SUMMER 2005

links

TRAFFIC CONTROL

JOE SCANLAN ON SOCIAL SPACE AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

WHAT MAKES relational aesthetics so boring? I've been wondering a lot lately why an approach to artmaking dedicated to social interaction has generated so much underwhelming art. Perhaps the fact that relational aesthetics is dependent on site contingency, collaboration, and contrived indeterminacy makes it feel a little too much like the 1960s and is therefore dulled by nostalgia, or worse, academicism. Or perhaps it was that Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*, first published in French in 1998 and translated into English in 2002, seemed like Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural production cut and pasted onto the artists of our time. In any case, I have attended my fair share of events over the past decade, including several that were key to the aesthetic's convergence in the 1990s (like "I, Myself, and Others" a group show that included Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and Philippe Parreno at Le Magasin, Grenoble, in 1992). Time and again I have found myself in a room full of people with no obligation other than to appreciate the moment, yet the group has always ended up exchanging pleasantries or planning dinner (if none had been served) instead of giving away their possessions, breaking into song, or trashing the place. Indeed, firsthand experience has convinced me that relational aesthetics has more to do with peer pressure than collective action or egalitarianism, which would suggest that one of the best ways to control human behavior is to practice relational aesthetics. That is, create an artwork as a situation devoid of all the white cube's usual restraints, then inform everyone who comes to see the artwork that its completion is actually up to them.

The basis for my thinking has to do with traffic. Not "Traffic," the exhibition curated by Bourriaud at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain Bordeaux in 1996 that is considered the ground zero of relational aesthetics, but *traffic*—the complex mix of persons and vehicles typically found in urban centers—and the way its interactions reflect the values a community places on group dynamics and self-determination. Conventional wisdom holds that the various entities using city streets should not arbitrarily mix. It has always been assumed that the more restrictions there are on traffic behavior, the safer its participants will be.

Recently the town of Drachten, Holland, adopted an approach to traffic safety that not only defies conventional wisdom but is eerily similar to relational aesthetics: The town square has been stripped of all directional signs and road markings, the curbs flattened, and the entire traffic area paved in identical stones. Every day, a steady stream of cars, buses, delivery trucks, bicycles, and pedestrians there engage in an open-ended negotiation of what should happen next. With no infrastructure telling them what to do, Drachten drivers and pedestrians actually have to pay attention to what they are doing as well as anticipate what everyone else might do. Hans Monderman, the traffic engineer responsible for the design, readily admits that his scheme works only when its participants share a common sense of ethics and the group conveys that invisible code of conduct to any initiates who enter the square. In other words, peer pressure. Or as Monderman explains it: "This is social space, so when Grandma is coming, you stop, because that's what normal, courteous human beings do."

Peer pressure is effective because it uses one of our most basic fears—public humiliation—as a built-in mechanism for controlling behavior. It works in public contexts because there is a consensus that the benefits of public safety, decency, and cooperation are of greater concern than the repression of individual action or speech. The same is true for relational aesthetics. Whether explicitly or not, a majority of its participants have agreed that a shared (and almost certain) mediocrity was preferable to the risk of aberrant behavior. Peer pressure might produce a safer town square or a prosperous magnet school, but it makes for rather timid art. By contrast, art should be a place where we can "kill Grandma" and, rather than call an ambulance or the moral authorities, stand around and talk about what it means.

Relational aesthetics set out to tap the creative potential of social space. But now—more than ever—social space is responsible for suppressing most of what is worthwhile about making art in the first place: Narcissism. Solipsism. Delusion. Perversion. Dedication. Fantasy. Absurdity. And while relational aesthetics might have changed the kinds of conversations we have about art, to include questions such as what an artwork might be made of, who could be involved, or where it might begin and end, rarely have these ideas been acute enough in practice to overcome common decency. And that's a shame. Because if there's one thing we need less of in the United States right now, it's common decency—or at least Bill Frist's idea of common decency. These days, both politically and aesthetically, I prefer to adhere to Martin Kippenberger's creed: "Keiner hilft keinem." Every man for himself. For better and worse, Kippy's iconoclasm affords a greater range of expression than tacit collaboration ever could. What's more, it just feels better. For all relational aesthetics' claims to utopia and tomorrow being another fine day, an aesthetic that can't allow anything bad to happen sounds more like anesthesia to me.

Joe Scanlan is assistant professor at the Yale School of Art.


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City center, Drachten, Holland, 2004. Photo: Ben Hamilton-Baillie.