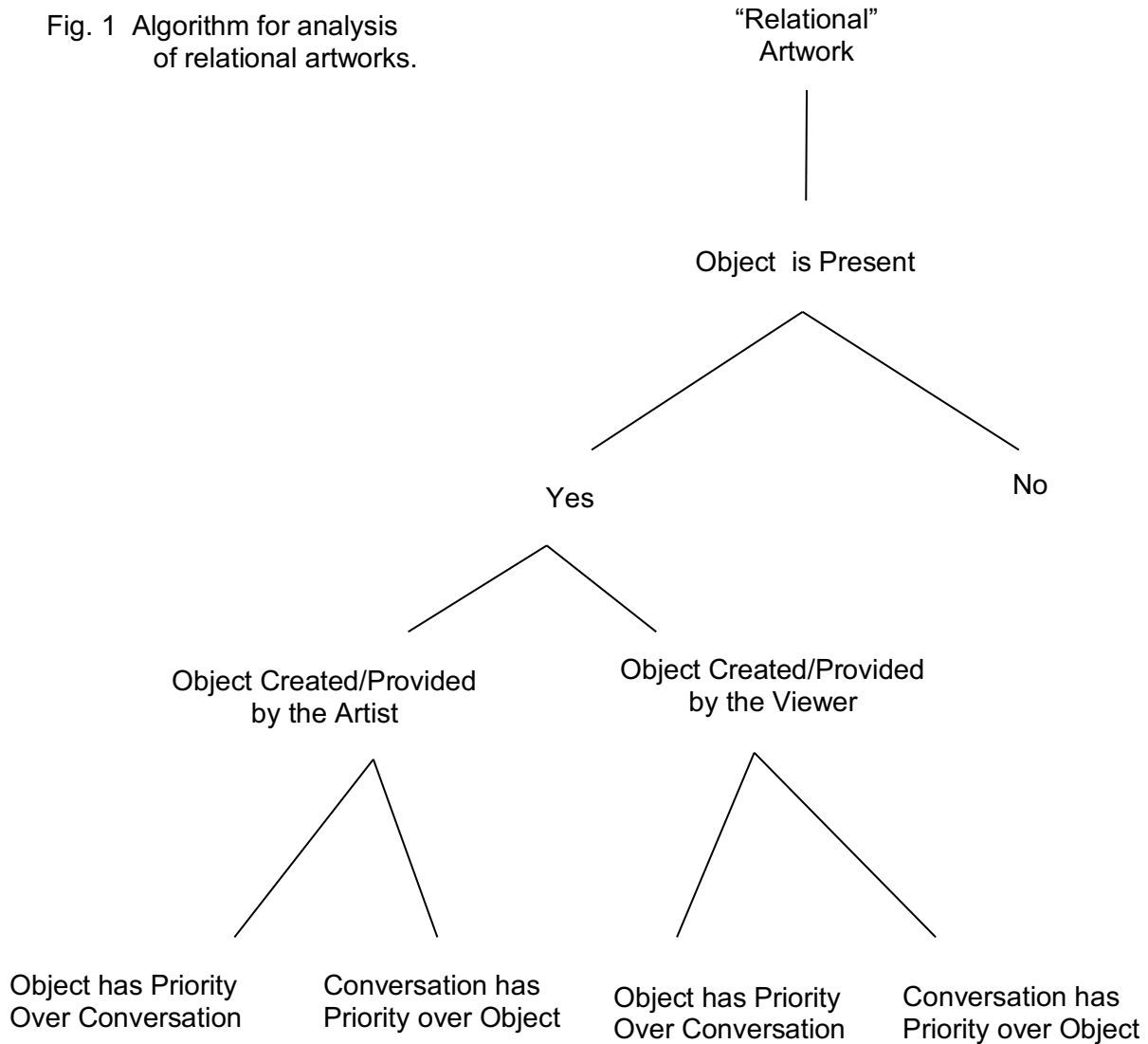
There are many other artists who have been, and are using, techniques that include or are similar to those observed by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*. The processes and techniques used vary widely.

An Analytic Tool

To provide a framework for analysis of relational art, I propose the following algorithm as a means to promote discussion about the role of objects in relational art (figure 1). The algorithm is not designed to be definitive for any work of art as being "relational". But rather, it is an aid to clarifying the role of the object in the artwork. In many cases the object's relationship to the viewer and its significance in the creation, presentation and interpretation of the work falls into multiple arms of the tool. Application of the tool, even when indeterminate, can generate relevant additional discussion. No category alone defines an artwork as "relational".

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[37] Wafaa Bilal, website. http://wafaabilal.com/the-things-i-could-tell/. Accessed 1. 28. 2019.

Fig. 1 Algorithm for analysis
          of relational artworks.

"Relational"
Artwork

Object is Present

Yes   No

Object Created/Provided
by the Artist

Object Created/Provided
by the Viewer

Object has Priority
Over Conversation

Conversation has
Priority over Object

Object has Priority
Over Conversation

Conversation has
Priority over Object

For example, Tiravanija's serving Thai food to gallery goers might fall into the category of "No" object being present, as the work was entirely dedicated to conversation. However, using the algorithm, the question can be raised, "Is the food, the object?" Similarly, Lacy's Los Angeles project with teenagers having conversations in cars suggests that objects are present, and provided by the artist, but that conversation has priority over the objects in the work. Beecroft, in *Traffic*, presented a tableau of women who undressed during the performance. There was no intended conversation expected or solicited from the viewers. Here the object had clear primacy over any conversation. Used in this way, the algorithm suggests that this particular work might not be considered within the Relational Aesthetic movement. The algorithm is intended to stimulate discussion about artworks that may, or may not, be identified within the Relational Aesthetics rubric. Artworks may not cleanly fit into these categories, however considering the presence and function of objects may be of value in considering how an artwork may be considered as relational.

Art Practice

My interest in using dialogue to unite communities dates to 2010, when I created a large-scale community health consortium to improve access and outcomes of preventive health care for minority communities in Minneapolis St Paul, Minnesota. The year-long event incorporated representatives from four minority communities, who worked hand-in-hand with health professionals to understand cultural preferences for care in the Hmong, Somali, Latinx and African American populations. Commissioned film scripts, cultural performances, dialogue and video dramatically improved inter-cultural understanding and contributed to improved health metrics.[38] It was apparent at the time that communication through conversation was a powerful means of stimulating much needed trust between people of disparate communities.

Engaging the public in conversations continued for me in 2016 with an artwork I entitled, "Agree Disagree". The work. shown at the VCU Anderson gallery, displayed the entire Apple corporate privacy policy as a printed document. I had conversations with viewers about the lengthy document and their choice to accept or not accept it, almost always without reading it. My interest in those conversations became the basis for future works that were specifically designed to encourage viewer conversation.

Subsequently, I have developed a series of artworks that engage the viewer in conversations, and occasionally in creating objects while engaged in conversation.[39] In some works I ask the viewer-participant to draw or write as a catalyst to conversation, a contribution to the project and a reference point for further interactions.

"Masterpiece" was explicitly created to encourage viewer engagement with food and conversation. The artwork explored the United States Supreme Court review of the legal case "*Masterpiece Cakeshop Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*"[40]. Two cakes decorated with "This is Cake" and "This is Art" were consumed by viewers as they read the court documents and discussed their understanding of the related legal and social issues. Presented once at the VCU Anderson Gallery where the participants were predominantly students, and once at the University of Richmond to adult learners, the conversations were distinctly different in level of understanding and clarity about the issue's larger context.

My 2018 artwork, "Digital Identity", invited viewers to draw an image that was iconic for themselves that was "transformed" into a personal digital identity. Viewers discussed their experiences with online privacy while creating the drawings on blank credit card stock. For the first time in my series of artworks, viewers became participants in constructing the object of the artwork. (Appendices 3,4) Other artists have used this approach. For example, Tiravanija sought to reduce the distance between artist and viewer by creating situations where the audience produces its own work. In *Pad Thai,* a project at De Appel, Amsterdam, in 1996, he provided amplified electric guitars and a drum set for visitor's use in creating their own music.[41]

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[38] https://www.ebanexperience.com/ accessed 1. 12. 2019.
[39] www.carlpatow.com accessed 12.18. 2018.
[40] Oyes. *Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission.* https://www.oyez.org/cases/2017/16-111. accessed 12. 26. 2018.
[41] Bishop, 2004. 57.

"River City Reflections", an outdoor public communal artwork I created with Leila Ehtesham at the 1708Gallery InLight event at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, asked participants to complete the phrase, "My wish for Richmond is…", in writing.[42] Their responses were placed in illuminated vessels, dropped into a cascading water feature, where they congregated in a reflecting pool downstream. Some 3,500 wishes were collected, and selected wishes were electronically scanned. This artwork extended the idea of viewer as participant in creating the object in the artwork and sought to include community members' visions for the city. The emphasis here was tangentially on conversation, largely due to the overwhelming volume of participants, but consistent with Bourriaud's commitment to the democratization of art. Interestingly, many of the conversations occurred after the event, as public participants reflected on their participation in an act that they interpreted as "healing" in nature, and on their visions for the future of the city.

Each of the works in my series engages viewers, and objects are used as catalysts for conversation. The most recent works include objects, made by the viewers, that play a secondary role to the conversations in the art. These works result in communally created objects that raise interesting questions about where creativity lies. Is it the artist who constructs the situation, the individual who draws or writes, or the collective expressions of all the participants that define the creative moment? One interpretation of this dynamic is that socialized creativity is described as "improvisation", the generative, relational, transitory and productive way in which people (...) work it out as they go along."[43] I can imagine in the future expanding viewers' participation to include other forms of intersubjective communication and action-oriented behaviors. The purpose of the work is not to analyze the conversations or generalize on the information or knowledge in the conversations or resultant images or artworks, but for each participant to voluntarily engage in reflection and expression of their perceptions about the topic at hand.

Thesis Artwork

WORKS WHEN, is a large-scale series of individual conversations with community members across the City of Richmond, Virginia. The participants in the conversations are asked to identify the neighborhood in which they live, and through a brief prompt, a conversation is initiated about what "works", or does not work for them in their neighborhood. The conversations take place in the community: at libraries, civic meetings, farmers markets and coffee shops. The viewer's location of their neighborhood and their observations on what "works when" are recorded by them on a polychrome wooden tile. The neighborhood location is indicated by placement of a small hemispheric pearl by the viewer/participant on a minimalist stylized map of the city on one side of the tile. Each tile, therefore, becomes a data point, as well as documentation of a conversation. The viewer writes a sentence on the back of the tile recording a fragment of the conversation in words. A conscientious effort is made to be inclusive of individuals from all Richmond City neighborhoods, by visiting locations throughout the city.

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[42] Carl Patow and Leila Ehtesham, *River Cities Reflections*. http://mywishforrichmondis.com. accessed 12.18. 2018.
[43] Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam. "*Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction*", in Hallam, Elizabeth and Tim Ingold (eds.), Creativity and Cultural Improvisation. 2008. Oxford/New York: Berg. 1.

The tiles are interlocking and are assembled on a large-scale stylized floor map of the city. The interlocking tiles are assembled based on the location of the pearlescent hemispheres placed by the participants. Viewers in the gallery have the opportunity to place additional tiles, to view the assembled tiles and to reflect on the tile's written statements.

Context and Inspiration for the Artwork

The inspiration for this work is a lifelong interest in the health of communities. Like many of my previous works, significant contemporary issues are discussed with the public. Policies and politics, as they relate to individuals in their communities are a driver. As Bourriaud notes, "...what artists are trying to do now is to create micro-utopias, neighborhood utopias, like talking to your neighbor, just what's happening when you shake hands with somebody. This is all super political when you think about it. That's micro-politics."[44]

Technical Description of the Installation

Polychromed 4 x 4-inch laser cut wood tiles, writing surface and pens, lighting, four channel audio system, industrial ISO foam, industrial roofing membrane, latex house paint, aqueous polymeric sealant, plywood, City of Richmond maps.

The tiles are 4" x 4" wood ply, with rounded corners. Each tile has laser etched slots that can be used to assemble three dimensional structures by inserting tiles into one another. The obverse of the tile is painted the 2019 Pantone color of the year, "Living Coral", and lines are drawn on the tile as a minimalist map of the city of Richmond, Virginia. Participants locate themselves on the "map" using a small adherent hemispheric dot. The reverse of the tile is divided into a top section that is blank, a middle section with the words "WORKS WHEN", and a lower section that is blank. Participants will be asked to fill in the blanks with a community issue (for example, "transportation" or "housing") and follow the phrase "WORKS WHEN" with an idea for community improvement (for example, "more bus routes" or "lower rent").

Prior to the installation at the Anderson Gallery, the tiles are used in a series of community-based pop-up events at libraries, cafes and community meetings. At the events, the tiles will be completed by viewers, stimulating conversation and ideas for identifying issues and describing possible improvements. Tiles from community sites are included in a three-dimensional assemblage at the Anderson Gallery installation, created by inserting slots in each tile into adjacent tiles. Participants at the Anderson Gallery can add their own tiles to the assemblage.

The 9 foot by 9-foot platform rises 2 inches above the floor. On its surface is painted a stylized map of the city of Richmond, Virginia, matching that of the tiles.

The tiles fit into one another by way of small slots, and the accumulated tiles are assembled into "communities" on the raised platform. The tiles are organized by the locations identified by the pearls on the tiles.

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[44] Nicolas Bourriaud. *Traffic: Space-times of the Exchange*. May Revue, 2012. http://www.mayrevue.com/en/traffic-espaces-temps-de-lechange/ accessed 12.11. 2018.

A four channel audio system routes sound from below the platform. Audio recordings are routed in a manner that intermittently distributes the sound, evoking a sense of neighborhood across the platform. Audio recordings will include sounds of neighborhood life, including people talking, sports noise, motor vehicles and nature sounds. The sound, coming from the corners of the platform, suggest activities of the community and activate the installation space.

A wire-bound book containing scans of 275 tiles was located on a custom shelf at the entrance to the gallery.

At the Anderson Gallery installation, information about the artwork, and information about constructing a tile is available to the public on wall displays. Three informational images, each 3 feet by 4 feet, provide context for the installation. In addition. a 5 foot by 6-foot map of the neighborhoods of Richmond, Virginia, helps to orient viewers.

At the opening, a constant stream of viewers interacted with the artwork by identifying their neighborhoods, talking about their experiences, and closely observing the assembled tiles. Many took photographs or the assembled tiles. The sound system added an additional dimension. Nearly every viewer spoke with the artist.

Figure 2. Map indicating locations of conversations

WORKS WHEN Conversations Located Across the Community

- VCU Café, Monroe Campus
- Museum District Council
- Highpoint Design Show
- VCU Students
- 5th District Community Meeting
- South of the James Farmer's Market

Richmond Public Libraries

A	Main Library
B	Belmont
C	Broad Rock
D	East End
E	Ginter Park
F	Hull Street
G	North Avenue
H	West End
	Westover
I	Hills

Figure 3. Tile Design

Tile Design

WORKS WHEN

The width of the slot is equal to the thickness of the tile.
Two tiles should fit snuggly together using the slots.

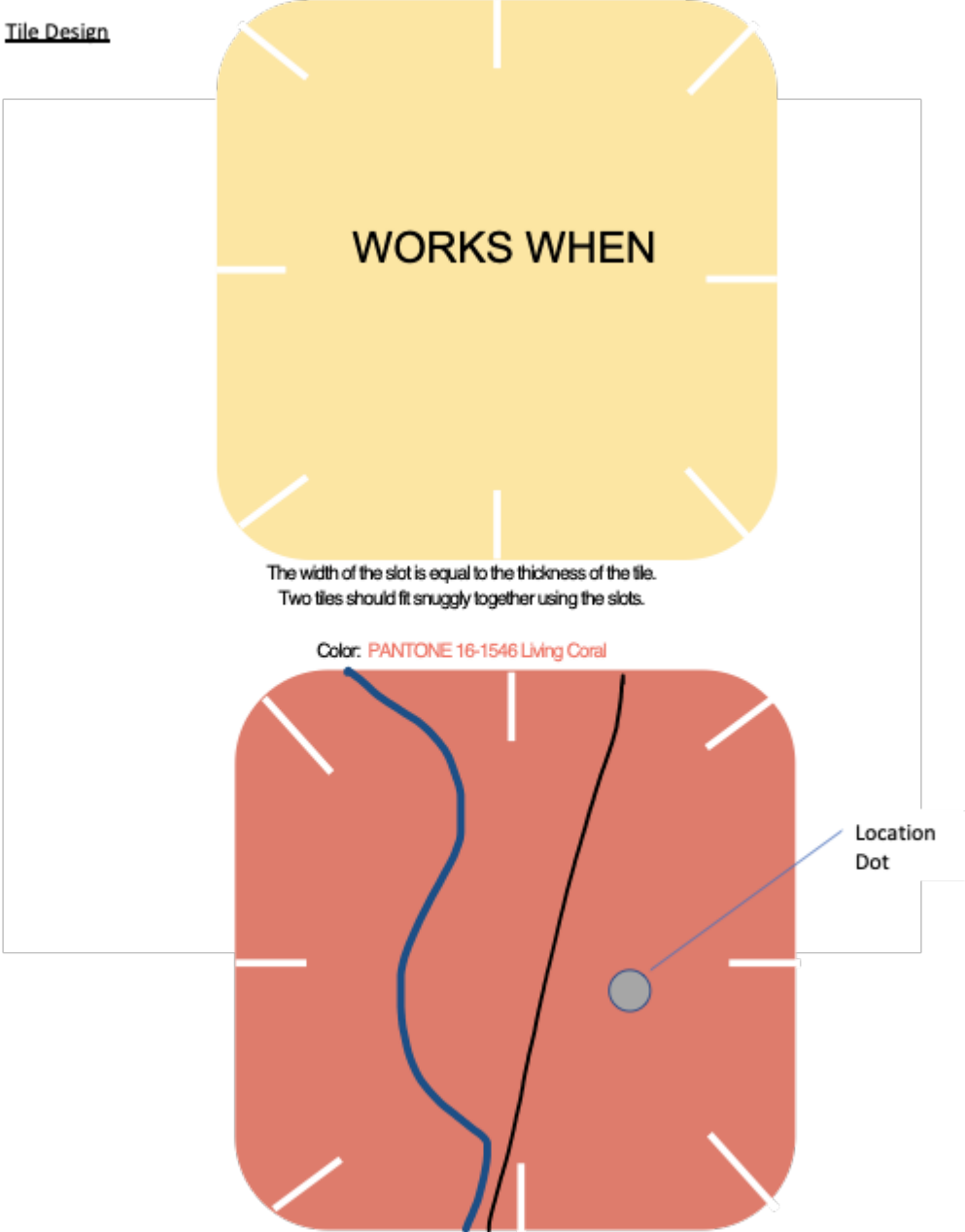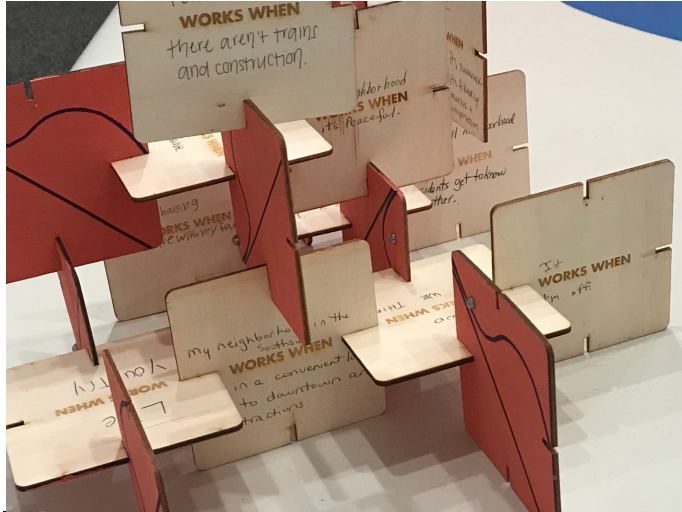Color: PANTONE 16-1546 Living Coral

Location Dot

Figure 4. Examples of Assembled Tiles

Tiles are assembled into "communities" on the large platform map based on the placement of the pearls on the tile surface.

Of note, *WORKS WHEN* is constructed around a series of principles and decisions that inform its final expression. Briefly:
- In every aspect of the artwork, engagement and participation of viewers was a fundamental principle.
- Conversations with individuals in community locations is the starting point for the entire work.
- Conversations can be short, or lengthy, depending on the participant's willingness to engage.
- Locations are selected to purposely include all areas of the city.
- Locations from conversations include public libraries, community meetings, cafes, farmers markets and other sites where people gather.
- The conversations are about neighborhoods, not "where you live," as homeless and undocumented individuals have been included.
- Individuals who cannot write are included by gently asking if the artist can write the tile for them.
- The tiles are polychromed in the 2019 Pantone color of the year, Living Coral. Coral is, of course, a sessile colony of individuals: a community living together for the benefit of the whole.
- The material for the tiles was selected for rigidity and ease of handling after experimenting with various materials.
- Laser cutting of the tiles improved reproducibility and precision over hand-made tiles, to increase ease of use by participants.
- Participants are given information about the opening of the exhibition, and many expressed an intention to participate at the opening.

- The platform is constructed of dense foam roofing boards, plywood and roofing membrane materials, being mindful of the materials used in real neighborhoods and safety for individuals walking on the platform surface.
- The roofing materials were donated by a roofing company, who will accept them after the installation is completed, for further use in their trade. In essence, they will be recycled.
- The placement of the sound exciters in the platform is intentional, to avoid external speakers that may distract viewers from participating in placing tiles. The sound system was tested several times prior to final construction.
- The entire installation is modular, readily disassembled and moved. The work will be shown at the Main Richmond Public Library following the exhibition at the Anderson Gallery.

The format of this work lends itself to replication in other communities.

WORKS WHEN as Relational Art

WORKS WHEN starts with conversations, and in that sense is a relational artwork. The conversations may be brief or extended, depending on the participants and their available time. Objects play a role in the artwork, as the tiles play an important part in engaging participants and in creating a visual object for the gallery space. It is conceivable that the work could be effective without the tiles, and therefore be purely relational. Conversations between participants and the artist have been uniformly reflective and positive in tone, occasionally emotional and heartwarming in content.

The conversations vary in length, content and complexity. Most are brief, require some personal reflection, and are essentially complete after writing on the tile. Some are lengthy, and a few extend beyond the completing the tile onto other subjects. A few examples:

- A young African American man, initially reticent to participate, talks about the ease of transportation by bus from his outlying low income neighborhood. He works at VCU in a fast food restaurant. He takes a few minutes to think about what to write on the tile. Then he writes, "Life WORKS WELL when you try."
- At one of the branch libraries an older man engages in a lengthy conversation about his relationship with the library. He calls it his "sanctuary" and his "battleground". When asked to explain, he reveals that he had a serious addiction problem 20 years ago. It was the library where he found solace and escape from drugs. He asks that I write the tile for him, as he dictated the words. He cries as I write.
- A middle-aged man talks about the many things that work well for him in his neighborhood, although he is miles from home at the time of the interview. He is applying as a vender at a farmers' market for the upcoming season. It turns out he is the itinerant musician at the farmers market, who I have passed for many years on visits to the market. He shared his contact information on his business card.
- I asked a woman in her 60s, who was checking out her books at the library, if she would be willing to assist me with the project. She seemed to be in a hurry but complied. She loved her neighborhood for its green space and quiet. After completing the tile, we continued to talk for another 10 minutes, or so, about the extensive new construction in her neighborhood and the distress it has caused among those who live nearby.

Bourriaud characterizes relational space as a "micro-utopia", as it permits the utopian element of art to exist as a "process" and simultaneously locates it within historical and political contexts.[45] In WORKS WHEN, the observations on the tiles mirror the micro-utopia concept, creating an intimate space to consider the present and future of the viewer's environment.

WORKS WHEN incorporates many features noted by Bourriaud to be consistent with Relational Aesthetics. At the same time, there are features that suggest its concept is, in part, outside the purely relational aesthetic. For example, this artwork object is explicitly designed to result in a gallery installation. The accumulated tiles are assembled for a specific gallery presentation, on a plinth, for viewing by an audience. It could be argued that, aside from the requirement for a presentation, this work could exist equally well without the assemblage. The conversations alone might be sufficient. If creating a tile is a necessary prompt, perhaps giving the tile to the viewer after its creation would be more democratic and meaningful to the participant. It might also be closer in feeling to Relational Aesthetics than removing the tile from the site of the conversation to be included in a gallery presentation.

Future of the Relational Aesthetics Movement

Traditional interpersonal interactions, including conversations, storytelling and community forums have been sidelined in both private and public spheres as computers and cell phones have become ubiquitous.[46] The public has become inundated with never-ending electronic communication and entertainment, and reportedly is beginning to tire of constant interaction with screens.[47] My prediction is that the intolerance of individuals to electronic overload will likely stimulate a reactionary movement toward more interpersonal communication, as a form of art.[48]

The balance between useful electronic exchange and hyper-stimulation is undefined and evolving. Not everyone is convinced that relational art interests the public enough to be a foil. Joe Scanlon wryly notes:

> What makes relational aesthetics so boring? I`ve been wondering a lot lately why
> an approach to artmaking dedicated to social interaction has generated so much
> underwhelming art. Perhaps the fact that relational aesthetics is dependent on-
> site contingency, collaboration, and contrived indeterminacy makes it feel a little

[45] Ruy Blanes, Alex Flynn, Maite Maskins and Jopnas Tinius. *Micro-utopias: anthropolitical perspectives on art, relationality, and creativity*. Cadernos de Arte e Anthropologia. 2016. 5(1). 11. https://journals.openedition.org/cadernosaa/1017. accessed 08.04.2018.

[46] Elizabeth Grace Saunders. *Reconnecting in a World Fighting for Your Attention*. New York Times, 25 Feb 2019, B7.

[47] Jenna Woginrich. *How I quit my smartphone addiction and really started living.* 11 Feb 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/feb/11/smartphone-technology-addiction-facebook-twitter. accessed 12. 2. 2018.

[48] Zoe Kleinman. *Are You Ready to Break Up with Your Phone?* BBC News. https://apple.news/ALHJ3mgouSlW0uvCBEaYA8Q. accessed 12.24.2018.

too much like the 1960s and is therefore dulled by nostalgia, or worse, academicism.[49]

My own experience has been that the public responds readily when presented with a structured situation that invites their participation on a subject of contemporary social interest. In each of my artworks viewers participate with little, if any, hesitation. In the case of "River City Reflections", viewers eagerly lined up, waiting to include their written wishes as part of the experience. Over 3,500 "wishes" were written by the public in two evenings of the installation.[50]

Technology may be a force undermining interpersonal relationships, but it also may offer new spaces to explore the relationship of the artist, viewer and art.[51] Amir Baradaran[52] suggests in his *FutARism manifesto* that mobile augmented reality is an alternative platform for the production and experiencing of art within social contexts, presenting interactive environments within cultural frameworks. His initial experiments in museums, such as augmented reality transformation of the Mona Lisa, allow the viewer to independently transform museum artwork using their cell phone and special software. The interaction appears to relate more to the viewer's interaction with spectacle than conversation. With augmented intelligence, however, it is not inconceivable that conversational, interactive, mobile augmented reality could be a relational art modality in the future.[53] Similar experiments with technology and interactive plot substitutions have had limited audience interest. The technology interface appears to limit potential choices and dampens the spontaneity of the experience. Artificial intelligence programs that create fully interactive conversations might be one method to introduce relational aesthetics through technology. Early experiences with interactive technologies, such as Google's Alexa, suggest that verbal interactions with technology can be extremely powerful.[54] It remains to be seen whether the public will eventually also tire of AI constructed conversation.

[49] Joe Scanlon. *Joe Scanlon on Social Space and Relational Aesthetics.* MutualArt. Summer 2005. HTTPS://www.mutualart.com/Article/TRAFFIC=CONtrOL/FBC1A92B4838F138. accessed 9. 1. 2018.
[50] Patow and Ehtesham, http://mywishforrichmondis.com.
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[52] Bruce Sterling. *Augmented Reality: FutARism manifesto.* Wired Magazine. 08.06.11. https://www.wired.com/2011/08/augmented-reality-futarism-manifesto/ accessed 12. 18. 2018.
[53] Todd Haselton. *Google's human-sounding A.I. called a restaurant and made a reservation for me and I'm completely amazed.* CNBC. December 19, 2018. https://apple.news/AkUO7_8NHSKeT3gKXHM5DPw. accessed December 20, 2018.
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Conclusion

Bourriaud's observation of artistic trends in the 1980s and '90s has led to a reexamination of the role of viewer, artist and object. Placing interaction and conversation at the center of the artwork inherently pushes the role of the object to the side, but in very few cases does the object entirely disappear. I propose an algorithm to clarify the role of viewer/participant/artist/object. In some cases, the artwork does not neatly fit the algorithm, however the algorithm provides a framework for discussion about the actual role of each of these forces in the artwork.

Pervasive electronic auditory and visual overload may be the driving force that stimulates interest again in conversation as a primary artistic methodology. Screen fatigue and overstimulation are now recognized as health issues. Solace through interpersonal communication is an avenue to reconnect with important issues in a space that allows for reflection, introspection and dialogue. In my opinion, there will be increasing public interest in art forms in which they can interact, especially those that ask for them to express their opinions, feelings and wishes as part of an engaging art experience.

Tania Bruguera takes the challenge one step further. Bruguera notes that, "We need to enter the conversation with those audiences from a space where they also have something to say, where they are as 'experts' or more than the artist and that is respected, not as a collection of data for the artist to work with, but as the establishing of an ecology of ethics where results are not necessary but where the process is the result, actually where the culture of expert is eliminated. Once we have an art that is used as a responsible civic tool finally the concept of the audience will be eliminated."[55] I see my own practice as evolving to this ideal through a series of iterations that increasingly engage the public where they live, talking about their own lived experiences, reflecting on what is and what could be, and then committing to action.

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Attachments

1. Artist's Statement

Carl Patow is a multimedia artist who identifies issues of contemporary social importance and constructs interactions with viewers as participants in dialogue. Objects, such as legal documents, food, or written phrases are catalysts to discussion and interpersonal interaction. The documentation of the interactions, written, drawn or audio recorded, becomes the substrate for his gallery and public installations. Increasingly, his conversations and installations have moved to public spaces, becoming inclusive of diverse community members. His approach is, at its heart, a means to expand intercultural understanding and community through relational aesthetics.

2. Acknowledgements of Community Support

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The Highpoint, 3300 W Broad St, Richmond, VA 23230

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The Museum District Association. Richmond, VA

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The Anderson Gallery, VCU, 1 E Franklin St, Richmond, VA 23219
        Chase Westfall, Director
        Maggie Flanigan, Administrative Coordinator

The Richmond Public Libraries, 101 E Franklin St, Richmond, VA 23219
        Scott Firestone, Director
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        Kerry Phillips, Library/Community Services Manager, Ginter Branch Library
        Diane Willmore, Library/Community Services Manager, North Avenue Branch Library

The Valentine. Will Martin, Director

Appendices

Photographs of selected works

1. Digital Identity. Participants create their own "Digital Identities" as part of the installation.

2. The digital identities are included in the installation and identified by participants.
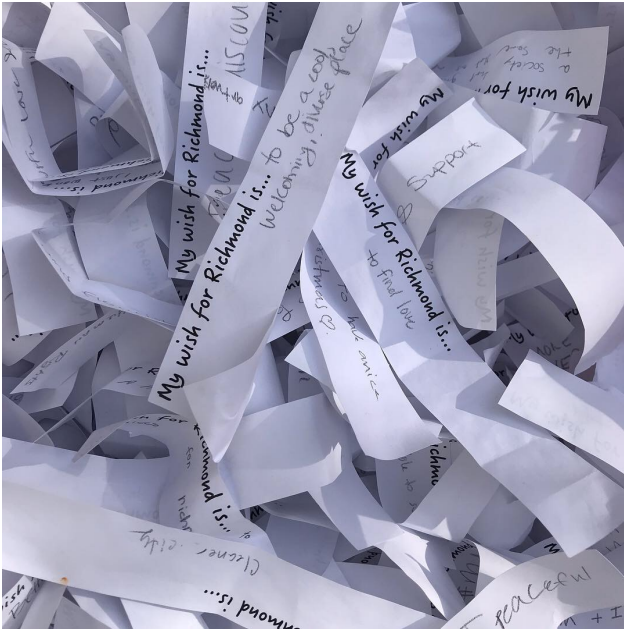
3. River City Reflections

Viewers preparing "wishes" to be inserted into illuminated vessels. Illuminated vessels are on the table to the right.

Thousands of "wishes" are contributed by viewers as participants in creating the work.
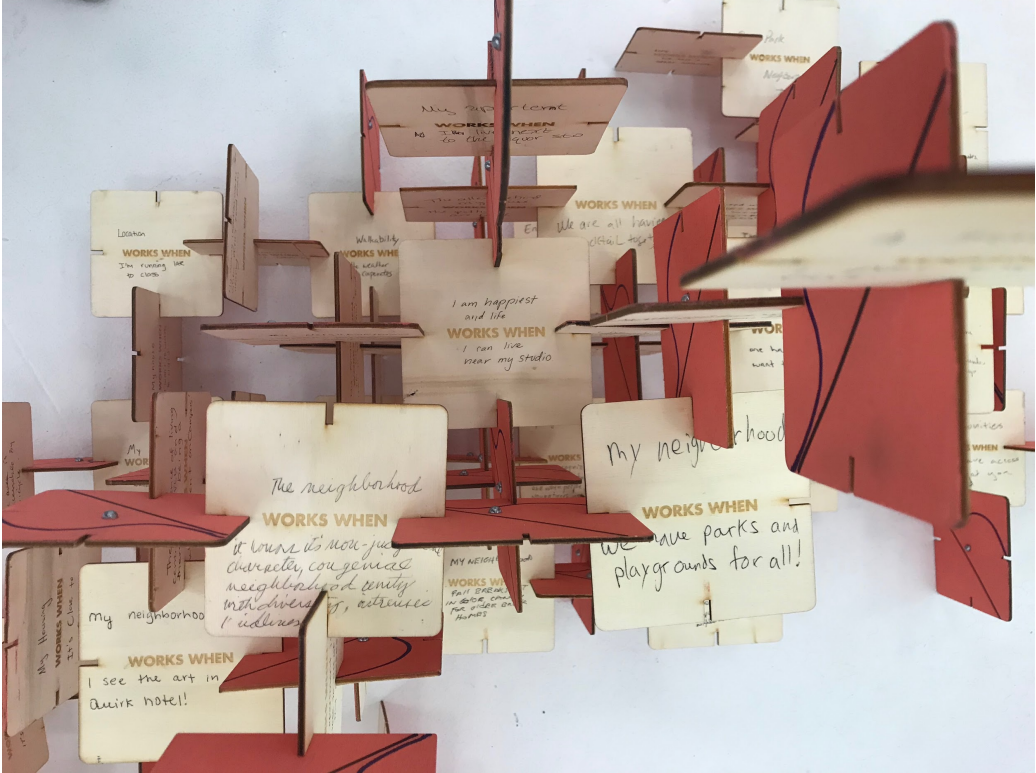

Wishes contributed by viewers are removed from the vessels, over 3,500 in all.

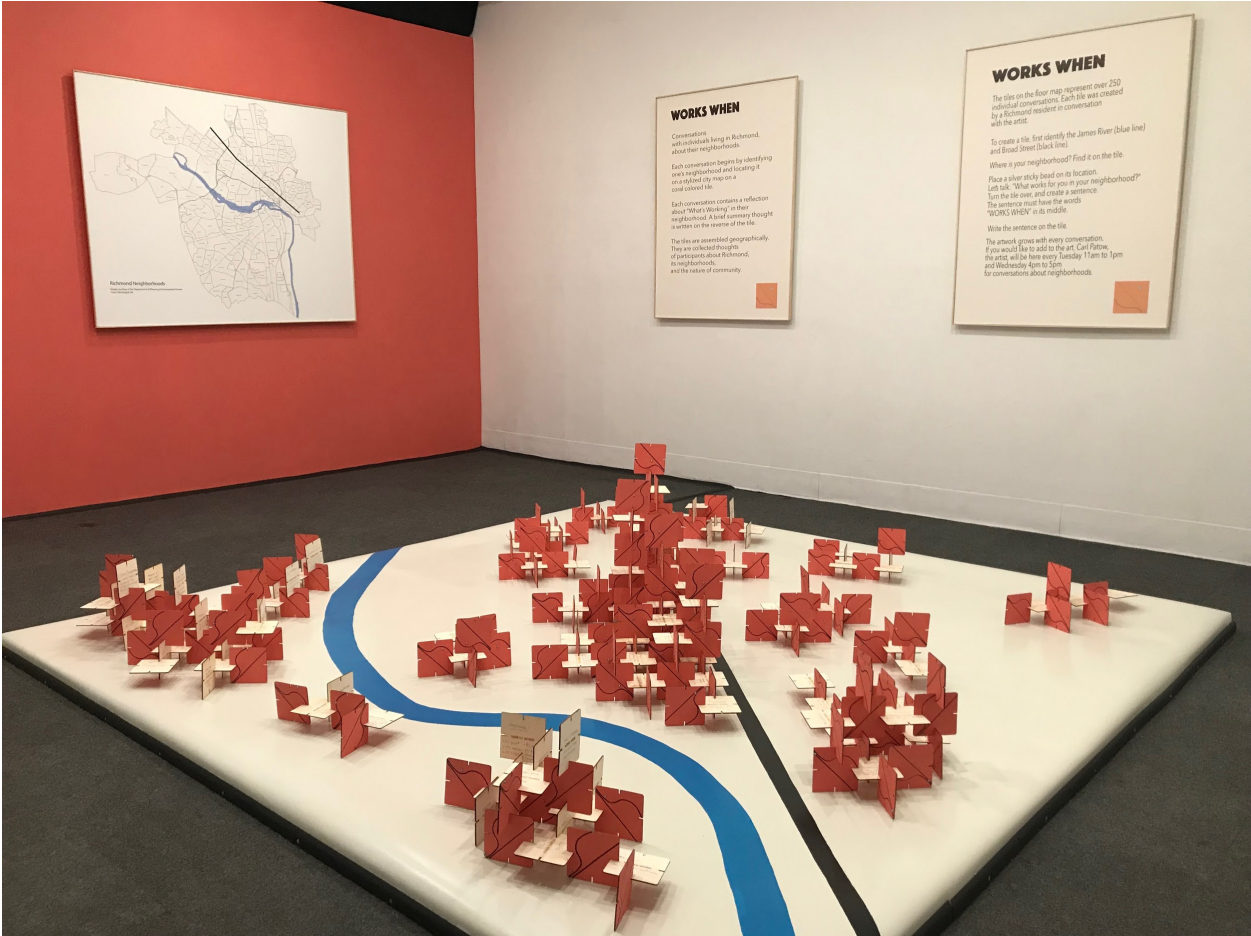4. Photographs: WORKS WHEN installation views

Assembled tiles viewed from above.

Observers interacting with prototype of the installation.

Detail of the Anderson installation, floor map and assembled tiles.

Vita

Carl Patow was born in Nuremberg, Germany, on August 8,1953 and is a United States Citizen. He holds degrees from Duke University (B.A., 1975), the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY (M.D., 1979), Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD (Master's in Public Health, 1996) and University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, MN (Master's in Business Administration, 2007). His career as a board-certified Otolaryngologist, Head and Neck Surgeon included service in the U.S. Army, HealthPartners (Bloomington, MN), and academic appointments at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Minnesota. For his service in Desert Storm, he was awarded the Bronze Star and other military honors. He served the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education as Regional Vice President for Clinical Learning Environment Review. He is a Clinical Professor in the Department of Otolaryngology at Virginia Commonwealth University. His artwork includes relational art, digital videos and multimedia installations. He has been the recipient of awards for film, video, interactive art and continuing medical education programs, locally, regionally and nationally.