Activism vs. Antagonism:

Socially-Engaged Art from Bourriaud to Bishop and Beyond

Abstract

This paper aims to reinvigorate a debate between two seemingly opposed approaches of socially engaged art. In the first part, I will examine Nicholas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics" in light of Clair Bishop's influential criticism that it rewards artistic activism for its own sake, independently of its aesthetic merit. I then turn this "normative critique" against Bishop's alternative account of aesthetic antagonism and argue, conversely, that provocation is not an aesthetic virtue in itself, but is subject to ethical analysis. Drawing on several works of contemporary performance art, I argue further that the prevailing theoretical tendency toward antagonistic poses a far more serious concern in its aesthetic defense of ethically problematic art.

Where once the socio-political clout of art seemed hemmed in by fashionable theories of aesthetic formalism, today's artist is engaged in a variety of practices bearing little resemblance to traditional artistic mediums. Where once the disenchanted modernist stood ready to safeguard the aesthetic from the corrupting encroachments of a market-driven culture industry, today's artist is all too eager to venture deeply into the waters of political activism, social engagement, public dialogue. And, where the critic's purview was once limited to those objects designated as art by the sanctioned space of the museum or the gallery, today's critic must contend with the proposition that art is activity, taking the form of shared meals, literacy workshops, community gardens and the like. Accordingly, this shift in contemporary art has led many critics to ask, in one form or another: Where is the art? How do I interpret and evaluate this activity *as art*?

The concept of "relational aesthetics," introduced in Nicolas Bourriaud's eponymously titled book,[1] was an initial and influential attempt to theorize the so-called "social turn" in artistic practices. In this brief but ambitious exposition, Bourriaud's account of relational aesthetics was both descriptive, responding to the proliferation of artworks in the 1990s that sought to enable various forms of social relations, as well as prescriptive, advocating an expanded conception of the artwork beyond the largely commercialized, object-centered ontology of art that preceded it. Yet, while the scope of artistic practices has in the meantime expanded to include "participatory," "activist," "post-production," "community-based," or "dialogical," art, philosophically there remains both considerable confusion about, as well as a dominant resistance to, what we might broadly refer to as "socially engaged" art.

A commonly accepted narrative among artworld literati is that this "arty party" (as Hal Foster's notoriously dubbed it) came to a close when art criticism arrived on the scene to shed some sobering light on relational aesthetics' uncritical valorization of social participation in art. Standing at the light switch is Claire Bishop, who argues that the expansion of relational art is all well and good except that, in Bourriaud's account, anyway, "the *quality* of the relationships in relational aesthetics' are never examined or called into question."[2] Notably, Bishop does not address the (already questionable) ontology of relational aesthetics itself. Instead,

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[1] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Collection Documents Sur L'art (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002).

[2] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, January 1, 2004, p. 65, doi:10.1162/0162287042379810. She develops this criticism in a more recent publication: Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012). However, as I will touch on below, her position shifts considerably in the book from her original criticism.

she seizes on the normative deficiency of Bourriaud's account: it doesn't tell us how to evaluate such relations *as art*?

Although the work of artists such as Rikrit Tiravanija, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Gabriel Orozco, Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, Maurizio Cattelan, and numerous others, has largely maintained, if not pronounced, its character as relational or socially-engaged art, this critique—call it the *normative critique*—has given way to an alternative conception of " relation antagonism," which champions disruption and confrontation as aesthetic ideals. My aim here is not to discount the significance of aesthetic antagonism, but to show that it is no less subject to normative critique. Granting Bishop's concern that socially engaged art "has become largely exempt from art criticism," we can likewise insist that antagonistic art not exempt itself from social and ethical criticism, that the aesthetic is inextricably, even if problematically, bound up with the ethical. Nor is my aim to defend Bourriaud's account of relational aesthetics (indeed, I have my own reservations about it). Instead, I wish to defend more generally a conception of socially-engaged art in which the complex interface of sociality, politics, ethics, and aesthetics serves as a catalyst, rather than an obstacle, to the critical evaluation of art.

Relational Aesthetics in Detail

The ontological claim of relational aesthetics seeks, above all, to expand the definitional limits of art beyond the material object to include the set of human relations occasioned by the production and reception of art. Its "theoretical horizon," as Bourriaud puts it in characteristically opaque prose, is "the realm of

human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space."[3] Instead of a singular, discrete object, the work of art is conceived as "a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum."[4] Thus, when Rikrit Tiravanija sets up a pop-up kitchen at the Venice Biennale, or when Felix Gonzeles-Torres invites viewers to take from a pile of candy in the corner of a gallery, we are being asked to consider the work of art, not as the dish served up or the piece of candy, but as the various modes of participation, interaction, exchange, and relations that such work entails. According to Bourriaud, in such instances we are to ask: "does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?"[5]

On the one hand, Bourriaud situates relational aesthetics within the conceptual lineage of Fluxus, Dadaism, and Situationism. Appealing specifically to the emergence of "happenings" or "situations," of the 1960s, Bourriaud posits relational art as the inheritor of the collectivist, anti-consumer ethos of an earlier avant-garde. So too does Bourriaud identify relational aesthetics with a strand of modernism that rejects the notion of aesthetic autonomy in favor of a Marxist-styled critique of social conditions, where the aim is to collapse the bourgeois distinction between "pure" and "political" art.[6] Expanding on Marx's concept of a "social *interstice*," he situates the relational work of art then in the liminal space between aesthetics and politics, where the possibility for new forms of interaction and engagement can begin develop. In this respect, Bourriaud carries forth the Marxist

[3] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* p. 14.
[4] Ibid., 22.
[5] Ibid, 109).
[6] Walter Benjamin's essay "Author as Producer" (*New Left Review*, 1.62, July-August 1934).

legacy of production aesthetics that extends from Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes to Terry Eagleton. Moreover, far from signaling a radical break from the discourse of modernism, the emergence of relational art is taken as testimony that modernity "is not dead" (ibid). Provided we understand "modern" to imply "a soft spot for aesthetic experience and adventurous thinking,"[7] relational aesthetics can be interpreted as the latest manifestation of the modernist appeal to experimental artistic processes as the principal point of entry into market-driven politics.

On the other hand, Bourriaud insists that relational aesthetics "is not the revival of any movement, nor is it the comeback of any style."[8] Allowing that intersubjectivity and interaction have undoubtedly informed various avant-garde practices, he nevertheless maintains that the present generation of relational artists treats these, not as "fashionable theoretical gadgets" nor as "additives (alibis) of a traditional artistic practice," but rather as "the main informers of their activity."[9] Further, Bourriaud maintains that relational art is uniquely positioned, both historically and conceptually, to avoid both the naïve utopianism of early avant gardism art as well as the entrenched pessimism of post-Duchampian anti-aesthetic. In the first place, the relations are primarily *aesthetic*: they offer open-ended opportunities for exchange rather than prescriptive formulae aimed at concrete social reform. This lends some clarity to the seemingly counterintuitive claim that relational aesthetics does not represent a theory of art, but rather a theory of *form,* insofar as "form" is defined in terms of the human encounters elicited by the work.

[7] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 45.
[8] Bourriaud, 44.
[9] Ibid.

By the same token, these aesthetic relations privilege the construction of shared experience over the deconstructivist strategy that reduces all forms of experience to semblance and spectacle.[10] Thus Bourriaud touts relational aesthetics as a "much-awaited alternative to the depressive, authoritarian, and reactionary thinking which, in France at least, passes for art theory in the form of 'common sense' rediscovered" (45)." It is a modernist-Marxist aesthetics with a twist of optimism.

The Normative Critiques of Relational Aesthetics

It is important to approach *Relational Aesthetics*, not as a full-throated theory of relational art, but rather as a curatorial vignette of emerging participatory art practices that Bourriaud sought to showcase in his 1996 exhibition, *Traffic*, at the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux. As such, even sympathetic readers are right to note its rather cursory analysis of a complex global trend evident in art of the 1990s. As Grant Kester observes, "While Bourriaud's writing is compelling, it is highly schematic. Further, he provides few substantive readings of specific projects. As a result, it is difficult to determine what, precisely, constitutes the static content of a given relational work."[11]

There are also unresolved conceptual difficulties, beginning with the core ontological claim that the relational work of art *just is* the set of social relations produced by the work. If the work of art is identical to its emergent properties, (i.e.

[10] Herein lies the distinction between relational aesthetics and Debord's closely related notion of "situation" as a disruptive force. Cf. p. 85).

[11] Grant H Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 30. Similarly, Liam Gillick admits: "the book does contain major contradictions and serious problems of incompatibility with regard to the artists repeatedly listed together as exemplars of certain tendencies." (Liam Gillick, Letter to Claire Bishop, *October* 115, Winter 2006, p. 96.)

the relations produced) what is the work *itself*? What is the thing that produces these relations? Take any one of the works from Felix Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled* series, for example: If the work of art consists in the act of participation itself—the *taking* of the candy—then what is the status of the pile of candy in the gallery corner? Of any individual piece of candy? And how are we to characterize these relations aesthetically? What about them allows us to distinguish art from non-art?

Critics are right, however, to leave aside the rather sterile definitional issues in Bourriaud's thesis and focus instead on the more interesting difficulty of evaluating relational art. After all, how exactly are we to evaluate the aesthetic success or failure of a pile of candy in a gallery? By the degree of participation? The more candy taken from the pile, the better the art? Seen in this light, there is a point to Foster's glib trivialization of relational aesthetics, since if "everything seems to be happy interactivity,"[12] it seems there is no *aesthetic* basis by which to evaluate relational art. At any rate, Claire Bishop's more substantial and sustained critique of relational aesthetics is also motivated by this concern. "Bourriaud," she writes, "wants to equate aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of the relationships produced by a work of art. But how do we measure or compare these relationships?"[13] Even granting Bourriaud's descriptive account of the gestalt switch from production to participation discernible among a particular group of artists, it fails to address any kind of criteria for evaluating these works. "If relational art

[12] Hal Foster, "Arty Party," *London Review of Books*, December 4, 2003, p. 22.
[13] Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," p. 65.

produces human relations," Bishop reasons, "then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?"[14]

The normative critique operates on the common sense assumption that not all relations are worth celebrating, aesthetically or otherwise. It is one thing to champion relationality as a conceptual tool for making sense of art works that don't necessarily seem like art work: a hammock slung in the MoMA garden, storytelling in a public square in Copenhagen, mock weddings, recorded interviews, televised game shows, literacy workshops, or even chickens getting drunk on whiskey. But it is quite another to praise relationality as a good in itself, given that exploitation, humiliation, and physical or psychological abuse are also human relations, but presumably not the sort that relational artists want to endorse or enable. So it turns out we can't simply collapse the ethical and the aesthetic under the rubric of "relational" art. The qualitative nature of the relation must in some sense matter to the aesthetic value of the work. It also matters who is involved with or affected by relational art. If it happens that the only community fostered by Tiravinija's work is, as Bishop alleges, comprised of art world insiders who "have something in common," then this surely is relevant to the quality of his work.[15]

Relational Antagonism

As we've seen, Bishop's normative critique identifies a key deficiency in Bourriaud's account of relational aesthetics. However, in shifting from this critique to her own account of socially-engaged art, Bishop collapses an important distinction between the

[14] Ibid.
[15] Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," p. 67.

empirical claim (that Bourriaud does not in fact anticipate relevant evaluative concerns) and the conceptual claim (that relational aesthetics lacks the theoretical resources to meet this objection). Acknowledging this lacuna in the theory of relational aesthetics does not commit us to abandoning the theory altogether, unless Bishop can show that the shortcoming is fundamental to the theory itself. Instead, however, she leverages the critique of relational aesthetics only to pivot to her own alternative account of *aesthetic antagonism*. The logic of her strategy is roughly this: given the absence of any aesthetic criteria for evaluating relational art, a competing theory which champions aesthetic strategies of dissonance, subversion, disruption, is the de facto more theoretically viable alternative.

But how exactly does the proposed account of relational antagonism escape the normative critique? For Bishop and other advocates of aesthetic antagonism, it is a more authentic commitment to the "open-endedness" of their works, a tribute to what Jacques Rancière terms the "emancipated spectator."[16] Perhaps this too easily absolves the artist of the ethical implications of his or her work. But in shifting away from the ethical turn in art, does the proposed alternative too easily inscribe the evaluation of the work within the familiar domain of the aesthetic? Bishop has a point that "good intentions should not render [relational] art immune to critical analysis,"[17] but nor should the consequences of antagonism be impervious to ethical analysis simply because we are dealing with works of art.

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[16] Jacques Rancière and Gregory Elliott, *The emancipated spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).
[17] Claire Bishop, "THE SOCIAL TURN: COLLABORATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS," *Artforum International* 44, no. 6 (2006): 178.

Bishop's preferred artist-provocateurs include contemporary artists Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn. Sierra's performative works are indeed interactive, but they are predicated on fundamental inequalities between artist, performer, and spectator. Indeed, any ideals of dialogue and democratic participation are conspicuously cast aside in these works, highlighting instead the crudely exploitive exchange relations between Sierra and the workers whom he pays to carry out dehumanizing tasks, as indicated in the aptly-titled performances: *160cm Line Tattooed on Four People* (2000); *Workers Paid to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes* (1996-98); *A person Paid for 360 Continuous Working Hours* (2000); and (more charming still) *Ten People Paid to Masturbate* (2000).

For Bishop, the pronounced antagonism of Sierra's work illustrates precisely the fallacy of sacralizing relationality as a good in itself. The art drives home the reality that actual human relations are often exploitive and dehumanizing. They serve to lift the fog, as it were, from the glassy-eyed utopianism of relational aesthetics and awaken us to this unfortunate reality. In contrast to Tiravanija's happy soup kitchen, Sierra is there to offer the sobering reminder "that there's no such thing as a free meal: everything and everyone has a price."[18] Relational antagonism, then, stakes a claim about what constitutes the appropriate aesthetic response to such social ills. Rather than constructing alternative modes of discourse and engagement, Sierra's strategy is to reproduce these ills as a spectacle that demands a critical reckoning. In so doing, aesthetic antagonism claims to deliver us from naïve interventionism to heightened critical awareness, from utopian idealism

[18] Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," p. 70.

to an "ethnographic realism," wherein—as Bishop explains—the outcome of Sierra's actions "forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works."[19]

Clearly, such claims are heavily freighted with their own normative assumptions. Sierra's work does not transcend ethics, but rather carries the (implicit) moral injunction toward critical awareness. Indeed, art that evokes "sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging" has aesthetic value only in relation to the presumed ethical value of raising consciousness by means of these sensations. Likewise, the aesthetic preference for art that "acknowledges the impossibility of a 'microtopia' and instead *sustains* a tension among viewers, participants, and context,"[20] reflects a normative judgment about the ethical merits of antagonism over consensus. It is important to see, then, that Bishop's attempt to reaffirm the aesthetic in socially engaged art does not imply that the aesthetic trumps the ethical, but rather that a second-order ethical imperative for critical awareness trumps any first-order ethical concerns about the nature of aesthetic relations. It is on this assumption that the apparent ethical violations enacted in Sierra's work are defended in the name of art. Aesthetically rendered exploitation is presumed to be qualitatively distinct from exploitation as such, insofar as it in the bigger business of raising awareness via artistic provocation.

But let us consider the normative force behind these claims. It is derived, in large part, from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's influential concept of political "antagonism" articulated in their 1985 publication of *Hegemony and Socialist*

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

Strategy. It is an ambitious attempt to rectify the failed leftist strategies of social reform through the poststructuralist theory of radical democracy. This approach signals an explicit break with Habermas' discourse of "consensus" as the regulative principle of deliberative democracy. Difference (i.e. lack of consensus), they argue, is not only an inherent, but a politically necessary, feature of any society characterized by multiculturalism and value pluralism. Thus a radical democracy is one that embraces and promotes this tension as productive and that "forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus, of a fully inclusive 'we'."[21]

Bishop adopts both the principle and the language of this approach:

> Laclau and Mouffe argue that a full functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate—in other words, democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased.[22]

Her interest, however, is in translating this form of political progressivism to the aesthetic. Equating relational aesthetics as the aesthetic equivalent of a regressive, consensus-based politics, Bishop goes on to identify relational antagonism, characterized by relations of dissent, friction, unease, instability, confrontation, and the like, as the aesthetic equivalent to the politics of antagonism.

More recently, however, Mouffe has attempted to clarify some of the aesthetic implications of political antagonism. These remarks reflect a more general attempt to distinguish between antagonism, understood as the uncritical valuation

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[21] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, p. xvii.
[22] {Citation}, p. 65

of confrontation for its own sake, and what she now terms "agonism," introduced to emphasize the importance of disagreement and difference as democratically productive forms of social engagement. As Mouffe explains,

> Agonism is a 'we/them' relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents."[23]

In the context of aesthetic practice, this means that, "according to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissent; that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate." As she goes on to clarify, however, this does not mean that critical art "only consists in manifestations of refusal."[24] This pessimism can take different forms.[25] But above all she is concerned that today's critical art all too readily dismisses " the importance of proposing new modes of coexistence, of contributing to the construction of new forms of collective identity."[26] Further:

> This perspective, while claiming to be very radical, remains trapped within a very deterministic framework according to which the negative gesture is, in itself, enough to bring about the emergence of a new form of subjectivity; as if this subjectivity was already latent, ready to emerge as soon as the weight of the

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[23] Chantal Mouffe, presentation at the Institute of Choreography and Dance (Firkin Crane) as part of *Cork Caucus*, 2005, p. 153.
[24] Ibid, p. 162.
[25] Specifically germane to this debate (though not discussed explicitly here) is the question concerning the relation of critical art to a culture industry. Here too, Mouffe is skeptical of a full-throated "strategy of withdrawal" which regards any and all artistic practices within a commercial or institutional context as compromised and co-opted. She writes that a museum, for instance, "can under certain conditions provide spaces for an agonistic confrontation and it is a mistake to believe that artist who choose to work with them cannot play a critical role and that they are automatically recuperated by the system." "Chantal Mouffe: Strategies of Radical Politics and Aesthetic Resistance | Reader in Progress," accessed November 7, 2015, http://truthisconcrete.org/texts/?p=19.
[26] Ibid.

> dominant ideology would have been lifted. Such a conception is, in my view, completely anti-political.[27]

Instead, Mouffe advocates a pluralistic approach, according to which the critical potential of art is not constrained to strictly negative and reactionary responses, but also bears the responsibility to put forward new models of politics and new modes of collective identity.

Mouffe's response pinpoints exactly what has been lost in translation from the political to the aesthetic. Bishop's notion of aesthetic antagonism, it seems, has mistaken cynicism for critical skepticism. She reads the "tension" in such works, not as a productive impetus, but as bleak testimony to the fact that *that's the way the world is*. Even if Sierra's work succeeds in frustrating the naïve assumption of art's emancipatory potential, it fails as an aesthetic counterpart to a politics of antagonism that ultimately aims at a more robust ideal of democratic relations. It is not antagonism, but *nihilism*, which for Bishop frames the aesthetic virtue of these works. It is a declaration of art's sociopolitical impotence which echoes Sierra's own fatalist admission: "I can't change anything […] I don't believe in the possibility of change" (71).

Paradoxically, instead of furnishing the normative basis for relational antagonism, Mouffe indicates why the concept of antagonism—political or aesthetic—is itself subject to normative critique. The normative critique can thus be reformulated and applied to antagonistic art by asking: What is the ethical value of aesthetic antagonism? As we've seen in the case of Sierra's work, the question has

[27] Ibid.

an added urgency, since what is at stake is the possibility of justifying exploitation under aestheticized conditions. It raises the question of how we distinguish the critical object from the object critiqued. And in fact this ethical question has been at the heart of a critical response to Sierra's work:

> Sierra's work is not symbolic, it is not simply *about* oppression, it is oppressive itself. Again, that hypothetical defender of Sierra may say that his work does this in order not to excuse itself from the cruelties of the labor market. But why recapitulate something in order to say it is wrong? Furthermore, why simply stop at saying it is wrong, something any moral midget can do, and instead not try to help transform those social relations?[28]

And how ought we—if indeed we *ought*—to evaluate the mimetic reproduction of exploitive relations as an *aesthetic* relation?

Let us consider another example of the problematic relation between the ethics and aesthetics of relational antagonism in the work of Italian performance artist Vanessa Beecroft. Like much of her work, her 2007 performance piece, *VB61, Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?* (2007), staged at the 52nd Venice Biennale, explicitly addresses the plight of Sudanese refugees. For the three hour performance, the artist enlists a group of approximately thirty Sudanese women (all painted black) to play dead on a white canvas floor as she (the overseer) alternates between active and passive participation: one moment moving about the inert bodies as she douses them with splatters of bright red fake blood, the next moment feigning aloof indifference.

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[28] John Menick. *Art review of Sierra's "Nine Forms of 100 x 100 x 600 Cm ..."* at Deitch Projects*. THE THING,* July 13, 2002.

The work is baroquely antagonistic. It is highly charged with overt, heavy-handed political content. It is a gruesome scene, scripted to evoke a maximal sense of unease and discomfort in viewers and to force them to confront the horrors of the genocide in Darfur. But what of its aesthetic merit? Is this guaranteed by its antagonistic character alone? From a spectator standpoint, one has to ask whether the feeling of unease is (as intended) a consequence of confronting our own moral indifference to real horror or (what is more likely) a consequence of the problematic spectacle that is a white, middle-aged female artist simulating a bloody genocide over the motionless, black bodies of stand-in refugees. Indeed, Beecroft's self-appointed role of voyeur-provocateur aims to disrupt an established order and emphasize the failures of collective conscience. But one can equally construe the controversy that her work instigates as a failure to sufficiently reflect on the ethical implications of her own artistic practices. Critic Suzie Walsh poignantly observes that,

> By safely distancing herself rather than implicating the audience… Beecroft seemed unaware that her refusal to involve herself and the audience any further perpetuates the separation and detachment that the work itself was supposed to critique.[29]

Much the way relational aesthetics falls short in its unreflective estimation of relationality as an aesthetic virtue, Beecroft is either oblivious or indifferent to the ethical dimensions of an aesthetic performance that seeks to peddle an ethics of awareness through blunt antagonism.

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[29] Suzie Walshe, "Sudan Performance VB61, Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?" *Art Fair International*. September 7, 2007. http://www.artfairsinternational.com/?p=29

Beecroft's insensitivity is not limited to this work; it reflects a broader tendency in the artist's repertoire to privilege the artist's disruptive act over the more complex set of circumstances that call for acts of intervention. This reality surfaced most visibly at the debut of Pietra Brettkelly's documentary film about Beecroft at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. As indicated in the title, *Art Star and Sudanese Twins*, the film documents the artist's efforts to adopt twin boys from an orphanage in south Sudan. Responses to the film are appropriately scathing. One critic writes that the film "cluster-bombs her faddish fascination with Sudanese orphans and paints Beecroft as a hypocritically self-aware, colossally colonial pomo narcissist."[30] Another critic caustically dubs the whole scenario a "hooters for intellectuals."[31] Admittedly, Beecroft's work does not offer an edifying vision of social progress as an aesthetic object. But the aesthetic means by which she attempts to shock her audience out of ethical complacency cannot, simply by virtue of this aesthetic strategy, exonerate itself from ethical critique. It cannot be the antagonistic gesture *per se* that counts as an aesthetic virtue—it matters *what kind* of antagonism it entails.

Antagonism and Aesthetic Autonomy

So far, we've seen that relational aesthetics and relational antagonism represent two distinct conceptual approaches to socially-engaged art practices, and that the

[30] Logan Hill, "'Art Star' Vanessa Beecroft: Slammed at Sundance," *Vulture*, accessed June 3, 2013, http://www.vulture.com/2008/01/vanessa_beecroft_slammed_at_su.html.
[31] The critic, to the best of my knowledge, has not been identified. The comments were first reported by Roberta Smith in a *New York Times* review of the exhibition dated May 6, 1998. http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/06/arts/critic-s-notebook-standing-and-staring-yet-aiming-for-empowerment.html.

normative critique turns out to apply equally to both. An evaluative set of criteria is in order whether aesthetic relations take the form of consensus or antagonism. But here I think it is necessary to acknowledge a gross disparity in the respective implications of this critique. Critics have rightly targeted the ostensible absence of aesthetic evaluation in the ethical treatment of relational aesthetics. But should we not be equally concerned, if not perhaps *more* concerned, about the absence of ethical criteria in the aesthetic estimation of antagonistic art? It is difficult to see the celebration of relationality in the work of Tiravanija or Gillick, however naïve or unreflective, as anything but a trivial academic concern next to the melancholic affirmation of Beecroft's genocidal theater or Sierra's exploitations as aesthetically appropriate forms of antagonism. In particular, at work in the subtle theorizing of aesthetic antagonism is the problematic assumption that conscience-raising has not only inherent ethical value, but also an ethical priority that shields the artist from any other form of ethical critique. Though robed in the cloth of progressive politics, this assumption is at bottom a revised formulation of romanticism's appeal to aesthetic autonomy, an attempt to separate the aesthetic as a privileged domain of critique.[32]

[32] Bishop attempts to disavows herself from this affiliation. "This is not to say," she explains in regard to antagonism. In regard to Sierra's work, she remarks that the "motif of obstruction or blockade" that she champions in his work "is less a return to modernist refusal as advocated by Theodor Adorno than an expression of the boundaries of both the social and the aesthetic after a century of attempts to fuse them" (78). her refusal to engage in the central question of *how* aesthetic relations are produced and sustained beyond the simple insistence that they be disruptive, disorienting, and antagonistic saddles us once again with the all too familiar conception of art as a distinct domain, detached from the norms of social and political relations. Neither she, nor Sierra, for that matter, offers any specification as to what sort of "boundaries" separate art from other domains of experience.

A perfect illustration of the moral self-certainty of artistic provocation is Christoph Schlingensief's *Ausländer Raus: Schlingensiefs Container*. In this politically charged art performance, a group of real-life asylum seekers are invited to live in a makeshift compound of shipping containers assembled in front of the Viennese Opera House in conjunction with the Vienna *Festwochen* art festival. Styled after the popular European reality TV show, *Big Brother*, the daily lives of the refugees are documented and broadcast on a streaming webcast while the public participates in voting out (i.e. deporting) the inhabitants two-by-two. The remaining "winner" is awarded a cash prize and "the prospect, depending on the availability of volunteers, of Austrian citizenship through marriage"[33] Meanwhile, the spectacle is saturated with mock xenophobic pageantry, including a large banner that reads "Ausländer 'Raus! ["Foreigners Out!"] and a constant stream of jingoistic rhetoric mimicking that of Austria's nationalist far-right FPÖ party.

No doubt there is a significant ethical dimension to even some of the basic practical concerns that this elaborate art stunt raises—e.g. the legal ramifications, the safety of the participants, the dubious "prospect" of asylum, and so forth. But it is the xenophobic posturing of the work, cast in the light of irony and clever ambiguity, that gets to the heart of the ethical critique of aesthetic antagonism. Those of us who, like Schlingensief, possess a keen critical acumen are clued in to the real political critique encoded in the act of aesthetic mimesis. With a knowing wink we are invited to read the progressive counter-message in the populist sloganeering spouted from the artist's megaphone. To everyone else, however, the work reads as

[33] http://www.schlingensief.com/projekt_eng.php?id=t033

racist demagoguery run amok. Schlingensief, of course, feeds off the public confrontations that predictably result from this ambiguity among the crowds that gather daily at the site. Whether, or to what extent, this work legitimates or amplifies anti-immigrant sentiments, or provokes threats or acts of aggression toward immigrants, is not part of Schlingensief's conceptual program. And why should it be? An ethics of awareness provides the justification for the artist's silent response to the expression of moral outrage and indignation. And there are many. But one woman's reaction, captured in the documentary film about the project, is particularly revealing. In a throng of people surrounding the artist in the square, the elderly woman emerges, slinging the water from her water bottle at Schlingensief, tossing the empty bottle at him, and shouting at him a string of insults: "Du Sau! du Scheißdreck! Du…*Künstler!* [You pig! You shit! You…*artist*!" Her response, though simple and familiar, exposes the chink in the armor of aesthetic antagonism, namely, that even the most sophisticated conceptual wrangling can grant the artist the right to act like an asshole.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by drawing attention to Bishop's own shifting attitude towards socially-engaged art and her growing sympathies for the kinds of participatory and collaborative art practices she once criticized. Bishop acknowledges this transition in the introductory remarks of her more recent monograph. "An important motivation for this study," she explains "was my frustration at the foreclosure of critical distance in these curatorial narratives." However, as she goes on to

acknowledge, the "hidden narrative of this book is therefore a journey from skeptical distance to imbrication" regarding her critical engagement with participatory art.[34]

I take it that this increased acceptance of relation-based art practices has evolved not only from the affinity that naturally develops from the greater involvement with artists and their works, but also from the realization that there is something to the claim that certain artworks have a certain resonance beyond the aesthetic that cannot be discounted. Both the theory and the practice of socially engaged art have also evolved in the meantime, due in no small part to the force of Bishop's critique. Both artists and critics are far more attuned to the complex norms of artistic practices that approximate political activism or cultural anthropology, so it is no longer necessary or even appropriate to discount such practices as artless pedantry. Instead, the normative critique is but one of many tools employed in a critical process that applies to a broad range of artistic practices attempting to transgress traditional aesthetic boundaries.

[34] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* p. 6.