

Relational Art as New Avant-Garde

Ole Bouman

Review – May 1, 2006

Erik Hagoort, *Goede bedoelingen. Over het beoordelen van ontmoetingskunst*, Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam, 2005, ISBN 9076936145

Goede bedoelingen (Good intentions) is the name of the book Erik Hagoort was recently commissioned to write for the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB). The reason for the assignment is immediately apparent from its subtitle: *Over het beoordelen van ontmoetingskunst* (On appraising relational art). Apart from a desire to develop the necessary theory, the Foundation primarily wanted Hagoort to come up with a tool to improve their own operations. In recent years they have encountered a type of art that is hard to assess with familiar artistic and formal criteria. Committee members are regularly faced with art projects which do not lead to a formal product, but to moments of social contact. Relational art, as it were, and when you describe it that way you are likely to experience discomfort at the idea you will be subsidizing things people also organize for themselves without art. Perhaps the appraisers sometimes had the feeling that they were being taken for a ride. Should they provide money to those who designate everyday activities as art and therefore think they should have access to art subsidies? Or is the Foundation being exploited for activities that are more appropriate to community work, social counselling, social activism, and actually, therefore, to 'soft' forms of 'do-goodery' that could better not be defined as art, but just as the outcome of sheer good intentions?

I won't beat about the bush. Hagoort has done the Foundation, and so the entire debate on this art form, a great disservice by making these alleged good intentions the crux of his argument and even pinning his title on them. From the start, he has legitimized the awkwardness of the art viewer and art appraiser wishing to come to terms with such art by launching a defence that will be a godsend for everyone who denounces it. Because, Hagoort says, this art is more about attitude than content. Indeed, he claims, you should base your appraisal of this type of art on the ethics of merit rather than art criticism. Also, passing judgement is out-dated and, instead, you should really try 'assessing good intentions'. Accordingly, philosophers are put forward who can help you in that process, folk like Martha Nussbaum, Michel de Certeau, Alisdair MacIntyre and Ilse Bulhof. They are believed to facilitate, with their ethical analyses, appreciation of this art, because they are concerned about the quality of good intentions.

Relational artists, wherever you may be, with friends like that you don't need enemies! You are slowly being forced into a corner where intention outstrips fact. In this way a radical mind can be condemned for having a thought, but also just because of that thought. And since that is nonsense, Hagoort proposes jettisoning judgements completely. What remains is a kind of understanding, a vague kind of sympathy that is as noncommittal as it is insipid. As anyone with talent knows, that is the beginning of the end. As an artist, you don't only have to hold your own against the reality in which you want to make your mark with a special project, but also against an a priori assessment that your heart is in the right place.

Just to be perfectly clear: a person wishing to be appreciated as an artist will have to produce art, not comfortable platitudes. So anyone wishing to investigate the value of relational art should not start with the work of all kinds of artists, but with the good grounds for this art in general. If they are there, you can proceed, entirely in keeping with good art criticism, to examine whether those grounds are served with the project or work in question. That is true for all cutting-edge art: it is not a matter of whether you can appreciate it, but whether the work examines and conveys an important issue persuasively.

So, does relational art have a strong motive, one that is stronger than the personal preferences of the Jeanne van Heeswijks, Rirkrit Tiravanijas and Alicia Framises of this world? Are these artists exponents of something that concerns the entire world and do they express it in a special way? Once we have reached our conclusion, judgement is no longer a pain but a pleasure, something to help good artists stand out from the crowd and give their work and lives meaning.

And here we have the remaining reasoning to bring the foregoing argument to a satisfactory conclusion: relational art may well be the most vital art form of the present day. At one time artists questioned the extent to which our perception obeyed 'scripts', or how our cultural hierarchy was coded, or what 'the museum' entailed. They made exceptional art works about those issues (just think of Picasso, Warhol and Duchamp), and similarly, today, it is essential to question the erosion of human relations by radically reversing existing scripts or finding others in their stead. In a hyper-individual society, in which it is often more important to avoid people than to seek them out, there are artists who are actively trying to devise new formulas for this pressing matter. Whether they are doing a good job is something that can still be discussed by good art critics, and whether they should receive financial support can continue to be noble work for art commissions. But those commissions and critics must understand what is at issue – not good intentions, but the rediscovery of human relations in an age of considerable concomitant abstraction.

Ole Bouman is an architecture historian, editor, curator, teacher and lecturer.

Tags

Art Discourse

This text was downloaded on June 25, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/relational-art-as-new-avant-garde