

From Relational
Aesthetics

to New
Institutionalism

and Now?

James
Voorhies

The influential book *Esthétique relationnelle (Relational Aesthetics)* is a collection of essays by French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud. Published in 1998, *Relational Aesthetics* sought to understand and analyze a bevy of artistic practices emerging in the nineties that began to draw on concrete human relations and social forms as integral parts of the work.¹ Bourriaud was at the forefront of this critique, examining the art of such figures as Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Christine Hill, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and others in *Relational Aesthetics*. Foundational connections among humans were the basis for a relational art, he observed, that relied on lived experience and took place among people, objects, and architectural space in real time. The immediate involvement of spectators was the defining hallmark of this wave of contemporary practice, and Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics was the first attempt to come to terms with an art that challenged the usual kinds of activity taking place inside a gallery. For instance, when Tiravanija makes Thai food for visitors in a gallery in Cologne, within which discipline does one categorize that activity: performance, installation, sculpture? And if one can decide on a discipline, how are its aesthetics assessed against the usual modernist sensibilities of immediate visibility and medium specificity vis-à-vis Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg? Relational art's defiance of the tenets of modernism, even more than its sociability and use of human relations, signaled it as a paradigm shift. Relational art represented new possibilities for

1 It was in the magazine *Esthétique relationnelle Documents sur l'art*, which Bourriaud cofounded and codirected with Éric Troncy from 1992 to 2000, that many of the essays in *Esthétique relationnelle (Relational Aesthetics)* were originally published.

producing and distributing art, and *Relational Aesthetics* offered possibilities for thinking about its aesthetic qualities and efficacy as art, and its intrinsic critique to the legacy of modernism.

The critically reflexive activity of New Institutionalism emerged in the 1990s alongside the relational art promoted by Bourriaud, striving to redefine the contemporary art institution and its role in shaping art and culture through expanded notions of the exhibition, social engagement, and alternative approaches to institutional activity. The Norwegian curator Jonas Ekeberg's seminal book *Verksted #1* published in 2003 by Office for Contemporary Art Norway includes essays that examine exhibitions, institutions, and biennials within a history of Conceptual Art and institutional critique in order to begin to historicize and broadly categorize them under the term of "New Institutionalism." While the term had been previously applied to economics, sociology, and even Christianity to signal a renewed confidence in the effectiveness of institutions, Ekeberg gave it to the self-reflexive activity occurring at art institutions, mostly in Europe, that

seemed at last to be ready to let go, not only of the limited discourse of the work of art as a mere object, but also of the whole institutional framework that went with it, a framework that the "extended" field of contemporary art had simply inherited from high modernism, along with its white cube, its top down attitude of curators and directors, its links to certain (insider) audiences, and so on and so forth.²

2 Jonas Ekeberg, "Introduction," in *New Institutionalism*, ed. Jonas Ekeberg, *Verksted #1* (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003), 9.

As part of this process of “letting go,” New Institutionalism used the exhibition as a critical medium and, like relational art, involved the spectator in situations that reduced the emphasis on the singular presentation of an art object to place greater emphasis on a more integrated engagement between art, materials, spectator, and institution. New Institutionalism is grounded on the increasingly prominent role of the curator, who emerged from a caretaker of collections and organizer of exhibitions to an impresario and creative producer who significantly affects how artists realize work and how the public experiences it. While a curator, by definition, is the point of dissemination of critical thought, whether via exhibitions, publications, or the Internet, institutions such as Kunstverein München in Munich, Rooseum in Malmö, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Bergen Kunsthall in Norway, and Moderna Museet in Stockholm began to prioritize the curator as a vital, creative, and intellectual-producing agent within the institution. The work of curators and artists at these institutions, including Maria Lind, Will Bradley, Liam Gillick, Nicolaus Schafhausen, and Apolonija Šušteršič, reflected the increasingly porous parameters in the division of labor. Exhibitions at these institutions often interwove curatorial and artistic strategies in order to involve the spectator in event- and process-based activities. The typically definable characteristics and responsibilities of these figures began to multiply, dissolve, and become muddled, questioning the long-standing roles assigned to artists and curators.

Exploring these questions, curator Maria Lind in 2002 launched the Sputnik Project at Kunstverein München, inviting

sixteen artists and curators to contribute to the production of content, the direction of the institution’s programming, and other aspects related to architecture, design, and communication over the course of three years. In *Exchange and Transform (Arbeitstitel)*, the first exhibition under this new model, Lind worked with artist and “Sputnik” Apolonija Šušteršič to redesign the Kunstverein entryway into a multifunctional social space and worksite.³ With the intention to activate more sustained social possibilities for an underused space, Šušteršič’s *Sputnik Lobby Eintritt (Entrance)* (2002) introduced an arrangement of comfortable chairs and tables for visitors to relax on. She inserted a coffee bar and a workstation that museum curatorial staff took turns manning, facing their administrative functions to the public realm while acting as a kind of welcome center-cum-lounge for museum visitors. The project exemplifies New Institutionalism’s desire to structurally redefine the contemporary art exhibition and its relationship with the public by removing fixed timeframes for specific activity and allowing varying tempos for experiencing and producing art.

In 2007, curator and writer Alex Farquharson and Lind reflected on the parallel development and unclear distinctions between relational art and New Institutionalism. Farquharson observes that New Institutionalism arose

from the so-called Relational art of the ’90s on the one hand, and the initiatives of independent curators on the other around the same time, before many of them moved to positions inside institutions. To me, Liam Gillick, Jorge Pardo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Philippe Parreno, for example, are neither object makers nor installation artists. The medium is the exhibition. That,

3 *Exchange and Transform (Arbeitstitel)*, Kunstverein München, April 26 to September 1, 2002.

rather than social engagement, will come to be seen as their most distinctive contribution to art history.⁴

Relational art and New Institutionalism have a definitive connection with the exhibition form, and their activity is solidly within the realm of art. This activity does not try to evacuate art to unite with everyday life. It relies upon and utilizes the exhibition and the critical potential art possesses within that form. Bourriaud champions this activity in relational art and its connection with the spectator because he views it as compromising the modernist project, describing it as a refusal to inherit the ideologies of modernity with its engrained emphasis on medium specificity, limitations posed by disciplines, and prescribed optical engagements between object and spectator. Instead, relational art sought to “inhabit the world in a better way” by alternatively using existing living forms that would encompass a range of human interaction—from sliding, meditating, and DJing, to cooking, drinking, playing—between individuals, groups, and communities.⁵ The social situations relational art leveraged with these forms were provocations to the routine activities taking place inside galleries among audiences, institution, and artists. He theorized that relational art was a benchmark for new models of living and action within a tangible reality, and therefore it called for new models of aesthetic assessment. In doing so Bourriaud proffered and indeed propelled, through curating and criticism, the production of this art that he saw as liberating itself from the modernist regime. Such was the potential invested in relational art.

4 Lind and Farquharson, “Integrative Institutionalism: a Reconsideration,” 111.

5 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle (Relational Aesthetics)*

(Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 13. Originally published in French in 1998 and translated into English in 2002. The essays in *Relational Aesthetics*, and artists

In the September 2006 issue of *frieze*, Alex Farquharson continued where Ekeberg left off in getting at a summation of New Institutionalism. Farquharson’s article “Bureaux de change” includes a roster of formerly independent curators, such as Lind, Schafhausen, Bourriaud, Charles Esche, and Catherine David, whose freelance experimental work became redistributed inside institutions (including perennial exhibitions like Manifesta and Documenta) when they eventually became their directors and curators. Kunstverein München, Palais de Tokyo, Rooseum, and Witte de With in Rotterdam, among others, took up this mode of institutional practice in order to change the relationships art institutions have with their public(s). The challenges of this difficult task are partially based on the impress the physical space of a museum holds, which echoes sentiments originally elucidated by Brian O’Doherty in the 1970s and subsequent artists of institutional critique. It also recalls the provocations curator Harald Szeemann made in 1972 with Documenta 5. The reigning influence and dismantling of such structures seemed particularly urgent for practitioners of New Institutionalism. Farquharson observes,

“New Institutionalism,” and much recent art, sidesteps the problem of the white cube altogether. If white-walled rooms are the site for exhibitions one week, a recording studio or political workshop the next, then it is no longer the container that defines the contents as art, but the contents that determine the identity of the container.⁶

whose work Bourriaud reflects upon, were written in part as a response in thinking through his work on the group exhibition *Traffic* (January 26 to March 24, 1996) at the

CAPC Musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux, France, where he was a visiting curator.

6 Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de change,” 158.

Farquharson continues with specific references to the spectator as a crucial means for developing this new public for art.

Reception, similarly, refutes the white cube ideal of the individual viewer's inaudible monologue, and is instead dialogic and participatory. Discussion events are rarely at the service of exhibitions at "new institutions"; either they tend to take the form of autonomous programming streams, or else exhibitions themselves take a highly dialogic mode, giving rise to new curatorial hybrids.⁷

The intersections of relational art and New Institutionalism speak to the parallel developments of these two critical approaches originally aimed at reconfiguring the exhibition inside the modernist gallery into something more active, open, and democratic than only the display of objects. It has been a long and difficult march against the "white cube" and the authority of the art institution it symbolizes. Somehow practitioners of relational art and New Institutionalism believed it was finally possible to change it. Perhaps change seemed more plausible if the artist and the curator waged critique together on two fronts.

While New Institutionalism, paradoxically, came out of a legacy of artistic practices that critiqued the institution of art, their emphasis on the role of the spectator simultaneously coincided with the rise of the blockbuster exhibition in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the increasing need for institutions to rely on ticket sales. The economy associated with mass audiences

that turn out for large, entertaining activities has become one of the driving factors for cities, countries, foundations, and corporations to capitalize on the commercial value of the spectator. A slide by artist Carsten Höller, for example, inside a museum would have, until relatively recently, been considered a cheap thrill lacking an aesthetics of art, and even representing an offense to the sanctity of the art institution. But major art institutions today are increasingly economic engines charged with supplying experiences for visitors who are consumers in what has emerged as a globalized culture industry.⁸

The reality of maintaining a continual critical position is a difficult task for any art institution, large or small. And, as Nina Möntmann observes in her 2009 essay "The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism: Perspectives on a Possible Future," many new institutions like Rooseum in Malmö have not survived.

What is not wanted, in short, is criticality. Criticality did not survive the "corporate turn" in the institutional landscape. This is not only due to the larger institutions that are run like branded global companies in an obvious way, like the Guggenheim, which provides the clearest example of how an institution is conceived and staged by politicians and sponsors. More and more this also applies to mid-size and smaller institutions.⁹

If the art institution adopts the critical voice once held by artists, how do the technical apparatuses of the exhibition and the institution remain alive, relevant, and

7 Ibid., 157–58.

8 Tate Modern received a record 5.2 million visitors in the year encompassing Carsten Höller's exhibition

Carsten Höller: Test Site (October 10, 2006 – April 15, 2007). Three-quarters of a million people corkscrewed down his slides. See "Tate Draws Record

Number of Visitors," *Artforum Online*, September 21, 2007, <http://artforum.com/archive/id=15840>. At the New Museum, New York, *Carsten Höller:*

Experience (October 26, 2011–January 22, 2012) drew more visitors per day than any other exhibition in its thirty-five-year history.

vocal? This is the underlying question that surfaces when considering New Institutionalism. With an emphasis on the curator as the organizer and a significant source of critical content and motivation, the responsibility of the institution to police its own behaviors and borders becomes even more urgent as we realize that the theoretical language Bourriaud generated around relational art's criticality today simply does not resonate in actuality, almost two decades after its inception. Indeed, a critical attitude faces a fugitive position in the midst of globalized contemporary art, an industry that has the potential to reduce the potency of critique through absorption and the need to produce greater and more spectacular experiences that generate economic and cultural capital. The critical attitude must perform a kind of constant reworking before it sets into institution and becomes the subject of its original scrutiny; capitalism lurches forward and critique must move along.

What ever happened to New Institutionalism? While the term never caught on, its activity is part of the general landscape of contemporary art today. Dispersed and atomized, it exists at small and large institutions and artist- and curator-run initiatives worldwide. Large museum programs are punctuated with variations on alternative modes of exhibition making. They can sometimes seem quick to capitalize on the spectator as a consumer and their experience a commodity. The situation, however, is much more complex and part of broader circumstances faced by contemporary society, where neoliberal event economies cater to the visitor in ways that are simultaneously entertaining, educational, and

spectacular. The work of artists and curators associated with relational art and New Institutionalism posed many different possibilities and futures for art and its institutions. They saw the exhibition as a viable form through which fluidity, unpredictability, and instability in art could be inserted. This activity possessed an underlying critique that sought to redefine the contemporary art exhibition and its relationship with the spectator. Today, however, artistic and curatorial strategies categorized under relational art face a contradictory predicament. The use of social forms in exhibitions that originally sought to break free from institutional constructs become entangled in others: as fuel for the industries of museum and biennial entertainment, municipal economies, and cultural tourism.

And now? As we begin to historicize the art of this recent era, and grapple with its genealogy, we realize the need to continually question the viability of critical forms of art—and march toward new ones. Relational art and New Institutionalism challenged the consensual conception, production, and exhibition of art, disrupting conventional artistic and institution practices. These ruptures are beacons, even part of incremental steps toward a new aesthetics of critical art. Their criticality reveals potential for new engagement with the spectator and value in staying ahead of the encroaching grips of global capitalism—by doing it differently.

9 Nina Möntmann, "The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism: Perspectives on a Possible Future," in *Art and Contemporary*

Critical Practice: Re-inventing Institutional Critique, Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds. (London: MayFly, 2009), 156.

**What
Happened**

**Ever
to**

**New
Institutionalism?**

**Carpenter Center
for the Visual Arts**

SternbergPress 

What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?

James Voorhies, Editor

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What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism? is the inaugural issue in a series of annual publications by the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University that expands and reflects on matters encountered over the course of the year.

Editor: James Voorhies

Designer: James Goggin, Practise

Type: Druk (Berton Hasebe, Commercial Type, 2014) and Lettera (Kobi Benezri, Lineto, 2008) after Candia (Josef Müller-Brockmann for Olivetti, 1975)

Copy Editor: John Ewing

Printer: Die Keure, Bruges

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Cambridge, MA 02138

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Sternberg Press

Caroline Schneider

Karl-Marx-Allee 78

D-10243 Berlin

sternberg-press.com

ISBN 978-3-95679-234-2

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President, and Fellows
of Harvard College

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Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts

Mission

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts is dedicated to the synthesis of art, design, and education through the exhibition of existing works and production of new commissions. It strives to bring people, ideas, and objects together in generative ways that provide unparalleled experiences with contemporary art, ultimately enriching the creative and intellectual lives of our audiences.

Program

The Carpenter Center program fosters meaningful engagement among artists, art, and our audiences. Exhibitions, lectures, residencies, publications, performances, screenings, and informal gatherings are choreographed to create a place where visual literacy, knowledge production, contemporary art, and critical inquiry seamlessly meet.

The Carpenter Center programming and directorship receive generous support from the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family.

Acknowledgments

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts extends special thanks to the contributors to this publication and other friends and colleagues at Harvard and around Cambridge, including Jennifer Bornstein, Giuliana Bruno, Dan Byers, Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Pieranna Cavalchini, Naz Cooper, Jeffrey De Blois, Dina Deitsch, Maia Dolphin Krute, Ruth Erickson, Mathilda van Es, Laura Frahm, Abigail Goodman, Andy Graydon, Jennifer Gross, Lori Gross, Haden Guest, Alfred Guzzetti, Paul Ha, Sharon Harper, Jessica Hong, Jill Johnson, Deborah Kao, Ernst Karel, Robin Kelsey, Sarah Kianovsky, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Annette Lemieux, Ruth Lingford, Dan Lopez, Magali Maiza, Jessica Martinez, Robin McElheny, Ross McElwee, Jen Mergel, Helen Mirra, Farhad Mirza, Sarah Montross, Robb Moss, Liz Munsell, Denise Oberdan, Nate Padavick, David Pendleton, Joana Pimenta, Jesse Posner, Ben Prosky, Eva Respini, Jeremy Rossen, Lynette Roth, Keris Salmon, Matt Saunders, Jeffrey Schnapp, Mary Schneider-Enriquez, Jennifer Sigler, Paula Soares, Diana Sorensen, Carol Stakenas, Jason Steeves, Gloria Sutton, Rebecca Uchill, Alise Uptis, Gediminas Urbonas, Robert Wiesenberger, Frank Williams, Andrew Witkin, Daisy Wong, Joe Zane, and Brian Zink.

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