

**Can the foundations of *Relational Aesthetics* be found in the movement of  
Performance Art?**

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## Introduction

*Relational Aesthetics* proposes an alternative to the previous theories of art, diverging from the traditional concept of art as merely the aesthetics of objects. The theory, coined by Nicholas Bourriaud, looks at the emerging art scene of the 1990's which had no quantifiable aesthetic, but rather placed the importance on the social connections that the 'objects' of art create. However, *Relational Aesthetics* seems to 'dance' around the idea that if art is about "human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space" then surely the object is obsolete, simply serving the purpose of a 'middle man.'<sup>1</sup> Performance Art largely emerged in the 1970s as the antithesis of the static nature of mediums such as painting and sculpture, which place importance on the physical object, leading to what Marx would call the 'Commodity Fetishism'.<sup>2</sup> Performance Art, it could be said, is a preliminary example of *Relational Aesthetics*, through its apathy towards objects and the use of the body itself to create these social connections, and yet it is largely omitted in Bourriaud's theory. By not only removing the fetishization of the object from art, but often removing the object entirely, or at the very least putting it out of the central focal point, Performance Art has an advantage that other mediums do not in the fight against commodification. To explore Performance Art's place within the theory of *Relational Aesthetics*, I will be exploring the hierarchy that is created by an object over its audience contrasted with that of the human form, Marxist ideas of commodities in relation to the use of the body verses the use of physical objects in art, and whether Performance Art really goes far enough to omit its own commodification, resulting in "relations between people and the world" this time not "by way of aesthetic objects," but by the people themselves.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon: Les Presse Du Reel [1998] 2002),14.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, eds, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (Washington D.C: Regnery Publishing Inc [1867] 2009.)

<sup>3</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 42.

## ***Relational Aesthetics and Performance Art: Hierarchy***

The relationship between the object of art and its 'beholder' is something debated throughout many art theories, but the physical locality of an artworks is telling. Particularly noticeable in the era of the 'white cube', the object of art is often cordoned off from the public with alarmed ropes, placed just above eye level to create a sense of superiority. Of course, the imagined object here evokes ideas of traditional forms of art, such as paintings on a wall, sculptures on a plinth, as opposed to what is a growing medium of conceptual physicality. According to Brian Hand in the IMMA essay 'WHAT IS Participatory and Relational Art?', "new forms of practice were developed" in and around the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, by such movements as Conceptual Art, Fluxus and Situationists, "who proactively sought out new artistic mediums to shape mutual exchange through open and inclusive practices . These new forms of practice appropriated non-hierarchical social forms."<sup>4</sup> Thus it could be said that with the development of these mediums came a decrease in the hierarchy between artist and public. Though these "new mediums" were being developed some 30 years before *Relational Aesthetics*' publication, Bourriaud concurs, believing that "the public is being taken into account more and more" in modern artworks, no longer abstract pieces evading those outside the gallery space.<sup>5</sup> It could be argued, therefore, that Performance Art set a precedent for this consideration of the public. The Fluxus Movement believed in art as a "time based experience employing performance."<sup>6</sup> Bourriaud references Phillippe Parreno, who described his work as "occupying 2 hours of time rather than square meters of space."<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud sites Marcel Duchamp's 1954 lecture on "the creative process" when exploring the idea that "the beholder is the joint creator of the work", creating a rapport between artist and audience, no longer as a dichotomy within which one has dominance, but as co-creators.<sup>8</sup> Marina Abramovic, who is said to have been influenced by the Fluxus movement (in particular Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*) is a paramount example of the dissolving of hierarchy within Performance Art, the public taking the artwork, and very much the artists life, within their hands.<sup>9</sup> In her 1974 work *Rhythm 0*, Abramovic gives the audience the power to use an array of objects against her, such as flowers as depicted in Figure 1, but most notably a gun and knife.<sup>10</sup> The performance is the epitome of both time based, endurance and non-hierarchical art. Hierarchy could be said to be defined by control, the artist having agency over their audience by means of the work. During his 'L'exposition du vide' Yves Klein "tried to control every aspect of the routine", creating dominance in stark contrast with Abramovic's rejection of control.<sup>11</sup> It could be argued, however, that it is impossible to truly dissolve this hierarchy. While *Rhythm 0* put the 'control' into the public's hands, the artist still "put the objects on the table very carefully chosen", invited the audience and "put herself completely in the hands of her audience", thus creating the parameters for her own autonomy, even while depriving herself of it.<sup>12</sup> This is furthered by the instructions that accompanied the piece, claiming "during this period I take full responsibility."<sup>13</sup> *Relational Aesthetics* would have us believe that "when an artist shows us something he uses a transitive ethic which places his work between the "look-at-me" and the "look-at-that", but when the "me" is the "that", the dominance of the artist is perhaps even more explicitly exposed.<sup>14</sup> It is, however, important to note that if "the public is being taken into account

<sup>4</sup> Brian Hand, *WHAT IS Participatory and Relational Art?*, (Ireland: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 05.

<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 61

<sup>6</sup> Brian Hand, *WHAT IS Participatory and Relational Art?*, (Ireland: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 06

<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 32

<sup>8</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 99

<sup>9</sup> Julia Bryan- Wilson, *Remembering Yoko Ono's Cut Piece*, Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 26 Issue 1, p99-123, 2003

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Wood, "Marina Abramovic- Rhythm 0- 1974", TATE, March 2010

<sup>11</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 37

<sup>12</sup> Marina Abramovic, interview with Glen Lowry, Museum of Modern Art

<sup>13</sup> Wood, "Marina Abramovic- Rhythm 0- 1974"

<sup>14</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 23

more and more” as Bourriaud suggests, Performance Art remains a catalyst.<sup>15</sup>



*Figure 1, Marina Abramovic, Rhythm 0, 1974, Performance  
(documented by photograph), frame (photograph): 98.1 x 100.7 x 2.5  
cm); frame (text): (25.9 x 18.3 x 2.5 cm), Solomon R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York*

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<sup>15</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 61

## ***Relational Aesthetics and Performance Art: Objects***

Though Performance Art is first and foremost an art form that rejects the commodification of objects, the piece itself sometimes involves the use of objects. Perhaps the most intrinsic use of objects within a performance piece is the aforementioned performance *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramovic. Seventy two objects were used by the audience on/against the artist, including a gun, knives, lipstick and flowers.

<sup>16</sup> Many of the objects used were already within themselves commodities. However, Abramovic stressed “I am the object”, denying the autonomy both of the props and herself, the objects merely being tools for her own objectification. <sup>17</sup> In 1975, Carolee Schneemann first performed her preeminent *Interior Scroll*, a performance piece within which the artist retrieves a scroll from her vagina, reading aloud the contents, taken from one of the artist’s own films ‘Kitch’s Last Meal.’<sup>18</sup> While the ‘object’ (the scroll) here was a central focus of the piece, it was Schneemann’s use of her body in connection to the object, and the words upon the scroll, that were important, this being evident in the way the piece has been documented; in prints Schneemann is in central view and the words of the scroll peripheral, as seen in Figure 2. Objects, when intertwined with the human body, create a symbiosis between performance and commodification; now the objects used in these performances could be extracted and commodified, or at least fetishized, for the public to consume. However, as in the cases explored so far, it is evident these objects are just a means for the performance to be done, to create human relations, thus supporting Bourriaud’s theory whereby both the object and the performance are just vessels for social engagement. This is particularly so in VALIE EXPORT’s *Tap and Touch Cinema*, where the object is a literal gateway to the performance. In this 1968 work, EXPORT creates ‘human relations’ by inviting the public to feel her body through a box, “challenging the public to engage with a real woman instead of with images on a screen.”

<sup>19</sup> Shown in Figure 3, the “mini- movie theatre (plastic or metal box with curtains)” was a means to create “woman’s first step from object to subject.” <sup>20</sup> Thus, according to EXPORT, the object used in her work was not the object of the artwork, but rather a means to reversing her own objectification. Ironically, this is in some ways the antithesis of Marina Abramovic’s exclamation that she herself was ‘the object’, and yet both pieces are working towards liberation of women as objects by using objects. The difficulty thus arises, however, that if Performance Art is to be used as an example of diverging from the material into the ephemeral, how should these objects be viewed? *Relational Aesthetics*’ theories often rely on the use of objects within art, Bourriaud claiming that “in the worlds constructed by these artists... objects are an intrinsic part of the language, with both regarded as vehicles of relations to the other.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, if these objects are merely agents in creating these “relations”, then they are really not objects at all, but physical expressions of social exchange, and thus not commodifiable. The lack of significance placed on these objects in the documentation of these works is too significant; while they have been documented and the space for these to be fetishized is available, there is not a lot of actual evidence of this occurring. Hence, the artwork remains a performance, the objects not defining the concept, but perhaps lending themselves even more to Bourriaud’s theory as “spreading out from its material form.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Wood, “Marina Abramovic- Rhythm 0- 1974”

<sup>17</sup> Wood, “Marina Abramovic- Rhythm 0- 1974”

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Manchester, “Carolee Schneemann- Interior Scroll- 1975”, TATE, November 2003

<sup>19</sup> “VALIE EXPORT, TAPP und TASTKINO (TAP and TOUCH CINEMA) 1968/1989”, Museum of Modern Art

<sup>20</sup> Roswitha Mueller, *VALIE EXPORT: Fragments of the Imagination*, (Indiana UP, 1994), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 47

<sup>22</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 20



Figure 3 Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975, Performance (documented by photograph), Image: 905 x 1830 mm, Frame: 1015 x 1956 x 60mm, Tate



Figure 2, VALIE EXPORT, *Tap and Touch Cinema*, 1968, Video, MoMA

## ***Relational Aesthetics and Performance Art: Documentation***

While a performance is an artwork in and of itself, the time based as opposed to physical nature of the pieces mean that the works are, often purposefully, ephemeral. Due to the arguably intrinsic nature of modern art within gallery spaces, performance pieces are often documented by film, photography and text, the transient adapting to commodification. Bourriaud addresses this dichotomy, saying that traditionally “an artwork can be seen at any time” (gallery opening times permitting) and that the “non-availability” of contemporary art offers a divergence from this tradition, due to its being “viewable only at a specific time.”<sup>23</sup> While the examples we have explored before, *Interior Scroll*, *Rhythm 0* and *Tap and Touch Cinema* have been documented, and this documentation, such as prints and video, live on to supplement the work itself, many works that could be described as performance pieces are actually defined by their documentation. An example of this could be Gillian Wearing’s 1994 *Dancing in Peckham*, a piece narrowly predating *Relational Aesthetics* publication, but that arguably has the most explicit impact.<sup>24</sup> Despite the name suggesting that the focal point of the piece is her ‘performance’ (dancing in a shopping centre for twenty-five minutes, pictured in Figure 4) and that the means of documentation is secondary, the piece is often defined by its medium as a ‘video.’<sup>25</sup> Though this may seem like semantics, the idea that the use of video has outweighed the event of going into the public and using your body to convey a message is significant. The concept of the piece arose when Wearing “had seen a woman dancing... at the Royal Festival Hall and, unable to capture the moment, decided to recreate it.”<sup>26</sup> To me this concept of “capturing the moment” is intrinsic in the commodification of Performance Art through documentation, the idea that for a performance piece to be legitimate it must be documented and consumable in the future. Bourriaud summarises the intention of Performance Art by saying that “the artwork is no longer presented` to be consumed... rather, it elapses within factual time.”<sup>27</sup> For me, the performative element of *Dancing in Peckham* is the art-work, Wearing’s initiative to perform in public, using her body rather than an object to convey a moment lost in time being paramount in the conceptual basis of the piece, and so the use of video as the sole medium seems inconsequential. This idea is backed up by Bourriaud’s belief that “the manoeuvrability of video also means that it can be used as a reified replacement for presence.”<sup>28</sup> While being performed in public clearly serves the purpose of linking the piece to its context, and a public performance often has to be documented if it is intended to eventually be within the gallery space, it is evident that the physicality of the video has become more significant than that moment in time and the authenticity of performance. I find a contradiction in Bourriaud’s writing, however, while he talks about Gillian Wearing having “a preference for video recording” and yet saying that the group of artists who have this preference “are still not “video artists”.”<sup>29</sup> Further still, moments later, Bourriaud continues to claim that “none of these artists has a preference for “performances”” either.<sup>30</sup> While he believes that it is “quite normal, today, that a...performance should end up becoming documentation on video tape” he also believes that “once the performance is over, all that remains is documentation that should not be confused with the work itself.”<sup>31</sup><sup>32</sup> Placing the means of documentation above the artists experience is surely working against the ideas within *Relational Aesthetics*, and thus refining Wearing’s and many others works to their simplest form, a human performance, will lend itself to creating social connections.

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<sup>23</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 29

<sup>24</sup> “Gillian Wearing- Dancing in Peckham- 1994.” South London Gallery Website

<sup>25</sup> “Gillian Wearing- Dancing in Peckham- 1994.” South London Gallery Website

<sup>26</sup> “Dancing in Peckham.” Southampton City Art Gallery Website

<sup>27</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 29

<sup>28</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 75

<sup>29</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 46

<sup>30</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 27

<sup>31</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 76

<sup>32</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 29



*Figure 4, Gillian Wearing, Dancing in Peckham, 1994, Video, South London Gallery*



### ***Relational Aesthetics* and Performance Art: Commodification**

As mentioned before, Marina Abramovic believed that in her performance she was “the object”, in a sense objectifying her own body in the name of art.<sup>33</sup> Though in my previous arguments I have explored the ideas around use of the human body as opposed to objects referencing Marxist ideas, one of the intrinsic beliefs Marx had was that under capitalism, humans become objects. In his *Critique of Relational Aesthetics*, Stewart Martin summarises the “inversion” in which “persons appear as things and things as persons.”<sup>34</sup> Art, despite its moments of resistance, has been established as a commodity, Bourriaud attesting to this by saying that art is “a human activity based on commerce... its sole function is to be exposed to this commerce.”<sup>35</sup> Whether the concept of commerce considered here is the literal definition as economic trade or a more socialised idea within which services are exchanged, Bourriaud is still conveying the notion that an artwork’s exchange value is an inherent part of the art world. This leads to what Marx calls the ‘Commodity Fetishism’ within which undue importance is placed on objects unnecessary to our survival and, in turn, such important things as basic human necessities are undervalued, as well as humans themselves.<sup>36</sup> Under capitalism, the labour work force has also turned humans themselves into commodities. Martin describes the relationship between this and art by describing Italian Performance Artist Vanessa Beecroft’s body of work as “a mass ornament of readily commodifiable bodies.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, Performance Art does not diverge far from commodification, even when objects are not being used; a group of what was previously ‘non commodifiable people’ becomes a workforce. This is furthered by the example of Santiago Sierra’s *Eight people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes*, which, as the name would suggest, explores the relationship surrounding what people are willing to do for money, exposing capitalism’s disregard for human autonomy, and how much the sacrifice of this autonomy costs (in this case, minimum wage).<sup>38</sup> In a society where objects are often given superiority over humans, and humans are treated merely as a means to achieve these objects, defining Performance Art as anti-commodification is perhaps naïve. It is important to note, however, that *Relational Aesthetics* is not safe from this critique. The aforementioned *Critique of Relational Aesthetics* attests to the fact that Bourriaud did not address this situation either, and as such Performance Art is still a good example of *Relational Aesthetics*, both in its positives and its downfalls. While Martin gives credit to Bourriaud, saying he does “acknowledge the affinity of ‘commerce’ of art with the ‘commerce’ of exchange value”, he contends that “Bourriaud partakes of a common form of political fetishism which thinks that the eradication of the ‘objectivity’ of the commodity eradicates capitalist exchange.”<sup>39</sup><sup>40</sup> Getting rid of the object, as in many cases of Performance Art, or, as in the case of *Relational Aesthetics*, releasing the object of its commodification, is not enough to truly abstract an art work from its exchange-value; before we liberate art from commodification, perhaps we first must liberate ourselves.

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<sup>33</sup> Wood, “Marina Abramovic- Rhythm 0- 1974”

<sup>34</sup> Stewart Martin, *Critique of Relational Aesthetics*, Third Text, 21:4 (2007): 372

<sup>35</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 18

<sup>36</sup> Marx and Engels, eds, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof”

<sup>37</sup> Martin, “Critique of Relational Aesthetics”, 380

<sup>38</sup> Martin, “Critique of Relational Aesthetics”, 381

<sup>39</sup> Martin, “Critique of Relational Aesthetics”, 376

<sup>40</sup> Martin, “Critique of Relational Aesthetics”, 378

## Conclusion

As I am currently developing my own practice, moving towards performance as a medium, I have become aware that I feel uncomfortable being seen as the 'object' of my art. Creating 'social exchanges' and 'human relations' is something I consider while developing a piece of work, and thus *Relational Aesthetics* is a logical theory to explore. However, while exploring the theories within *Relational Aesthetics* was intended to liberate this idea of objects being intrinsic to art work, and thus using my body alone was the best way to enact this liberation, I have in reality just become more aware of my place within the regime of capitalism as a commodity. Considering examples of Performance Artists from the 1960s and 70s, being faced with the idea that I must 'become an object' (Abramovic) in order to transition myself from an 'object to subject' (EXPORT) is daunting, especially considering that I am not the only force in my objectification, capitalism doing much of the work for me (patriarchal elements not even yet to be considered.) I can, however, surmise that, for my own work at least, Performance Art remains the most logical. A dominance held by one human over another is obsolete if the intention is to create mutual social exchange. Objects used in performance remain vessels for social change, my body becoming one of these vessels. The art of using one's own body to convey a human experience is unchallengeable. And finally, while humans may be commodities under capitalism, it is humans that will 'perform' their liberation from these bindings.

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