

Taylor Greenfield
Professor Diane Zeeuw
Post-structuralism
October 28, 2009

Activate! The Aesthetics of Participation

In our postmodern world, it seems we are more accurately able to express ourselves in our home pages than we are in our real homes. The current movement towards a society where true human interaction is minimal at best and where we are satisfied instead with simulated communication is a dangerous possibility: our day-to-day interactions have been reduced to blips on a screen and our relationships with our communities grow dim. However, two movements in the world of art seek to counter-act this trend. By acknowledging and celebrating the differences and similarities between each community, site-specific and relational artworks transform the connection between the artist and the viewer into a dialogue where art serves as a platform for a broader, active discussion of place, experience, community and authenticity. It is this discourse and the resulting interactions that become the substance from which the art is created.

According to the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty, we are all products of our communities and it is impossible for us to rise above them (Grenz, 157). In an article titled *Representation, Social Practice, and Truth* published in 1988 in the journal *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Rorty writes:

For such appeals presuppose that philosophical account of our practices need not take the form of descriptions of our relation to something not ourselves, but need merely describe our practices. The desired “relation to the world” which representationalists fear may be lacking is... built into the fact that these are our practices—the practices of real live human beings engaged in causal interaction with the rest of nature (222).

In other words, the way we understand the world around us is rooted in the cultures from which we came—the communities we are from are integral to our being. Our “relation to the

world” is defined within our practices and our occupation of space and our interactions with others are the cornerstone for how we come to understand everything else.

Rorty does not share the pessimistic view of his other postmodern contemporaries, like Derrida and Foucault. Instead of despairing at a world without center, he celebrates multicenteredness and the rich variety of interpretation each community brings to the table—advocating a spirit of tolerance for each other’s views as a way of arriving at a utopian society (Grenz, 159). This type of pragmatic optimism and celebration of difference is what makes site-specific and relational art works so vital to today’s practicing artists. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud states: “Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies, any stance that is “directly” critical of society is futile” (Bourriaud, 31). In other words, we must be within a given society, we must know it, in order to find truth; and what holds true for one society will not necessarily hold true for another. And since we understand and relate to the rest of the world based in our society, it is impossible to stand in direct opposition of it (Rorty, 222). Instead, he suggests that we work *within* community. In an article titled *A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference* published in *Philosophy East and West* in 1988, Rorty states:

The real work of building a multicultural global utopia, I suspect, will be done by people who, in the course of the next few centuries, unravel each culture, into a multiplicity of fine component threads, and then weave these threads together with equally fine threads drawn from other cultures—thus promoting the sort of variety-in-unity characteristic of rationality. The resulting tapestry will, with luck, be something we can now barely imagine... (593)

With the hope of a universal, over-arching truth lost, artists in the past few decades have set out in search of what truth can be found within individual communities. By exploring the details of what makes up a specific place, and by investigating what constitutes a particular community, artists are able to piece together what constitutes our relationships with one another.

Starting in the 1960's, artists began moving out from the gallery as a form of "institutional critique" (Kwon, 3). This move brought works out into the public realm, and during the advent of public art in the mid 1960's to the mid 1970's, public art was often merely enlarged works of established artists and little attention was paid to a work's relevance to the site on which it was to be placed (60). However, this indifference was intentional: artists like Alexander Calder and Henry Moore, renowned for their large outdoor sculptures, were far more preoccupied with the works' physical and aesthetic placement than its relationship with a potential audience: the community that surrounded it (63). Take for example Grand Rapids' own Calder, *La Grande Vitesse* a huge painted steel construction which seems completely unaware of the onlooker, but is instead quite content to focus its attention elsewhere [Fig. 1]. Public art of this time period, although technically free of the museum or gallery, treated its environment with the same callous indifference—as if it were surrounded on all sides by white walls. All sites were equal, and the only considerations were consistent with those of a work installed inside: lighting and placement.

This ambivalence toward place continued until the early 1980's, when an appreciation for art works that better unified themselves with their settings began to gain momentum. This is best illustrated by the reaction against Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, installed in the Federal Plaza in New York City [Fig. 2]. *Tilted Arc* was a vast 120-foot long steel sculpture that stretched like a black wall across Federal Plaza, splintering it in half, decreasing visibility and increasing separation. Serra recognized the connection between art and site as something far greater than mere points on a map. His sculpture served as a literal and visual demonstration of societal fragmentation that occurs even in our most public of spaces [Fig. 3]. *Tilted Arc*, while different from its predecessors because as a site-specific work it took into account its particular social and political environment, it was anti-integrational in its conception and defied any continuity

between art and site (74). This, however, all seemed part of the plan—as he clearly expressed in his views toward public works:

Works which are built within the contextual frame of governmental, corporate, educational, and religious institutions run the risk of being read as tokens of those institutions... But there are sites where it is obvious that an artwork is being subordinated to/accommodated to/adapted to/subservient to/useful to... in such cases it is necessary to work in opposition to the constraints of the context so that the work cannot be read as an affirmation of questionable ideologies and political power. I am not interested in art as affirmation or complicity (Kwon, 74).

But unfortunately for Serra, regardless of his awareness of the underlying social and economic matters surrounding this site, it was still prone to the same fallacy as many of the public works that came before it. It failed to accommodate in any way its surrounding community, and as a result was taken down in 1989. While I would not argue that this is the failure of the piece (Serra thought it performed perfectly as a work of art as it paid no heed to its audience), I would suggest that the removal of this work opened up a dialogue concerning what a successful site-specific work would consist of, as well as a more in depth discussion about the importance of place.

“In all discussions of place, it is a question of abstraction and specifics” (Lippard, 37). In other words, every place is composed of concrete things, like buildings, and the ephemeral, like our relationships with our neighbors. Place implies past, present, and future: thinking of the site in this way would lead to the inevitable shrinking of the distance between art and its audience, transforming site-specific into community-specific. Community is best described by philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy, in his book *The In-Operative Community*:

Community is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspensions that singular beings are. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communications is not a work or even an operations of singular beings, for community is simply their being... (Bishop, 68)

Each community shares certain qualities, but no two are the same. Houses, schools, supermarkets—while each of these may look very similar from one community to the next, and even though their functions remain constant, they are made singular by the people who inhabit them. Each is given a history by our experiences: ours, that of those who came before, and those who will come after: “All histories perceived in the landscape are to some extent subjective, as are the social and cultural biases that color them” (Lippard, 86).

By acknowledging this, the artist acknowledges that there are as many ways of approaching a site-specific work as there are sites: “...there are potentially as many landscapes as individual ways of seeing, or at least as many cultural ways of seeing...” (61). This then becomes the rationale for approaching each new site differently, and assessing it not only as a physical setting but also engaging the community, or the audience.

For example, in his *West London Social Resource Project* from 1974, artist Stephen Willats carefully examined these ideas by choosing a set of communities, considering all of the variables as not only relevant but as ingredients for the work (Kester, 93). His objectives were:

1) To show those who took part in it the role of behaviour conventions in determining the attitudes of people and their perceptions of their immediate environment. The environments used in the Project were those of the participants’ residential neighborhoods; (2) To make clear to other artists the inappropriateness of currently used traditional methods of getting people to understand what they are trying to communicate in their works, particularly to people who have little or no interest in or knowledge of visual art (Willats, 155).

This is clearly very different from Richard Serra’s mode of thinking in terms of audience. In fact, Willats no longer uses the term “audience” because of its passive connotations but instead uses “participants” to refer to those involved with the work (155). The participants included people from four British social groups: working class, middle class, lower middle class, and upper middle class citizens. Each participant was interviewed and given a manual with questions designed to shed light on their thoughts about the visual facets of their environments.

The questions were not laden with artistic language, but instead were written specifically for the people who were answering them. For example: “Describe/Draw/Make a map of how you think your house, garden etc. should relate to our neighbors” or “Describe and make a plan of a garden or open space that could be used by all the people in your neighborhood showing how it would function” (158). This feedback was posted in local libraries and subsequently visited and discussed between neighbors (157) [Fig. 4]. In the final step of the project, each participant was asked to propose changes to their homes and communities. While none these changes were physically made, it was the change in consciousness on the part of the participants that was most notable:

The methodology we used did not appear to influence the way they [the participants] perceived their environments... It seems certain, however, that the Project has altered, considerably in some cases, participants’ awareness of aspects of their environments of which they took little notice before and participants’ relationships with members of their community (Willats,158).

Willats’ project invites participants not only into a dialogue with their neighbors, but also into a dialogue with themselves and with the artist. His “Socially Interactive Model of Art Practice” from 1970 helps provide a template for contemporary artists delving into an artworks ability to create relationships (Kester, 92). In contrast to a conventional model of art practice where art is the product of the artist and viewable by but not accessible to the audience, Willats’ model places the artwork at the center, nestled between the artist, the audience, and context. Each plays an equal role in its production, and the work of art is made real not by its object hood and its ability to be seen, but in its happening and its ability to be experienced. This is something that the conventional art model cannot provide: the ability of the artist to level with their audience and for both to be present at the art’s making.

Another work dealing in the vein of community-specificity is Suzanne Lacy's *Full Circle*, part of a series of public exhibitions in Chicago titled *Culture in Action* begun in 1993 (Kwon, 100). Her work was comprised of one hundred large boulders, each bearing a plaque with the name of a woman from the city [Fig. 5]. Each boulder was placed at different sites across the city, but remained unified in its significance to the Chicago community. Each of the eight works included in *Culture in Action* were similarly minded: "[Culture in Action] tested the territory of public interaction and participation; the role of the artist as an active social force" (100). Chicago in its entirety came under inquiry in these works: each artist was paired with a community-based group, working together to create a variety of works. Parades, hydroponic gardens, distribution of different materials illustrating various neighborhood trends... the overall project was a huge undertaking, covering the Chicago community with what perhaps were less conventional art works, but each highlighted a different aspect of the population and displayed renewed artistic dynamism.

But where is the legitimacy of an artist stepping into a context not their own? Even though the artist is establishing a direct relationship with their viewers, can the "conclusions" of the artist about a certain community ever be reliable if the artist has no ties to the place outside of the context of the artwork? If the artist cannot be trusted, then the authenticity of the work hangs in the balance. In her book, *The Lure of the Local*, Lucy Lippard takes great pains to describe how an artist needs to approach a site:

If art is defined as "universal", and form is routinely favored over content, then artists are encouraged to transcend their locales. But if content is considered the prime component of art and lived experience is seen as a prime material, then regionalism is not a limitation but an advantage, a welcome base that need not exclude outside influences but sifts them through a local filter (Lippard, 37).

The relationship between an artist and their chosen site *is* a precarious one. The goal of art in the Modern era was to transcend from culture to culture and remain autonomous, but art in the Postmodern age embraces multicenteredness and collaboration. This heightens the responsibility of the artist: the artist must investigate a site fully in order to create anything meaningful from it. “Each new site, issue, or community becomes another opportunity to reaffirm the artist’s social transcendence through the language of art, which can bridge cultural differences and heal social divisions” (Kester). Even though all artists come from different places, it is this very fact—that we all come from somewhere—which gives artists the ability to associate themselves with, transform (and be transformed by) any given community/site. Also, as Lippard states, any artistic advances will be sifted through by the locals and subsequently discarded if not up to par.

This transformation—this relationship—that occurs between the artist, audience and context is what gives a work its authenticity. In fact, in many cases, it has *become* the work. In the past few years, more and more art works exploring the importance of our social selves have come to the forefront. The site has taken on another facet: the place where community is made. As our participation in our communities continues to decay and the isolation in our society becomes more apparent, artists continue to seek out the site and call attention to these divisions. Art critic Hal Foster, in an article titled *Chat Rooms*, discusses the shortage of collaboration:

Perhaps discursivity and sociability are in the foreground of art today because they are scarce elsewhere... Even an art audience cannot be taken for granted but must be conjured up every time, which might be why contemporary exhibitions feel like remedial work in socialization: come and play, talk, learn with me (Bishop, 194).

This is where relational art comes in. It contains the same facets of site-specific work: artist, context, and audience/participant, but in many works of relational art the space that is utilized is created by the artist. The authenticity of the work no longer lies in its relevance to the

community in which the work is taking place, but now its truth is defined within the genuineness of the connection between one person and another. Often these works are not able to be defined by any one artistic media (sculpture, installation, etc.) but instead are activated by what the general public brings to the work.

In the case of Rirkrit Tiravanija, his work certainly defies definition, but his intentions are clear: bring people together and create art out of that encounter. In this way, “it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through ... It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion” (Bourriaud, 25).

In his piece *Aperto 93* created for the 1993 Venice Biennale (one of many similar pieces done in different galleries all over the world) Tiravanija constructed within the gallery a space to house not created objects but the stimuli for interactions and socializing: he provided seating, cooking supplies, food (often Pad Thai), books and other amenities [Fig. 6]. It is his use of food as a means of generating conversation that is so unique. Tiravanija offers up a *created* space for engaging with one another—he sets up a context for interaction (Bourriaud, 25) [Fig. 7].

Another piece that reinforces this is Angus Fairhurst’s work *Gallery Connections* from 1991. By rewiring two telephones in two separate galleries so that once dialed they would call each other at the same time, each gallery would answer the phone believing that it was the other gallery who had called (Bourriaud, 32). The resulting interactions were both humorous and humbling: “After a moment of bewilderment—where competing galleries suddenly find themselves connected—the conversation eventually breaks down as one repeatedly asks the other, “But why did you call me?” “No, hang on a minute, you called me!” (Muir). In a more aggressive way than Tiravanija, Fairhurst creates a space for communication. By linking the phones together, the participants (willing or not) are made to relate to one another.

There is, however, some skepticism of art that deals only with human relations. Many see relational art only as a “watered down form of social critique”. However, simply because relational art does not always deal in pre-existing relationships in the same way as community-specific works does not mean it is in any way “watered down”. The creation of context does not mean that any interaction within that context will be false: “The [relational art] exhibit is an interstice, defined in relation to the alienation reigning everywhere else” (Bourriaud). Relational art collages existing experience (already occurring within those who choose to participate in the work) with constructed experience (the context generated by the artist).

Another critique of these types of works is their temporary nature: since both community-specific and relational art works are not necessarily transportable to a gallery-near-you, our experiences of them are very limited. However, the spirit behind such works, although it lacks the ability to be commoditized, is what traverses the gap between the lived experience an individual may have by engaging with the work directly and those may only hear about it. Works that continue to raise our awareness of community ensure its survival, regardless of whether or not we experience the work first-hand.

The instigation of community that these types of work pioneer is invaluable in reclaiming human interaction. Despite the dissimilarity from one community to the next, site specific and relational artworks provide a blueprint for the kind of optimism and collaboration that Rorty suggests: the unraveling and re-weaving of places, communities, and experiences into this new type of work: one that re-aligns artistic practice with life outside the gallery.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Bibliography

- Bishop, Claire. *Participation (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. Boston: The MIT Press, 2006.
- Bourriaud, Nicholas. *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996.
- Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. N.p.: University of California Press, 2004.
- Kwon, Miwon. *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Boston: The MIT Press, 2004.
- Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. N.p.: New Press, 1998.
- Muir, Gregor. "Angus Fairhurst." *The Guardian* 2 Apr. 2008. Web. 25 Oct. 2009
<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/apr/02/2>
- Rorty, Richard. "A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference." *Philosophy East and West* 42.4 (1988): 581-96.
- Rorty, Richard. "Representation, Social Practice and Truth." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 54.2 (1988): 215-28.
- Willats, Stephen. "The West London Social Resource Project." *Leonardo* 7.2 (1974): 155-58.
- Stimson, Blake, and Gregory Scholette, eds. *Collective after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*. N.p.: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007.