Polemical Relations

Larys Frogier

Translator: Brian Holmes

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Troncy, Éric. *Le Colonel Moutarde dans la bibliothèque avec le chandelier : textes, 1988-1998*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 1998

- 1 Eric Troncy and Nicolas Bourriaud have had a decisive influence on curatorship and art criticism in France since the late 1980s. The publication of their respective essays allows for an appreciation of their crucial contribution in favor of contemporary art, particularly through the journal *Documents* which they co-founded in 1992. The polemical tone of their texts and their defense of French and international artists has elicited rejection and admiration no less than suspicion. Yet no one can deny the fact that they have stimulated French criticism, which has been somnolent to say the least, and mired in nationalistic debates over the “crisis of contemporary art.”
- 2 The two anthologies reveal very different critical practices. Bourriaud’s texts aim to legitimate a sensibility of contemporary creation which he calls a “relational aesthetics,” whereas Troncy’s adopt overtly polemical positions directed against conventional forms of the exhibition and reception of contemporary art. Although we are definitely not in the presence of texts by art historians, it is fundamental to stress that in their own ways, both authors maintain a concern for memory. Troncy and Bourriaud make it clear that the contemporary practices of the production and exhibition of works are necessarily multiple and need to be analyzed beyond a history of autonomous art. Thus they offer an incontrovertible response to reactionary criticism, and take up the work shunned by art historians unwilling to confront the most contemporary artistic practices – which, of course, has always been one of the essential functions of art criticism.

- 3 In the journal *Documents*, Troncy and Bourriaud have actively promoted contemporary artists such as Parreno, Joseph, Gillick, Tiravanija, Höller, Fend, Dion, Gonzalez-Torres... According to Bourriaud, the works of these artists seek to enlarge the scope of art to the relational foundations of contemporary society. In their form and content, Bourriaud's texts have all the characteristics of the manifestoes that have marked the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. One finds the same polemical tone against academic artists and intellectual conformists, the radical refusal of the concepts of formalism and autonomy on which the modernist aesthetic is founded, the claim to certain historical heritages (in this case Duchamp, Kaprow, Fluxus, Warhol, On Kawara), and finally, a statement of the fundamental terms of relational aesthetics: "interactivity," "convivial [or 'user-friendly'] spaces," "transitivity," "intersubjectivity," "art as the production of human relations." This form of the manifesto issues directly from a tradition of twentieth-century art criticism with which Bourriaud explicitly affiliates himself: "As a student, when I decided to engage in art criticism, I was influenced by very literary models, from Mirbeau to Rosenberg, by way of Thomas McEvilley, Pierre Restany, and the writings on art by the dadaists and the surrealists."¹
- 4 Like all manifestoes, Bourriaud's have generated significant dynamics in a current context which is searching for its bearings. No one can underestimate the function of the art critic in "forming a school," and thereby stirring fruitful debates for or against a given aesthetic orientation of contemporary art. By federating artists, sparking polemics, informing and promoting, Bourriaud has upset the conservatives, helped make known the works of new artists, and compelled other critics to take a stand. Like all manifestoes, Bourriaud's have the principal disadvantage of gathering extremely different, indeed opposite artistic practices under a single generic term. Indeed, Bourriaud's texts often sidestep a sustained inquiry into the way the works present themselves to the eye (with the exception of the essay on Gonzalez-Torres). The visual productions are summarily described and grouped under a generic idea of the relational, as though the critic feared engaging in an overly formalistic analysis of the works. The reader thus remains somewhat frustrated when it comes to visualizing and exploring works which are still not very well known. Additionally, this procedure of including works within a "relational aesthetic" takes the risk that the artists may not entirely recognize themselves in the critic's assertions.
- 5 Finally, the relational aesthetic founded by Bourriaud takes its place within a major theoretical debate over the reformulation of the new social relations in the Western democracies. Thus it plays an important role in the possibility of comprehending contemporary works within a spectrum of recent theoretical references dealing with politics and with the place of the subject. Although Bourriaud engages in punctual borrowings from Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, and Guy Debord, his relational aesthetics issues fundamentally from the sociological thought of Michel Maffesoli. The latter has in effect proposed to found an "aesthetics of interaction": "I understand aesthetics in a sense very close to its etymology, as the fact of feeling common emotions, sentiments, passions, and this, in the most diverse domains of social life (...). In other words, this aesthetics is a way of designating the constant interaction, the more-or-less intense 'co-presence' which is tending to spread throughout social life."² Now, it is important to stress that the aesthetics of interaction formulated by Maffesoli subtends an ideology that eliminates any political project. The aesthetics of co-presence "is in no way finalized, it quite distinctly has no project, but is content to live from day to day, together with

others, in the simple pleasure of living an existence ‘without quality.’”³ Thus Maffesoli’s aesthetics not only risks proving utopian, but tends above all to spread reactionary ideas such as a vulgar anti-Marxism and a blindness before the political and ideological use of technologies. Maffesoli’s apolitical stance is dangerously ideological. The object here is not to confuse Maffesoli’s theoretical ideology with Bourriaud’s critical discourse, but to point out the innocence or naïveté of certain ideas that emerge from the latter’s relational aesthetics. Indeed, one can legitimately contest Bourriaud’s writings for adopting an often reductive analysis of aesthetic modernity, as well as an infatuation with human and artistic relations which would blindly cut themselves off from any relation to power: “The essence of artistic practice would thus be the invention of relations between subjects: each particular work of art, the invention of a world in common; and the work of each artist, a bundle of relations with the world generating other relations, and so on to infinity.”⁴ In this context it appears necessary to think contemporary works by way of theories of the subject and of politics as diverse as those of Jean-Luc Nancy, Etienne Balibar, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, etc. It is also important to stress the specificities and differences existing between these artists of the relational tie, for example, between the convivially utopian work of Rirkrit Tiravanija and that of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, which constantly mobilizes a subtle intersubjectivity and a political vigilance on the part of the artist and the visitor to the exhibition.

- 6 As to the practice of the exhibition, Troncy and Bourriaud have rethought the approaches to the contract between the producer and the spectator who receives the works, thus pursuing a history of the exhibition initiated by the dadaists, the constructivists, Duchamp, Fluxus, and curators such as Harald Szeeman. For Troncy, there is nothing more boring than an exhibition that deals with a theme or attempts a synthesis of what contemporary art is or ought to be. He therefore proposes making the exhibition into a “display” of objects which no longer imposes any authority of the works in terms of form or content. The display is supposed to make the space livelier and allow one to consume the objects that are offered to be seen and experienced. Though Troncy’s stated intentions are totally justified and exciting, it nonetheless remains that their materialization in the exhibition space is problematic. Indeed, such exhibitions give the visitor the curious impression of consuming the remains of a festive event which has taken place between the curator and the artist before the exhibition. To be sure, the visitor is offered the means to relax, shake off his guilt trip, have a drink, get a massage, in short, the possibility to create a space of relations. But then what? Isn’t this a desire to create a utopian and autonomous space of art, a relational space cut off from the relations of power between individuals and social realities? No living space can ever escape from power relations, whether amorous or conflictual, which remain omnipresent during dinners among friends, collective parties, or the realization of an exhibition...

NOTES

1. Bourriaud, Nicolas. “La Fluidité de l’art, entretien avec Catherine Millet,” *Art Press* #198, January 1995, p. 40.

2. Maffesoli, Michel. *La Transfiguration du politique: la tribalisation du monde*, Paris : Grasset, 1992, pp. 254-255.
3. Ibid., p. 255.
4. Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Pour une esthétique relationnelle (Première partie)," *Documents sur l'art* # 7, Spring 1995, pp. 88-99.