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Conference Report

Transforming Aesthetics

The Art Association of Australia and New Zealand, in association with the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics, University of New South Wales, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 7–9 July 2005.

At a time in Australia's history, when the narrowing of the critical space of culture can be matched only by the increasing nebulosity of political rhetoric, the question of the role of aesthetics is crucial. Never before have public cultural institutions been under such close scrutiny, never before has the Australian government adopted such an interventionist stance with respect to culture, and never before has the steady slide into conservatism been accompanied by a wider deployment of ambiguous political terms. Yet, while the profile of cultural projects in the public domain may have increased, this has taken place in a sphere of culture that is increasingly removed from the material relations of contemporary capitalism. The result is that today's culture production is conceived as only either purely aesthetic or purely political.

The question of the role and shape of aesthetics has resurfaced since the early nineties, in an increasing number of seminars and exhibitions, as a consequence of what Sarah James has recently referred to as our "anti-aesthetic yet post-theoretical times."¹ Nicolas Bourriaud was one of the first curators/authors to respond to the question. In the catalogue of his 1995 *Traffic* exhibition and his 1998 book, *Relational Aesthetics*, he argues that artistic practices in the nineties were relational in the social sense of incorporating viewers into the form of the work itself. Bourriaud claimed that, during the nineties, artists were staking out an alternative ground for resistance through practices of social relations determined and arranged by individuals. Attempts to define contemporary artistic practices are always risky, particularly if they define things that span a decade. Not surprisingly, Bourriaud has since come under much criticism: for his implication that relational art practices are more democratic and universal than other art practices; for his conflation of dialogue with democracy, which overlooks the fact that dialogue can also be based on inherent antagonisms;

and for his neglect of the fact that collective exchange takes place within a plurality of discourses that do not necessarily lead to democratisation, but may in fact play into the hands of hegemonic power.²

The Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (New South Wales chapter) conference, *Transforming Aesthetics*, hosted by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in association with the University of New South Wales Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics (7–9 July 2005), was a timely intervention which aimed to show the ways in which the visual arts have been able to re-invent themselves in recent years to present a set of critical approaches for unpacking key issues. The conference was in part a critical response to Bourriaud, and in part a musing on the critical position of aesthetics today from the perspective of a variety of disciplines that include art history, philosophy, anthropology and new media studies. Taking Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics as its point of departure, the twenty-two conference papers included five keynote addresses. Bourriaud, Jane Taylor, Andrew Benjamin, Ernst van Alphen and Sean Cubitt, in that order, each considered the question of contemporary aesthetics. Despite the large number of speakers, the close focus of this forum produced a close thematic and critical proximity of papers that is difficult to achieve in conferences today.

Bourriaud's keynote address set the premise of the conference by arguing for the introduction of a notion of "altermodernism" into modernity. Bourriaud suggested that "altermodernism" is based on notions of translation, dialogue and diversity and would thus remove it from atavism or nostalgia for the grand narratives of modernity. The address provided some interesting general remarks—Bourriaud's discussion of multiculturalism as an "invisible agent of isolation" was particularly relevant in the present context of Australia. However, the most interesting material was to be heard in the session papers. In part, this is because Bourriaud's address felt like a defensive answer to recent criticisms of the political dimension of his relational aesthetics, rather than a fresh exposition or a productive new line of argument. The lack of response by Bourriaud to the impressive spectrum of papers that directly engaged his ideas in the following two days was disappointing and perhaps the main detractor from the overall strength of the event, as it went against his own argument about the importance of translation of ideas through conversation. Although this unresponsiveness may have been due to his visible ill-health and the lack of question time that persisted throughout the three day event, it may simply be evidence of Bourriaud's notorious lack of interaction with other speakers at conferences.³

The session "Intercultural Affectivity" included the keynote address by Jane Taylor on the concept of "sincerity" in artistic practices following the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission (TRC) in South Africa, and papers by Jennifer Biddle on the relation of affect and line in the work of Indigenous painter Emily Kane Kngwarraeye, and Robyn Ferrell on the affective character of the “real” in photojournalism. Taylor argued that the ambiguity often found in the usage of the concept “sincerity” places it above disciplinary concerns into a universal ideological stopgap. Without addressing the specific ways in which sincerity is inscribed in particular cultural contexts—as Taylor showed—efforts to consider the notion of sincerity will inevitably be constrained by ideological allegiances and intellectual affiliations. Culturally specific limitations, or lack of translation, inform the kinds of assumptions about truth and affect that make this possible. Taylor’s discussion provided an important insight into the way in which these assumptions informed the TRC in South Africa and representations of the military in Iraq. Biddle’s paper argued against a universal notion of affect in art as trans-cultural catalyst for encounters between colonial and indigenous cultures. She proposed instead an understanding of affect that is attentive to cultural specificities, yet removed from an individualistic model. For Biddle, affect is the means to articulate the formation of subjectivity that is enacted in cultural encounters. Robyn Ferrell was similarly critical of the universal application of affect as the marker of experience in photojournalism. Ferrell’s warning against identification with journalistic photography as easily communicable was particularly apt, given the present political context. In the sense that all three papers in this session presented ways of thinking about the limits of western thinking about affect, they suggested different, yet proximate ways in which aesthetics can be located within the context of postcolonial studies.

The second session, “Relationality in Aesthetics”, argued for aesthetics as the space of possibility for effective politics today. Andrew McNamara’s paper examined the work of Felix Gonzales-Torres as an incision between private and public spheres of the socio-economic space. McNamara questioned whether the artist’s practice can be described as inter-subjective in Bourriaud’s terms, or whether the artist in fact rejected this very relation. McNamara showed that Gonzales-Torres’s refusal to provide closure on the fissure between the private and the public in his practice may ultimately be better thought of as a critical gesture towards relationality. Gay Hawkins considered waste as a relationality that opens new ways into relations between people and material objects, rather than approaching things as commodities. Her paper argued that waste as objects with derided functionality provides a unique aesthetic opportunity for rethinking our inter-subjective relation with waste. This is a relation that emphasises critical difference based on aesthetics within the framework of material culture where value is based on circulation of capital. The final paper in this session by Mark

Pennings provided a measured exposition of Bourriaud's relational aesthetic through the scope of Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle, questioning the possibility of social critique that emerges out of related artistic practices. By repositioning the "do-it-yourself" ethos associated with relational aesthetics within the unstable ground of Deleuzian poststructuralism, Pennings's paper suggested some of the criticality—such as between the public and the private, and between human subjectivity and material culture—that emerges from the approaches outlined by the first two speakers.

The papers in the next session, "Against Conviviality", comprised a juxtaposition of the formal analysis of Samuel Beckett's aesthetic theories by Anthony Uhlmann with the more political approaches of papers by Anthony Gardner and David McNeill. What all three had in common was a critique of relational aesthetics as a feasible strategy in the present context. McNeill proposed artistic vandalism in the work of Alexander Brener and Oleg Kulik as a form of political gesture and resistance to global artistic democracy. These practices stand in stark contrast to the welcoming and democratic work usually associated with Bourriaud's model of inter-subjectivity. Gardner questioned Bourriaud's easy deployment of democracy into conservative rhetoric through analysis of the artistic strategies of artist Slaven Tolj's engagement with audience. His paper positioned an alternative model of audience participation that is based on chance, antagonism and misunderstanding, such as the demands on the audience's responsiveness (or lack of it) to the performance when faced with an artist whose very practice may potentially be placing his life in danger. Such a model, Gardner argued, is much more appropriate today than the liberal utopianism of relational aesthetics.

The next session, "Aesthetics and Interdisciplinarity", further extended the question of the political in contemporary art, particularly through Jill Bennett's paper which considered art as an "event" that sets up the condition of actuality. Using Rancière's model of aesthetics and politics, Bennett read Bourriaud against the grain to question the possibility of unstable and non-signifying relational aesthetics. Her conclusion that the aesthetic and signifying instability of affect suspends the relation between aesthetics and the political—effectively making their separation impossible—indicated an understanding of art and politics as promoted by Rancière in recent years. Rancière developed a model of aesthetics that puts politics and the people totally in the space of what he refers to as "the aesthetic regime of the arts", and unites the register of representation with "realism" as an aesthetic and political category in a relation of constructive opposition.⁴

Toni Ross presented a critique of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, as based in liberal pluralism, through an account of Mark Dion's work, and the way in which it

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ffects interdisciplinarity. Dion’s installations evoke modernist museum displays, iron-
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 classification, ordering and evaluation to both question the museological production
 and ordering of knowledge and show the possibility of a non-disciplinary space in the
 museum. Ross’s paper, which stood out in its conciseness and clarity, argued that the
 model of relational inter-subjectivity may have outlived its political usefulness.

Andrew Benjamin’s closing keynote address for the second day provided a rich
 source of ideas for the by then visibly exhausted audience (the two back rows of the
 room were firmly asleep), using works by Dürer and Bruegel to argue for aesthetics of
 immediacy and simultaneity that take place through complex and disjointed tempo-
 rality. Yet I could not help but wonder whether Benjamin—a philosopher by
 profession—did not realise that his excited ruminations on perspectival space in
 Bruegel’s canvas rehearsed Ernst Gombrich’s canonical study of the relation between
 perspective and experience.⁵

In his keynote address for the second day, Ernst van Alphen considered films by
 Peter Forgacs as encounters of two notions of history, where “similarity” between nar-
 ratives obstructs notions of historicism and presents a notion of difference. Van
 Alphen’s conclusion that only a critical use of media can articulate memory without
 historicism provided the setting for the papers of the day.

The theoretical drive of the first day’s mainly “art historical” papers was offset by
 the more practical tone of papers in the session “Intermedial Relations in Curatorial
 and Artistic Practice.” Tony Bond considered curatorial practices, such as his own
 attempts to negotiate the question of difference in the increasingly ambiguous rela-
 tion between Australian and Asian cultural identities. Lu Jie provided a highly
 entertaining account of a practical application of curatorial practices that address dif-
 ference through cultural interaction in the context of the project of reenacting the
 “Long March” in China. Artist Anne Graham’s examples of her own work showed how
 aesthetics can be transformed through collaboration and transcultural translation.

Due to unfortunate cancellations of papers by Darren Tofts and Pia Ednie-Brown,
 the two “Distributed Aesthetics” sessions planned for the day were fused into one,
 showing accordingly that the very “immateriality” of new media shows the most open-
 ness to adapting to changes, in contrast to more traditionally based practices. Anna
 Munster’s paper argued precisely this point by showing the ability of new media to
 distribute and disperse its aesthetics across a broad spectrum of social issues and thus
 undermine notions of property in contemporary global culture. Yet, as Munster’s
 paper showed, it was this critical ability of new media to effectively highlight the

tensions based on notions of value inherent in our relation to culture that possibly led to the governmental backlash against it, and the 2004 dissolution of the New Media Arts Board. Andrew Murphie's paper similarly argued for reverse engineering of aesthetics in new media that leads to the end of the transcendental subject. Susan Ballard's concern with disturbance and disruption of digital art through "noise" suggested one way in which this distribution of aesthetic can be mapped on a trialectic between noise, audio and video.

Sean Cubitt's concluding off-beat keynote speech, which extended into a final plenary session, articulated a series of binaries as a way to summarise the key concerns that emerge out of new media's aesthetic in the light of recent socio-political changes. Cubitt's remark that art should not attempt to heal the state's failures or to show what it feels like to be alive, posed two important questions, which in some ways reflected the overall concern of the event. On the one hand, if art is not to show us what it feels like to be alive—through aesthetic representation—should it then show what it feels like not to be alive as a political subject in the eyes of the failing state democracy? On the other, if art is not to remedy this failure of democracy – through political intervention – should art then abandon democracy as a failed project of neo-liberal politics of culture? As state cultural policies remove aesthetics from the political sphere by consigning them into the realms of cultural/public debates, Cubitt's at times cryptic response indicated an alternative, and appropriately frantic, way for aesthetics to move forward.

Despite the range and diversity of approaches to the question of aesthetics and affect, the papers in the conference appeared to divide between two key positions. On the one hand, affect was approached by a number of speakers as a way to both test the limits of relational aesthetics, and as a way to suspend the relation between the political and the aesthetic, thereby exposing the impossibility of their separation. On the other, the position of aesthetics itself was repositioned on uncertain ground, between the impossibility of artistic autonomy, and the politicisation of this impossibility. By bridging the gap between the political and the aesthetic in a way that was closer to Rancière's "distribution of the sensible"—which positioned both people and aesthetics in the political—than to Bourriaud's relational model, these two lines of enquiry suggested that the ultimate question for aesthetics today is how to negotiate the space of the dialectic between them.

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NOTES

- 1 Sarah James, "The Ethics of Aesthetics", *Art Monthly*, 284 (March 2005) 7–10.
- 2 See David McNeill's review of Bourriaud's book, *Postproduction* in *ANZJA* 6.1 (2005) 124–128.
- 3 For example, see Dave Beech's review of the conference at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in which Bourriaud participated, 'The Art of the Encounter', *Art Monthly* 278, (July/August 2004). 46.
- 4 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
- 5 For examples, see E.H. Gombrich *The sense of order: a study in the psychology of decorative art*, (New York: Cornell UP, 1979), and *The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1982).