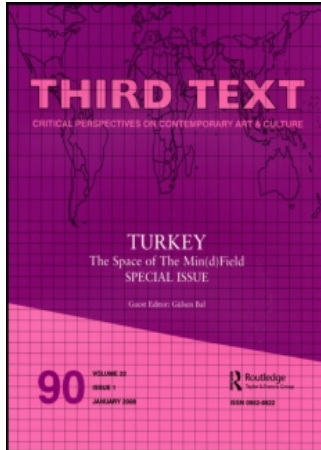


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Third Text

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713448411>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2007

To cite this Article: Martin, Stewart (2007) 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', Third Text, 21:4, 369 - 386

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09528820701433323

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820701433323>

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Critique of Relational Aesthetics

Stewart Martin

- 1 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with M Copeland, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2002. Originally published in French by same publisher in 1998 as *Esthétique relationnelle*.
- 2 See in particular his subsequent books *Formes de vie: L'art moderne et l'invention de soi*, Editions Denoël, Paris, 1999, 2003, and *Postproduction: Culture as Screen Play: How Art Reprogrammes the World*, trans J Herman, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2002.
- 3 'Relational Aesthetics, of which [*Postproduction*] is a continuation, described the collective sensibility within which new forms of art have been inscribed. Both take their point of departure in the changing mental space that has been opened for thought by the Internet, the central tool of the information age we have entered. But *Relational Aesthetics* dealt with the convivial and interactive aspect of this revolution (why artists are determined to produce models of sociality, to situate themselves within the interhuman sphere), while *Postproduction* apprehends the forms of knowledge generated by the appearance of the Net

In a period in which manifestos tend to be regarded longingly rather than actually written or followed, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* has emerged as the text for a new generation of artists, curators and critics. It offers a new characterisation and collectivisation of contemporary art practices, and a new configuration of their political terms and conditions.¹ Despite its theoretical and historical precariousness, and the controversies attending its dissemination – hardly disqualifications in the history of the genre – this text is currently recognised as one of the more ambitious and compelling presentations of a framework for certain novel dimensions of art. 'Relational aesthetics' has acquired the status of an 'ism', a name for what is new about contemporary art, and a key position in debates over art's orientation and value today.

Relational Aesthetics professes to be, in the first place, a theory of art in the 1990s, although it is by no means considered past it now, and Bourriaud himself has continued to apply its principles in subsequent publications.² Initially published in 1998, the book arose from Bourriaud's critical and curatorial engagement with artists emerging during this period, in a now feted, if questionable, fusion of these roles. The timeframe of the book is therefore largely generational, defined by the panoply of artists he interpolates with the concerns of relational aesthetics, such as Félix González-Torres, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija, to name only a few of his more frequent references. But besides this grouping, Bourriaud also appeals to a broader historical determination and specification of relational aesthetics, according to which these artists are responding to deep and encompassing social transformations of the conditions and conception of art. Above all is the emergence of new communication and information technologies. The Internet is said to be pivotal here.³ But it is scarcely distinguished from previous categories of technology, especially cinematography. This tends to undermine the technological determination of the 1990s. Bourriaud occasionally shores this up by discussing the novel combinations of technologies that have emerged, such as the digitalisation of images and music. He is also attentive to the subterranean and delayed effects of older technologies, such as cinema, and how their implications only become explicit through new technologies

or in indirect forms, such as video or post-production techniques. However, Bourriaud's conception of relational aesthetics is not technologically determined in an immediate or narrow way. Bourriaud sees technology as a social relation, and the various technological innovations he discusses are all considered in terms of their social form and how they effect our social relations.

Bourriaud's introduction to what characterises art in the 1990s reads as follows:

Rirkrit Tiravanija organises a dinner in a collector's home, and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup. Philippe Parreno invites a few people to pursue their favourite hobbies on May Day, on a factory assembly line. Vanessa Beecroft dresses some twenty women in the same way, complete with a red wig, and the visitor merely gets a glimpse of them through the doorway. Maurizio Cattelan feeds rats on 'Bel Paese' cheese and sells them as multiples, or exhibits recently robbed safes. In a Copenhagen square, Jes Brinch and Henrik Plenge Jacobson install an upturned bus that causes a rival riot in the city. Christine Hill works as a check-out assistant in a supermarket, and organises a weekly gym workshop in a gallery. Carsten Höller re-creates the chemical formula of molecules secreted by the human brain when in love, builds an inflatable yacht, and breeds chaffinches with the aim of teaching them a new song. Noritoshi Hirakawa puts a small ad in a newspaper to find a girl to take part in his show. Pierre Huyghe summons people to a casting session, makes a TV transmitter available to the public, and puts a photograph of labourers at work on view just a few yards from the building site. One could add many other names and works to such a list. Anyhow, the liveliest factor that is played out on the chessboard of art has to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts.⁴

The innovation of nineties art, for Bourriaud, is 'not any style, theme or iconography', but 'the fact of operating within... the sphere of inter-human relations'.⁵ 'Relational aesthetics' is a theory of the emphatically *social* constitution of contemporary art; of the extent to which art has become, more immediately and above all else, a matter of its social constitution. Bourriaud states this repeatedly. 'Art is the place that produces a specific sociability.'⁶ 'Art is a state of encounter.'⁷ 'The aura of contemporary art is a free association.'⁸ Art's 'sociability' is the principal 'object' or 'work' of so-called relational art; all art's 'objects' are subordinate to this social or relational dimension: 'what [the artist] produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects'.⁹ To draw out what is decisive here we could modify Bourriaud's words and formulate a definition that he might be happy with: *the idea of relational aesthetics is that art is a form of social exchange.*

The widespread interest generated by *Relational Aesthetics* has doubtless been encouraged by Bourriaud's professional status as a curator, especially at the Palais de Tokyo. As a consequence, there has been considerable scepticism about whether the critical and political claims he makes for relational art are merely a form of strategic professionalism. But it is nonetheless due to these claims that *Relational Aesthetics* has attracted attention and controversy as a new conception of art's relation to radical politics. Bourriaud's political claims for the 'specific sociality' of relational artworks are certainly emphatic. He claims that they overcome the

(how to find one's bearings in the cultural chaos and how to extract new modes of production from it).'
Bourriaud,
Postproduction, p 8.

4 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, op cit, p 8

5 Ibid, p 43

6 Ibid, p 16

7 Ibid, p 18

8 Ibid, p 61

9 Ibid, p 42

utopianism of the historical avant-garde, not simply by abandoning it, but by realising it through the localised and momentary formation of alternative ways of living: ‘the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist’.¹⁰ This realised utopianism, as we might think of it, is described as a micro-political disengagement from capitalist exchange, defined as a ‘social interstice’ in Marx’s sense of a ‘trading communit[y] that elude[s] the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit’.¹¹ There is a sense in which relational artworks are conceived as autonomous communes, even if they are actualised only momentarily. This is perhaps most evident in Tiravanija’s works, and especially in his most ambitious to date, *The Land*, which he co-founded in 1998 in some rice fields outside Chiang Mai, Thailand. Described as a ‘lab for self-sustainable environment’,¹² it has been the site for various artistic projects to facilitate what we could think of as an eco-aesthetic community. The realised utopianism of relational art – of art as a direct form of non-reified life and community – has made *Relational Aesthetics* resonate with the sporadic emergence of anti-capitalist movements since the 1990s and the affinities they have achieved in the artworld. *Relational Aesthetics* can be read as the manifesto for a new political art confronting the service economies of informational capitalism – an art of the multitude.

But it can also be read as a naive mimesis or aestheticisation of novel forms of capitalist exploitation. The criticism of *Relational Aesthetics* to date has certainly questioned its support for an anti-objective or inter-subjective art of conviviality, querying the assumed critical value of its ‘open’ and ‘relational’ qualities.¹³ There have also been sustained attempts to emphasise the irreducibility of judgements of form to ethics in relational art, and to oppose Bourriaud’s harmonistic conception of the social with a more agonistic conception of political community.¹⁴ However, what is absent is criticism of what is in many ways most fundamental, for Bourriaud too, namely, a critique of the political economy of social exchange that is implicitly proposed by *Relational Aesthetics*; in other words, a consideration of how relational art produces a social exchange that disengages from capitalist exchange, and – at the heart of this issue – how the *form* of relational art relates to or opposes the commodity form or the value form. What follows here is such a critique. It is an attempt to draw attention to profound limitations in Bourriaud’s conception of art as a form of social exchange, and thereby explain why it is so helplessly reversible into an aestheticisation of capitalist exchange. But it is also an attempt to reconstruct the idea of relational aesthetics by rethinking it within a dialectical conception of art and its commodification. The contentions pursued here are: (1) that the idea of relational aesthetics and relational art should be seen as a development in the dialectical relation of commodification and art that has in many ways constituted modernism, which is also a dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy or, more precisely, a dialectic of fetishism and exchange; (2) that *Relational Aesthetics* effectively manifests an extreme heteronomous critique of art’s autonomy; and (3) that it is in these terms that so-called relational art functions as an immanent critique of the commodity form, or rather a political struggle over subjection to the commodity form. It is in this struggle that the political

10 Ibid, p 13

11 Ibid, p 16

12 See <http://www.thelandfoundation.org>

13 See, for instance, Hal Foster, ‘Arty Party’ [review of Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* and *Postproduction*, and Obrist’s *Interviews: vol. 1*] in *London Review of Books*, 25:23, 4 December 2003.

14 See Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *October*, 110, Fall 2004, pp 51–79. See also Liam Gillick’s ‘Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”’, *October*, 115, Winter 2006, pp 95–107.

significance of modern art – its relation to ‘anti-capitalism’ – can be construed, regardless of art’s apparent indifference or precariousness with regard to a more explicit or narrowly defined sense of politics.

DIALECTIC OF COMMODIFICATION AND ART

In Marx’s account of commodification, we can discern a dialectic of subject and object, or, more precisely, ‘persons’ and ‘things’. This is a dialectic of inversion in which persons appear as things and things as persons. In Marx’s famous words: ‘To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, ie, they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things.’¹⁵ Art’s relation to capitalist culture can, in important respects, be condensed into thinking about its relation to this dialectic of inversion between subject and object. For Marx, this inversion produces an alienation of humanity. Again, in his well-known characterisation of fetishism, Marx writes:

... to find an analogy [to the fetishism of commodities] we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands.¹⁶

This is a dialectical inversion of subject and object: we can discern a *struggle of subjection* or subjugation in commodification and, by extension, in art. The ambivalence of the term ‘subject’ condenses this struggle and its stakes. The subjectivity of humanity is de-subjectified or subjected to the subjectivity of capital; the commodity form subjects labour to the self-valorisation of capital – capital’s autonomous or subject-like self-determination.

A politics of anti-capitalism must revolve around this struggle of subjection to capital. Certainly, what we are commonly told is ‘politics’ – from disputes over rights or between parliamentary parties, to international disputes, etc – does not always manifest itself as this struggle. It is frequently suppressed and recoded as an ‘economic’ or perhaps ‘religious’ issue. Even amongst recent left-wing theorists of ‘the political’ there has been a general indifference to the political form of the commodity and the commodity form of the political.¹⁷ Elaborations of the political form of *Relational Aesthetics* have inherited this.¹⁸ If we abandon this indifference, a transformed sense of both politics and art’s relation to politics is revealed. Whatever the marginality and precariousness of art’s relations to received ideas about politics, it is in many ways fundamentally constituted by the struggle over its subjection to commodification. So, if we think of the political in terms of this struggle, we can see art as politically formed to its innermost core. In a certain sense, we can think of art as a primal scene of politics in capitalist culture.

Art’s historic relation to the struggle of subjection to commodification has revolved around the issue of whether art is a commodity, and as such enables humanity’s subjection to capital; or whether art is *not* a

15 ‘...sachliche Verhältnisse der Personen und gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse der Sachen.’ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Bd. 1, Werke, Bd. 23, Karl Dietz, Berlin, 1962, p 87; translated by B Fowkes as *Capital*, vol 1, Penguin Books, London, 1976, 1990, p 166.

16 Ibid, pp 86–87; trans, p 165

17 This is true of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London and New York, 1985, 2001; Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, J Barker, trans, Verso, London–New York, 2005; and Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans J Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1999. On this problem see Stewart Martin ‘Culs-de-sac’, a review of Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics* and Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, in *Radical Philosophy*, 131, May/June 2005, pp 39–44.

18 See the discussion of Laclau and Mouffe in both Bishop’s ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, and Gillick’s response, ‘Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”’, *op cit*.

commodity, and thereby resists this subjection. This underpins the polemic between ‘pure art’ and ‘anti-art’ that has riven aesthetics on the Left: whether art should be rejected as a commodity or affirmed because it is not; whether art is critical by virtue of its autonomy or due to its heteronomous determination by the social. This polemic has proved to be so intractable because the opposition of anti-art and pure art is a contradiction internal to the commodity form, especially within an increasingly commodified culture. Anti-art and pure art are two faces of the same currency. Recognising this transforms the terms of debate. On the one hand, the anti-art position has had to confront the extent to which the dissolution of art into life is not simply emancipatory but a dissolution of art into capitalist life. It has also had to confront the extent to which capitalist culture has itself taken on this anti-art function to this end. This reveals a critical dimension to pure art, which the anti-art position must recognise if its critique of art is to function as a critique of commodification. On the other hand, the pure art position has had to confront the extent to which art’s purity is a form of reification deeply entwined within art’s commodification, indebted to capitalist culture. This requires that the defence of art against commodification must incorporate a dimension of anti-art if it is to criticise this entwinement. Either way, art’s resistance to commodification is obliged to take the form of an immanent critique or self-criticism. This suggests that the self-critical constitution of modern art is due to its commodity-form, and that this is misrecognised by various formalist narratives.

The alternative to this transformed dialectic of anti-art and pure art is to establish new terms for the struggle with commodification, outside the framework of art. But if commodification is tied intrinsically to art – whether through the fetishism of value or the artification of the world – then an alternative will sound suspiciously like evading the issue. This is not to rule out considerations of a break with this dialectic, since this is clearly the vital issue. But such a break must demonstrate that it is not effectively a break with the critique of capitalist culture *tout court*; a harmonious rapprochement with the arty non-art of late capitalist culture. This is the ‘Hegelian trap’.

My contention here is that we should interpret relational art and the idea of relational aesthetics as a novel inflection of this transformed dialectic of commodification and art. More precisely, that the idea of relational aesthetics unconsciously articulates the radical extension of the heteronomous dimension of this dialectic. Bourriaud certainly seeks to go beyond the traditional standoff between art and anti-art. No doubt this is implied in his rejection of the legacy of art criticism that is blind to relational art’s novelty, that is, its overcoming of the reification of art without destroying art. But he does not recognise the dialectical relations that replace this standoff, and consequently becomes the ideologue of their effects, helpless against the ironic reversals of his good intentions. *Relational Aesthetics* is the spontaneous theory of art’s heteronomous determination by the social.

In order to elaborate the critique of relational aesthetics and reveal its immanence to this dialectic of commodification and art, it is illuminating to consider an opponent, a defender of autonomous art. Not just a spontaneous ideologue like Clement Greenberg, but Theodor W Adorno, who not only stands at the autonomous ‘pole’ of this dialectic of modern

art – in opposition to which we can see ‘relational aesthetics’ standing at the heteronomous ‘pole’ – but who also gives us key insights into how the dialectic of commodification and art functions as a dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy. Adorno therefore reveals his own criticism and enables us to elaborate a theory that would go beyond a new stand-off between *Relational Aesthetics* and *Aesthetic Theory*.

AUTONOMY: ADORNO

Contrary to what many assume, Adorno saw the autonomous artwork as inherently entwined with its commodity form, and considered that its critical relation to commodification was a result of this inherence, that is, as an immanent critique of commodification: ‘Only by immersing its autonomy in society’s *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market... The absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity.’¹⁹ Autonomous art is conceived, by Adorno, as an intense form of commodity fetishism, which exposes the contradiction internal to the commodity form: namely, that the reduction of use-value to exchange-value is both *necessary* for exchange-value and *impossible* for it, since it is ultimately uses – however frivolous or ‘unnecessary’ – that are exchanged, and the useless is, strictly speaking, rendered valueless. Pure exchange-value is a contradiction in terms. The autonomous artwork is thus a fetishised commodity that aspires to be valuable independently of its use, and thereby valuable in its own terms. It therefore manifests the contradiction of exchange-value immanently: exchange-value generates something that seeks to be valuable in its own terms, and therefore independently of its exchange-value. Adorno effectively mobilises the fetish character of the commodity against its exchange-value. Fetishism is seen as a form of autonomisation – immanent to the commodity form – that, through its intensification in the artwork, contradicts exchange-value; while exchange-value itself functions heteronomously in so far as it determines everything in terms of what it can be exchanged for.

This autonomy (or anti-heteronomy) of art is, for Adorno, anti-subjective or anti-social. Autonomous art is conceived as a fetish in Marx’s sense that it refuses or obscures its social determination. For Adorno, autonomous art is constituted through its irreducibility to the audience that receives or experiences it, as well as to the artist who produces it (although this is less emphatic): the autonomous artwork is strictly ‘non-subjective’ or ‘objective’. Adorno’s contention that capitalist societies are characterised by the domination of social exchange by exchange-value means that art is critical of capitalism as a result of its ‘anti-social’ character, its uncommunicativeness – namely, its antipathy to all the things that Bourriaud restores to art’s virtue. For Adorno, art is critical in so far as it is mute, in so far as what it communicates is its muteness. However, the artwork does nonetheless acquire a subject-like character, but, ironically, through its objectivity, as something autonomous and self-determining. Again, this corresponds directly to the fetish as described by Marx – an object that appears to be a subject. However, the artwork (as autonomous) appears to be a singular subject. As such, it resists subjection to exchange-value – the source of the subject-like function of capital as self-valorising value.

19 Theodor W Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1970, 1995, p 39; translated by R Hullot-Kentor as *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p 21 (translation altered)

It remains a big problem that Adorno does not really consider the autonomy or subject-like character of capital in *Aesthetic Theory*, focusing only on the heteronomous dimension of exchange-value. Elsewhere in Adorno's writings, such as in *Negative Dialectics*, we find reflections on this. Nevertheless, we can draw out the consequences here and say that the autonomous artwork is essentially defined by its resistance to being subjected to capital. The autonomous artwork is a countersubject to capital.

Now, despite all this, Adorno's point is not that art is actually autonomous from its social constitution. Following Marx, he thinks this would be a fetishisation or illusion. But in generating the illusion of autonomy Adorno claims that art criticises the illusion – intensified within a universally commodified culture – that nothing is valuable independently of its exchange value. Therefore art is a self-conscious illusion, or an illusion mobilised to criticise another illusion. But, because of this double illusion, autonomous art must incorporate criticism of itself into itself if it is not to function ideologically, namely, as a stubborn claim to the essentially critical dimension of autonomy. Hence the necessity of autonomous art's anti-artistic or heteronomous dimension, whereby art must criticise its presupposition of received conceptions of autonomous art if it is to avoid suggesting that this autonomy is literally independent of its social constitution, or secured dogmatically or conservatively through tradition. If art's claim to autonomy is to be self-critical it must be achieved through mediation with an anti-artistic or heteronomous dimension.

This self-critical dimension of Adorno's account reveals an aporia of autonomy and heteronomy within the formation of modern art that still resonates profoundly with the dynamics of contemporary art, even where they appear to be removed from Adorno's concerns, as Bourriaud would have us believe. Adorno articulates this aporia as follows:

If art gives up its autonomy [i.e., if it becomes heteronomous], it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for-itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others. The social totality appears in this aporia, swallowing whole whatever occurs.²⁰

If this aporia still constitutes art in capitalist societies, and we have every reason to think it does, it cannot be tackled by the simple pursuit of one or the other of its tendencies. The affirmation of either autonomy or heteronomy needs to be replaced by a dialectical critique of their relationship. Thus, art's autonomy is only constituted critically if it is mediated by its heteronomy, and, as Adorno always maintained of dialectics, this mediation must take place via extremes. It is in the terms of this extreme mediation of art's autonomy with heteronomy that the idea of relational aesthetics is best considered.

HETERONOMY: BOURRIAUD

The critique of relational aesthetics that is proposed here therefore has a dual orientation: (1) the criticism of Bourriaud's idea of relational

20 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, pp 352–3; trans (altered), p 237

aesthetics, rethinking it in terms of the dialectic of commodification and art, heteronomy and autonomy, that we find in Adorno; and (2) the criticism of Adorno's idea of modern art, rethinking it in terms of this transformed idea of relational aesthetics in order to generate a critical theory of contemporary art.

If, as I have suggested, *Relational Aesthetics* is pre-eminently a theory of art as a form of social exchange, then the crucial question that must follow in order to consider its relation to commodification is: how does relational art's form of social exchange relate to the form of capitalist exchange? In other words, how does relational art's form resist the value form? Bourriaud certainly recognises these questions. He acknowledges the affinity of the 'commerce' of art with the 'commerce' of exchange-value, while insisting that they are fundamentally distinct. In aspiration at least, *Relational Aesthetics* sees art as having an essentially critical relation to capitalist culture, defined by its resistance to exchange-value and, at least implicitly, its struggle with subjection to the value form. However, the precise nature of this struggle is indeterminate. Bourriaud describes art's resistance to, or disengagement from, exchange-value as achieved by virtue of the antipathy of its 'own economy' from the 'general economy'.²¹ But how are we to understand this? Mainly it seems, through the subordination of 'aesthetic objects' to 'relations between people' and 'the art object' to 'artistic practice'. At one point, Bourriaud suggests that what is at stake in art's social exchange is 'an exchange whose form is defined by that of the object itself, before being so defined by definitions foreign to it'. However, this seems to merely inflect the general argument that the distinction of the social exchange of *art* from the social exchange of *value* is the dissolution, or at least subordination, of relations to objects to 'relations between people'.

This makes good sense if we think of it as a transposition of Marx's account of commodity fetishism, which is doubtless Bourriaud's intention. Marx opposes the social relations of commodities that are fetishised to the social relations of their producers that are obscured by this fetishism. So, in Marxian terms we can understand *Relational Aesthetics* as arguing that relational artworks involve a refusal of commodity fetishism: a reassertion of social relations between 'persons' *against* social relations between commodities. Whereas Adorno discerns an ironic recuperation of the affinity of art to commodity fetishism, as an immanent critique of the commodity form, Bourriaud interprets the social or non-object-oriented character of relational artworks as the simple negation of social relations between things, and the affirmation of social relations between persons, thereby rejecting Adorno's whole strategy. (Bourriaud pointedly opposes Adorno's aesthetics at several points.) Hence, whereas for Adorno it is the non-communicativeness and enigmatic character of art that make it critical, for Bourriaud it is precisely its communicativeness and transparency.

This non-fetishised space of art underpins the realised utopianism of Bourriaud's account; the sense in which art is a relation of social exchange free from exchange-value. But, if this is an antidote to the residual late bourgeois melancholy of Adorno's defence of art as the 'absolute commodity', it is also prone to its own bad conscience, namely, the extent to which *Relational Aesthetics* collapses art's autonomy *from*

21 '[The work of art] is devoted... right away, to the world of exchange and communication, the world of "commerce", in both meanings of the term. What all goods have in common is the fact that they have a value, that is, a common substance that permits their exchange. This substance, according to Marx, is the "amount of abstract labour" used to produce this item. It is represented by a sum of money, which is the "abstract general equivalent" of all goods between them. It has been said of art, and Marx was the first, that it represents the "absolute merchandise", because it is the actual image of... value. But what exactly are we talking about? About the art object, not about artistic practice, about the work as it is assumed by the general economy, and not its own economy. Art represents a barter activity that cannot be regulated by any currency, or any "common substance". It is the division of meaning in the wild state – an exchange whose form is defined by that of the object itself, before being so defined by definitions foreign to it. The artist's practice, and his behaviour as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his work. In other words, what he produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.' Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, op cit, p 42.

exchange-value, leaving the social exchange of relational art subjected to the dominant social relations of capitalist exchange.

Given this problem, it is notable that Bourriaud does in fact recognise the need for relational art to have a form of autonomy. He describes *Relational Aesthetics* as primarily a theory of form rather than of art, and in the glossary to the book he defines form as: ‘Structural unity imitating world. Artistic practice involves creating a form capable of “lasting”, bringing heterogeneous units together on a coherent level, in order to create a relationship to the world.’²² It is also implicit in his idea of art as a social interstice that disengages from capitalist exchange and forms itself into a realm apart. *Relational Aesthetics* effectively proposes an autonomous art of the social, or rather, an art of social autonomy. In this it continues a deep motivation of romantic and modern aesthetics. But the question remains of how this autonomy is to be achieved, how it disengages from capitalist exchange relations that, Bourriaud does not deny, broadly encompass relational art. In other words, the issue is the nature of relational art’s immanent disengagement or critique of capitalist exchange. Bourriaud has certainly responded to this problem. In *Formes de Vie* he proposes a history of modern art as a reaction to the alienating effects of modernity, and of how the recovery of lived experience from its compartmentalisation and reification becomes a central motivation for modern artists. The idea of relational aesthetics emerges as the outcome of this drive, against the disciplines of particular arts and towards forms that enable the development of subjective relations. More pointedly, in *Postproduction* Bourriaud clarifies the concept of exchange in *Relational Aesthetics* by appealing to a pre-capitalist notion of the ‘market-form’ in which human relations of exchange are not abstracted, as they are within capitalist markets.²³ The broader economic significance of ‘postproduction’ is the consequence of the market becoming omnipresent: art making, viewing, exhibiting, etc. are defined by the manipulation of already marketed elements. The always already givenness of the market establishes a network of relations within global capitalism that the Internet and other informational systems facilitate, rather than simply invent. Postproduction is seen as not just a reflection or reification of this universal marketisation, but a critical use of it to recover the human relations abstracted within it. Again, the insistence on social relations against any objectification is key to Bourriaud’s argument:

When entire sections of our existence spiral into abstraction as a result of economic globalisation, when the basic functions of our daily lives are slowly transformed into products of consumption (including human relations, which are becoming a fully-fledged industrial concern) it seems highly logical that artists might seek to rematerialise these functions and processes, to give shape to what is disappearing before our eyes. *Not as objects, which would be to fall into the trap of reification*, but as mediums of experience: by striving to shatter the logic of the spectacle, art restores the world to us as an experience to be lived. Since the economic system gradually deprives us of this experience, modes of representation must be invented for a reality that is becoming more abstract each day.²⁴

22 Ibid, p 111

23 Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, op cit, p 23

24 Ibid, p 26, emphasis added.

It is striking how much more melancholic this verdict is than those proffered in *Relational Aesthetics*. It is also clear here that Bourriaud fully

recognises the need for an immanent critique of capitalist exchange. Nonetheless, his basic position is the same: social relations contra objects.

This position is compelling, except for some basic problems. Bourriaud claims that relational art is motivated by the experience of lost human relations, but if human relations are indeed encompassed by capitalist relations, is not this experience of a different time a thing of the past? And if not yet, then how long until it is? This is usually seen as Adorno's problem, but it can be contrasted with his conception, since, if the critical dimension of art is located within the commodity form itself, universalised commodification does not, of itself, reduce the critical potential of art. Attending this problem is whether Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics has any response to the compensatory function of art within capitalist culture, namely, the extent to which art is allowed to be an exception within capitalist exchange in order to provide a relief from its alienating effects and quench the desire to overthrow it. Art functions ideologically here precisely by presenting itself as a space that is free from capitalist exchange. The unreflexive affirmation of relational art by Bourriaud does little to address this. This is partly an issue of the emphasis on conviviality rather than antagonism. But proposing antagonism as simply an alternative form of freedom or democracy only reproduces the problem. In any case, the issue is not just the internal social relations of art, but how it relates to capitalist exchange as, supposedly, something outside it.

However, the pivotal problem with Bourriaud's account is his undialectical affirmation of the social contra objects as the key to art's resistance to capitalist exchange. Although this is in superficial accord with Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, it makes a common but decisive error. Bourriaud contends that 'objects' are the 'trap of reification', and that this trap can be avoided by affirming social relations. But to say this is to be already trapped. Marx is emphatic:

... the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things.²⁵

Capitalist exchange value is not constituted at the level of objects, but of social labour, as a measure of abstract labour. It is the commodification of labour that constitutes the value of 'objective' commodities. To think that the source of value is in the object-commodity is precisely the error that Marx calls fetishism. Bourriaud partakes of a common form of political fetishism which thinks that the eradication of the 'objectivity' of the commodity eradicates capitalist exchange. This ironic fetishism also leads to erroneous claims that the service economy or postindustrial society has led to some basic transformation in the value-form. If anything, here the commodification of labour is more immediate and explicit. If we avoid this fetishism, we are stripped of any delusions that the simple affirmation of the social within capitalist societies is critical of capitalist exchange; it simply draws attention to the social constitution

25 Marx, *Das Kapital*, op cit, p 86; trans (altered), p 165

of capitalist exchange, exposing it directly. There is no freedom from capitalist exchange here, merely the confrontation with it, face to face.

Bourriaud's fetishism of the social produces an inversion of his critical claims for relational aesthetics. His realised utopianism echoes with the commodified friendship of customer services. For all his claims to the novelty of the idea of relational aesthetics, it is a reapplication of Romanticism. Art is conceived as an immediate form of non-capitalist life. But without an account of what mediates relational art's disengagement from capitalist life, it is helplessly reversible, obviously occupying the other side of capitalism's coin. *Postproduction's* melancholic and atavistic appeals to the original market-form are symptomatic of the typical ideologies of romantic anti-capitalism. Without an immanent critique of the capitalist formation of life, dreams of an alternative are prone to be harmless or unwittingly mimetic. The Romantic's conception of an aesthetic form of life, which induced an abstraction of life, was radically transformed by the value form diagnosed by Marx. Indifference to this transformation has cruelly mocked the good intentions of socialist aesthetics ever since.

The ironies of art's relation to commodification often leave Bourriaud's interpretations of so-called relational works wanting. He frequently seems blind to their commodified and objectified form. For instance, he endorses Vanessa Beecroft's use of people in her works as emphasising art as a form



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992, Installation view, 303 Gallery, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York

of social encounter.²⁶ But to consider her works as a social interstice disengaged from capitalist exchange is comic. Beecroft's works are little more than a mass ornament of readily commodifiable bodies. They have few resources to *détourner* the spectacle they luxuriate in. Less glaring instances would include Félix González-Torres's 'stacks' or 'candy spills'. Bourriaud discusses the relation of social responsibility in the visitor's breaking up of the work.²⁷ We might elaborate Bourriaud's claims here. Thus, *Untitled (USA Today)* consists of three hundred pounds of sweets wrapped in bright shiny red, blue and white or silver wrappers, heaped in a corner. The audience is free to take the sweets. It contradicts the taboo on touching art, let alone eating it. The work is not just the object – for instance, the sculptural form of the pile of sweets – but the social process by which they are taken and consumed. The work is therefore literally dissolved into social interaction, in line with the basic premises of *Relational Aesthetics*. But this is hardly a simple realm apart from capitalist exchange. The allusion to American consumerism is apparent in the kitsch character of the sweets and their colouring, as well as in the title's reference to the saccharine news provided by the US daily, *USA Today*. Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)*, first installed in the 303 Gallery in New York in 1992, would be another instance. In this work Tiravanija moved the unseen rooms of the gallery into the public viewing spaces, including the business office, the packing and distribution materials and various other facilities. The director of the gallery and assistants therefore had to work on display in the central gallery, while Tiravanija cooked Thai curry that was offered to gallery visitors. Thus, the social relations that go into the gallery's business are put on show, together with the convivial offer of food and a chat from the artist and whoever else is around. Social relations that are usually hidden or subordinate to 'the work' become foregrounded, become the work. What appears insubstantial and careless is actually a way of focusing attention on these social relations. A stronger sense of social interstice is apparent here, perhaps. However, the social relations that this work exposes are ultimately those that go into the gallery functioning as a seller of commodities. These are not disengaged from but merely brought out into the open. Stripping away the fetishism of the work leads to an encounter with the social relations of commodification. And is not the food and drink offered here, as at many of Tiravanija's shows, among the most basic and naturalised of social relations, an ordinary myth of social needs, social relations degree zero? When one is not distracted by conversation, the absence of a work leads one's eyes inevitably to the packaging of commodified food and drink.

These slippages or reversals are pervasive in many so-called relational artworks. So much so that it becomes apparent that the limitations of Bourriaud's conception of relational aesthetics are also limitations in his account of these works. The problematic status of these works in Bourriaud's terms can be reinterpreted far more convincingly in terms of a dialectical theory of commodification and art. The ambivalence of González-Torres and Tiravanija can be seen as a precise presentation of the contradictions of an art of social exchange; not so much a micro-utopia but as an immanent critique of capitalist exchange relations. The title of one of Tiravanija's shows might function as a more telling characterisation of relational aesthetics: *Das Soziale Kapital*. Another artist who is of particular interest in this context would be Santiago Sierra,

26 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, op cit, p 39

27 Ibid

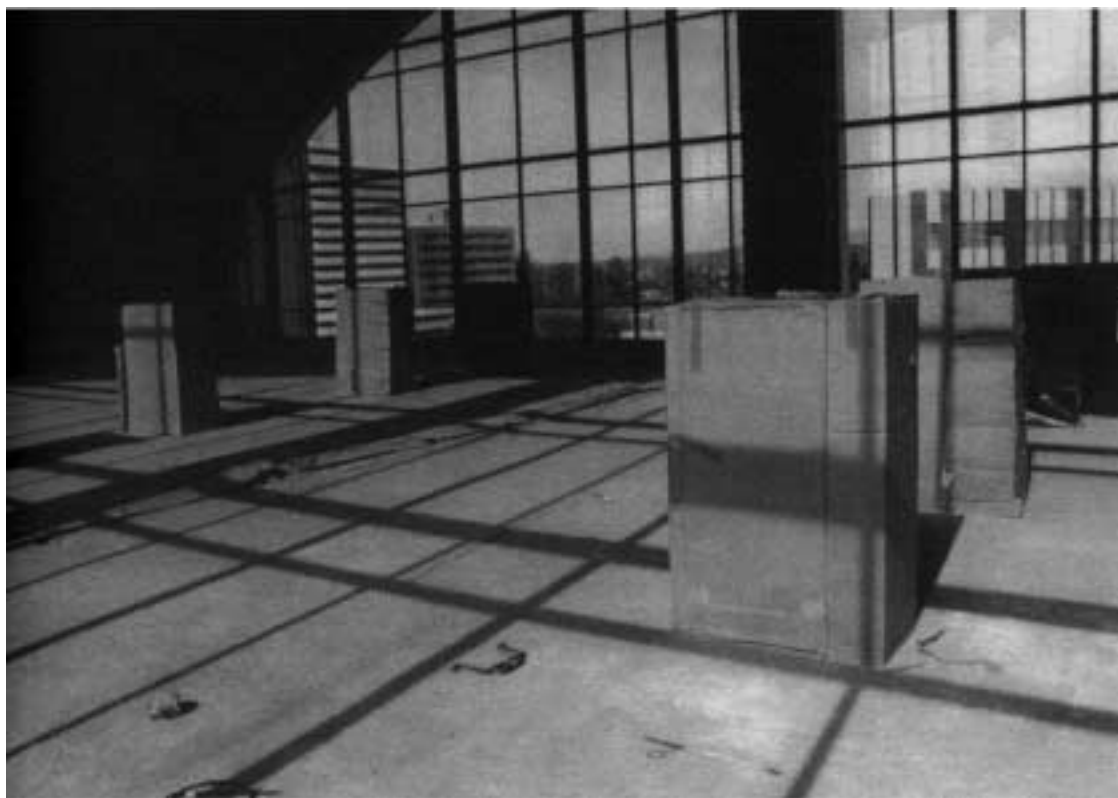
who is not discussed in *Relational Aesthetics*, although this may be due to the timing of his transition to using people in his works. In these works, people are often employed in the most explicitly commodified and instrumentalised forms. The itemisation of the money paid to people for each work is an integral component. For instance, for *Eight people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes*, C&G Building, Guatemala City, August 1999, we are given the following list of materials:

On the top floor of a semi occupied office building, situated in the industrial zone of Guatemala City, eight boxes of residual cardboard were made and installed separated from each other at equal distances. Eight chairs were placed next to these boxes. A public offer for work was carried out, asking for people willing to remain seated inside the boxes for four hours, receiving 100 quetzales, about 9 dollars. After obtaining a considerable response from the workers, they were placed in the boxes at noon and they came out at three o'clock, an hour less than the planned schedule due to the excruciating heat. The public did not see the workers when they were placed in the boxes.²⁸

This piece was re-created at the ACE Gallery in New York in, March 2000. Here:

28 Eckhard Schneider, ed, *Santiago Sierra: 300 Tons and Previous Works*, Walter König, Cologne, 2004, p 122

The workers remained four hours a day over a period of fifty days. The majority of them were black women or of Mexican origin. They were



Santiago Sierra, *8 Personas Remuneradas Para Permanecer En El Interior De Cajas De Cartón*, Edificio G & T Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala, Agosto de 1999, *8 People Paid To Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, G & T Building, Guatemala City, Guatemala, August 1999. Photo courtesy of the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich, © Santiago Sierra

hired through a government employment agency and received the minimum wage per hour specified by state law, which is 10 dollars. To avoid claims for the working conditions, as a result of being locked up for four consecutive hours, the contract declared them as extras for a show since the legislation is permissive in that case. The workers changed during the fifty days, many quit while others took their places or some did not show up to work leaving their chairs and boxes empty.²⁹

These and other works by Sierra are an anomaly for Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics. They are a relational art that is *not* a social interstice apart from commodification. They dissolve the fetishism of the artwork, but only into the commodification of labour that produces it. They are an art of social exchange mediated by money. Only Bourriaud's darkest reflections on the transition from a society of the spectacle to a society of extras correspond to these works by Sierra.

Whereas Adorno seeks the critical force of art through the radicalisation of its *fetishism against exchange*, Bourriaud seeks it through the radicalisation of its social *exchange against fetishism*. Between them we can discern a dialectic of art's relation to commodification, a dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy. In so far as relational art is still considered as needing to be autonomous from society – from capitalist societies – it does not stand outside this dialectic as a purely heteronomous position. *Relational Aesthetics* is no more a simple break from this problem of modernist art than *Aesthetic Theory* is simply outmoded. In their mediation we can discern a more adequate critical theory of contemporary art.

THE PROBLEM OF A POST-CONCEPTUAL ART OF THE SOCIAL

In order to render this critical theory of relational art more historically concrete and consider the covert genealogy that has contributed to the timeliness of *Relational Aesthetics*, it is necessary to consider its relation to the broad attempt to overcome the crisis of a modern art of the social that developed around Conceptual Art – although, in key respects, this crisis was already precipitated by controversies surrounding Minimalism. At the heart of Fried's critique of Minimalism – or 'literalism' as he prefers to call it – in his seminal essay, 'Art and Objecthood', lies the claim that: 'the experience of literalist art is of an object in a *situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder...*'³⁰ If this characterises the decay of art into objecthood, the salvation of art is achieved through the dissolution of the artwork's objecthood into non-literal modalities, such as opticality, which Fried derives from Greenberg: 'matter is rendered incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage'.³¹ Art is understood as a self-conscious illusion, transfiguring its actuality in order to withdraw from the everyday space and time of the viewer and enter a space and time of its own. Famously, Fried's objections were turned into virtues in the attempt to render the relation of the viewer or audience to the artwork the principal matter of art, rather than the artwork itself, in any more independent sense.

We can discern a dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy at stake in this dispute over Minimalism; a sense in which it presents an unconscious transposition of the dialectic of subjection induced by art's relation to

29 Ibid, p 114

30 Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London, 1998, p 153

31 Ibid, p 161. This is a quotation taken from Greenberg's 'The New Sculpture'.

exchange value. Art becomes an issue of whether its social situation destroys or transforms its autonomy, and the autonomy or heteronomy of the social therefore becomes pivotal to art. We can interpret a critique of social heteronomy in Fried's critique of theatricality: art is not subjected to viewers as *their* object, but considered as if it were itself a subject, autonomous, which viewers are required to experience through absorption, that is, through their subjection to art. Fried's position would hereby correspond to the critique of art's subjection to its heteronomous determination by capitalist social exchange, with Minimalism rendered the agent of exchange value. But it bears no less of a correspondence to a fetishism of art, akin to a fetishism of commodities, in which autonomous subjectivity is preserved for art and to which people/viewers are subjected/absorbed. The experience of art is revealed as an experience of subjection to the commodity form. To this extent, Minimalism functions as a criticism of commodity fetishism. Adorno's aporia is blindly reproduced here. Its reiteration might be stated as a double-bind or unintended consequence of Minimalism. If we see Fried's defence of art's autonomy as a fetishisation of it, as if it were a subject, treating it with the ethical relations we should have with real people and then, conversely, if we dissolve the artwork into its social relations, do we not dissolve our respect for this autonomy with it, resulting in social relations that have been instrumentalised?

Relational Aesthetics is a new theory of art's theatricality, affirming it and radicalising its consequences. Bourriaud sees relational art as generating an inter-subjective space that not only incorporates the beholder, but also reduces the art object to this incorporation in ways that exceed Minimalism's persistent interest in the object.³² But, whatever the virtues of a radicalised post-Minimalism as a critique of commodity fetishism, it remains entwined in a double-bind and prone to ironic inversion. This is explicit in various relational works. If this is veiled in Beecroft's aestheticism, it is laid bare in Sierra's brutalism. In these works the re-direction of our attention from objects to subjects does not produce a space of inter-subjective conviviality, but the instrumental commodification of labour that social exchange can be reduced to in capitalist societies. Art is stripped of its aura of free association and acts out a tragedy: the utopian conception of art, that we should relate to it as if it were another person, is realised in dystopian form, sweating in a cardboard box on a minimum wage. Neo-formalist objections to ethical judgements of relational art reheat the traditional notion of art's autonomy from morality and miss the point. An altogether distinct politicisation of form is at stake here. Form is rendered a modality of subjection to capital.

Bourriaud's indifference to these contradictions may well derive from the polemical exigencies of pursuing the emancipatory potential of relational art. But to grant this is also to draw attention to *Relational Aesthetics* as an attempt to overcome the crisis of a modern art of the social that these contradictions produced in the post-Minimalist practices of the late 1960s and 1970s, especially Conceptual Art and, in particular, its fostering of an art of institutional critique. These practices came to recognise that, if the subtraction of attention from the art object sought to refuse its fetishism – and the commodification that this implied – then focusing on the social space and experience of the audience exposed the terms of its own commodification. The solution or strategy of institutional

32 Bourriaud refers to Fried's theory of theatricality explicitly as a model for relational aesthetics in his discussion of Félix González-Torres. See *Relational Aesthetics*, p 59.

critique, practised by the likes of Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers, was to make the critique of art's social conditions the principal objective of art. This produced an autonomous art of the social in a critical but also negative form. In order to prevent art functioning as a compensation for, or mask of, the instrumentalisation of social relations, the social was only presented negatively, through exposing how it is disciplined by the ideological forms of the art institution. Art's autonomy was thereby reduced to the critique of art's autonomy. Hence, the avant-garde project of an art of the social that would dissolve art into life was preserved negatively, through art's self-criticism. This strategy of institutional critique more or less consciously sought to sustain an avant-garde utopia of the social as the revolutionary realisation of art in a non-capitalist life. An autonomous art of the social was only the preparation or surrogate for a dissolution of art into social autonomy. The dream of realising art in life would be sustained by imposing a taboo on the dissolution of this dream into art.

Negative utopianism is essential to institutional critique's anticipation of a social autonomy beyond art. If this dimension is lost, it immediately decays into institutional narcissism. The taboo ceases to function critically and merely mimics the art institution's alienation of social autonomy. This reversibility of institutional critique has in many respects provided a regulative riddle for critical art since. Whether it is to return art to an ornament of capitalist culture, or strengthen its relation to a social autonomy beyond it, overcoming the taboo on presenting the social has become a central task of contemporary art. *Relational Aesthetics* pursues precisely this task, but indifferent to the contradictions of art's heteronomy and autonomy within capitalist culture. Relational art has made the mimesis of the social non-art into the heteronomous condition of art's autonomy. Bourriaud's declared indifference to the distinction of art and non-art is symptomatic of a radicalisation of social heteronomy as the condition of possibility of art.³³ The entrenchment of relational art in the exhibition form and the dissembling strategies of today's artworld testify to this.

As a new theory of art's theatricality, *Relational Aesthetics* and relational art should be seen in opposition to Jeff Wall's conception and practice of art-photography, which is revealing itself as a new case for Fried's defence of absorption. Wall's critique of the taboo on the social in Conceptual Art provided the prelude for an alternative elaboration of an autonomous art of the social.³⁴ He has argued that the self-critical reflection of photography in its use by Conceptual artists generated the reflexivity necessary for it to emerge as an autonomous form, but without excluding reference to the social in the way that modernist painting and sculpture tended to. 'Photography about photography' retains its representation of the social through its indexical exposure to the world outside it. Autonomous art-photography pictures social heteronomy. This alignment of Wall and Bourriaud, art-photography and relational art, may seem counter-intuitive, but their differences are internal to a post-Conceptual affirmation of the social within art: Wall, through a recovery of pictorialism against literalism; Bourriaud, the reverse. This distinction has tended to save Wall from criticisms aimed at *Relational Aesthetics*. Wall's pictures often engage in the reification of social life in ways that some relational art seems naive about. In turn, this has generated criticisms of the pantomime-effect of Wall's pictures, in which

33 Ibid, pp 30–1

34 For Jeff Wall's critique of the suppression of social content in Conceptual Art, see *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* (1985), Art Metropole, Toronto, 1991. For his outline of art-photography as a solution, see "Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975*, eds Goldstein and Rorimer, MIT Press, London–Cambridge, MA, 1995, pp 247–67.



Pierre Huyghe, *Chantier Barbès-Rochecouart*, 1994/1996, Billboard and offset printed poster 80 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris and New York

people are presented by the performance of people. The taboo on the social content of art has continued to haunt Wall. Pierre Huyghe's *Billboards* dramatise the picturing of social relations in Wall's art-photography of everyday life. Actors perform a scene in response to the location of a billboard, which is then photographed and pasted onto the billboard. A confrontation is generated between the space of the picture and the space of its situation, outside of the museum that Wall has been so keen to occupy. This confrontation is then re-photographed and exhibited, reincorporating this drama into a picture. These works present a point of indifference between relational art and art-photography.

Relational art and art-photography may well be setting the terms of debate over what form a critical art of the social can take today. As such they share a far-reaching desire to overcome the taboo on affirming the social in art. But this taboo is not only a 'reinvention of defeatism', as Wall has said of the politics of Conceptual Art.³⁵ It also recognises the alienation of social relations within capitalist culture. Attempts to eradicate it

without eradicating what caused it are liable just to suppress the problem and function ideologically. Wall and Bourriaud share the repression of defeat. Overcoming the alienation of social relations in art remains bound to a political project of anti-capitalism. Such a project requires that a critique of the dialectics of social exchange in capitalist culture should be at the heart of any critical theory or practice of contemporary art worth the name.

This article derives from a paper presented to the conference, 'ISMS: Recuperating Political Radicality in Contemporary Art: Constructing the Political' (organized by the Office for Contemporary Art, Norway and the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Middlesex University) held in Oslo, 20–21 April 2006. It has also been published in the proceedings of that conference: *ISMS: Recuperating Political Radicality in Contemporary Art: 1. Constructing the Political*, Verksted series no 8, eds Marta Kuzma and Peter Osborne, Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo, 2007.
