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Bourriaud and the aesthetics of electronic interaction

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Abstract

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) provides a sophisticated critique of interactive aesthetics. His focus, however, is not literally interactive electronic art, but rather Conceptual Art of the 90s that deliberately reduces technical means and prompts human dialogic interaction. Bourriaud celebrates work that shifts the status of the art object from self-contained aesthetic thing to socially relational model (or field). In his view, technological art, in its very obvious claims to interaction reveals its association and complicity with broader regimes of simulated conviviality and interaction that characterize modern democratic society. It seems that interaction becomes all important in the instant that it effectively disappears. Here Bourriaud is clearly the heir to critics such as Adorno, Mumford and Baudrillard who question the social emancipatory claims of technological media. Despite its apparent Luddite tendencies, this critique retains value in terms of qualifying the rhetorical claims of electronic interaction. But for my purposes what is more interesting is the way in which Bourriaud draws upon key features of technological media in order to describe the sphere of genuinely critical interactive art. The digital image, for instance, in its programmatic, algorithmic potential provides a model for the contemporary art object. Rather than a static, fixed thing, the digital images represents a "generative power" (Bourriaud, 2002, p.70). I would argue as well that the notion of model itself reveals a debt to modern technological media, which constitutes not works but systems that obtain life and currency only through (problematic) interaction. Bourriaud's critique represents an effort then to tease out a notion of genuine interaction from the formal structure of its avowed enemy. It is hardly surprising then that every positive aspect of dialogic interaction is defined in terms of its difference from electronic forms of interaction. Very curiously, the latter is positioned both as model and evil double for the properly relational character of contemporary art. This paper traces the contours of this ambivalent relation and considers the value of the concept of relational aesthetics towards an assessment of the interactive claims of interactive electronic art.

Introduction

In his influential *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), French curator and theorist Nicholas Bourriaud examines emerging paradigms of socially engaged art practice. He describes the new status of the art work in the following terms:

> A work may operate like a relational device, containing a certain degree of randomness, or a machine provoking and managing individual and group encounters. (30)

Rather than a traditional representational object, the work appears as a generative potential that only obtains proper form in the real time of encounter, engagement and dialogue. The language Bourriaud employs to describe this new aesthetic framework has obvious relevance to aspects of new media. The notion of "relational" summons the thinking of networks, links, virtual entities that are functionally inter-related and that behave like a digital program or system. Then there are terms like "device", "randomness" and "machine", which resonate with the thinking of computation. Yet despite this space of analogical agreement, Bourriaud deliberately excludes new media from his conception of relational aesthetics. The latter appear far too bound up, in his view, with wider regimes of simulated interaction that undermine any genuine potential for social dialogue and participation. He is at pains to distinguish relational art works from the triviality of "facile gadgets" (59) and the uncritical, illustrative character of experimental computer graphics (68).

Leaving aside the sweeping dismissal of new media practice – which resonates with the post-1960s gulf between tech-art and Conceptual art - the notion of relational aesthetics provides a very useful challenge to dimensions of interaction within new media art; questioning the glib rhetoric of digital participation and highlighting the often very limited strategies of immersive engagement within new media installation. New media practitioners need to confront relational aesthetics, even if they finally come to recognize that their interests are somewhat different. Whereas Bourriaud privileges the terrain of

human dialogue, important strands of new media practice posit interaction in other terms – as a relation, for instance, to a space of displacement in which human, technological and social relations are interrogated and reconceived. This paper expands upon these issues, focusing specifically on the implications of Bourriaud's double manoeuvre of excluding new media art from relational aesthetics while simultaneously modeling the conception upon key characteristics of new media.

Technology and Relational Aesthetics

> The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. […] The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving. (Debord 1)

Guy Debord's 1960s critique of "the society of the spectacle" provides a crucial reference for Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics. Bourriaud shares Debord's view that genuine social interaction has been replaced by systems of production and consumption that separate people and that fashion an imaginary, ideological unity. He argues, however, that the cultural-technological terrain has shifted. The key vehicle is no longer mass-communication spectacle, but the modern forms of interactive communication that promise dialogue but provide only its dubious simulation:

> The "society of the 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 (26)

Bourriaud conceives new media (in the form of telecommunication, the internet, auto-banks, electronic games and so on) as a mode of "Enframing" (Heidegger 324) that compromises any possibility of genuine human interaction. Against this fake social regime, Bourriaud envisages art as a space in which human dialogue is still possible, in which contact between people is not instantly mediated by strict institutional protocols and technological forms (16). Art represents a social "interstice" (16) where meeting and

conversation can occur. It no longer carries the promise of utopian revolt, but fashions small interventions in the real. It works to "re-stitch" (36) the frayed social fabric.

So it is precisely against Debord's spectre of the "autonomous movement of the non-living" - of media as a technological sphere that hijacks and falsely impersonates the social - that relational aesthetics is conceived. Yet Bourriaud acknowledges that this conception is inevitably shaped by the very forces it resists. The relational art work is positioned as a generative model rather than a representation (18) and its form is characterised in terms of functional links rather than traditional formal-material aesthetic qualities:

> The contemporary artworks's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line. (21)

Both as model and as immaterial "formation" (21), the relational art work engages with the structure of new media - specifically software.

This issue is most explicitly addressed in the chapter entitled "Screen Relations", which sets out to describe the complex links between relational art and technological productive forces. Bourriaud argues that art must obey the "*Law of Relocation*" (67). It must transport technology beyond technique (out of the space of technical process) in order to clarify its conceptual and social implications. Only then can it attain properly aesthetic form. In his view, the problem with new media art is precisely that it fails to do this. It remains caught up with the technical and as a result ends up producing something too literal, too illustrative, too symptomatic (68). He draws parallels to the history of photography, arguing that, originally, photography had its most interesting artistic consequences beyond the material basis of the medium; in, for instance, the concern with the physics of light and color in Impressionism or the exploration of mechanical gesture in Abstract Expressionism (67). Bourriaud stresses that this is not a matter of preferring one medium to another (painting over photography), but of insisting upon a motion of

critical displacement. It is within this context that he claims that "the main effects of the computer revolution are visible today among artists who do not use computers" (67). Without being new media, in fact precisely by not being new media, relational art has the capacity to represent a profound meditation on the consequences of digitisation.

What is the Displacement of the Social?
But then a series of questions emerge relating to the application of the "Law of Relocation." Is it only the relationship between productive forces and art that demands relocation? What about the representation of the social itself (which can, of course, also be regarded as a sphere of production/re-production)? How is it that the social can be directly addressed within relational art while technology cannot be directly addressed within technological art? Why does the concern with human relations within relational art escape the need for displacement? How can it become the literal content of art without the need for any poetic motion away, aside, askance? Imagining that it can simply render human relations as such is surely to fall into the trap of an illusory immediacy. The consequence is a lack of critical concern for the specific character of social interaction within art – the patterns, for instance, of social exclusion that define it.

In the very motion of summoning participation, relational art must draw lines and divisions. Bourriaud describes the Gonzalez-Torres project, *Untitled (Blue Mirror)* (1990), in which the artist provides a large pile of posters for gallery visitors to pick up and take away (49). Each visitor who takes a poster becomes part of the event (and takes their place within the contemporary art world), whereas everybody else who misses out on a poster, or the event, is effectively excluded. This work is interesting not only for the relation it sketches between generosity and disappearance but also because it defines the limits of social interaction. The cube of posters represents both a potential to disperse in all directions and the (social) closure of the gallery space. At its worst, relational art glibly asserts its generosity but is like an orgy in which strict measures are maintained to ensure that nobody ugly or distasteful attends. It describes a restricted and elite notion of convivial (erotic) interaction.

If nothing else, the strength of the traditional art work is that it acknowledges the gaps and fissures within the social that manifest its necessity. The art work plainly serves to mediate and affirm dimensions of separation and absence. Similarly the exploration of networked interaction within new media art is as much about the impossibility of the social as its manifestation. The social is conjured, but the very technological form of its virtual manifestation demonstrates the limits of the social and the play of mediation, displacement and exclusion that constitutes it. Relational aesthetics imagines that through some tiny gesture the social may literally, ephemerally take shape, and that it is the specific role of art to manifest this alternative space. In this manner, however, relational art can appear less as a realm of genuine engagement than of withdrawal and consolation. Everything depends upon the extent to which the social relation is affirmed or rendered problematic. Interesting relational art is less about literally manifesting social interaction than about establishing theatrical frameworks in which aspects of sociality can be investigated and questioned.

Bourriaud positions the "Law of Relocation" as a means of distancing art from the technological apparatus, but what if it were to represent precisely the opposite? It is worth recalling that the notion of technology and its relation to art and the human is complex and obscure. Heidegger famously argues that technology is not what it seems, that it is actually a form of revealing (Heidegger, 1993). What it reveals, however, is not the simplicity of an accessible truth, but rather that truth never comes as itself, that it is always, inevitably, veiled and displaced. Technology represents then an order of meta-level truth; it is the lie that comes undisguised, the displacement from the authenticity of being that actually manifests the heart of being. Within this context, the "Law of Relocation", so vital to the distanciation of art, would seem, in its motion of displacement, to engage with the paradox of technology. Bourriaud portrays it as guarantee of the aesthetic, when it may instead represent the technological within art.

Moreover, if the "Law of Relocation" is not simply a means of ensuring a very conventional hierarchical division between 'Art' and its periphery, then why can't it be applied to the relation between new media and social interaction? Why can't the

alienated sphere of code and electronics provide a profound (relocated) ground for meditation on aspects of human sociality? Consider, for example, the simplest computer program, "Hello World!" It represents communication through a multiple and uncertain set of displacements. Is it a summons to dialogue, an instance of solipsism, or a motion of communication that exceeds the human altogether? The indeterminable character of this program says more about the nature of society and the limits of social interaction than any number of explicitly convivial scenes.

But I have no wish to insist upon the necessity for radical (and inconsistently applied) gestures of relocation. The process can be subtle. It is possible, for instance, to reflect upon the consequences of the digital without abandoning digital processes altogether. In areas such as computer software, it is perfectly legitimate to gain skills as a computer programmer and to actually produce work in code. Numerous examples of critical software art demonstrate that there is value in pursuing the contours of the instrumental in their complex machinations - producing work that deflects software from its ordinary operations and that works to introduce multiple interstices within the technological apparatus itself

Mechanical and Dialogical Interaction

> The artistic practice thus resides in the inventions of relations between
> consciousness. Each artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, (Bourriaud
> 22)

Relational aesthetics emphasises relations between people. It projects a space of authentic dialogue. This excludes art that is not fundamentally directed to the human or that is concerned with the limits of the human – the relationship, for instance, between the human and inanimate matter, which typically involves a sense of ambivalence; the discovery within the human of unconscious (inanimate) dimensions and within the inanimate a terrain of strange, misguided, uncertain agency. While new media art can certainly - directly or obliquely - address ordinary issues of social interaction, it can also,

very classically, be about the encounter between the human and the animate/inanimate mechanism. In these cases, the issue is less about false interaction or interaction that falls short of the ideal of human dialogue, than of interaction couched in different (cybernetic) terms. New media explores multiple relations: human-machine, human-machine-human and machine-machine. The focus can be variously on the texture and implications of mechanical interaction, the play between human interaction and the unfolding of algorithmic systems, the simulation of human conversation or emerging contexts of networked sociality. I am happy to accept that only bits and pieces of new media art relate to Bourriaud's conception of relational aesthetics, but the binary view that there is either genuine human dialogue or nothing ignores the complex modalities and shades of grey that characterize new media art and communication. Moreover, it ends up insisting upon a fundamental incompatibility between the human and the technological that ignores crucial dimensions of intersection and ambivalence.

Conclusion

This paper has questioned Bourriaud's rejection of new media art as an ill-conceived effort to engage with the consequences of new media technology. It has argued that the "Law of Relocation" (67), which demands a shift away from any specific technical process (productive field) into the terrain of art, is inconsistently applied; representing new media art as an overly literal engagement with new media while the social focus of relational aesthetics is permitted its literal, direct focus. More generally, the paper has argued that Bourriaud privileges a notion of human dialogical interaction that oversimplifies the relationship between the human and the technological. The chief danger of his aesthetic scheme is that, in imagining a purely human space of dialogue, Bourriaud misses the actual risk and possibility of technology. Technology adopts the guise of the exterior, but its exteriority is immanent within the human field, affecting every aspect of social interaction.

Incidentally, new media art runs into precisely the same problem in terms of its current enthusiasm for the tangible, haptic and kinaesthetic. At one level this can enable a means of investigating the relation been body and electronic interface/process, but it can also

represent an effort to return to a space of humanly grounded phenomenological intimacy. It can be cast as a space of presence, of physical discovery, of full realization, versus the evil virtuality and disengagement of the traditional computer interface. This is like Skinner's rats taking pleasure in the feel of the metal button and the taste of the processed pellet, ignoring precisely the system that dominates them. And it is within this context that the notion of relational aesthetics becomes useful.

References

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