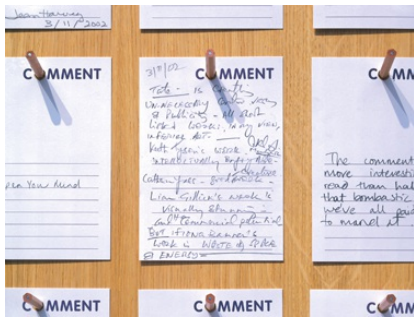


Observer: Strained Relations



Scott Williams and Henrik Kubel of A2/SW/HK, who designed the space, applied graphics, and print campaign for the Tate Britain's Turner Prize Exhibition, 2006, created a room where visitors could write comments on cards and hang them on the wall to complete the design.

Summary

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What should “relational aesthetics” mean to graphic designers?

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About the Author

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Jan van Toorn: *Critical Practice* (010 Publishers).

More "Observer" columns

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[Not Dead Yet](#)

by [Rick Poyner](#)

The French curator and writer Nicolas Bourriaud’s book *Relational Aesthetics* is the most influential work of art criticism to appear in the past decade. First published in 1998 and translated into English in 2002, it’s a fashionable art-world bestseller that can be found in any gallery bookshop. Bourriaud defines “relational aesthetics” as a theory that judges art-works “on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt.” Relational art, he says, concerns itself with “the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”—by which he seems to mean the private space of both the artist and the viewer.

The work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, a Thai artist based in New York and Berlin, is often given as an example of relational art. Tiravanija creates events in galleries where he cooks and gives away food (Thai curries, for example) to anyone who wants to join in and eat. The art lies not in the formal or material aspects of the occasion, but in the interactions and relationships that spontaneously occur between the artist and the people who take part. It offers the consolation of “everyday microtopias” where it is possible to find pleasurable moments of sociability free from the manipulations of the highly commercialized public sphere. As Bourriaud writes, “Meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention thus represent, today, aesthetic objects likely to be looked at as such.”

It was only a matter of time before designers and design critics started wondering whether relational aesthetics might be applied in some way to graphic design. In 2006, the British writers Monika Parrinder and Colin Davies, founders of the website Limited Language, argued in *Eye* magazine that the central ideas of relational aesthetics can “open up a broader way of thinking about communication and the effects of its

dissemination in the world.” It was a brave attempt, but not entirely convincing. While it is possible to find graphic design projects that offer some degree of interactivity or draw people into a relationship with a space, projects that promote social relationships between people are rare. Parrinder and Davies cite a room at Tate Britain in London—designed by the UK studio A2/SW/HK—where visitors to the annual Turner Prize exhibition could write their comments about the art on cards and hang them on the wall. They claim that this is “more than a simple method of feedback; it is about meeting and creating a live community.” Fascinating as these cards were to read, I saw no evidence that they had the power to cause complete strangers to break into debate about art or anything else.

Relational aesthetics is at root a political idea—Bourriaud describes how the relationship between people is “symbolised by goods or replaced by them, and signposted by logos.” Clearly, this is a world shaped by design. Today, he suggests, we are presented with the “illusion of an interactive democracy in more or less truncated channels of communication.” Thus, you can write your opinion on the wall at Tate Britain, but it has no influence on the selection process for the prize, or the jury’s decision about the winner. Participation is an illusion. The system, controlled by the curators, continues much as it always did.

Difficulties also arise in a recent Design Observer blog post by Andrew Blauvelt, head of design at the Walker Art Center. Blauvelt argues ambitiously that, after design’s formal and semantic phases, we are now in a third phase of modern design history, which is relationally based and contextually specific. Blauvelt must have known that his title, “Towards Relational Design,” would immediately bring to mind Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics for some readers (Parrinder and Davies imply the term, but don’t use it), but nowhere in his article does he explain the connections or differences. When questioned about this in a comment, Blauvelt replied that although he is very aware of relational aesthetics, he “chose not to ‘go there’ because it doesn’t offer a comprehensive enough theory that could possibly bridge the divide between contemporary art culture and specific design practices.”

In that case, we might ask, why use the term “relational” at all, especially when this new usage also risks confusion with relational database design, a well-established term in computing? In fact, Blauvelt’s rather abstract description of relational design—the most detailed example in his post concerns vacuum cleaners rather than graphics—does suggest areas of thinking in common with Bourriaud. Blauvelt, too, is for real-world settings rather than unattainable utopias. Noting the influence of digital developments such as interactivity, open source collaboration, and social networking, he focuses on design’s performative and participatory aspects and its “ability to facilitate social interactions.”

The art writer Claire Bishop, a critic of relational

aesthetics, has pointed out its supporters' tendency to assume that any encounter that permits social interaction, regardless of its content, must be inherently democratic, without showing how these encounters are valuable. "If relational art produces human relations," she writes, "then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?"

That question is even more trenchant and pressing when it comes to graphic design as a medium of public communication, for the reasons Bourriaud indicates. Yet Blauvelt doesn't address these essentially political issues, preferring upbeat but vague allusions to "open-ended rather than closed systems" and "connected ecologies," even as he acknowledges that the public is viewed instrumentally (by commercial organizations) as a social entity to be "exhaustively data-mined and geodemographically profiled." Here, "relational" starts to sound like a euphemism for ever more subtle forms of social monitoring and control. If this is the era of relational design and if graphic design really is a part of it, then Bishop's clear-sighted question—what types of relations, for whom, and why?—remains the one we need to answer.

Reader Comments
