

EMPATHY AND CONTEMPORARY ART

I define beauty in terms of what the world needs but does not have. And although you may not agree, I feel we need greater empathy. Our lives are filled with superficial interactions and quick judgements that seldom take into account how other people think, feel and experience. The resulting absence of empathy is a major, and probably necessary, cause of many forms of social conflict. We all know how difficult it is to hurt someone we know well, someone we have looked in the eye and shared intimacies. It is obvious that one reason the leaders of one country can decide to invade or destroy another country is because the inhabitants are faceless, unknown, too distant to enter the moral universes of the powerful. There is a famine of empathy and a limitless supply of ignorance and misunderstanding.

Beauty, therefore, is that which encourages, inspires or identifies empathy. When I encounter a piece of art, I ask myself: how does this help me understand the lives of others? And does it move me to help other people in new and unexpected ways?

Can we find this kind of beauty in contemporary art? In some ways, yes. In a recent collection of essays,¹ Nicolas Bourriaud identifies – and applauds – a trend in European art that has emerged since the early 1990s. This is the development of a ‘relational aesthetic’, an art concerned with human interaction and social exchange, one that involves the viewer as a participant and creator of art, rather than a passive observer of a product and perspective wholly designed and controlled by the artist and the exhibition space. The public has an opportunity to enter a conversation with the artist, either directly or indirectly. There is the scope for empathy. One example is a work by Miche Fabre-Lewin, ‘Sacred Mayonnaise’, performed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in [2003?], in which members of the public made mayonnaise using traditional ingredients, under the instruction of the artist. The results were then eaten in an atmosphere of community and sharing.

Bourriaud’s analysis is a brilliant description of a contemporary phenomenon evident in the art world. But does he really help us identify the beauty that the world requires? Is the ‘relational aesthetic’, as he defines it, a potential source for mutual understanding and human relations based on equality?

One difficulty is that Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics contains no theory of power. All dialogue involves power relationships. Often those who instigate the interaction are in authority, defining the language and scope of debate and ideas. Occasionally Bourriaud acknowledges the problem, for instance when discussing work that contains a surveillance element with hidden video cameras ‘spying’ on the unwary public. The result is that the beholder may be ‘transformed into the subject of the artist’s eye’ in a relationship that becomes ‘sado-masochistic’.² Although acknowledging the potential ethical difficulties of such work – the way the beholder can be disempowered – he generally ignores the problem of power. Instead he argues that relational art, operating in the interstices of the dominant economic system, can help ‘re-stitch’ a social fabric ravaged by global capitalism. In fact, much relational art

¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas (2002) *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, with the participation of Matheiu Copeland, les presses de réel.

² Bourriaud 2002, 77-78.

can serve to re-enforce the authoritarian practices of modern capitalism, as the surveillance example demonstrates.

Relational art is also inherently self-limiting. This is because contemporary art is a largely elitist endeavour, in terms of both those who produce the work and those who consume it. Despite being a tired and obvious point, there is no doubt the most marginalised and disadvantaged sectors of society usually have little contact with the kind of art that defines the 'relational aesthetic' paradigm. Certainly support groups for Muslim women undertake artistic projects and some school children get to meet Tracy Emin, but most people in this country do not frequent the Whitechapel Gallery, or even the Tate Modern, nor do they watch Front Row. Contemporary art, therefore, is usually only encouraging social interactions between members of a social elite. In doing so, it may be helping to reproduce difference and inequality, while doing little to encourage empathy where it is most needed – across social boundaries.

Most of the examples of art in the relational aesthetic mode that Bourriaud draws on are from single-person exhibitions. The structure of these shows contains an authoritarian imbalance, with one person commanding the attention of many. The problem is analogous to the lone singer on a stage who can get the audience to sing along happily with her chorus but nevertheless remains in command, all eyes are upon her, the central and determining eye. The dialogue created by the single artist is thus premised on a relational inequality; it is a dialogue between ruler and ruled. Bourriaud's book contains the same structure. He is telling us how it is, in unambiguous terms, leaving little space for the reader to interpret, question, dissent. Perhaps I am doing the same – but at least I hope to be aware of the problem.

In my experience the best conversations – those that encourage people to see the world from new perspectives – are the product of sustained interaction. It may require a few hours, it may require multiple meetings. Satisfactory conversations that extend beyond the superficial rarely occur in an instant or brief encounter. A problem with most art, including relational art, is that it generally only permits a momentary dialogue between the beholder and the artist, a conversation so short that it can hardly have any depth. We normally only spend a few minutes with the work and rarely more than an hour. The hope is that there is an instantaneous connection, a flash of enlightenment and understanding. The art of empathy, in contrast, requires an ongoing process of interaction, something that most artwork fails to provide.

According to Bourriaud, the emergence of the relational aesthetic mode is a consequence of urbanisation since the end of the Second World War, which has produced an increase in the frequency and intensity of social interactions in our lives; this 'system of intensive encounter,' he argues, 'has ended up producing linked artistic practices'.³ This explanation for the rise of relational aesthetics is both vague and unsubstantiated. One might easily argue the opposite, that the development of artworks encouraging a social exchange between the artist and the viewer is a reaction *against* the alienation and isolation of modern, urbanised society, and is a desire for meaningful human interactions, a search for community. There is an odd incongruity between Bourriaud's occasional conjecture that relational art helps re-stitch a society

³ Bourriaud 2002, 15.

destroyed by capitalism, and his failure, when explaining the emergence of relational aesthetics, to acknowledge the lack of connection that so many of us feel in our lives.

There is a lot of inter-human and communicative art that I enjoy, that inspires me, that helps me understand the lives of others more profoundly. But much of it has little to do with empathy, for it is encumbered by unequal, authoritarian modes of dialogue and social elitism. So where can we find the beauty that is empathy? Although our societies lack empathy, there are instances of empathy and mutual understanding surrounding us every day, human connections and interactions that often go unnoticed by ourselves or the media, but which represent a living utopia. These include, for instance, school friendships and relationships across racial, religious and other cultural divides; the mutual aid that sustains many worker cooperatives, farmers' markets, and voluntary organisations; the nurses on emergency wards, giving care and hope; the bankers who decide, after a decade in the City, to become child psychologists or social workers.

People are cooperating, sharing and learning about each other everyday and everywhere. But there is not enough of this understanding, particularly amongst those who dominate society. Contemporary artists could reorient themselves to identify the empathy that already exists and occurs, and to ensure that it is noticed, that it becomes inspiring. My suggestion is that each artist becomes a new kind of tour guide, not producing original works, but taking the public out into the world to see itself.

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