

Exchange and relation in relational aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper proposes a reflection on relational aesthetics, developed in the 90s by the French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. To this end, elects as a counterpoint Marcel Mauss' thought, specifically his essay on the gift, in order to understand the similarities and differences between the approaches of the two authors to the concepts of relationship and exchange. The question that motivates this text is well prepared: sociability models proposed by Bourriaud reinforce and reproduce the logic of consumer capitalism or suggest alternatives to it?

Keywords

Relational Aesthetics. Contemporary Art.
Models of Sociability. Sociology of Art.

1 Introduction

During a photography exhibit at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts – the institution to which he would have been designated Director a few months earlier; – Nicolas Bourriaud¹ briefly commented there was an approximation between his relational aesthetics and sociology. There was, however, no information regarding the nature of the connection that his theoretic formulation, principally based on his book of that same title, published in 1998, would have with that field of knowledge. The set of artists and work analyzed by Bourriaud might configure a sociological art – whatever that expression may refer to – or would his study be inscribed as a sociology of art? In any way, the brief comment brought about the possibility of searching for an understanding of relational aesthetics under a specific perspective of social Science: the concept of gift, as developed by Marcel Mauss in his *Essay on the Gift - the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies*. The emphasis placed upon the concepts of relation and Exchange – both by Bourriaud as well as by Mauss – has motivated the

current article, functioning as an analytic prism for the following reflection.

2 Relational Aesthetics

Upon justification of the source of relational aesthetics – being it specific to art in the 1990's – Bourriaud drafts the following general historic landscape:

This [art] history, nowadays, seems to have taken a new bearing: after the field of the relations between Humanity and divinity, then between Humanity and object, artistic practice now centres in the sphere of inter-human relations, as proven by experience in course since the beginning of the 90's (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 39-40).

May it be noted that said landscape is marked by a sequential logic, whereby the “intrinsic relational character of the art work” (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 39-40) slowly shifts its focus until, finally, it rests upon the sphere of human relations. Not delving into the author's historiographical model, let us only observe that, characterized by phases that succeed or substitute themselves, it seems to find its roots in a progressive teleological logic and, because of this, close to the master narrative that Arthur Danto had given as concluded in the 1960's. Besides that, it must be observed that relational aesthetics does not represent the presence of relation in art in juxtaposition to its

absence in previous artistic creation. Relational character is inherent to artwork. The crucial difference between previous artistic creation and that produced after 1990 resides in the emphasis that the later concedes to a specific type of relation, the inter-human relations. What, however, does that, in fact, mean?

It means that artistic production over the past 20 years has been trying to create, in museums and galleries, sociability models in which the spectator must actively participate. In reality, the artists do not create such models but, as interonauts, they appropriate themselves of pre-existing models and dislocate them to art spaces. It is what Bourriaud defines as post production art in a book that is the continuation of relational aesthetics:

The practice of a DJ, the activity of interonauts, the performance of post production artists all suppose a same figure of knowledge, characterized by the invention of itineraries within culture. All three are *semionauts* who produce, before all else, original routes amongst the signs (BOURRIAUD, 2009b, p. 14).

As a “*semionaut*,” the contemporary artist bases himself on sociability models found in daily life – dinners, parties, meets, contracts, trade exchanges etc. – and reformulates

¹ In 2012, Bourriaud was in Rio de Janeiro for two speeches: the first one was proffered at PUC-Rio on April 13 On the theme “The Art Schools of the XXI century”; The second one, whose theme was “Radicante, por uma estética da globalização”, happened at the Modern Art Museum on the following day. I was present at the first encounter, during which the French curator informed us as to his new appointment: director of the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, in Paris.

them within the context of an art gallery. Said proposals are justified by the need to respond to the uniformity of behaviors and the standardization of social connection amidst the current cultural chaos. Relational aesthetics would be the way out against Bourriaud's prediction to whom "soon, human relations will not be able to keep away from mercantile spaces" (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 12).

The enemy, is, therefore, clear: the reification of human relations. Against this trend towards merchandising of social connection, a specific set of artists² would deal with creating social interstices, understood as a "space for human relations which, even if inserted in a more or less open and harmonious manner within the global system, suggests *other possibilities of exchange* beyond those in place in this system" (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 22, italicized by the author). Thus, the exhibit becomes an interstice in which a certain gathering will be constituted in an ephemeral manner. Art Works are not, therefore, products, but moments of socializing. A private "domain for exchange" is instituted by the instructions or the objects that produce socialization, as proposed by the artist. In what way, however, are said domains alternative to commercial exchange (and here we come to a neural point in this text)?

Bourriaud's argumentation is based on an emphasis on human relations, particularly the exchanges between individuals, as a form of constitution of sociability. We have but to inquire how this is done, beginning from the description and analysis of some experiences produced by artists mentioned by the French critic. However, before analyzing some creations by Rirkrit Tiravanija – a Thai artist considered the exponent of relational aesthetics – and Carsten Höller, let us go through to the understanding of relations and Exchange under the specific sociological point of view of Marcel Mauss. The hypothesis that leads us to perform this passage is the following: the gift, as an archaic form of Exchange, imposes precise limits to Bourriaud's approach, allowing for the development of a critical discourse in relation to the notions elaborated upon by the author.

3 The gift-exchange

In his "most justly celebrated work, the influence of which was most profound," (LEVI-STRAUSS, 2003, p. 23) Mauss looks upon archaic forms of exchange found in various societies, particularly the Melanesians, Polynesians and Americans.³ The gift exchange presents a set of obligations as characteristic elements: obligation of giving, obligation of receiving, and obligation of repayment. If the former is the "essence of

² Rirkrit Tiravanija, Vanessa Beecroft, Douglas Gordon, Andrea Zittel, Angela Bulloch, Gabriel Orozco, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Jorge Pardo, Phillipe Parreno, Maurizio Cattelan, Jes Brinch, Christine Hill, Carsten Höller, Noritoshi Hirakawa, Pierre Huyghe e Felix Gonzalez-Torres are recurrent names in Bourriaud's exhibit.

³ Mauss also explores the giving habits in ancient laws - Roman Law, as well as German, Hindu, Celt and Chinese Law.

potlatch” (MAUSS, 2003, p. 243), the latter is fully that in itself (“it’s all of *potlatch*”) (MAUSS, 2003, p. 249). Giving, in this context, is the manner by which a chief maintains authority over his tribe: “he cannot prove this fortune unless he spends it, distributes it, humiliating others with it, placing them under the ‘shade of his name’” (MAUSS, 2003, p. 244). We can see in this point an aspect that differentiates the gift-exchange from the commercial exchange: in the Exchange system of giving and retribution that is the *potlatch*, in extreme cases, the prestige to be conserved by the chief and his clan does not mandate for the maintenance of wealth, but its total destruction. “It is a dispute,” observes Mauss (2003, p. 238), “of who will be the wealthiest and also the most extravagantly prepared to squander that wealth”.

When a gift is offered, it cannot be refused.

Rejection represents incapacity for retribution, the acceptance of inequity and consequently a levelling and loss of prestige and authority. The obligation to receive is also a commitment: “a gift is received as a ‘load on one’s back’ It goes beyond just benefitting from a feast or a thing, a challenge is being accepted” (MAUSS, 2003, p. 248). Such challenge inevitably leads to the third obligation, the retribution, which arises when the donor receives the gift under the spirit of reciprocity.

Two connected elements permeate the three obligations mentioned: rivalry and risk. To explain the presence of these elements, it is convenient to explain that the gift-exchange occurs between

clans, tribes, families and such groups The exchanges happen between moral people and involve, at all times, the risk of loss of authority, prestige and honor. Thus, there is always a latent conflict in the giving, that may result, if the voluntary obligations do not happen, in combat: “refusing to give, neglecting to invite, as well as refusing to receive, is equivalent to declaring war: it is refusal of the alliance and intercourse” (MAUSS, 2003, p. 202).

The three obligations that configure the gift-exchange constitute the basis of *potlatch*, mentioned before and defined as a specific genre of institution, called total service of an agonistic type. A total service system is, in turn, a regime of exchange that has the above mentioned characteristics, in which the exchange is not solely of economically useful things, but

[...] acts of politeness, courtesy banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals and fairs, in which the market is but one element and the circulation of wealth but one part of a wide and enduring contract, (MAUSS, 2003, p. 191).

These systems are observed as total, (or general) social facts, thus denominated as they put into action the entire society and its institutions” (MAUSS, 2003, p. 309). The mix is the crucial element herein: all institutions, be they religious, moral, economic or legal, are revealed in these complex facts. This mix also causes people and things to coincide, and on this point, it is once again Worth hearing Mauss’s voice (2003, p. 212):

It is, after all a matter of mixtures. Souls mix into things and things mix into souls. Lives are mixed and thus people and things mixed each come out of their spheres and mix: which is precisely the contract and the exchange.

and returned it is precisely because one gives and returns respects – and ‘courtesies’. But in addition, in giving them, a man gives himself, and he does so because he owes himself – himself and his possessions – to others (MAUSS, 2003, p. 263,).

If the archaic form of exchange has already been described herein, the reason for its existence may be understood from the mixing of souls in things and things in souls. Previously, observation was made to the risk of loss of authority and prestige: it is in regards to a moral concern transversal to the gift-exchange directly associated to the spirit of the object given, the strength of things given that behold the receiving end to repay. The *mana (hau)* must be understood as a virtue – not a physical property of the goods exchanged – but a kind of source of energy (the “personality of the thing”) that works as an axis for this exchange system.

The exchange is not, therefore, done within a purchase system and moved by an individual utilitarian interest, but by means of gifts given and repaid, motivated by *mana*. The mix inherent to this system is what also marks the social regime, configuring a permanently continuous movement, traversing social life and being its symbol:

Everything is tied together; things have personality, and personalities are in some manner the permanent possession of the clan. Titles, talismans, coppers and spirits of chiefs homonyms and synonyms, having the same nature and function. The circulation of goods follows that of men, of women, and children, of festival ritual, ceremonies and dances, jokes and injuries. Basically they are the same. If things are given

4 Exchange in relational aesthetics

Upon concluding his essay, Mauss clearly draws a distinction between the gift-form and the buying and selling system. At this point of his argument, the author endeavors to observe traces - or more than that - this archaic type of exchange in our societies. Perhaps he might not find it in its entirety, but he does not abstain from saying that the constituent moral of the gift and that is expressed its triple form of obligation motivated by *mana* (the soul of the thing) reappears in some societies, corresponding, also, to a “return to the right”. In fact, old principles, in our days, react to abstractions, inhumanities and to the hardship of our codes (Mauss, 2003, p. 295).

Thus, the “atmosphere where gift, obligation and freedom are blended” is not only distant from us, in archaic societies. It extends to our lives and it is from this extension⁴ that we should resume Bourriaud’s work. It should be clear that the purpose here is not to verify whether or not relational aesthetics fits the exchange system described by Mauss.

In this case the answer would be: no. These two exchange approaches are reached from suspicions and questions that both authors make regarding utilitarian economic regime: if in Mauss he is

⁴ With regard to our temporal distance from the archaic societies, it is worth remembering, pursuant to Argan (2003, p.21.), that prehistory has no precise chronological limits.

opposed to the gift-exchange economy, in Bourriaud he becomes responsible for the commodification of human relations.

To perform the proposed approach it is necessary to resort to some relational aesthetics experiences in order to verify its logic and operation. At this point, a clarification: the notion of Bourriaud is not an aesthetic program, nor it is configured as a defining manifesto of a stable identity of a group of artists. This is a theoretical adventure whose reasoning lies in work on a specific set of creators such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Vanessa Beecroft, Douglas Gordon, Andrea Zittel, Gabriel Orozco, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno, Maurizio Cattelan, Carsten Höller Pierre Huyghe and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, to remain with the most recurrent names. The creations produced by this sample of artists are the most diverse and surprisingly, occupy a few pages in Bourriaud's book. Except for brief and prompt analyses, the reference to the works - despite the availability of information about them - comes devoid of descriptions and investigations regarding their order, morality and reason, to put in Mauss' terms. Therefore, there is a crucial difference as to the methodological rigor that moves the two writings. If Mauss focuses on social facts, specifically

noting the social life in a sometimes exhaustive description of the dynamics that characterize the archaic forms of exchange, Bourriaud rushes in by a generalization of contemporary artistic condition, without this being accompanied by compelling and reasoned analysis.

Thus, relational aesthetics establishes an exchange domain, insufficiently described so that one may understand the general and fundamental lines to its operation. In an attempt to envision such form and reason, this paper resorts to artistic productions of two exponents of relational aesthetics: Rirkrit Tiravanija and Carsten Höller. First, however, we must not be unfair and should comment the chapter dedicated to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres.⁵ The Cuban artist is considered a kind of precursor of relational aesthetics, because his work creates a "space based on intersubjectivity, which is precisely what will be explored by the most artists interesting [mentioned above] from the following decade [1990's]" (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 72). The author's thesis is that the homosexuality in Gonzalez-Torres is not confined only to the thematic horizon of his works⁶, being especially his formal apparatus. It is a duality without oppositions that establishes a date, a life in common, cohabitation. Perfect Lovers is elucidative of the argument above: two watches

5 Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) was a Cuban-born artist who was naturalized American. Co-presence and availability: the theoretical heritage of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is the only essay devoted to an artist in Relational Aesthetics. In Post-production, in chapter Using the forms, brief analyses are performed, however more suppressed, over certain creators. Overall, the look of Bourriaud towards the works is mindful, however, these studies seem to function more as critical isolated analyses than as grounds for the author's theses, for whom art is marked by relational aesthetics and/or by post-production.

6 There is the mention of works such as Untitled (March 5th) #2, 1991, and Untitled (March 5th)#1, 1991; and Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1991. Two lamps, two mirrors and two watches are the respective elements to each work mentioned.

alike, laid side by side and stopped at precisely the same hour evoke, more than sync, a perfect tuning.

If the above works are analyzed from the perspective of a perfect cohabitation, works such as *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)*, 1991 and *Untitled (Blue Mirror)*, 1990, allow observing a specific form of exchange. In the first case, eighty kilograms of candy are arranged in the corner of the gallery room, available to visitors. Ross, Gonzalez-Torres' boyfriend, had died of AIDS and the amount of candy matches the ideal weight of his healthy companion. Over time, the facility tends to fade in parallel to the weakening and subsequent disappearance of Ross. In *Blue Mirror*, a stack of blue paper, also available to the visitor, is laid out in the gallery. The risk of its dissipation is similar. In both cases, the visitor, upon choosing to carry along a unit that constitutes the layout, takes part in the artwork's annihilation. He takes a piece of the work and, in doing so, makes it incomplete and increasingly close to its moment of extinction. In *Portrait of Ross*, the act is also covered by an allegorical dimension, because each candy is a part of the partner's body, being his weakness associated to the setting's dematerialization.

Such works, undoubtedly, are not complex facts moved by a gift-exchange. Moral people are not compromised, but rather, are individuals, nor do they shake the authority of any parties involved. The existing conflict in such works is given by the symbolic object that each visitor may take ownership without bearing, however, necessarily the

spirit of reciprocity. Perhaps nor the obligation in giving or receiving can be seen, because what exists is the gratuitous availability of elements (candies, sheets of paper, etc.) which may or may not be taken by the visitor. Failing to accept it does not mean loss of authority and of the work of art, which materially disappears, in reality is always renewed, because quantities are refilled periodically (the exact way Gonzalez-Torres prescribed).

The offer of food also characterizes certain artistic events of Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. *Untitled (Free / Still)*, 1992, is the work that many regard as the hallmark of his career: the artist made the art gallery (*303 Gallery*, New York) a space of conviviality in which he cooked and offered to visitors, free of charge, a special dish of Thai curry rice. Just as the above commented works of Gonzalez-Torres, in *Free*, the visitor is free to accept the artist's offer, but without having the risk of having the work disappear. In this case, Tiravanija, in addition to offering something tangible (food) also builds a place of coexistence that gathers and agglutinates participants. The artwork functions, therefore, as a pretext for people to interact with each other. More than accepting the food, an individual should relate to others: this is the purpose of the work, whose experience was so reported by Jerry Saltz (apud BISHOP, 2012, p. 122):

At 303 Gallery I usually sat with someone or was accompanied by some unknown and it was great. The gallery became a place to share, a cheerful place to chat with sincerity. I had wonderful rounds of meals with gallery owner. Once Paula Cooper and I ate together and she retold a long

and complicated chunk of professional gossip. The other day, Lisa Spellman reported in hilarious detail the story of an intrigue about a fellow Gallery owner who tried to unsuccessfully steal one of her artists. About a week after David Zwirner accompanied me. I accidentally ran into him on the street and he said “nothing is working right today, let’s do Rirkrit.” We went and talked about the lack of excitement in the world of New York art. Another time I was accompanied by Gavin Brown, the artist and gallery owner ... who spoke of SoHo’s collapse - just to consider him welcome and say that it was about time, because the galleries were displaying lots of mediocre art. At another moment an identified woman follow me and a curious flirting atmosphere hovered in the air. And yet another time I talked with a young artist who lived in Brooklyn and had had real insights into the exhibits he had just seen.

Saltz’s testimony, labelled by Claire Bishop as “informal chatter”, precisely unveils the nature of the experiments proposed by Tiravanija. If the Gallery turns into a living space in which individuals can meet and interact, the “field of trade” established there is among gallery owners and art lovers, in a bar-like atmosphere that allows you to make professional contacts. Thus, nothing more suited to art market. Even if the food is shared (and there we respect its nature)⁷ it is so in a context where human relations motivated by such sharing attempt to confirm the idea of “community

whose members identify with each other because they have something in common”: interest in art that translates into gossip, conversations about exhibitions and flirting (BISHOP, 2012).

A possible counter-argument to Bishop’s position connects the offer of *Thai* food carried out by Tiravanija to the mealtimes of the ceremony described by Lévi-Strauss. After all, what the Thai artist does is to “throw a reception.” Rice, in turn, is a meal that for Thai people bears double importance – sacred and economic – , a fact that makes the artist’s offer take on a “special flavor”. In Thai cuisine, however, rice is never absent. Moreover, Tiravanija’s recipe is properly configured as a “daily menu”, distancing itself, with this, from the *rich food* that characterizes ceremonial meals. Nevertheless, *Free* proposes a situation where strangers meet, with the tension between “the norm of loneliness and the fact of society” (Lévi-Strauss, 1982, p. 99). The informal chatter does not confirm, however, a meeting between strangers, quite the contrary. The possibility of creating an unfriendly environment seems to be outside the gallery space: inside, one should freely and mandatorily, practice love between peers, because everything is “great”, “cheerful”, “wonderful”.⁸

7 Mauss says: “It is the nature of food to be shared, not sharing it with any other is ‘killing its essence’, is destroying it for himself and others” (Mauss, 2003, p. 282).

8 It is curious that this work of Tiravanija - *Free* - bears the same title of a recent book by Chris Anderson. In his work, the author defends the idea that companies can gain more revenue if they offer products to customers and do not charge, such as the internet. For him, we are in a historical moment in which the economy can be built around the idea of “free”. The relationship between exhibition and a book that promotes a new business strategy notes that Bourriaud strives to create a reading of artistic production fully bonded to the reality of contemporary consumption. The figure of the *semionaut* performs, for example, a perfect identity between the artist and this character of technological consumption who is the Internet user.

The last case mentioned here is similar: the *Carousel* (1999) and *Valerian I and II* (1998), works by Carsten Höller. In these works, the Belgian artist installs a merry-go-round and a slide, respectively, at an art gallery. Rides found at amusement parks are thus displaced into the space of an art gallery. Shown at the 28th Bienal de São Paulo, *Valerian I and II* caused tremendous stir among the regulars, minimizing the stress caused by the event's empty second floor. In an interview with curator Ana Paula Cohen, Höller says that "no, it's already too late" to change the logic of consumption that has made the contemporary art system became comparable to mass events, such as major festivals in entertainment industries. If the change is not feasible, one is left with the option of literally transforming the exhibition space into an amusement park. From the point of view of the person receiving the proposed experience, there is - as in the case of Tiravanija - a serene comfort without antagonisms. In other words, we benefit from the party without the risk of war; we accept the food and fun, without challenges.

The absence of conflict in artistic proposals taken into account in this article⁹ is the indicator that most seems to checkmate the attempt of relational aesthetics in building an alternative space to established exchanges.¹⁰ Therefore, if this is based on the sphere of inter-human relations, one has to ask what kind of relationship the artists and their works create for the audiences. The participation of regulars, and their perfect communion, is closer to mass images than a community concerned with its constitution and validity. The description of works produced by icons of the "movement", such as Höller and Tiravanija, allows us to envision that, inasmuch as living spaces are proposed, the "spheres of exchange" rather reinforce and reproduce the logic of consumer capitalism than resist or propose alternatives to it. If it is too late, it might be worth resorting, one last time, to Mauss (2003, p. 299), for whom "this moral [which causes the citizen to have an acute sense of oneself, of others and of social reality] is eternal".

9 The work of Gonzalez-Torres seems to escape this diagnosis. What arouses interest in his work is not motivated, however, by relational aesthetics. The same can be said for productions of Vanessa Beecroft, Gabriel Orozco, Maurizio Cattelan and Pierre Huyghe.

10 Claire Bishop and Jacques Rancière seem to agree here. While the first provides a sharp counterpoint to the relational aesthetics upon defining relational antagonism, the second values dissent to the detriment of relational proposals' consensus, regarded as "political whims of an art coming out from itself toward the political tasks of proximity and social medicine where one attempts, under theory of relational aesthetics, to 'fix the flaws of social bonding' (Rancière, 2010, p. 57).

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Troca e relação na estética relacional

Resumo

O presente artigo propõe uma reflexão a respeito da estética relacional, desenvolvida na década de 1990 pelo crítico e curador francês Nicolas Bourriaud. Para tal, elege-se como contraponto o pensamento de Marcel Mauss, especificamente seu ensaio sobre a dádiva, a fim de se perceber as semelhanças e diferenças entre as abordagens dos dois autores para os conceitos de relação e de troca. A indagação que motiva este texto é assim elaborada: os modelos de sociabilidade propostos por Bourriaud reforçam e reproduzem a lógica do capitalismo de consumo ou lhe sugerem alternativas?

Palavras-Chave

Estética Relacional. Arte Contemporânea.
Modelos de Sociabilidade. Sociologia da Arte.

Intercambio y relación en la estética relacional

Resumen

Este artículo propone una reflexión sobre la estética relacional, desarrollada en los años 90 por el crítico y comisario francés Nicolas Bourriaud. Para ello, se elige como contrapunto el pensamiento de Marcel Mauss, específicamente su ensayo sobre el don, con el fin de comprender las diferencias y similitudes entre los enfoques de los dos autores a los conceptos de relación e intercambio. La pregunta que motiva este texto es: los modelos de sociabilidad propuestos por Bourriaud refuerzan y reproducen la lógica del capitalismo de consumo o sugieren alternativas a la misma?

Palabras-Clave

Estética relacional. Arte Contemporáneo.
Sociabilidad Modelos. Sociología del Arte.

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