

# The Radicant

*Ilse van Rijn*

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**Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, New York, Sternberg Press, 2009, ISBN 9781933128429, 192 pp.**

More than ten years after the publication of his much discussed book *Esthétique relationnelle* (1998), the English translation of which, *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), appeared at about the same time as his subsequent essay, *Postproduction* (2001), Nicolas Bourriaud has now published *The Radicant*. The book was written between 2005 and 2007 in the various cities he was living in: Paris, Venice, Kiev, Madrid, Havana, New York, Moscow, Turin and finally London. Bourriaud recently organized the Tate Triennial in London (3 February – 26 April 2009), which he christened 'Altermodern'. As we can in the meantime expect from Bourriaud, this title, like that of the present book, is more than just the name of a project. Once again, the curator who writes as well as travels is using his collaboration with artists to descry a phenomenon that needs to be named and elevated to a new category. The theory of 'relational aesthetics' was developed in connection with 'Traffic', the exhibition which he organized in 1996 in CapcMusée d'art contemporaine in Bordeaux. Now, too, we see theory taking shape in close dialogue with practice. The current juncture can be typified as 'altermodern', says Bourriaud – our way of thinking and living displays 'radicant' patterns. In *The Radicant*, Bourriaud takes a closer look at these two, interrelated concepts.

The book consists of three parts: a theoretical account of 'Altermodernity', an aesthetic reflection based on works of art under the heading 'Radicant Aesthetics' and an elaboration of his 'radicant ideas' relating to cultural production and contemporary means of consumption and use, this chapter being called 'Treatise on Navigation'.

Bourriaud states the importance of reconsidering modernity. Twentieth century modernism was dominated by radical movements in which artists returned time and time again to the roots of art or of society, in an attempt to purify an origin or rediscover essences. Bourriaud, however, is now waging that the modernity of our century will be discovered in contrast to such radicalism, yet without any attempt at whitewashing a standardization of the imagination set in motion by globalization. Today's makers are establishing the basis for this art of the future, which he calls 'radicant'. 'Radicant' is a botanical term for organisms whose roots form new roots while growing. It will not escape most people's notice that this sprouting root has a lot in common with that other metaphor derived from botany, the rhizome. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari's fluid, non-hierarchical structure places the subject between brackets already from the outset, Bourriaud maintains that with the radicant the subject is implicit. The radicant assumes the form of a path or a trajectory; the radicant subject carries his roots along with him on his travels and questions them. With the result that: 'To be radicant means setting one's roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one's identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviours, exchanging rather than imposing.' In response to this radicant art, Bourriaud calls today's modernity a global equivalent of and an alternative to the historical period – an 'altermodernity'.

'Altermodernity' distances itself from the postmodern reaction to modernism which, says Bourriaud, has bred standardization. While postmodern multiculturalism did little more than stimulate cultural anchoring and ethnic enrootedness through promoting a respectful inclination towards 'the other', Bourriaud concludes that no 'others' exist today. There are only other places ('elsewheres'). This statement, which represents an important argument within Bourriaud's general theory, is partly based on the writings of Victor Segalen, the traveller and Symbolist-inspired poet who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, expressed his ideas about man's relationship to his environment in notes that were later published under the title *Essay on Exotism: An Aesthetics of Diversity*. Translated into the present time, 'neutral areas', concretized in airports and train stations, the result of globalization, can be regarded as temporary, precarious abodes, artificially created through a cultural mix that generates singularity. In these spaces, unmarked by a single, overpowering past ('smooth spaces'), artists carve a way of their own through a multiplicity of signs. Bourriaud calls them 'semionauts'. For him, the immigrant, the exile, the tourist and the 'urban wanderer' are the dominant figures within this contemporary culture. The question they pose is no longer: Where do you come from?, but: Where are you going to? There is room in these neutral spaces for discussions, dialogues and negotiations. What prevails here is an aesthetics of diversity.

The work of art is consistent with this dynamic, explains Bourriaud. It is 'time-specific', translating the condition of the one location into the other. In this way, translation counts as an important new artistic means. The altermodern work of art is characterized by its precarious status, its portability and its experimental form, as opposed to the modernistic constancy of permanent installations that were devised in terms of progress and constructive development.

Thomas Hirschhorn's temporary Monuments (to Deleuze and Spinoza, among others) can thus be regarded as radicant and altermodern. And, according to Bourriaud, the movement of the knights in Gabriel Orozco's *Knights Running Endlessly* (1995) is typical of a radicant aesthetics. In support of his ideas, works regularly crop up in *The Radicant* by artists familiar to us from his *Esthétique relationnelle and Postproduction*, such as Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick. But mention is also made of lesser-known artists whose works were included in 'Altermodern': Loris Gréaud and Spartacus Chetwynd, Seth Price, Subodh Gupta and Pascale Marthine Tayou. The question inevitably arises as to whether in *The Radicant* Bourriaud is once again preaching to the

converted, a reproach that was levelled against him with regard to *Esthétique relationnelle*.

Clearly, a certain degree of distance is lacking in *The Radicant*. Sometimes this is less problematic than on other occasions. Bourriaud virtually identifies with Victor Segalen. Like Bourriaud himself, 'Segalen travels; he reports from the field'. The reference to this early theorist is inspiring, and adds value to *The Radicant*. But the lack of distance also typifies his theoretical 'conclusions'. Terms like 'radicant' and 'altermodern' seem no more than tendentious, temporary labels, name tags on a suitcase, while the intrinsic, theoretically sounded out basis for these fails to extend beyond its own borders. Bourriaud labelled the work of Philippe Parreno in the 1990s as a typical form of relational aesthetics, describes it a bit later as an example of postproduction, and now presents it as the form of radicant art showing us the way to an altermodern period. To posit such rapidly changing descriptions as conceptual categories does not help the credibility of Nicolas Bourriaud's theoretical 'reflections'. At most they can be seen as polemical stands.

**Ilse van Rijn** is a critic and art historian. She is working on her doctoral research, studying 'autonomously produced artists' writings: their operative force, status and role,' collaboratively supported by the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, the Jan van Eyck Academy and the University of Amsterdam / ASCA. She was previously a researcher and adviser at the Jan van Eyck Academy. Currently, she teaches in the Rietveld department of 'image & language.'

## Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse, Philosophy

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