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Human Interaction

Timothy Hicks

ART 525: Art History Seminar

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My essay addresses the theme of relational aesthetics and community by focusing specifically on Rirkrit Tiravanija's performative installation titled *Untitled (Free)*, (1992). In Tiravanija's work, these themes are conveyed and contextualized by the location of the exhibition of the installation. I am addressing Nicolas Bourriaud's definition of relational aesthetics, in which case, I disagree with his non-political views of art. As Bourriaud argues, "[t]he artwork of the 1990s turns the beholder into a neighbor, a direct interlocutor. It is precisely the attitude of this generation toward communications that makes it possible to define it in relation to previous generations."¹ I believe it is important when viewing performative artwork that the individual tries to retain an impartial position. In doing so, the viewer is better able to fully engage with the work and see it for what it is and the message that is being portrayed. If the viewer were to approach the work with a presumptuous stance, the message would be blurred and the intention would be lost. I do, however, agree with Bourriaud's ideas of aesthetics in relation to the work of Tiravanija. In this way I will explain my views of relational aesthetics, which I find problematic. The political expression in *Untitled (Free)* can be viewed by Tiravanija's showcase of a disenfranchised socio-economic class. As a work incorporating both performance and installation, the viewer's participation is very important to the piece.

Tiravanija transformed the space in New York's 303 Gallery into an insightful dwelling with a makeshift kitchen, refrigerator, hot plates, rice steamers, vegetable curry, tables, and chairs. The structure is covered from floor to ceiling in wood and throughout the space there are also wooden frames that appear to mimic walls. This edifice is the

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002), 43.

groundwork and a type of neutral zone for the participants to fully engage. When walking into the gallery, the audience is first confronted by this simplistic approach to space. They are then given a bowl of rice and Thai vegetable curry. After that, they are invited to sit down or move around the exhibition area freely. From there, it is up to them whether or not they decide to engage with other viewers. The refrigerator and stovetop are also present in the space to physically show that the food is being freshly made by Tiravanija as a kind of live performative engagement.

The subject is strongly political, due to the fact that people of a higher social standing were the ones viewing the 1992 show and the performance required their participation in the context of a minimal, lower-status environment. In art, this subject matter is frequently echoed in the incorporation of the non-traditional proletariat figure which can be traced to Eduoard Manet's late-nineteenth century subjects and to the Russian Proletkult (1917) subjects as well. Tiravanija's work is similar in objective, although he wanted to make his work about the viewers and their personal interactions with each other and within the space. In the performance of *Untitled (Free)*, food is handed to the viewers when they first walk in. One might see the show as being about providing this simple meal when in fact, it is about much more. The bowl of rice and Thai curry is a catalyst for the main purpose of the work: human interaction, which is the part that actually follows Bourriard's theory. Tiravanija uses his work as an extension of the minimalist aesthetic to create a performative engagement between the artist and the viewer, which I argue is equal parts aesthetics and politics.

Bourriaud makes a compelling argument and has strong support for an art that is no longer political and serves strictly an aesthetic function:

“What they do share together is much more decisive, to wit, the fact of operating within one and the same practical and theoretical horizon: the sphere of inter-human relations. Their work involves methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her, and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together. So they are all working within what we might call the relational sphere, which is today’s art what mass production was to Pop Art and Minimal Art.”²

I believe Bourriaud’s statement from his book to be very true. It is very much about the audience’s active engagement with the artwork as well as their connection to each other.

Bourriaud’s relational sphere is not new but follows the ideas of Donald Judd, an artist who was mainly associated with the Minimalist movement. In his famous 1965 essay “Specific Objects,” Judd mentions how compositional relationships are important. He stated that, “the composition must react to the edges and the rectangle must be unified, but the shape of the rectangle is not stressed; the parts are more important and the relationships of color and form occur among them.”³ The space that Tiravanija creates with the wooden structure can therefore be seen as a metaphor for a blank canvas. The food, people, and interactions that take place can be looked at as the line, color, and composition. Art, more specifically minimal or literal art, utilizes these concepts to the fullest in order for the viewer to understand the emotion or meaning of the work. By making the audience a literal part of the artwork, Tiravanija is forcing the viewer to fully

² Ibid.

³ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook*, Vol.8 (1965).181.

engage and become enveloped in the work. If a component of the installation were to be in a place that emphasized too much visual weight on the viewer, the intended message would not be received. In the planning of an installation work, like any other artwork, visual tension and balance is key. That balance is what makes an artwork successful, allowing the viewer to be visually engulfed in what is happening around them. This is especially true for installation work like *Untitled (Free)* due to the fact that it is strictly interaction-based.

The performative aspect is a strong component of Tiravanija's work. It is a feature that is important to the objectives of minimalism. Much of minimalistic work, especially installation/performative work relies on the elements of performance to help convey the artist's intentions. Because the aspects or features are usually limited in a minimal work, the performance becomes a large component of the work; even if that means the work is simply displayed for the audience to walk around. Art critic Michael Fried explains that "something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it *seriously* - and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being *aware* of it and, so to speak, in acting accordingly."⁴ Performance artwork is very much about the viewer's interaction and recognition of the work. Much in the way that Fried explained, performance is a medium that requires deep contemplation. A collection of interactions develop within each viewer's mind as well as within the space of the installation itself. In this performance piece, the viewer is actually the "actor" in whatever role s/he chooses.

Although *Untitled (Free)* is a strong piece that deals with relational aesthetics, it is

⁴ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", in *Art and Theory 1900-2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 839.

also very much about politics. The idea of showcasing a lower-class social setting puts the economically-advantaged viewer in an unfamiliar place. Many individuals may not know what it is like to frequent a soup kitchen or inhabit an otherwise barren space. Tiravanija places the audience in a situation where they may become uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Some viewers engage more than others, acting as commentary for our society. There are those who may have a hazy perception of what a difficult life in a low social classification may be like. This exhibition puts them in that situation and allows them to open up to a different world. In my own engagement with the work, I saw a squatter's paradise since I understood it from my own lower economic experience. The installation images of the exhibition appear to show a variety of citizens engaging in a meal and in friendly conversation. To me, this is a breath of fresh air and relevant to those afraid of becoming that stereotypical "starving artist." Even in the context of the photograph from the show, there is an embedded political essence.

The push and push of relational aesthetics and politics is an intriguing combination to use in the development of the artwork. It brings up many different views and philosophical outlooks on a situation. Art critic Paul Ardenne discussed the situation in this way:

“For Tiravanija, what we should look to is to flip the side of this complaint about the victory of time and its corollaries—the subjugation of the individual to the order of things and ontological defeat; in other words, to life as possibility and the time to come as a promise.”⁵

Untitled (Free) is very much about enjoying the present and freezing the moment in time

⁵ Paul Ardenne, “Review,” *Artpress*, (March 2005). 74.

to enjoy the company of others and simply indulge in the basic necessities of human beings.

Oftentimes, the parallels between financial success and poverty are few and far between. Those who enjoy financial security seem to spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about their economic prospects in the future. Meanwhile, those who reside in a lower economic situation, such as struggling artists, appear to spend more time thinking about their immediate financial situation in the present. And while this latter demographic invests a tremendous amount of worry into inelastic financial needs, even those more financially secure are able to relate to financial stress due to the elastic desires they've grown accustomed to. This financial bind is a correlating factor for all individuals who participate in society. I believe that the conceptualization of money can actually help to bring a society together and can potentially help to form a community. This may not always be true, but as I have said before, Tiravanija puts the viewers in a situation of time suspension to fully engage their individual consciousness and feel the "present" of the community and those around them. A type of situation like this brings people together and fuels the need for inter-human relationships; hence, bringing people together in a community type of setting.

Ardenne also had another interesting point in his article: "There's another, equally problematic aspect of Tiravanija's work worth remarking on while we're at it: its irrepressible desire to be pleasing."⁶ This is an interesting point that Ardenne brings up because in order for a work like Tiravanija's to be successful, it needs to be pleasing, which reveals the cynicism of the art world. The minimalistic nature of the work gives

⁶ Ibid.

the viewer very little to engage with visually. Therefore, the elements of the work need to be a cohesive unit in order for the message to read correctly. I also feel that in order for *Untitled (Free)* to be a community engagement, it needed to have elements that different viewers would see as successful. In this case, the pleasing nature of the visual elements play an effective role in engaging the viewers' visual consciousness.

Most importantly, the avant-gardism of art was always political, and in this way, Tiravanija's work can be seen as something that is echoed from the past. For example, Manet was an early avant-gardist who initiated political issues. *The Ragpicker* (1865–1870), depicts a homeless man wearing torn clothes which was not the norm for painting subjects in nineteenth-century painting. Painters usually depicted what the audience wanted. Marcel Duchamp, like Manet, did not follow the norm and he often incited confrontation with his viewers: "The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation; through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale."⁷ *Untitled (Free)* takes after Duchamp's ideas, focusing on the subject of the viewer and how s/he views the work. The audience determines the outcome of the exhibition and how successful the outcome may be. "The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."⁸ What Tiravanija has done is simply set the foundation and environment for an artistic experience to take place. Strangers interacting with one another and engaging in conversation is what the artist was

⁷ Marcel Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Phaidon, 1975), 140.

⁸ Ibid.

after. This minimalist concept is much like Duchamp's sense of using a literal object in order for a message to be received.

Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* can be seen as both a minimalistic artwork dealing with relational aesthetics and community. Again, I agree with Bourriaud's ideas and concepts of aesthetics but I disagree with him that performance no longer deals with politics. Clearly, the work of Tiravanija is largely dealing with political content, including the hierarchy within social and economic class systems. This work deals with ideologies of community in the sense that it is about people coming together and interacting with one another. But on the other hand, a community must deal with the problems of the upper class and the lower class, such that Duchamp had initiated with his iconic *Fountain* (1917). He was taking something that could be seen as the lowest form of a manufactured object and made it into something considered to be high-class artwork. This can also be seen as an example of the upper-class experiencing something from the lower-class. The message of Tiravanija's work can be seen as another example of the lowest social class looked down upon and criticized by those of higher socio-economic standing. The work of art today can still shed light on the fact that we, as a society, need to address problems of social class and come together as a community.

