

# Being Situated in Recent Art: From the “Extended Situation” to “Relational Aesthetics”

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*In contemporary art, the term “relational aesthetics” emerged a decade ago as a label for emerging art practices that defied conventional categories. Coined by critic Nicholas Bourriaud, the term describes projects by artists such as Pierre Huyghe, which involve examinations and representations of social systems and contexts, and in which audience participation is a critical component. The roots of this approach can be traced to the Minimalism of the 1960s and the phenomenological basis of sculpture by Robert Morris and Richard Serra, which opened up possibilities for later artists to construct more extended situations involving memory, time, experience, and the contingency of context. This paper proposes to examine art from the 1960s to the present and trace the developing theory and primacy of audience situations in contemporary art.*

With the 1998 publication of Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, a working term was finally coined to describe the work of a host of contemporary artists who seemed to defy even the most elastic of standard art labels. The artists Bourriaud considers in his book do not make discrete objects of art; nor does their art respect the conventions and limits even of more “progressive” art forms such as film and video, performance, and installation art. Instead, artists such as Rirkrit Tirivanija, Sophie Calle, and Pierre Huyghe operate loosely within the institutional discourse of art while engaging in ongoing examinations of broad social systems. Most of their artworks—perhaps “projects” is a better word—tend toward decenteredness; they may involve stagings and stages, and offer the audience multiple entry points and opportunities for engagement. Indeed, these projects do away completely with the idea of the passive viewer, and the production of the work’s meaning is actually made contingent upon the audience’s engagement with, experience of, or situation within the project. Bourriaud’s analysis is heavily informed by poststructuralist theory and the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In this paper, I propose to examine other theoretical precedents for “relational aesthetics,” particularly Minimalist theory of the 1960s, to trace the developing theory and primacy of audience situation and experience in contemporary art.

In the 1960s, sculptors including Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Richard Serra merged on the scene and posed a challenge to critics and audiences who sought to describe and understand their works. These

artists used industrial materials, repetitive and non-representational forms, and rejected pedestals and other framing devices in favor of placing sculpture directly on the floors, walls, and even ceilings. Due to its mute, geometric quality, the work was variously labeled “minimal art,” “ABC art,” and “literal” or “primary” art. While Morris’ and Serra’s works in particular were formally connected by their reductivist aesthetics and non-representational qualities, their most significant common achievement was the degree to which their works proposed radically new relations to their sites of exhibition and to the viewers who encountered them.

In the early 1960s, Robert Morris produced Minimalist objects that today serve as the paradigm for these radically revised relations. His sculptural output in this period consisted of geometric constructions of wood or fiberglass, painted in neutral colors to detach them from material or narrative associations. One photograph of Morris’ 1964 exhibition at the Green Gallery in New York has become iconic. It depicts a long beam-shaped form arranged on the floor, an L-shaped rectangular structure jutting out from the wall and joining the floor, a pyramidal form ensconced neatly in the gallery’s corner, a rectangular beam bridging another corner, and a thick, rectangular plane suspended from the ceiling. Morris’ own writing was among the first to consider this “new sculpture” in light of phenomenology and the moving body of the viewer. His “Notes on Sculpture,” published in the February and October, 1966 issues of *Artforum*, distinguished the concerns of the “new sculpture” from those of painting, largely on the basis of their ontological differences: the flat surface and frame of paintings suggests the space of narrative and illusion, while the new sculpture easily dispenses with such suggestions and focuses on its own inherent terms: “The sculptural facts of space, light, and materials [that] have always functioned concretely and literally.”<sup>1</sup>

While Morris’ focus on the “literal” characteristics of the medium may evoke the Modernist theory of Clement Greenberg, the resemblance is purely superficial, as we shall see. In fact, it is another aspect of Morris’ approach to sculpture that puts him squarely at odds with Greenberg and his critical heir, Michael Fried—namely, Morris’ acknowledgment of the viewer’s position and role within a sculptural context. In “Notes on Sculpture,” Morris refers to a “public mode” of the new sculpture and the “extended situation” it creates, which includes not only the sculptural objects, but the body of the viewer and the space of exhibition: “The better new work takes relationships out of the work and *makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field*

*of vision.* The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic... One is more aware than before that *he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.*"<sup>2</sup> Morris' ideas forge clear links to phenomenology, and critics since the 1960s have liberally employed Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in their analysis of Morris' Minimalist.

Morris' concept of the "extended situation" of sculpture and its basis in time and experience was quite effectively illustrated by an anecdote told by fellow sculptor Tony Smith in a 1966 interview. Though this anecdote is particularly well known among art historians and contemporary artists, it seems worthwhile to quote Smith directly at length for the purposes of this discussion:

When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the fifties, someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first, I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art.

The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.<sup>3</sup>

Significant here is Smith's description of the nighttime ride as a process, a movement through space and time, and an experience that obviates and transgresses the conventional delimiters of art—specifically, the frame. The frame freezes and idealizes time in a work of art, while an art rooted in experience is inextricably bound up with time, unfolding, changing, and moving.

This distinction between ideal time and real time is also the basis for critic Michael Fried's anti-Minimalist polemic, "Art and Objecthood," published in 1967 as a direct response to Robert Morris' 1966 "Notes on Sculpture."<sup>4</sup> In Fried's analysis, Minimalist sculpture (he terms it "literalist art") aspired to theatricality, a condition that is by definition not art. Theater is a time-based performance, and the viewer's relationship to it is likewise time-based, rooted in real time and coterminous with the experience of everyday life. Art, on the other hand, is removed from real time, inhabiting an ideal space and stopped time that radically distinguishes it from "everyday life."

This polemical exchange between Morris and Fried has achieved iconic status in art history, illustrating idealist Modernism's opposition against a model of art that actively engages the viewer, forging connections based in real time, real experience, and the real conditions of context. Nowhere is the problematic of this kind of sculpture born out more vividly than in the work of sculptor Richard Serra.<sup>5</sup> In a series of large-scale urban sculptures of the 1970s and 1980s made of slabs of hot-rolled, rusting, Cor-ten steel, Serra sought to challenge the aesthetics but also the ideological apparatus underpinning the sites, while engaging viewers directly in a confrontation with the conditions of the urban environments that shape our experience—but are largely beyond our own control. In works such as *Tilted Arc* in lower Manhattan (removed 1989) and *Terminal* in Bochum, Germany, among others, the cold neutrality of the sculptures' enormous slabs draws out the inherent brutality of the architecture that surrounds them. In various ways, the works invite viewers to consider the economic and political forces that construct the instrumental cityscape in which they live, work, and form their conception of reality.

Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*<sup>6</sup> identifies a kind of artistic practice that arose in the 1990s and has roots in the consideration of viewer situation witnessed in Morris' work of the 1960s and Serra's large-scale urban sculptures. Bourriaud's examples, however, bear very little visual connection to the Minimalist sculptural work of Morris and Serra. He focuses primarily on artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Huyghe, and Sophie Calle, whose work tends toward post-studio practice, which is to say that it moves beyond the production of objects and even installations, and might take any number of forms in its focus on social systems and human interaction. Nevertheless, this work directly engages audiences in very complex ways, and even more than Minimalist sculpture, is capable of revealing the ideological structures

undergirding the institutional frameworks within which the audience lives, works, and views art.

Bourriaud defines relational art as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space.”<sup>7</sup> While relational art projects often engage (in order to deconstruct) specific social systems, this is not to imply that these artists operate strictly within the limits of empirical reality. On the contrary, a great many of them, particularly Sophie Calle and Pierre Huyghe, construct and deploy elaborate fictions, and often overlay “real” social systems with those of the artist’s devising. The result can be a blurring of reality and fiction, or the creation of a kind of parallel universe that serves to heighten the audience’s awareness of the contingency of reality. Like an elaboration of Morris’ “public mode” and “extended situations,” these projects mimic systems of social relations, and situate the audience squarely within their systems.

Like Minimalist art, and like the social relations they model themselves after, these projects are necessarily temporal. Bourriaud claims that in relational aesthetics, “[art] is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion.”<sup>8</sup> He emphasizes the essentially interactive and ultimately productive structure of these art engagements: “Because art is made of the same material as the social exchanges, it has a special place in the collective production process. A work of art has a quality that sets it apart from other things produced by human activities... if a work of art is successful, it will invariably set its sights beyond its mere presence in space: it will be open to dialogue, discussion, and that form of inter-human negotiation that Marcel Duchamp called ‘the coefficient of art,’ which is a temporal process, being played out here and now.”<sup>9</sup>

The subject of time as it functions both in relational aesthetics and Minimalism might be illuminated by a brief consideration of Gilles Deleuze’s film theory and his analysis of Henri Bergson, particularly Bergson’s concepts of time, succession, and *durée*. In Ronald Bogue’s fine analysis of Deleuze’s film theory, the author emphasizes the themes of non-hierarchical, indeterminate production and static representation of values that recur in writings by both Deleuze and Bergson. Here we find a direct, if unexpected, connection to Minimalist theory. In his seminal 1964 essay, “Specific Objects,” Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd discusses his use of mathematical means to generate repetitive, anti-hierarchical compositions that bypass conventional narrative and illusion.<sup>10</sup> Judd’s works consist of repeated geometrical metal

forms installed on gallery walls or floors; compositionally, the works consist of nothing more than, as he terms it, “one thing after another.” Likewise, in “Notes on Sculpture,” Robert Morris discusses his predilection for “simpler forms that create strong gestalt sensations.”<sup>11</sup> Richard Serra developed his own sensibility of repetitive, non-hierarchical form in his film “Hand Catching Lead” (1968), which records a disembodied hand attempting to catch lead ingots regularly dropped from above the frame; one ingot falls after another, and either the hand catches and releases, or misses it, over and over and over. The film’s structure involves no hierarchy, denouement, or other kind of specific payoff.

It is useful to employ Bergson’s concept of *durée* to characterize this continuing, anti-hierarchical compositional process. Deleuze describes the *durée* this way: “It is a case of a ‘transition,’ of a ‘change,’ a *becoming*, but it is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself.”<sup>12</sup> Compositionally, Minimalist works share this anti-idealist structure of formation. A description by Bogue of the *durée* is perhaps more illuminating in this context:

*Durée*...should be thought of as a musical melody. Although we tend to spatialize and hence distort melody through the graphic representations of musical scores or the visualization of keys on a piano, melody is actually an indivisible multiplicity changing qualitatively in an ongoing movement. The melody does not so much consist of discrete notes as it passes through the notes, the entire succession of notes forming a single process—a process which, however, is not a simple unity, but an indivisible heterogeneity. *Durée* is in this regard fundamentally *indeterminate*, the future truly open and unforeseeable.<sup>13</sup>

This description may appear to clash with the compositional logic of Minimalist sculpture. After all, nothing appears simpler, more unified, or gestalt-bound than Judd’s repetitive boxes or Morris’ geometric beams. But such an assessment would fail to account for one of Minimalism’s most important characteristics: its contingent status of being. The works simply don’t exist—or don’t exist *qua* sculpture—outside of their context. Rather, the objects in their spatial and institutional context form that extended situation of which the viewer is part. In this sense, Minimalist situations are entirely indeterminate, their meaning “truly open and unforeseeable.”

This is an opportunity also to briefly invoke Bergson’s ideas on matter in relation to Minimalism. Bogue writes, “And as Bergson observes, physics

increasingly shows us that the corpuscular theory of matter is untenable, that there are no irreducible, impenetrable bodies in nature, no ‘things’ in motion.”<sup>14</sup> In consideration of Minimalism, this helps clarify the contingent status of the structures—they exist not as idealized, impenetrable objects, but as part of extended situations that are by nature in flux.

The concept of *durée* can be used to describe the rather banal nature of experience itself. Rather than understanding experience as a process punctuated by quintessential, privileged moments, Deleuze (via Bergson) argues for a much more pedestrian structure of life and growth. Bogue observes: “With the advent of modern science, essential tendencies and privileged moments are abandoned. Galileo studies the fall of an object without respect to any specific moment of its descent. Time consists not of a string of indivisible, quintessential moments, but of a sequence of equidistant, indifferent, and interchangeable instants—*instants quelconques*, as Bergson and Deleuze call them, ‘any-instants-whatever.’”<sup>15</sup> Returning to the work of the Minimalists, there seems no better description of Serra’s monotonous “Hand Catching Lead,” or Judd’s mind-numbingly beautiful galvanized steel repetitions, or the active experience of either.

Repetitive, indeterminate systems form the basis of our experience and our reality; they likewise describe the projects by the artists Bourriaud considers, and the quality of the viewers’ engagement with them. At this point, I will focus on two contemporary artists, Olafur Eliasson and Pierre Huyghe, and a selection of their projects that seem to embody relational aesthetics and that engage and situate viewers.

Olafur Eliasson’s *The Mediated Motion* was a project the Danish artist organized in 2001 for the Kunsthau Bregenz in Germany. *The Mediated Motion* represented more than an exhibition; it was a sustained interaction between the artist, the building, and the viewers. The project might be described as an extended situation, whose limits were extremely porous and which offered up a constantly changing, time-based experience. Indeed, the project’s ontological status, its very beginning and end, were always open to question, as Rudolf Sagmaister claimed in a catalog essay on the work.<sup>16</sup> For Eliasson, an exhibit doesn’t begin on opening day. This particular work began years earlier, in the artist’s initial agreement with the Kunsthau Bregenz and his consideration of the project. Eliasson took the opportunity to address visitors in the invitations to the exhibition—to start the show, so to speak, in their minds, before they “actually” encountered it. Eliasson’s projects are always “site-specific” in the most general sense of being designed for a

particular place. But Eliasson thinks of the design as a dialectical process: “When I work with an object or installation I think about how the object, through its codes and connections in culture, influences the spectator or person engaging with the object. But I think equally much how the person in fact changes the object by the already existing knowledge about and recognizability of the given object—or installation—or situation.”<sup>17</sup> Eliasson’s early invitations effectively broadened the exhibition’s parameters to include the visitors’ anticipation of the experience, before it actually took place.

For the physical exhibition at the Kunsthauus Bregenz, Eliasson used all of the conventional galleries, but also expanded the work into unexpected, non-gallery spaces, such as the foyer and stairwells. In each space, Eliasson created a different environment, a hybrid of the natural and the manmade. Wooden walkways hovered above algae-covered pools of water; suspended bridges carried visitors over foggy, indeterminate depths; near the café, a row of logs sprouting shiitake mushrooms lined the wall. Changing light conditions kept the exhibition spaces in constant visual flux. At every turn, *The Mediated Motion* challenged conventional distinctions—between the natural and the cultural, between inside and outside, between permanence and flux. A visit to the exhibition was a lesson in the ways that context mediates our experience—even as it foregrounded the subjectivity of that experience. And the exhibition’s utter lack of any sense of logic, narrative, or denouement was immediately evocative of the banal *durée* of everyday life, best described by returning to sculptor Donald Judd’s phrase: “one thing after another.”

Outside the Kunsthauus walls, *The Mediated Motion* extended its reach into the urban context in a series of billboards. Each billboard featured a photograph of a wooden walkway winding through a green, lush forest—continuing the exhibition’s theme of mediation and contextual meaning. French artist Pierre Huyghe has also made effective use of the billboard in considerations of urban experience and its structural mediation. In 1995–1996, he produced a series of photographs of people in various urban locations in Europe, enlarged the photographs, and then installed them on billboards *in situ*—that is, on the exact sites where each photograph had been taken. He then produced photographs of people at the billboard sites, adding yet another layer of mediation to the representation of his, and our, encounter with the “original” site. Significantly, the sites themselves are spaces of mediation—a bus terminal; a street running beneath a highway overpass; a construction site—or, in other words, sites of transition rather



than destination. These are places we commonly pass through, but never aim for, on our way somewhere else.

Typical of works that deal in relational aesthetics, Huyghe's billboard pieces offer viewers multiple entry points. It becomes erroneous to question where these works begin and end; rather, they take on various manifestations, and each encounter with the work is as "legitimate" as the next. Viewers of these works might be situated anywhere along their continuum—one viewer may have seen the billboard *in situ*, while another has encountered the photograph of the billboard in a gallery, or catalog, or on the internet. Thus these works extend not only through space but through time, and cannot be limited by any kind of structural frame, whether literal or institutional.

For the 2003 film project *Streamside Day Follies*, Huyghe took a different approach that nonetheless involved the likewise offers multiple points at which viewers may encounter the work. For *Streamside Day Follies*, Huyghe mixed reality and fiction, taking a new suburban subdivision located in the Hudson Valley, New York, and parlaying it into a metaphor for the founding of civilization itself.

The nexus of the project involved the staging of a "founders day" celebration at the newly constructed subdivision of Streamside Knolls in Fishkill, New York. In cooperation with New York's Dia Art Foundation, Huyghe distributed a press release and invitation to the event, billed the *Streamside Day Celebration*. The invitation is remarkable for its straightforward character and descriptive detail, which never give up the fictional status of the project's basis:

A parade, animal costumes, music, and a barbeque dinner with hot dogs and hamburgers, corn on the cob, pumpkin pies, ice cream, lemonade, and green cotton candy are some of the highlights of this celebration at Streamside Knolls, a new residential development. *Streamside Day Celebration* is free and open to the public.

*Streamside Day Celebration* will begin with the planting of a tree. Children will be offered animal costumes to wear for the event. At 3:30 pm, a parade with a fire engine, police car, mail truck, school bus, two pick-up truck floats, and an ice-cream truck will travel though Streamside Knolls. People can enjoy an ice cream while listening to welcoming remarks. Around 5:30 pm dinner will be served, followed by a Streamside Day Cake. The public is welcome to take pictures throughout the event.<sup>18</sup>

Huyghe filmed participants in animal costumes enjoying music and food during the celebration. To this footage, he added film of two small children in an overgrown forest setting and images of a wayward fawn negotiating her way among freshly laid streets and innocuous suburban architecture. The final film is a miniature epic that charts the rise of civilization, beginning with the children in a prelapsarian paradise, and ending with the triumph of the subdivision and the subjugation of nature.

When exhibited, *Streamside Day Follies* involves a series of movable screens, which converge before viewers in a gallery and on which the film and still photographs are projected. At the conclusion of the projection, the movable screens disperse, taking their place at the periphery of the gallery. Thus, the physical conditions of viewing are constructed and dismantled at every showing, and the audience is situated squarely in the center of this drama of construction and deconstruction that parallels the subject of the film. The exhibition machinations also neatly deconstruct the “nature” of film, revealing its constructed character and the modes of mediation through which it purports to deliver “reality” to its audience.

With this project and others, Huyghe offers up the themes of situation and the primacy of experience in art. He also affords opportunities for viewers to critically examine their own situational relationships—to other viewers, to the art work, and to society and history in the broadest terms. Huyghe’s approach owes much to the “extended situations” proposed by Minimalist artists of the 1960s, as do the other various other artists discussed by Bourriaud under the rubric of “relational aesthetics.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture.” Reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1968. New York: E.P. Dutton Co., Inc., pp. 222-235.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, in Battcock, 231-232; italics mine.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Smith, in Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., “Talking with Tony Smith,” in Battcock, p. 386.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in Battcock, pp. 116-147.

<sup>5</sup> I am limiting my discussion to Serra’s public works from the 1970s and 1980s. Since that time, Serra’s works have changed markedly. The 1990s and 2000s have seen Serra working in friendlier sites for his sculptures, primarily high profile museums and art foundations, and the critical reception has shifted from observations about confrontation and control, to more congenial and conventional

discussions of viewer engagement with space.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronze Qoods, with the participation of Mathieu Copeland. France: les presses du reel, 1998 [English edition 2002].

<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," 1964. Reprinted in Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: Early Works 1955-68* (exhibition catalog). New York: D.A.P., 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, in Battcock, p. 226.

<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Zone Books, 1988, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Sagmeister, "The mediated motion': Olafur Eliasson at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz." In Olafur Eliasson and Günther Vogt, *The Mediated Motion*. Walther König, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Olafur Eliasson, "Excerpt from the diary talk." In *ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>18</sup> The press release and description of Huyghe's project are reproduced at <http://www.diabeacon.org/dia/press/huyghe.html>.