

## Don't Look Now! By Dave Beech (50 minutes)

### ART IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE

29 January 2009, 10:30am – 4:30pm  
Loughborough University, Business School,  
Sir Richard Morris Building, Room BE0.53

John Roberts: 'Collective authorship represents the promissory social space of the organization of art's ensemble of skills and competences beyond their privatization in 'first person' expression, aesthetics, and the whole panoply of possessive individualism inherent in the Cartesian Theatre'.<sup>1</sup>

### The Post-Cartesian Artist

In 'The Intangibilities of Form' John Roberts identifies what he calls the emergence of the 'post-Cartesian artist'.<sup>2</sup> He argues that Duchamp inaugurated a shift away from handcraft and representation that ushered in 'a discourse on the diffusion of authorship through the social division of labour'.<sup>3</sup> This 'diffusion' is a double movement in which art sheds its old techniques and absorbs the whole gamut of techniques at large.

'Too often the discussion of the readymade languishes in the realm of stylistic analysis, the philosophical discussion of art and anti-art, or, more recently, the Institutional Theory of Art', Roberts says, not as a *technical* category'.<sup>4</sup>

This new reading of Duchamp is also a new reading of art after Duchamp. The key transformation is that the readymade 'brings the link between artistic technique and general social technique in the modern period into inescapable view'.<sup>5</sup> The result is an ontology of art in which there are no longer any specifically artistic skills or techniques, such as painting or sculpture, that define art (what Thierry de Duve calls 'generic art'<sup>6</sup>), in which art draws its techniques from industry, politics, entertainment, philosophy, science and so on, without limit.

An example that suggests itself is Alex Farquharson's list of Carsten Holler's practices: 'zoologist, botanist, paediatrician, physiologist, psychologist, occupational therapist, pharmacist, optician, architect, vehicle designer, evolutionary theorist and political activist'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Roberts *The Intangibilities of Form*, Verso, 2007, p.125

<sup>2</sup> Roberts *The Intangibilities of Form*, p.101-132

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p.53

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p.22

<sup>5</sup> Roberts *The Intangibilities of Form*, p. 53

<sup>6</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, ????????

<sup>7</sup> Alex Farquharson, 'Before and After Science', *Frieze*, issue 85, September 2004, p.93

And this means, among other things, that the artist goes through the same kind of expansive transformation and can no longer be identified or conceptualized in the old ways. This is the birth of the post-Cartesian artist.

What Roberts calls the 'aggressive Cartesianism and asocial aestheticism of modernism',<sup>8</sup> is radically undermined by Duchamp and then redoubled by Warhol's 'Factory', but it is only fully jettisoned by Conceptualism, when art's preoccupation with crafting a unique object is replaced with a repertoire of techniques borrowed from anywhere and everywhere.

Thus, for Roberts, 'the artist's voice becomes subordinate to the forces of reproducibility and general social technique'.<sup>9</sup> This means 'making' art (often, making without making) with non-artistic skills and techniques, 'making' with the hands of others, and 'making' through instruction.

This subordination opens the artist up to a multitude of previously unavailable roles, discourses and modes of address: 'The displacement of the first person singular discourages the author to think of himself or herself as a unified subject bounded intellectually and conversationally at art historical precedents (rather than, say, for example, a performer of a set of cognitive/artistic skills indebted to the problems of philosophy and science and other non-artistic discourses).'<sup>10</sup> This displacement of the first person singular, of course, may often mean the artist working in the first person plural ie collaboratively.

### **Whatever Happened to the Viewer**

It is not just the art object and the artist that is transformed by these developments within the post-Duchampian ontology of art. The birth of the post-Cartesian artist is matched by the transformation of the encounter with art. The viewer isn't dead, but its hegemony – the reign of the 'disembodied eye' – has been broken. However, we cannot go on to develop a theory of the post-Cartesian viewer, as the viewer of art as viewer is Cartesian through and through.. We need to develop an understanding of what kind of encounters with art have replaced the 'disembodied eye'.

Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the history of art could now be rewritten as a history of art's social encounters. "Today," he goes on, "this history seems to have taken a new turn. After the area of relations between humankind and deity and then between humankind and the object, artistic practice is now focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations."<sup>11</sup>

There is no viewer of these inter-human relations, and if there were then this would probably be seen as a troubling social presence that affects the inter-human action that it views. Also, any objects that are included within these inter-human relational artworks are generally *used* rather than *viewed*. Liam Gillick's work, for instance, is always visual, he has said, because he is

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<sup>8</sup> Roberts *The Intangibilities of Form*, p.128

<sup>9</sup> Roberts *The Intangibilities of Form*, p.115

<sup>10</sup> Roberts *The Intangibilities of Form*, p.115-116

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*,

interested in how the visual environment structures behaviour. This is a politicization of the visual in art and culture. And just to underline the fact that the visual aspects of his work are meant to be reflected on politically rather than viewed in any ordinary aesthetics way he has said the work 'is better as a backdrop to activity ... If some people just stand with their backs to the work and talk to each other then that's good.'<sup>12</sup>

An art not to be looked at is an art that proposes a thorough reconfiguration of art's materiality, agents and agencies: the art object is no longer necessarily the primary focus of the encounter with art; the white box institutions in which we encounter art adapt by mimicking libraries, cafés and other social spaces; art's addressee, no longer necessarily a gallery-goer, is expanded with a range of new activities and new styles of engagement; and the artist itself turns to unfamiliar skills to produce the new art.

### **The Art of Encounter**

A detailed and expansive debate has been taking place over the past several years about the relative merits of various categories of social encounter. I want to argue that this interest in interactivity, participation and dialogue in contemporary art, that jettisons the Cartesian 'viewer' from art, is one of the most conspicuous legacies of the post-Duchampian ontology of art. So, we can say that this ontology is the *shared ground* of (1) Nicolas Bourriaud's relational and convivial aesthetic, (2) Claire Bishop's art of antagonistic social relations, and (3) Grant Kester's advocacy of artists and arts collectives who operate 'between art and the broader social and political world'.<sup>13</sup> I want to group these competing approaches to contemporary practice under the heading 'the art of encounter'. And I want to explain its relation to the post-Cartesian artist. This will then allow me to engage more critically with current thinking on art's social ontology.

Nicolas Bourriaud has provided a sophisticated theoretical defence of 'conviviality' based on a postmodernist micropolitics. The art of encounter, for him, is exemplified in artworks social events such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's Thai soup installations and Carsten Höller's scientific tricks, games and amusement rides, and Andrea Zittel's furniture-as-meeting-place. So, relational art seems to be an art of the generic social encounter, the programmatically unspecified event, the boundlessly open exchange.

Claire Bishop takes issue with Bourriaud's emphasises on conviviality and 'immanent togetherness', emphasizing instead an art that reveals real antagonisms within its social and cultural exchanges. Bishop is right to ask questions about 'the *quality* of the relationships in relational aesthetics'. In particular she seeks to contrast the 'informal chattiness' of a typical relational artwork with the inherent friction that Chantal Mouffe argues is necessary for any genuine democratic process or political dialogue. For this reason she highlights projects '*marked* by sensations of unease and discomfort rather

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<sup>12</sup> Liam Gillick, *Renovation Filter: Recent Past and Near Future*, catalogue, Arnolfini, Gallery, Bristol, 2000, p. 16

<sup>13</sup> Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p.9

than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a “microtopia” and instead sustains a tension among viewers, participants, and context.’<sup>14</sup> She cites the work of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn as examples of work that is disruptive and destabilizing with friction, awkwardness and discomfort.

Bishop’s main argument – that Bourriaud’s conviviality is not adequately antagonistic to count as democratic – provides a strong corrective to Bourriaud’s ethics of inter-subjectivity. In the process, Bishop makes the case for an antagonistic (ie political) rather than convivial (ie ethical) account of art’s social relations. Nevertheless, Bishop’s account turns on its own structural absence. She promotes antagonism and censures conviviality insofar as they are present *in the work itself*. In other words, she presupposes that the politics of the encounter has to be resolved formally in the work. This is why she praises Sierra and Hirschhorn: she is after works that are *marked* by antagonism. But why would the antagonism have to appear *in the work*? Does Bishop not neglect the variety of possible ways in which hegemony can be challenged and the variety of ways in which art can contribute to that process?

Grant Kester has offered a third model that neither limits its social encounters to convivial ones nor restricts its political antagonisms to ones that mark the work. In the book ‘Conversation Pieces’, Kester tracks projects that operate ‘between art and the broader social and political world’.<sup>15</sup> This is, in other words, a politically spiced-up ‘new genre public art’.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Bishop, though, his approach does not focus on the dialogical *structure* of artworks and more on the dialogical encounters with communities, emphasizing the contrast between a ‘patronizing form of tourism’ and ‘a more reciprocal process of dialogue and mutual education’.<sup>17</sup>

Kester thus proposes a new role for the artist: ‘A dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist, one defined in terms of openness, of listening ... intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator’.<sup>18</sup> By focussing on the conduct of the artist in relation to the communities it encounters, Kester’s argument, unfortunately, defaults into a moralizing analysis. However, there is a more serious problem. There is an in-built limit to Kester’s account. The social models and techniques that Kester’s dialogical artists use typically derive from political contexts, such as WochenKlausur, who have collaborated with communities to help set up ‘interest groups’. But why restrict the art of encounter to political forms of organization and

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<sup>14</sup> Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *October* 110, Fall 2004, p.70 My emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, 2004, p.9

<sup>16</sup> See Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995

<sup>17</sup> Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p.151

<sup>18</sup> Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p.110

communication? A political interrogation of the art of encounter surely does not require that artworks take their models of encounter from the political field.

Where does this leave us? We now have three theories of contemporary art's new social ontology, each of which has been subjected to critique. First, Bourriaud's utopian celebration of inter-human conviviality, which avoids antagonism. Second, Bishop's art of antagonism, which underestimates the diversity of ways in which art can contribute to counter-hegemonic struggle. Third, Kester's dialogical art, which reverts to an ethics of the artist's conduct. And together they map a context, albeit incomplete, of the art of encounter. They also provide a set of debates through which we might begin to evaluate a variety of specific works and theories, especially in terms of its relative ethics, politics and social relations. We are now, therefore, in a position to assess the various claims made on behalf of interactivity, participation, collaboration and co-operation in contemporary art.

### **Include Me Out!**

I want to consider interactivity, participation, collaboration and co-operation in contemporary art as a structured set of relations. They are best defined, I'm suggesting, in terms of each other. I want to dwell for a moment on the words themselves. Interactivity has two means, which tend to be conflated in discussions of interactivity in art: (1) acting with each other, and (2) (especially in computer science) responding to the user. Participation means having a share, taking part, or being part of a whole. Collaboration, broken down as co-labouring, means working together, as does co-operation. In contemporary art, though, the difference between interactivity, participation, collaboration and co-operation, not to mention collectivity, is measured in terms of a sliding scale of the degree to which the work's public is active within the work, including, crucially, how early or late that activity is.

In her book 'Participation', Claire Bishop correctly distinguishes between participation and interactivity, explaining that the latter, especially in connection with developments in digital technology, merely incorporates the viewer 'physically' (pressing buttons, jumping on sensitive pads and so on). Participation, Bishop points out, is not so much 'physical' as 'social'. And this is precisely the sort of distinction that fuels the advocacy of participatory art.

There is a temptation, within the earnest tradition of participation, to treat it as a solution to the problems endemic to the whole range of prior forms of cultural engagement, from the elitism of the aesthete to the passivity of the spectator, and from the compliance of the observer to the distance of the onlooker. Acknowledging the problematic social histories of these forms of engagement, which are still in the process of being written up, the rhetoric of participation proposes a break. Participation is thought of as a style of cultural engagement that does away with all previous problematic forms of cultural engagement by eradicating the distinction between all of the previous cultural types and all cultural relations between them.

Miwon Kwon, in the book 'One Place After Another', interprets the rhetoric of participation within 'new genre public art' as precisely that of democratising art with 'pluralist inclusivity, multicultural representation and consensus-building'

that shifts the focus 'from the artist to the audience, from object to process, from production to reception, and emphasises the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups (ideally through shared authorship in collaborations)'. Kwon remains sceptical about such claims, rightly so. Participation, although disguised as a generous shrinking of cultural division, can be seen as an extension of art's hegemony and, as Grant Kester argues, an opportunity for the artist to profit from their social privilege.

It is vital to the critique of participation, therefore, that we locate it within – rather than beyond – the differential field of culture's social relations, as a particular form or style of cultural engagement with its own constraints, problems and subjectivities. We can begin by noting that the participant typically is not cast as an agent of critique or subversion but rather as one who is invited to accept the parameters of the art project. To participate in an art event, whether it is organised by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jeremy Deller, Santiago Sierra or Johanna Billing, is to enter into a pre-established social environment that casts the participant in a very specific role.

The point is not to single out individual artists who fail to meet the potential of participation's promise. The point, rather, is that participation always involves a specific invitation and a specific formation of the participant's subjectivity, even when the artist asks them simply to be themselves. The critique of participation must release us from the grip of the simple binary logic which opposes participation to exclusion and passivity. If participation entails its own forms of limitations on the participant then the simple binary needs to be replaced with a constellation of overlapping economies of agency, control, self-determination and power. Within such a constellation participants take their place alongside the viewer, observer, spectator, consumer and the whole panoply of culture's modes of subjectivity and their social relations.

Jacques Rancière highlights another pernicious distinction that participation cannot shake off: that between those who participate and those who don't. Even if we view participation in its rosier light, Rancière argues that its effects are socially divisive. The critique of participation is, here, immanent to the development of participation as an inclusive practice that does not and cannot include all. Seen in this way, participation must be excluding because it sets up a new economy which separates society into participants and non-participants, or those who are participation-rich and those who are participation-poor.

Both in art and politics, participation is an image of a much longed for social reconciliation but it is not a mechanism for bringing about the required transformation. In politics, participation vainly hopes to provide the ends of revolution without the revolution itself. And in art, participation seems to offer to heal the rift between art and social life without the need for any messy and painful confrontations between cultural rivals.

There is, perhaps, great potential in the proposal of participating in a promising situation – and this is presumably the only scenario envisaged by the supporters of participation. However, there is potential horror within the

threat of participating in an unpromising situation. Participation presupposes its own promise, therefore, by assuming the prior promise of the situation to which the participant is invited. As such, participation sounds promising only until you imagine unpromising circumstances in which you might be asked to participate. In troubled and troubling circumstances, participation is a malign violating force that neutralises difference and dissent.

Consider, for instance, Gillian Wearing's 'Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say', 1992-93. When someone complains that such work is ultimately controlled by the artist, or that the work addresses those internal to contemporary art rather than those represented by the images, what is tapped into is the underlying tension between art and the rest of culture. The point behind the complaint is that the participation of civilians in artworks does not fundamentally challenge the cultural distinctions that separate them from the artist and the minority community of art. In fact, participation simply re-enacts that relationship in an ethnographic fashion. It would be unfair to expect a single artwork to overcome such systemic ills, but this is precisely the problem with the concept of participation: it is based on the misconception that properties of the artwork could offer a technical solution to art's social marginalisation.

One way of getting a handle on the limitations and constraints imposed on the participant is to contrast participation with collaboration. It is the shortfall between participation and collaboration that leads to perennial questions about the degree of choice, control and agency of the participant. Is participation always voluntary? Are all participants equal and are they equal with the artist? How can participation involve co-authorship rather than some attenuated and localised content? The rhetoric of participation often conflates participation with collaboration to head off such questions. Collaborators, however, are distinct from participants insofar as they share authorial rights over the artwork that permits them, among other things, to make fundamental decisions about the key structural features of the work. That is, collaborators have rights that are withheld from participants. Participants relate to artists in many ways, including the anthropological, managerial, philanthropic, journalistic, convivial and other modes. The distinction between them remains.

### **Don't Look ... What Now?**

So, when I said earlier that interactivity, participation, collaboration and so forth can be seen as an incomplete map of art within the post-Duchampian ontology of art, I meant that we have a very narrow view of the possibilities. The main restriction on contemporary practice, I would say, is the over-emphasis on redressing the power of the author. Co-authorship is certainly a major element of post-Cartesian art, but it is clearly not *all* that it implies.

It is essential to recognize the devaluation of the 'first-person' in art – and artists are collaborating today at an unprecedented rate, as well as addressing their various 'publics' as participants and encouraging them to participate or collaborate with each other – but working together, both co-

operatively and antagonistically, and getting help from technicians, professionals and experts, is the tip of the post-Cartesian iceberg.

We used to have three heroically singular elements to art: the artist, the art object, and the viewer. All of these have been opened up to 'general social technique', creating a lot of anxiety and excitement, and a handful of theories, each promoting one possible way of being post-Cartesian. We need to see that the critique and transformation of the gallery, which has occurred roughly at the same time, is fundamentally related to the emergence of the art of encounter: the gallery is the institution of those three singulars, and therefore it cannot survive their demise. Thus, the gallery, which has begun to mimic or host other institutions, has itself been opened up to general social technique.

So, it is not an adequate response to the current state of art to celebrate collaboration or participation in contemporary art. Nor can we merely add these social elements together at arrive at an ideal practice (an arts collective working with participants on self-institutionalizing events from materials and skills at large). In fact, while social authorship and social cultural reception seem to both follow from the post-Cartesian condition, collaboration and participation, as we understand them, are unhappy together. If you have collaborators and participants working together, you have a hierarchy of authorship, responsibility and control.

The fundamental reason why the current map we have is incomplete and inadequate is that it does not yet face up to the fact that when art is opened up to general social technique, our theory of art has to become a theory of the society that we want. We simply cannot have a theory of the art of encounter without at the same time rethinking social relations at large.

We need a better map. More importantly, though, we need to change the landscape that is being mapped.