Precarious Constructions
Answer to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics

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In the following essay, Nicolas Bourriaud reacts to Jacques Rancière's claim that his 'esthétique relationelle' is little more than a moral revival in the arts. According to Bourriaud, the significance of the political programme of contemporary art is its recognition of the precarious condition of the world. He elaborates this theme in his recently published book *The Radicant*. [1]

In a recent book, Jacques Rancière questioned 'the pedagogical model for the effectiveness of art', seeing in today's most socially engaged works of art the validation of a model for relations between art and the political that has been outdated for 200 years. We agree with him that the political effectiveness of art 'does not reside in transmitting messages', but 'in the first place consists of dispositions of bodies, the partitioning of singular spaces and times that define ways of being together or apart, in front or at the centre of, within or without, nearby or far away'. [2] However, it is in fact the approach to this formal problem that is shared by the artists who are discussed in my essay 'Relational Aesthetics', which Rancière misunderstands, seeing it 'as arrangements of art [that] immediately present themselves as social relations'. [3] We are apparently confronted here with an optical deformation that is quite common among contemporary philosophers, who do not recognize the concepts that art reveals through its visual reality because they make the wrong connection between the library from which they observe the world and the artists' studios. So let's put things straight: these repartitionings of time-space not only constitute the link between for example Pierre Huyghe and Rirkrit Tiravanija, which is after all clearly explained in the book, but in fact also delineate the actual locus where the relations between art and politics are redistributed. On the condition, however, in accordance with Rancière, that their areas of application are not confused with each other. At no time are the artistic positions analysed in 'Relational Aesthetics' described as social relations that are not mediatised by forms, nor do any of them answer to this description, although social relations can constitute the living material for some of the practices in question.

It seems that the debates that have been raised by the 'relational' in art since the publication of the book essentially revolve around the respective positions of ethics, the political and aesthetics in the artistic practices that are described. These practices have been suspected of putting morals above form, generating a purely 'social' or even 'Christian' or 'compassionate' art; they have been accused of proposing an angelic ethical model, masking the existing conflicts in society. This misunderstanding was all the more perplexing because the book discusses the emergence of a new state of the form (or new 'formations', if we insist on the dynamic character of the elements in question, which actually include precisely 'the disposition of bodies' within their field of definition) and hardly ventures into the domain of ethics, which is considered as a kaleidoscopic backdrop reserved for the interpersonal dimension that connects the viewer to the work he encounters. In short, it isn't the ethical dimension of the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija or Liam Gillick that is put forward in 'Relational Aesthetics', but their capacity to invent innovative

ways of exhibiting on an interpersonal level. Besides, the works of the artists who are discussed in my essay display very heterogenic relations with the spheres of politics and ethics and do not lead to a global theory. Which ethics do Vanessa Beecroft and Christine Hill have in common? What is their shared relation to politics?

The problem primarily resides in the web of relations between words and images. Rancière's description of the work of Tiravanija overlooks its formal dimension from the start: its arrangement, he writes, 'presents the visitors of an exhibition with a camping-gas stove, a water cooker and packets of dried soup, intended to involve them in action, dialogue and collective discussion . . .' [4] This does not really take into account the concrete reality of the work: what about the colours, the disposition of elements in space, the dialogue with the exhibition space, the formal structure of the installation, the protocol for its use? In fact, Tiravanija's exhibitions have never limited themselves to such a summary arrangement as that which is 'described' by Rancière, who here seems to sketch a general, vague outline of a work rather than giving an exact idea of what it is actually like. You might just as well say that Vermeer is a painter who depicts domestic interiors in which women perform trivial activities, or reduce Joseph Beuys to a shamanic figure who speaks with animals. Here the stalemate finds its origin in formal models that underlie artistic arrangements, in the importance of architectural structures, in philosophical references, and mostly in the issue of the use of forms which lies at the heart of Tiravanija's practice. Yet, by inducing the idea that those structures are meant for 'action, dialogue, or collective discussion', Rancière implicitly gives the work of the artist a political dimension. Tiravanija does not construct meeting rooms, and for him the function of usability represents a backdrop that is more formalized and abstract than Rancière might think.

Thus, the question is asked today in its full amplitude: Can we derive an ethics from contemporary art? Considering the heterogeneous character of artistic production and the large variety of theoretical sources on which the artists can draw, this demand may seem totally absurd. Furthermore, you would be right to ask what would be the 'holder' of that ethical philosophy in art today: The work of art itself? The modalities of its reception? The materials it uses? Its production process? However, certain dominant traits in the contemporary formal landscape, certain invariables in the exploitation and management of signs by artists enable us to outline an answer to this complex question. A fragmentary answer, of course, and just as precarious as the objects to which it is attached: moreover, precariousness constitutes the dominant trait and the 'reality' of these ethics. By placing this word between quotation marks, I am referring to the Lacanian real, that focal point around which all the elements of the visible are organized, that hollow form that can only be apprehended through its anamorphoses or its shadows. On that basis: first, every ethical reflection on contemporary art is inextricably bound with its definition of reality. Second, let us postulate that the real of contemporary art is situated in ***precariousness***, whose different figures interconnect the works of Maurizio Cattelan and Thomas Hirschhorn, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Kelley Walker, Wolfgang Tillmans and Thomas Ruff.

A Precarious World

Zygmunt Bauman defines our period as one of 'liquid modernity', a society of generalized disposability, driven 'by the horror of expiry', where nothing is more decried than 'the steadfastness, stickiness, viscosity of things inanimate and animate alike'.[5] The constellation of the precarious, notably from the point of view of the *renewable*, is the invisible motor of consumer ideology. Placing himself on the level of the collective psyche, Michel Maffesoli describes individual identity as eclectic and diffuse: 'A fragile identity, an identity which is no longer, as was the case during modernity, the only solid foundation of individual and social life.'[6] Here, the observations of the sociologist appear to be in keeping with certain philosophical intuitions about precariousness. In order to produce the philosophy that Marx never had the time to write, Louis Althusser places himself in the 'line of Democritus', who said that the world is made up of a rain of atoms whose deviations produces encounters that are the principle of all reality: in short, capitalism was just a chance encounter between agents that otherwise may have never found themselves in the same space. As for Foucault, he defined the enunciations that make human thought function as events that appear and insert themselves in a given historical field before disappearing just as rapidly as they have arrived, filtered out by a new configuration of knowledge.

Endurance, whether it concerns objects or relations, has become a rare thing. When we look at artistic production today, we see that in the heart of the global economic machine that favours unbridled consumerism and undermines everything that is durable, a culture is developing from the bankruptcy of endurance that is based on that which threatens it most, namely precariousness. My hypothesis is that art not only seems to have found the means to resist this new, instable environment, but has also derived specific means from it. A precarious regime of aesthetics is developing, based on speed, intermittence, blurring and fragility. Today, we need to reconsider culture (and ethics) on the basis of a positive idea of the *transitory*, instead of holding on to the opposition between the ephemeral and the durable and seeing the latter as the touchstone of true art and the former as a sign of barbarism. Hannah Arendt: 'An object is cultural to the extent that it can endure; its durability is the very opposite of functionality, which is the quality which makes it disappear again from the phenomenal world by being used and used up.'[7] In this new configuration, the physical duration of the artwork is dissociated from its duration as information and its conceptual and/or material precariousness is associated with new ethical and aesthetic values that establish a new approach to culture and art.

This precarious state, on which in my view truly innovative relational practices are based, is largely confused with the immaterial or ephemeral character of the artwork. However, the former is a philosophical notion, while the latter are merely formal or even demonstrative properties that only refer to their outward appearance. The precarious represents a fundamental instability, not a longer or shorter material duration: it inscribes itself into the structure of the work itself and reflects a general state of aesthetics.

Precarious Art

Etymologically, the term *precarious* means: 'that which only exists thanks to a reversible authorization.' The *precaria* was the field cultivated for a set period of time, independently of the laws that govern property. An object is said to be precarious if it has no definitive status and an uncertain future or final destiny: it is held in abeyance, waiting, surrounded by irresolution. It occupies a transitory territory. Generally speaking, we could say that contemporary artworks have no absolute rights as to their conceptual status. In the end, the question amounts to an interrogation: what gives you the right to set foot on artistic soil? Do you have the correct papers, the deeds that give you the right to occupy the land? From the perspective of a precarious aesthetic, the question runs differently: what matters is to know whether the object generates activity, communication, thought, what its degree of *productivity* is within the aesthetic sphere. Here agrarian thought (the durable bond with the land) is replaced by concepts of trade (the cross-border encounter between an object and its users). The contemporary artwork does not *rightfully* occupy a position in a field, but presents itself as an object of negotiation, caught up in a cross-border trade which confronts different disciplines, traditions or concepts. It is this ontological precariousness that is the foundation of contemporary aesthetics.

Thus, contemporary art assumes this double status of crossing borders and precariousness, by the undifferentiated use of different 'mediums' – something that Rosalind Krauss, from a very critical perspective, calls the 'postmedia condition' of contemporary art, following in the footsteps of Marcel Broodthaers's fictional museum. We can only acknowledge that the great works of art today present themselves in the form of trajectories or synopses: the works of Pierre Huyghe, for example, each constitute a 'building site' with at its centre tools for production and diffusion that spread their effects in subsequent projects through collaboration with various interlocutors. The functional model for these projects is precarious: like in the film by Jacques Tati, *Jour de fête* (1949), a tent is put in place, disposes its effects, and then withdraws.

Thus, precariousness cannot be reduced to the use of fragile materials or short durations, because it impregnates the whole of artistic production, constituting a substratum of reflection and playing the role of an ideological support for passing forms. In short, precariousness now impregnates the whole of contemporary aesthetics, in its negative as well as its positive versions. This includes managing the duration of the exhibition; the huge installations of Thomas Hirschhorn dedicated to Deleuze and Bataille only last the limited time of an exhibition, and sometimes only 24 hours, as was the case with his homage to Michel Foucault. The work of Tris Vonna-Mitchell is emblematic for this new type of relation with the precarious: based on oral performances of the artist talking about his travels with the support of a complex slideshow, his exhibitions accumulate disparate materials, referring to other, simultaneous or past exhibitions, none of which constitute a real conclusion. The slide and video projectors, photographs and rare objects that constitute them only weave an endlessly flickering circuit of signs in space.

Besides the mode of production itself, we can distinguish three main patterns in precarious aesthetics, namely transcoding, flickering and blurring:

a. Permanent Transcoding: Formal Nomadism

In the works of Kelley Walker, Wade Guyton and Seth Price, forms are displayed in the shape of copies, forever in a transitory state; the images are instable, waiting between two translations, perpetually transcoded. The practice of these three artists dissuades us from giving their works a precise place in the production and processing chain of the image, because the same patterns are repeated with greater or lesser variants in distinct works.

Kelley Walker operates by linking visual objects: he depicts an uprooted reality in works that are only 'freeze frames' of an enunciation in a continuous state of development, constantly incorporating earlier stages of his work. As for Wade Guyton, he leaves it to mechanical reproduction techniques to generate form variables that he introduces in his work.

Taken from magazines, television or Google search, they seem ready to return there, instable, spectral. Every original form is negated, or rather, abolished. Navigating through a network made up of photocopies, prints, screens or photographic reproductions, forms surface as just so many transitory incarnations. The visible appears here as a nomad by definition, a collection of iconographic ghosts; the work of art presents itself in the form of a USB-stick that can be plugged into every support.

b. Flickering: Intermittences

The phosphorescent drawings of Philippe Parreno fade every minute and only become clearly visible again once they have been reloaded by a spotlight; the candelabras of Cerith Wyn Evans deliver messages in Morse code; Maurizio Cattelan develops a strategy of the 'flash', his works are governed by the surprise effect. These are all modes of *flickering*, the specific regime of the visible that is marked by intermittence, the programmed fading of what is presented to our eyes or to our perception. Something manifests itself and then disappears from sight: here the precarious is suggested, inscribed in time as the condition of the work. A work by Philippe Parreno, *Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It's an Artwork and in December It's Christmas (October)* (2008), consisting of a decorated aluminium Christmas tree that has the status of an artwork for eleven months of the year, but changes into a real Christmas tree at the beginning of December, is thus structured by the concept of intermittence. In Carsten Höller's case, the flickering light that is present in a large number of his works makes us question our perception of reality: it functions as a major signal in the grammar of doubt

This art of flickering (as a functioning mode of the artwork) is associated with a vision of a reality that also flickers: the present lags behind itself, as is pointed out by Marcel Duchamp (the *Bride Stripped Bare* described as a 'delay in glass') and later by Jacques Derrida (*Difference* as the gap between being and meaning). As it is delayed, we only perceive its shards, like those supernovas of which our eyes only record the explosion that has taken place millions of years ago – and that is exactly how art functions, as a 'delay' through which we can see the world.

This new distribution between the direct, the deferred and the archive is a seedbed for certain contemporary practices that insist on the unique, singular character of the artwork, on its status as a non-reproducible event. Tino Sehgal's minimalist scenarios, which he has staged with actors, or Trish Donnelly's performances do not generate any visible traces a posteriori. This insistence on the 'here-and-now' quality of the artistic event and the refusal to record it other than as an indirect archival work, represent both a challenge to the art world (whose institutional nature from now is confused with a mighty archival apparatus) and the affirmation of a positive precariousness that consists of an unburdening – in keeping with the famous statement made by Douglas Huebler that the world is already full of objects and that he doesn't wish to add any more.

c. Blurring: The Indiscernible

In a number of photo series, notably in the *jpegs*, Thomas Ruff outlines a typology of blurring: *jpeg bb01 (Bagdad Bombing)* (2004) shows an aerial view of an arid zone dotted with buildings connected by roads. The title indicates that we are dealing with the war in Iraq, and that the irregularities in the terrain are bomb craters. The dimensions of the photo (188 x 311 cm) reveal the pixels that make up the image taken from the Internet, as the title suggests: everything is enunciated, but everything is blurred. In the *Substrat* series, Ruff

blows up the original document to the point of abstraction, while on the other hand, in a collection of photos of pornographic scenes, the original image is only slightly veiled. The aesthetic of the permanent zoom: reality is mediatised by the Internet, then mediatised again by the blow-up. Like with Kelley Walker, the image is presented in an instable, precarious state: it is no longer a matter of framing, but a question of the distance that is taken with regard to the object. The work of Wolfgang Tillmans is also influenced by the issue of focus: *Freischwimmer #82* (2005) is an abstract photo (we will call it that for convenience's sake, because of our doubt about its 'identity'), which at his exhibitions hangs side by side with life-size pictures or close-ups of still lives. What is striking about these few examples is not the nature of the images, but the total equivalence that these artists establish between the different modalities of 'making visible'. The world that they depict is indiscernible and already pixellated from the outset.

In the works of Mike Kelley, blurring is an indication of a displacement of signs: the mise-en-scène of the formless is blurred in works such as *Framed and Frame . . .* (1999): the colours are applied on the sculpture (with paint from a spray can) so that they do not coincide with the form that they cover. There is an underlying project: as Kelley explains: 'The meaning is confused spatiality, framed.' The meaning is blurred because it results from a displacement.

Ethics of Non-Finitude: The Precarious Politics of Art

The social body as it appears in contemporary art production does not constitute an organic whole that needs to be changed from the bottom up, as was the case with the framework of modernist dramaturgy, but a disparate collection of structures, institutions and social practices that can be detached from one another and that differ from one society to the next. For late twentieth-century artists, the social body is divided into lobbies, quotas or communities: it is a catalogue of narrative frameworks surmounted by tools for home production (home technology) or professional production. In short, what we traditionally call reality is in fact a simple montage. On the basis of that conclusion, the aesthetic challenge of contemporary art resides in recomposing that montage: art is an editing computer that enables us to realize alternative, temporary versions of reality with the same material (everyday life). Thus, contemporary art presents itself as an editing console that manipulates social forms, reorganizes them and incorporates them in original scenarios, deconstructing the script on which their illusory legitimacy was grounded. The artist de-programmes in order to re-programme, suggesting that there are other possible usages for techniques, tools and spaces at our disposition. The cultural or social structures in which we live are nothing more for art than items of clothing that we should slip into, objects that must examined and put to the test. It is a question of *postproducing* social reality or, in other words, of confirming, in a negative form, its ontologically precarious nature. [8]

That, to my mind, is the essential content (beyond the anecdotal) of the political programme of contemporary art: *maintaining the world in a precarious state* or, in other words, permanently affirming the transitory, circumstantial nature of the institutions that partition the state and of the rules that govern individual or collective behaviour. The main function of the instruments of communication of capitalism is to repeat a message: we live in a finite, immovable and definitive political framework, only the decor must change at high speed. The relational scale models of Pierre Huyghe or Liam Gillick, the videos of Doug Aitken and the sign linkages of Kelley Walker each in their own way present the reverse postulate: the world in which we live is a pure construct, a mise-en-scène, a montage, a composition, a story and it is the function of art to analyse and re-narrate it, and adapt it in images or by any other means. Rancière arrives at a similar conclusion when he writes that 'the relation between art and politics [is not] a passage from fiction to reality, but a relation between two ways of making fiction'. [9]

Thus, the political substratum of contemporary art is not a denunciation of the 'political' circumstances that are immanent to actuality, but the persistence of a gesture: spread the precarious almost everywhere, keep the idea of artifice alive and productive, undermine all the material and immaterial edifices that constitute our decor. It is because our social reality has proven to be artificial that we can envisage to change it; and contemporary art, as a producer of representations and counter models that subvert this reality by exposing its intrinsic fragility, also encompasses a political programme that is much more effective (in the sense that it generates real effects) and ambitious (insofar as it refers to every aspect of political reality) than all the messages and slogans it uses to comment on daily events.

Opening those channels of speech that are 'blocked' by the media, inventing alternative modes of sociability, creating or recreating connections between distant signs, representing the abstractions of global capitalism through concrete singularities: just as many precarious constructions with incendiary effects that today open avenues to a truly political art.

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Footnotes

1. Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* (New York/Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009).
2. Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), 61.
3. Ibid., 77.
4. Ibid., 78.
5. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Oxford/Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 3.
6. Michel Maffesoli, *Du Nomadisme* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1997), 109.
7. Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance', in: Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 209.
8. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2002).
9. Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, op. cit. (note 2), 84.

Tags

Art Discourse, Aesthetics

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