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# **Relating to Relational Aesthetics**

by

**Anne Hollinger Lindley**

Submitted to Pomona College in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

September 2009

**First Reader: Kathleen Howe**

**Second Reader: Frances Pohl**

*“All profoundly original work looks ugly at first.”*

-Clement Greenberg

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my ultimate gratitude to Professor Kathleen Howe for her continued support throughout the writing process of this text, not only for her encouragement, critical eye, and wealth of knowledge, but also for her primary respect and care for me, as she once said herself, as a person above all else.

I would also like to thank Professor Pohl for her above and beyond generosity in helping me with this project, as an academic, a critic, and an incredibly intelligent mind.

Special thanks to Mark Allen for his time and willingness to share his continued interest in and investigations of relational work with me, in his ever impeccable and precise way.

And finally, thanks to my father, Haynes Lindley, and mother, Holly McCloud, for their continued support as parents, and curious brains as academics.



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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Cross-disciplinary social art isn't a new idea. Originating over one hundred years ago within the Dada and Surrealist movements in Europe, it has been explored further in the mid to late twentieth century in what is known as postmodernism. The development of a set of artistic practices based in the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than the autonomous physical art object, was postulated as a genre which was called relational aesthetics by French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*, first published in France in 1998. Art as a relational practice has an extensive history in the alternative space, yet is now beginning to be incorporated directly into the mainstream art world, continuing to break barriers between art and life, the museum and the world outside of it. Not only is art which previously existed as a marginal practice being conceived as relational aesthetics and brought into the museum, but object-based work that existed within the museum is brought outside of it and valued for its similar relational qualities. Out of this complex history of relational art, recognition is emerging for the social elements of art works that may not have been originally conceived as "relational." Simple human interactions are being positioned as art works, and works of art are evaluated for their undeniable social component.

This thesis will examine the practice of relational aesthetics as it involves the viewer, as well as the way in which it plays out within and outside of the institutional setting of the museum. I will focus primarily on two unique projects: that of *The Machine Project Field Guide* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art on November 15, 2008, produced by Machine Project, a social project operated out of a storefront gallery in Echo Park; and David Michalek's *Slow Dancing* at the Lincoln Center Festival in New York City, July 12-29, 2007. I will explore the

first project, *Machine* at LACMA, in its conception and execution as it corresponds to what Bourriaud would identify as relational aesthetics; and the second, *Slow Dancing*, not originally conceived as such. I will examine the primacy of the viewer experience in each in order to critique Bourriaud's classification of relational aesthetics as a uniquely defined practice.

Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*, currently the sole text exploring relational aesthetics, offers a new way with which to approach one specific vein of contemporary art practice involving the viewer. Bourriaud defines and outlines this practice as differing from participatory art of the twentieth century. Early in his text, Bourriaud delineates relational aesthetics as: "an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the 'encounter' between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning."<sup>1</sup> He posits the way in which an art practice rooted in the whole of social human interaction as opposed to a physical art object indicates a revolutionary upheaval of the aesthetics once established in modernism: overturning the supremacy of the tangible and visually complete art object. However it must be made clear that Bourriaud's explanation of relational aesthetics with regard to the modern aesthetic is much more of an *indication* of an upheaval of the physical art object than it is the *embodiment* of the upheaval itself. In other words, relational aesthetics certainly incorporates the physical aesthetic, however it approaches and incorporates it in a very different way from the modern tradition with which we have standardized the arts in the past. While the material object is not the basis of the practice, relational aesthetics is "part of a materialistic tradition,"<sup>2</sup> and objects are an intrinsic part of that language. According to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics doesn't fetishize the concept

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 15. Note: While the original French edition was published in 1998, Les Presses du Réel published an English translation in 2002

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

at the expense of the object as does Conceptual Art, nor does it give rise to a space like Minimal Art. Instead the work creates viewer participation that embodies a durational interaction of a social space. Clearly stated by artist Liam Gillick, “The problem with Bourriaud’s text... is that while it has prompted both a serious debate in some quarters, elsewhere it has been uncritically accepted.”<sup>3</sup> *Relational Aesthetics* “has been at the center of both careful and critical elucidation since the moment of its publication.”<sup>4</sup>

Bourriaud claims that relational aesthetics functions within the social fabric, relying upon live commentary and immediate discussion, as well as the element of duration. Through this duration, relational art “strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another.”<sup>5</sup> Within western industrialized societies in our twentieth-century world, the environment has become so fast paced that interactions between individuals are slowly being eroded. Bourriaud writes, “Before long, it will not be possible to maintain relationships between people outside these trading areas.”<sup>6</sup> While not necessarily exclusive to his definition of relational aesthetics works, Bourriaud has tapped into a fundamental concept that influences many contemporary artists, an artistic tool with which to establish and maintain connections otherwise lost.

On November 15, 2008, Machine Project took over the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Works of art Bourriaud would classify as relational aesthetics infiltrated the museum: a speed metal guitarist under a Gothic arch on the roof viewable solely by telescope encouraged people to gather around and engage in conversation; a man in a suit of pepper tins

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<sup>3</sup> Liam Gillick, “Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop’s ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’,” *October Magazine* 115 (Winter 2006): 96.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9.

engaged the viewer in physical dialogue; a group project aimed at recreating a size-accurate abstract painting using live flowers; free gallery massages; a clapping ensemble; musical aliens; and a plastic bag crocheting workshop. While these sorts of activities take place weekly at Machine Project, this was the first time these works were presented to such a large audience. Bourriaud speaks to the nature of these relationship-initiating works as taking “extreme and clandestine forms,”<sup>7</sup> which they seemingly did until very recently. Bringing Machine Project to LACMA fights the tendency for relational aesthetics to remain on the fringe by entering previously subversive and clandestine works into the canon, thereby transforming the way in which we view not only the museum, but also the relational works themselves.

While many contemporary artists have rooted their practices purely within relational aesthetics like those showcased by Machine Project, New York artist David Michalek has not. He has taken portraiture as his inspiration, working in a myriad of mediums, though primarily photography and film. And while within the past decade Michalek has begun to develop the relational aspects of his practice, his interest in such works grew out of an initial and continuing development of portraiture, and the intrinsic although limited social interaction portraiture initially requires and eventually spawns. His work now involves storytelling, dialogue, movement, collaborators and an audience; however as emergent from a traditional sort of portraiture, this was not always the case. Michalek’s black and white portrait photography is beautiful visually, yet is even more interesting because of whom he photographs and how he accomplishes these shots –by developing trusting relationships with his subjects over a period of weeks before touching a camera. And while some of his work, such as the black and white portraits, grows out of relational structures, not all of his art has taken the same path.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

In 2007 Michalek set to work on a project unlike any other he had previously created. Taking inspiration from his wife Wendy Whelan, principle dancer with the New York City Ballet, Michalek decided to engage the world of dance. Using video, a medium he was familiar with, Michalek filmed five-second clips of each of forty-three dancers, stretching the high-definition video clips into ten-minute films. Using a HD prototype camera designed for military ballistic analysis, Michalek was able to capture 1,000 frames per second. The result is durational dance photography. Michalek makes visible the fleeting shapes of the dancers bodies that come together to form movement without losing the element of time that makes dance such a powerful medium.

First displayed during the Lincoln Center Festival, July 12-29, 2007, three portraits played simultaneously on large screens suspended from the building, bringing dancers from around the world together in one location. At a glance, these fifty-foot projections appear to be photographs, the barely perceptible movement noticeable only through time. For Michalek this was a study of dance, time, and the differing characteristics between film and photography. And while he was sure of his desire to explore all three, he was unsure of how the general public would accept, or how they would observe the resulting work. Michalek originally intended these works to be displayed in the museum, an interior setting with an already captive audience. He didn't know if people passing through bustling Lincoln Center would even notice the movement. While the size and location of the three panels commanded notice, would anyone stop to look? Or would they only see three still photographs of dancers as they walked past? These questions encouraged Michalek to focus more clearly on the relations that his work would trigger among the audience, just as Bourriaud suggests relational artists do<sup>8</sup>. Much to Michalek's surprise, busy

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28.

New Yorkers did take the time to stop and observe his meditation on time and movement. Not only did they stop, they came back. Over the course of the week, people returned night after night, toting picnic baskets and blankets, lawn chairs and pillows.

Michalek's work has been recognized within the mainstream art world, in the museum, for some time. However, with a fairly recent understanding of relational aesthetics, David Michalek is beginning to place more emphasis on the aspects of his work he had not considered before. His mainstream object-based art began to be critiqued in terms of its previously unexplored relational aspects. Not only is Michalek placing more emphasis on the social relational component, so is the rest of the world.

As opposed to Machine, work created within the framework of relational aesthetics that in its conception stepped away from pure objectness and to be showcased within the museum, *Slow Dancing* does the opposite. It recontextualizes objectness outside of the museum, thereby highlighting its previously denied relational aesthetic. This relocation transforms the experiential qualities of the work. It creates an awareness of perception impossible within the gallery. The power *Slow Dancing* has over the outside viewer is the drastic difference between the speeds of the film and the city, demanding a change within the viewer in order to interact with the work. Within the gallery there is no such lag. There is no need for the observer to create the possibility for slowness that he or she must do in a hectic urban environment. That is the twilight zone between film and photography that Michalek inhabits.

While cross-disciplinary social art may not be new, the ways in which Machine Project at LAMCA and *Slow Dancing* at the Lincoln Center Festival have transformed the way in which art interacts with the museum space certainly is revolutionary. Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* attempts to provide the necessary context within which to recognize this contemporary



shift and how it functions within the larger art historical context. From this starting point, theorists and artists have come to embody and describe the current phenomenal relationship we begin to experience within the web of the viewer, art object and relational space. While the work created is certainly a continuation of past participatory work, it is created and seen in new ways that reflect the needs of contemporary society.

My thesis explores Bourriaud's recognition of the transformation of the contemporary art world into a space that functions as a social fabric, and critiques his limited exploration that ignores a significant aspect of history, as well as the unique technological advances of the twenty-first century. In Chapter Two I discuss Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* by addressing the way in which it defines and applies relational aesthetics as a category of artistic practice, as well as the literature specifically commenting on this text, that of critic and art historian Claire Bishop and artist Liam Gillick. I also discuss Bourriaud's text as it applies to artistic practice in general, regarding relationality and materiality in art.

In Chapter Three I discuss the creation of Machine Project, and include an explanation of its practices and exhibits. I then explore Machine Project's activities at LACMA and the way in which Bourriaud's text applies to such activities. I also analyze Machine at LACMA through the lens of other art historical literature such as John Dewey's *Live Creature* and Hilda Hein's "Museums: From Object to Experience" as they relate the art object, the museum as institution and real life.

Chapter Four situates David Michalek's *Slow Dancing* as a work which was not originally created under the rubric of relational aesthetics yet shares many of its characteristics, in order to critique Bourriaud's discussion of relational aesthetics as a unique and individual practice. I analyze Bourriaud's text by applying it to *Slow Dancing*, and continue the discussion

of relational works and the institution by discussing *Slow Dancing* when returned to the museum setting. Finally I address David Michalek's other works to illustrate his awareness of and prior experience with relational aesthetics.

Chapter Five acts as a critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's stance on what he calls the practice of relational aesthetics by discussing the opinions of several contemporary art historians, art critics and scholars. I analyze relational aesthetics as a practice in relation to similar practices in history, and discuss the way in which relational aesthetics has become an increasingly popular practice, and how it differs from other practices. Finally I situate relational aesthetics within the twenty-first century and explore the way in which this particular moment in time has shaped relational practice.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics***

## Relational Aesthetics: A Definition

Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics, a term he coined with the release of his text *Relational Aesthetics* in 1996, as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space.”<sup>9</sup> For Nicolas Bourriaud, French curator and artist turned theorist, the most obvious and fundamental issue in dealing with contemporary relational aesthetic art is approaching a body of work that functions without a traditional material form and context.<sup>10</sup> No matter its qualification as an aesthetic object, or its more general relation to aestheticization in general, relational aesthetics nonetheless be reduced to the following: “an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the ‘encounter’ between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, “art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue”<sup>12</sup> as Bourriaud acknowledges. Art history would not exist, in fact, if art didn’t have a relational history. However, relational aesthetics is unique in that its primary form is fundamentally interwoven with “society, history, and culture,”<sup>13</sup> thereby demanding of historians and critics a slightly different method of classification and deciphering the physical object in order to understand it.<sup>14</sup> That distinction makes it important to investigate the issue of whether or not relational works can be examined using the same principles as object based works, and if not, what qualities must historians use to qualify such an artistic practice.

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

However, relational aesthetics, as defined by Bourriaud, is not the only category of work being created in the twenty-first century which places high importance on the viewer, nor is it the first category of work that has done so in the past hundred years. Object-based art, art based solely on human interaction, and art based on human interaction which also incorporates the material form, all place high value on the viewer's participation or response.

Bourriaud discusses people being "joined together in a form."<sup>15</sup> If so, then "form can be defined as a lasting encounter"<sup>16</sup> and relational works in essence create form. Therefore judging artwork by its formal components is no longer problematic if the durational interaction is understood as comprising the form, or "formations."<sup>17</sup> Instead of judging new work on past forms it becomes necessary for form to evolve. Form becomes a relational property<sup>18</sup>. After all, relational aesthetics is "part of a materialistic tradition,"<sup>19</sup> and perhaps the question of form becomes irrelevant if there exists a "materialism of encounter."<sup>20</sup> "The essence of humankind is purely trans-individual, made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms which are invariably historical (Marx: the human essence is the set of social relations)."<sup>21</sup> A social form has then always been documented as some sort of physical being.

"Like any other social arena, the art world is essentially relational, insofar as it presents a 'system of differential positions' through which it can be read."<sup>22</sup> And thus experience is critical. "The dense network of interconnections between members means that everything that

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 27.

happens in it will possibly be a function of all members.”<sup>23</sup> Essentially Bourriaud references a relational web that plays a much larger role than people recognize. “It’s art that makes art, not artists”<sup>24</sup> and thus everyone in the relational arena is an artist, or nobody is, and the art functions in creating itself. This “points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art”<sup>25</sup> in which the artist is seen as the ultimate dictator or mastermind. Relational aesthetics however, does not represent such an upheaval as it does indicate one. Relational work very much incorporates the aesthetic; it just approaches and incorporates it in a very different way from the modern tradition we acknowledge. There are different levels of material manifestation – and occasionally it is debatable whether Bourriaud would categorize something as a relational aesthetic work. Relational aesthetics is not governed by an underlying theme, and thus it is not stipulated. Its form is its theme: “the sphere of inter-human relations”<sup>26</sup> involving “social exchange,”<sup>27</sup> interactivity and communication.

At an art exhibition there is a “possibility for immediate discussion”<sup>28</sup> or for later review as opposed to immediate commentary being one possibility, relational aesthetics as a practice insists upon it. In addition, relational art has a social goal. Nicolas Bourriaud insists it is all about “learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution.”<sup>29</sup> A work in the relational aesthetic mode based on preconceived evolution would be described as theatre. According to Nicolas Bourriaud, art

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 13.

should now be “ways of living and models of action within the existing real”<sup>30</sup> as opposed to an imaginary ideal or a rehearsed reaction to reality.

Seemingly in contrast, Bourriaud simultaneously suggests “the *new* is no longer a criterion.”<sup>31</sup> This would indicate that relational aesthetics differs in no way from a type of postmodern appropriation in that our social interactions borrow daily from other things, whether manifested physically or not. He also states, “The relationship between people, as symbolized by goods or replaced by them, and signposted by logos, has to take on extreme and clandestine forms, if it is to dodge the empire of predictability.”<sup>32</sup> Bourriaud references Marxist theorist and Situationist Guy Debord’s “Society of the Spectacle” in which “human relations are no longer “directly experienced,”<sup>33</sup> but start to become blurred in their “‘spectacular’ representation.”<sup>34</sup> Relational aesthetics extends Debord’s critique by proposing a term for a contemporary practice, a new form of artistic production that is entirely based on first-hand experience.

Relational aesthetics, as proposed by Bourriaud, can involve everything in daily life, not just a mundane interaction, but also a political context, or something of the like<sup>35</sup>. “These ‘relational’ procedures (invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments, etc.) are merely a repertory of common forms, vehicles through which particular lines of thought and personal relationships with the world are developed.”<sup>36</sup> Bourriaud is thereby describing Michalek’s *Slow Dancing*, although he would not include such a piece under the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 46.

relational aesthetics rubric due to the lack of artist intention as such. Happenstance has dictated its relationality, not the artist, a contradiction further examined in Chapter Four.

Nicolas Bourriaud identifies a connection between relational aesthetics and consumer society, an excellent example of which can be seen in *Machine* at LACMA, explored fully in Chapter Three. In order to place relational aesthetics within this consumer society, it is necessary to examine “the place of artworks in the overall economic system, be it symbolic or material, which governs contemporary society. Over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, the work of art represents a social *interstice*.”<sup>37</sup> Thus eliminating monetary profit (as defined by Karl Marx), relational aesthetics as human relation can seamlessly fit into the contemporary system of trading. Encouraging an “inter-human commerce”<sup>38</sup> eliminates one difficulty proposed with bringing *Machine* to LACMA. However, this may not be applicable within the larger mainstream where it is necessary to involve some sort of monetary exchange, more than it is within the alternative space, whether in a gallery, another building, or outside. So while this is a good thought, perhaps a “free area”<sup>39</sup> from commerce cannot really exist.

In contrast to the discussion of relational aesthetics occupying a commerce free zone, Bourriaud claims that “anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish,”<sup>40</sup> therefore limiting any human interaction to the confines of commercialism. Such an inherent contradiction within Bourriaud’s text certainly needs to be addressed, however both situations: art as interstice and art relying on marketability, both appear, and time will tell if both are able to successfully coexist or if one remains dominant. People will come face to face in very specific and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 9.



intentional ways when they are desirous of such a purely social interaction without commercial context, as the “social bond has turned into a standardized artifact”<sup>41</sup> most frequently.

While bringing Machine Project to LACMA is the first step in forcing something specifically and purposefully unmarketable into the mainstream where entrance requires an admission fee, it is also furthering the existence of the social bond as artifact. Is this a step forward for what Bourriaud calls relational aesthetics, or a step back? If it were a step forward, then it would highlight the existence of interaction for interactions sake –slowing the world down and asserting public recognition for something that is undeniably being pushed to the side of our society. Yet if it is a step back, then the insertion of Machine into LACMA is denying its unmarketable existence and forcing it into our capitalist society. Perhaps it functions in both ways simultaneously. It might be best explained that the social bond as artifact is how we now process works lacking in material manifestation and cannot be inserted into our commercial society.

Delacroix wrote in his diary that a successful picture temporarily ‘condensed’ an emotion that it was the duty of the beholder’s eye to bring to life and develop. This idea of transitivity introduces into the aesthetic arena that formal disorder which is inherent to dialogue. It denies the existence of any specific ‘place of art’, in favor of a forever-unfinished discursiveness, and a never recaptured desire for dissemination. It is against this closed conception of artistic practice, incidentally, that [Swiss and French filmmaker] Jean-Luc Godard rebelled against, when he explained that it takes two to make an image. This proposition may well seem to borrow Duchamp’s, putting forward the notion that it’s the beholder who makes pictures, but it actually takes things a step further by postulating dialogue as the actual origin of the image-making process.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 26.

Now, the artist focuses more clearly on the relations that his work will trigger among the audience<sup>43</sup>. Physical work functions only as a case of production with the relational component at the center of its focus, even if a material object does exist. David Michalek's *Slow Dancing* is a perfect example. Today, emphasis is put on external relations within the art. "The subversive and critical function of contemporary art is now achieved in the invention of individual and collective vanishing lines, in those temporary and nomadic constructions whereby the artist models and disseminates disconcerting situations."<sup>44</sup>

### Critical Response

Essential to an understanding of relational aesthetics is an artist Bourriaud focuses on in his text, Liam Gillick. Gillick, responding to a principle critic of Bourriaud's, explained in an essay published in *October*, that Bourriaud wrote *Relational Aesthetics* as a distancing mechanism, to distinguish himself as a curator from many of the artists he displayed in his exhibitions. Specifically, Bourriaud felt it necessary to respond to the Centre d'Arts Plastiques Contemporains (CAPB) Bordeaux press office that called an exhibit "interactive-baroque-conceptualism."<sup>45</sup> Bourriaud felt there needed to be an updated forum within which to situate some contemporary work, because attempts to describe the work in terms of earlier practices was no longer valid. And while this may be the case, an updated forum or vocabulary is very different from proposing a new genre of art entirely. This is where Bourriaud's argument begins to lose ground.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>45</sup> Liam Gillick, "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'," *October Magazine* 115 (Winter 2006): 97.

At times everything seems to be happy interactivity: among ‘aesthetic objects’ Bourriaud counts ‘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’. To some readers such ‘relational aesthetics’ will sound like a truly final end of art, to be celebrated or decried. For others it will seem to aestheticize the nicer procedures of our service economy (‘invitations, casting sessions, meetings, convivial and user-friendly areas, appointments’). There is the further suspicion that, for all its discursivity, ‘relational aesthetics’ might be sucked up in the general movement for a ‘post-critical’ culture – an art and architecture, cinema and literature ‘after theory’.<sup>46</sup>

The connection between these practices of the mid twentieth century and relational

aesthetics is evident, so when Claire Bishop, art historian and primary critic of *Relational Aesthetics*, takes issue with Bourriaud’s explanation of relational aesthetics by saying that the work has no definitive qualities, she is not so much denying that such work is taking place in the artistic realm, but instead suggesting that relational aesthetics must be explored and established much further before these current human interactions can be classified as a practice distinct from earlier models. Bishop does not deny that interaction based work has or is taking place, but disagrees with Bourriaud’s classification of relational aesthetics as a new type of practice without formal limits<sup>47</sup>. Following Bishop’s criticism, a productive question to ask would be, how does relational aesthetics differ from earlier work that involves human interaction or relational components? Should it be defined separately? Ironically, she answers the question herself in an essay entitled “Viewers as Producers” in which she writes, “Although the photographic documentation of these projects implies a relationship to performance art, they differ in striving to collapse the distinction between performer and audience...,”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hal Foster, “Chat Rooms,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 195.

<sup>47</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October Magazine* 110 (Fall 2004): 52.

<sup>48</sup> Claire Bishop, “Viewers as Producers,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 10.

Bourriaud describes contemporary works as “having to do with interactive, user-friendly, and relational concepts”<sup>49</sup> and functioning to connect “levels of reality kept apart from one another.”<sup>50</sup> In this case, contrary to Bishop’s argument regarding Bourriaud’s vagueness, any miscellaneous trip to the supermarket could not be a relational work because there is no intent to connect anything previously isolated. However, it would seem that the broad qualities of Bourriaud’s observations do apply more to relational works in general, and are not so much a definition of a new category of such relational art. The artist’s intention to connect realities is something that Bourriaud defines as key. It seems as though a fair explanation of this relational aesthetics phenomenon is one that prioritizes artist intention; it combines the role of the artist as the dictator of meaning for his or her own work with the interactive strategies of the 1960s.

Nicolas Bourriaud postulates a distinct form of production, however his critics disagree. I will apply Bourriaud’s theory for a relational category of art as well as the critique in considering relational aesthetics and contemporary art that involves the viewer in an active role. While in some ways Bourriaud’s practices do establish a distinct genre of art, in others, they do not. In this examination I will consider two projects, Machine Project at Los Angeles County Museum of Art and David Michalek’s *Slow Dancing*, in order to examine relational work in general, and the unique classification of relational aesthetics.

## Historical Antecedents

The necessity of dialogue governs art historical practice and theory. Some problems thereby reemerge while considering relational aesthetics that have forever been plaguing the art historian: idealism, seeing art as governed by its own static rules; and art as changing and

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<sup>49</sup> Bourriaud, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

deducing its own rules through time<sup>51</sup>. So how might film, *Slow Dancing* for instance, be involved in this -being governed by its own rules through time. In this case a new medium simulates an old one, functioning like artist Frank Gehry's Santa Monica Home from 1977 as opposed to artist Michael Graves' Portland Services Building from 1980 in Douglas Crimp's essay *Appropriating Appropriation* written in the early 1980s. *Slow Dancing* appropriates an object, the photograph, and reframes it in the context of film, a concept I explore further in Chapter Four.

Relational works are much situated within an art historical trajectory. Judging work without considering its aesthetic value is challenging, as one would ignore the aspect that makes relational aesthetics, art<sup>52</sup>. Modern art ultimately facilitated relational aesthetics "by permitting many simultaneous ways of looking at pictures"<sup>53</sup> whether the practice of relational aesthetics may be similar or not. "Meaning and sense are the outcome of an interaction between artist and beholder, and not an authoritarian fact."<sup>54</sup> Secondly, while relational aesthetics is not a direct re-interpretation of past practices, it is reminiscent of the Conceptual art of the 1960s in which the concept or idea for a work of art took precedence over its materialization. It differs in that Conceptualism indicated that the work of art may or may not ever physically come to fruition. Relational aesthetics is purely in the present even though interactivity is not a new idea<sup>55</sup>. Unlike Conceptual Art, relational aesthetics "in no way celebrate[s] immateriality."<sup>56</sup> In fact objects are an intrinsic part of the language. The "relative immateriality"<sup>57</sup> of art from the 1990s is more

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 54.

due to the artists' interest in time through space "than a desire not to produce objects."<sup>58</sup>

Bourriaud asserts that contemporary work has an intrinsic awareness of time,<sup>59</sup> established not only through production but also at the moment of exhibition through the grouping of viewers.<sup>60</sup>

And while frequently formally similar to past modes of art, relational works use these "like a vocabulary, [on] a lexical basis."<sup>61</sup> Particular pertinent however, is Situationism, in which a situation "is intended to replace artistic representation by the experimental realization of artistic energy in everyday settings."<sup>62</sup> However, Situationist theory ignores human interrelations,<sup>63</sup> which are at the heart of relational aesthetics. Situationist theory does, though, unite time, place and action.<sup>64</sup>

In Minimalism the artist valued the viewer's interaction above all else. Robert Morris, American Minimalist theorist and artist working primarily in the sixties, proposed the *gestalt*, a perceived whole that is more than the sum of its parts, which became one of the most prominent aspects of the Minimalist discussion. In the minimalist *gestalt*, the viewer completes the work, creating a space between the art objects and the viewer. The necessity of the viewer in the work in contemporary times is not far removed from this 1960s artistic practice. In fact the importance of the viewer is not unique to relational aesthetics but occurs in other contemporary art that doesn't fall under the relational aesthetics umbrella – that which wasn't created with relational intent yet lies in the realm of work that ends up functioning in a highly relational manner.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

A concrete example of viewer based work was first seen in the late 1950's and through the sixties and seventies with a group of artists and composers known as Fluxus, and those associated with painter and performance artist Allan Kaprow as "Happenings." whereas in contrast, in Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*, for example, "there was always an audience in one (usually static) space and a show given in another."<sup>65</sup> In relational aesthetics collaboration is key, the focus being on the "collective dimension of social experience."<sup>66</sup>

One might be tempted to align relational aesthetics with the goals of the 1960s performance art. However the difference between relational aesthetics and performance art is that in a performance "there is no live comment made about what is seen (the discussion time is put off until afterward)"<sup>67</sup> whereas relational aesthetics exists to create such live interactivity.

### **Relational Aesthetics: The Difference**

The idea of art as experience introduces a key idea. It is a possibility that the location of relational aesthetic practice as Bourriaud describes it does play a key role in the type of experience one has? Within the social interstice of the alternative space, relational aesthetics "fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom."<sup>68</sup> However, it is unclear if this social fabric remains when the project is brought into the museum. One possibility is that bringing relational aesthetics projects into the museum automatically forces the work to model itself after the version situated within the fringe gallery. If museum bureaucracy exercises a certain level of control that the alternative space does not, and thus demands that works be

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<sup>65</sup> Allan Kaprow, "Notes on the Elimination of the Audience," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 102.

<sup>66</sup> Bishop, "Viewers as Producers," 10.

<sup>67</sup> Bourriaud, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 18.

formatted in a way that differs from their presentation in an alternative space, those alterations automatically remove the level of spontaneity experienced in the non museum space. In the museum the work is thus removed from its original social fabric and instead uses that fabric as inspiration. In this formulation, relational art would lose the power of its spontaneous encounter if brought into the museum, a location thought of as entirely unsuitable for “the transformative potential of aesthetic experience”<sup>69</sup> by Allan Kaprow fifty-plus years earlier.

On the other hand, bringing a work Bourriaud considers an example of relational aesthetics into the museum might present a very similar situation to finding a relational aesthetics practice in the gallery. Both are artificial environments at some level, and there is no reason why the natural relational interactions that occur in a smaller institutional space could not exist in the larger institutional space of the museum as well. Museums institutionally are struggling to create new kinds of social space. Social fabric thereby exists on the museum level as well as the gallery level.

This issue of location is common with relational work, something Claire Bishop would take issue with<sup>70</sup>. Machine Project at LACMA is an excellent example of such a spectacular simulacra –the interactions, that at Machine Project’s storefront in Echo Park take a natural type of expression, become signifiers of that natural interaction at the museum, leaving the essence of the work, a natural relation between people, behind. Bourriaud does acknowledge art history as a field that is historically associated with “representation”<sup>71</sup>. Do relational works automatically assume a representational function when moved into the context of the museum? Is the “art

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<sup>69</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art, A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 24.

<sup>70</sup> Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52.

<sup>71</sup> Bourriaud, 9.



world a reservoir of examples”<sup>72</sup> or is artistic praxis, according to Bourriaud, a “rich loam for social experiments?”<sup>73</sup> Or one could suggest that all human interaction is now just a recycled stockpile of social material for experimentation, regardless of its setting.

“By conducting themselves inside the art world on the basis of the parameters of “worlds” that are heterogeneous to it, these artists here introduce relational worlds governed by concepts of clientele, order of commission, and project.”<sup>74</sup> French artist Fabrice Hybert transformed the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris into a supermarket<sup>75</sup> in 1995 much like Machine transformed LACMA. The visitor was crucial in Hybert’s work because his/her interaction defined the piece<sup>76</sup>. We shall consider whether the viewer functioned differently at LACMA than at Machine. Everyone participates at Machine, whereas at LACMA the participation took a more varied form. There was the additional element of watching a relational piece take place that one wasn’t directly involved in. We will consider in Chapter Three if this ‘destroys’ the work as Bourriaud defines it. Frequently the artist has no preconceived idea about what will happen, like David Michalek with *Slow Dancing* in Lincoln Center. In fact, the work functioned in an opposite manner to that he had imagined. Tristan Tzara said that “thought is made in the mouth,”<sup>77</sup> and with relational aesthetics possessing similar characteristics not only to mid-century performance art but also Surrealist works that invited audience participation in the 1920s and thirties, this is precisely the case.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 40.

Typically, relational art is removed from the “administrative rationality that underpins it,”<sup>78</sup> that of the institution, and instead “tends to draw inspiration more from the flexible process governing ordinary life”<sup>79</sup> that can be seen in alternative spaces. And relational works have been criticized for agreeing to the restrictions of galleries and art centers which are seen as contrary to the desire for “sociability underpinning their meaning.”<sup>80</sup> Hal Foster discussed the location of recent participatory works outside the gallery, “rendering them even more difficult to decipher in aesthetic terms.”<sup>81</sup> David Michalek’s *Slow Dancing* is certainly one of those difficult to decipher works. It lies in a grey area because while it was not intended as relational; its location outside the gallery helps it to functioning within the relational aesthetics framework. Yet its location outside also suggests it to function as a film in the park, or another sort of entertainment. This might compromise its evaluation on solely aesthetic terms. However one classifies *Slow Dancing*, this quandary can certainly “indicate a distinctive turn in recent art,”<sup>82</sup> expanding upon Bourriaud’s text in its application to future contemporary works.

“As part of a ‘relationist’ theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its ‘environment’, its ‘field’ (Bordieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice.”<sup>83</sup> With David Michalek’s *Slow Dancing* this is certainly the case. Outdoors in the venue of Lincoln Square Plaza the audience refuses this interpretation by creating a durational interaction with the film. Nicolas Bourriaud claims that “producing a form is to invent possible encounters; receiving a form is to create the conditions

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>81</sup> Foster, 190.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Bourriaud, 22.

for an exchange.”<sup>84</sup> In that sense Michalek’s work is relational- his medium allows for a variety of encounters.

“Sacredness is making a comeback, here, there and everywhere. In a muddled way, we are hoping for the return of the traditional aura; and we don’t have enough words to shout down contemporary individualism.”<sup>85</sup> So then will the emergence of relational aesthetics in the mainstream museum lead to its demise and revitalize the aura? Perhaps this is the result. There has been an influx of taking the public into account in creating artwork—moving the art’s origin and effect<sup>86</sup>. “The aura of art no longer lies in the hinter-world represented by the work, nor in form itself, but in front of it, within the temporary collective form that it produces by being put on show.”<sup>87</sup> This seems to embody a direct response to a perceived lack of community, and not as much the alteration of what we desire as art. This is the essence of *Slow Dancing*: the work becoming the interaction taking place in front of it. Contemporary art thereby moves a work’s “origin and effect”<sup>88</sup>. These works are therefore a way for the twenty-first-century societies we inhabit to reconstitute a community, one that will then aspire to the sort of sacredness art supposedly possessed in the early twentieth century and before.

One of the key aspects in discussing relational work, something it has in common with movements from the mid twentieth century – Minimalism, Conceptualism, Situationalism – is the element of duration. Durational works have an inherent problem with regards to collection or commodification of the work. It is a “period of time to be lived through.”<sup>89</sup> Durational art either must be constantly on display or cannot be collected as its durational immateriality forbids it.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 15.

What does the art's availability have to do with anything? Performance art relies on a work with specific duration at a certain time. Thus it must "elapse[s] within a factual time."<sup>90</sup> While not with specific reference to Michalek's *Slow Dancing*, the following can be applied; Bourriaud says "The work does not (offer) itself as a spatial whole that can be scanned by the eye, but as a time span to be crossed, sequence by sequence, similar to a still short-movie in which the viewer has to evolve by himself."<sup>91</sup> Because art is made up of social exchanges, works whose byproduct is relational must be temporal in nature. What informs it is part of its subject, and takes on a social form having nothing to do with its original usefulness –thereby acquiring an exchange value<sup>92</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 42.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Mark Allen and Machine Project**

Creating a gallery that deals primarily in relational aesthetic art and artists may not be the norm for a young artist, but for Mark Allen creating Machine Project was a long time coming. And for the art world in general, Machine Project was a long time coming as well. From the beginning of his career as an artist/curator in Houston, Texas, and as a student at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, California, Allen became interested in the art community as it functions within and outside of educational institutions. He found that there is a fundamental difference between the communities of formal art education in academia, and the art educational communities outside of school. Allen experienced an intrinsic disconnect between the two: the institutional conversation collapses outside of that specific setting; it becomes the 'real world'<sup>93</sup>. It became important to Allen to integrate the investigation of the academic art community outside of the institution, and address in some way the issue of pedagogy versus asserting agency outside of the institutional space.

Allen's first attempt at a forum for a relational and social artistic pedagogy was C-Level, a practically hidden location in the China Town area of Los Angeles. While C-Level certainly did provide a relational forum, its invisibility, located as it was down an alley behind other buildings, prevented it from fostering the public conversation Allen desired. Thus Machine Project was born in Echo Park, a storefront on Alvarado Street, visible not only to local foot

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<sup>93</sup> Mark Allen, "Relational Aesthetics" (interview with author, Machine Project, Echo Park, CA, Apr. 24, 2009).

traffic but also to any stranger who might drive by. Machine's location and conceptualization allows for Allen's ultimate desire, the establishment of a pedagogical art forum outside of the academy and within the real world, a space that habitually punctures the barrier between art and life<sup>94</sup>. Machine is filled with a range of exhibits and activities: *Mount St. Holly* by artist Holly Vesecky, a volcano of flowers bubbling with hot chocolate from which people may drink; *Dark Pastoral* by Jessica Z. Hutchins, a computer controlled leather body builder torso for one to ride much like a mechanical bull; and the *Holiday Fry-B-Q*, where staff stands by to fry whatever delicious item one may have brought. As was written for the catalogue of an exhibition of Machine Project's and can be applied to all that takes place at Machine,

These strange evocative objects were created with the idea that art could serve as both an aesthetic experience and as a conveyance of a social concern... The name 'machine' places us in deliberate contrast to the traditional functions of museums and galleries. We wanted to create a machine for cultural transformation, a place for working rather than archiving and commoditization.<sup>95</sup>

Machine Project provides an arena with which to respond to Claire Bishop's criticism of Nicolas Bourriaud's text: what is the difference between art and life? In Allen's eyes, Machine functions a lot like a church<sup>96</sup>. As one might attend church as a habitual spiritual action within life, one might visit Machine as a habitual artistic action within life. Allen came up with this idea on his own, however he is not alone in his belief. In *Seven Days in the Art World*, author Sarah Thornton quotes Italian collector Sofia Ricci, "I'm an atheist, but I believe in art. I go to

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Mark Allen and Jason Brown, "Forward," in *Machine Project Guide to Cultural History & the Natural Sciences*, ed. Mark Allen and Jason Brown (Los Angeles: Pomona College, 2006), 8. (Note: this catalogue was published in conjunction with the exhibition: Project Series 29: Machine Project Guide to Cultural History & the Natural Sciences, January 22 – April 9, 2006, at the Pomona College Museum of Art.)

<sup>96</sup> Allen, "Relational Aesthetics."

galleries like my mother went to church. It helps me understand the way I live.”<sup>97</sup> There is a clear distinction between life and whatever artistic or spiritual interaction one may have in the designated forums. Every moment isn’t an art project; art is a part of life, separate from life’s other parts. “Life is compartmentalized.”<sup>98</sup> However, one moves back and forth among the parts. Instead of removing the wall between them, one punctures it by means of regular experiences. The relational art experience isn’t rarefied, and contextualization is key for the relational aspects of many works of art. Borrowing a quote from American philosopher John Dewey, “The task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”<sup>99</sup> Allen seeks to restore this continuity by establishing regular access to artistic events.

Dewey also says, “In other words, art is not nature, but is nature transformed by entering into new relationships where it evokes a new emotional response.”<sup>100</sup> This contextualization is precisely what can be drawn from Bourriaud’s descriptions of the ‘micro-utopia,’ a pocket within the living world that functions simultaneously with daily life, yet is not equated with daily life. “Art isn’t material or practice; it is a framework for interpretation,”<sup>101</sup> says Allen. Therefore it is interesting to look at everything in terms of art as a tool. Things aren’t necessarily more art than others but they rely on context. He says, “A gallery is almost like a pair of glasses you put on – a

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<sup>97</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 93.

<sup>98</sup> John Dewey, “The Live Creature and ‘Ethereal Things’,” in *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 20.

<sup>99</sup> John Dewey, “The Live Creature,” in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 12.

<sup>100</sup> John Dewey, “The Act of Expression,” in *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 79.

<sup>101</sup> Allen, “Relational Aesthetics.”



site that specifies art happens here.”<sup>102</sup> Art is therefore a matter of aesthetic perception based on attitude and intention.

Viewing Machine Project as a church functions on a few different levels. One of the most fundamental aspects of today’s society, key to relational aesthetics, is the fast paced technology that has replaced the clubs and centers within individual communities that had brought people together. In the early and mid twentieth century men and women spent time within their communities, going to rotary club meetings, engaging in activities at their local bowling league. Those things that had been looked down on as old-fashioned and a waste of time are now missed. A society needs communities in order to function and Machine Project provides a space for a community to form around Allen’s idea of social and artistic praxis. “By offering small services, the artist repairs the weaknesses in the social bond.”<sup>103</sup> German artist and art theorist Joseph Beuys stated, “Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deadline: to dismantle in order to build a social organism as a work of art.”<sup>104</sup> Ultimately the escape from the end of art and the more grave situation, the end of society, is the same: to construct a social structure that is art. Allen says, “Everything besides human interaction has a low bandwidth,”<sup>105</sup> meaning that human interaction is the meatiest of all forms of communication, and enables not only a society but the art world to be richer. The live action at the intimate scale Allen provides allows for a relation among audiences – a sort of temporary community much like the community forums of centuries

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 90.

<sup>104</sup> Joseph Beuys, “I Am Searching for Field Character,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 125.

<sup>105</sup> Allen, “Relational Aesthetics.”

past. “It is more important to better your community today, than your world tomorrow,”<sup>106</sup> says Allen. For today’s inhabitants of a global twenty-first-century society, this is something that can be easily forgotten.

Mark Allen was invited to present Machine Project at the Los Angeles Museum of Art (LACMA) over the course of one day, November 15, 2008. After hearing his beliefs and intent for Machine Project, one might question whether one could sustain these community-creating, relational, artistic endeavors in the larger institutional setting and, over a limited period. Or perhaps one might doubt the ability for the same genuine relationships to transpire without feeling staged or inauthentic. Allen’s conception was to transform LACMA into a civic space, such as a park where one person might come to play Frisbee and another might come to have a picnic.<sup>107</sup> The glory of such a space is that it belongs to a community; everyone can make it their own. Thus it develops meaning through use over time, as does Machine Project. If one visits only once, he or she misses what Machine is all about. One must visit time and time again to experience the community.

At LACMA the goal was to schedule a year of programming to take place in one day<sup>108</sup>. Machine functions by means of recurring meetings over time, while the Machine Project at LACMA functioned by means of recurring meetings, spatially. Multiple events occurred, sometimes simultaneously over the sprawling LACMA campus, preventing one from attending every event. Each event within the galleries functioned in an intimate setting – gallery sites were chosen to be approximately the same size as Machine Project’s storefront. One encountered people at an event one might have seen at another event, creating an instantaneous community.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

Two people may have met in the *Machine Musical Elevator* listening to the brass trio, one on the way to take part in the Institute for Figuring's *Hyperbolic Crochet Plastic-Bag Workshop*, the other to listen to a poem via telephone in Joshua Beckman and Anthony McCann's *Distance Learning*, only to meet up again to watch Walter Kitundu and Robin Sukhadia perform *Field*, an instrumental ensemble inside Richard Serra's colossal *Sequence*. These two individuals, recognizing one another, might share experiences since seeing each other last, forming an instantaneous community, made up of people with similarities and differences, who have come together for one reason, to partake in a work of relational aesthetics. There was Gothic Arch Speed Metal, a performance viewed via telescope, which functioned as the clock tower of a civic space with a pulsing wave of people gathering periodically to watch and listen.

In a lecture delivered on April 23, 2009, art history professor Marie Shurkus said that in relational works the viewers serve a unique function, the emergence of "a participant/viewer who is also a witness."<sup>109</sup> In this case "the 'embodied memories' are the final destination for the work. It constructs a certain community."<sup>110</sup> Locating the art within the embodied and collective memories of the participant/viewer gives relational aesthetics a form unlike work of the past. It answers the main critique of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, that his formulation does not specify the form that the work actually takes. According to artist Carsten Holl r, the work "will be 'broadcast' by the stories [the participants] are willing to tell."<sup>111</sup> Continuing with Shurkus' observation, it becomes appropriate to apply a statement by John Dewey from 1934

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<sup>109</sup> Marie Shurkus, "Relational Aesthetics, Re-enactment, and the Post-Medium Condition: What Difference Does It Make Anyway?," (lecture, Department of Art and Art History at Pomona College, Claremont, CA, Apr. 23, 2009).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Carsten H  ller, "The Baudouin/Boudewijn Experiment. A Deliberate, Non-Fatalistic Lare Scale Group Experiment in Deviation," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 145.

obviously not intended for relational aesthetics yet entirely applicable. He wrote, “Form may then be defined as the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event,<sup>112</sup>” which is precisely what Shurkus describes.

While interviewing Allen for an article for the New York Times, Jory Finkel commented, “Isn’t this similar to work that was done ten to twenty years ago?”<sup>113</sup> Mark responded, “Well the piece always has to do with the context, the historical time, and the audience. And since they are all different now, this work functions differently.”<sup>114</sup> Finkel and Allen’s brief interaction perfectly summarizes the connection between relational aesthetics and its predecessors. Finkel locates relational aesthetics within a historical trajectory and would thus agree that Bourriaud fails to acknowledge this sort of relational work isn’t a new idea, while Allen’s response outlines the distinguishing characteristics of relational aesthetics and the importance of its unique qualities within its own historical moment. Or, as Shurkus states, “Relational aesthetics should render a possibility for a new relationship with past events, and the present”<sup>115</sup> as Finkel points out that Machine Project clearly creates.

In contrast to Allan Kaprow’s *Happenings* from the 1950s and 1960s that could occur only once, within relational aesthetics specific ideas for works can be repeated and still continue to function as entirely new pieces of art. Something always happens differently. “You just run the experiment again,”<sup>116</sup> says Allen. For example Machine showcased Corey Fogel’s *Countercumulative Marcotting*, a dance and noise improvisation in which the artist wore a suit of

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<sup>112</sup> John Dewey, “The Natural History of Form,” in *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 137.

<sup>113</sup> Allen, “Relational Aesthetics.”

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Shurkus.

<sup>116</sup> Allen, “Relational Aesthetics.”

three hundred aluminum black-pepper shakers, at the LA Art Fair in 2007. The first time it could almost have been called a failure; his costume was incomplete and there was a less than animated response from the audience. Fogel tried it again at LACMA, and it was certainly a success. He interacted with and triggered relations amongst the members of the audience. The fact that *Countercumulative Marcotting* wasn't entirely original is beside the point; it in no way lessened the relational experience for Fogel or the so-called audience. Another example is Machine Project's Consigliere/Assistant Director Jason Brown's lectures<sup>117</sup>. His talks consistently morph around a key topic yet there is never a repeat lecture, nor an entirely new lecture, rather an amorphous lecture. It is like cooking – people don't mind eating a recipe again; it will always be different and everyone involved will always learn something<sup>118</sup>.

Some fundamental issues arise from Bourriaud's text regarding the possibility of relational aesthetics within the setting of the institution. Many twentieth century movements directly attacked or rejected the white cube of the museum- an era marked by institutional critique. The *Machine Project Field Guide* at LACMA differed from the past by pushing the audience and the institution into new forms of engagement, yet withholding any sort of institutional critique. Instead, it revealed the typical set up of the institution rather than judging it. Allen worked with the museum, using its wide reaching features to reveal how a large-scale institution functions, showcasing one-of-a-kind physical art objects. LACMA bureaucracy pushed back on some proposals for the project, however Charlotte Cotton, the photography curator at LACMA who acted as an internal advocate for Allen, made the process work. Aspects or specific works may have been eliminated after consideration of their impact on the institution, however Allen did not consider these alterations problematic nor did they change the discourse

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

of the project. Allen says, “It was like a large brainstorming session with the artists and Charlotte, which is the exact process that occurs at Machine Project anyway. The power relationship one might expect was certainly not as clear as one might think. Machine at LACMA caused irreversible changes to both Machine and LACMA.”<sup>119</sup> As is said of relational aesthetics, “the teacher takes equally from the taught,” and in this case the roles were not clearly defined. The viewer, LACMA and Machine Project all have taught and learned in this unique conversion of relational aesthetics in the institution.

This is a key moment for museums. Museums now have interactive activities and events built into their structured programming such as film screenings and poetry readings, however instead of pushing the envelope they tend to remain in the realm of ‘community events’. The type of relational aesthetics pieces presented on November 15<sup>th</sup> at LACMA go many steps further and come from a very different place, however they seemed to function seamlessly within the museum structure and created an even more involved community space than the sporadic events we see now after museum hours.

One of Claire Bishop’s critiques of relational aesthetics is that, “An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas of artist-as-designer... is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience.”<sup>120</sup> Of course Mark Allen received significant credit and attention for his ‘take-over’ of LACMA on November 15, 2008. However, Allen’s hard work, brainchild, and ultimately the recognition he received in no way overshadowed the role of the individual artists. Five minutes spent with Allen reveals that not only are his heart and mind entirely invested in his project, but that his status is the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October Magazine* 110 (Fall 2004): 53.

farthest thing from his mind. To Allen it is all about the artists and the amazing development that their combined efforts create.

In fact the artists in Machine Project's show at LACMA have continued to do things at the museum. Their relational aesthetic practices are becoming integrated into the museum's discourse. Interestingly enough, that integration is through the education department. During a lecture on April 16, 2009 at Pomona College, art historian Richard Meyer discussed the acquisition of a Jackson Pollock by LACMA during the 1950s. The one caveat was that the Pollock was to be used "solely for educational purposes"<sup>121</sup> and by no means hung as part of the permanent collection. There was also an opportunity at that time for LACMA to acquire a color field painting by Mark Rothko, however it was not acquired because the museum found it to be too abstract. As Tom Wolfe wrote in *The Painted Word*, "The game is completed and the trophies distributed long before the public knows what has happened."<sup>122</sup> More than fifty years later a Pollock and a Rothko both occupy space on the gallery walls in LACMA's permanent collection. The educational department comes to act as a curator in a way. Clearly the first step to being accepted within the institution is by means of education, however broad its definition. Sarah Thornton writes, "For the past several years, the focus on current art has been such that no one waits for history to make decisions about what is great, good, or simply competent."<sup>123</sup> Art History, a discipline once concerned solely with the past, is suddenly being forced to grapple with the present.

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<sup>121</sup> Richard Meyer, "Art Now: Teaching Contemporary Art in Los Angeles," (lecture, Pomona College Art History Department, Claremont, CA, Apr. 16, 2009).

<sup>122</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 1975), 26.

<sup>123</sup> Thornton, 111.

In addition to obvious reasons of highlighting a community of artists hidden within the larger art world, assembling them and allowing the public to see that they are in fact part of the discourse, as well as expanding peoples' horizons, the museum's attendance doubled at LACMA on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the day of Machine Project's take-over. Likewise, after the LACMA event Machine quadrupled its membership, one its primary means of support along with fundraising. A criticism of Bourriaud's text, whether or not an art practice without a physical sellable object can function in the institution or more so in our commercial world, is proven invalid by Machine at LACMA as it demonstrates that it like all else functions within a circular economy. Relational aesthetics has not created, and is not located, within an interstice outside of commercialism. In fact everything in a capitalist market exists within its structure. However, the success of the relational aesthetic practice is not rooted in capitalism or commercialism as it does not rely on being purchased or sold. And as Allen validly establishes, "The core activity of a museum functions in the same way. A museum is not a commercial gallery."<sup>124</sup> Instead of fostering the idea of scarcity that commercial galleries naturally do by claiming to sell things that are one-of-a-kind, galleries like Machine Project seek to foster a potentially immaterial and abundant artistic community or relationship, which Allen believes art should always be established as – a relationship. If artwork based solely in the physical object ends in modernism, it would be appropriate for LACMA to begin to take part in whatever the new discourse may be, in this case relational aesthetics. Flaws or not, Nicolas Bourriaud's text *Relational Aesthetics* offers an important way to understand this type of practice, and until someone comes up with a new text, one cannot deny it.

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<sup>124</sup> Allen, "Relational Aesthetics."



In “The Live Creature,” twentieth-century American philosopher John Dewey discusses the history of placing art on a pedestal such that it is removed from the life in which it was originally created. Art is born from the aesthetic appreciation for things we see everyday, the movements of an athlete, the warmth of a fire, or the utilities of a Native American bowl, and should not be so removed from those original inspirations that we lose sight of them altogether. Dewey thus suggests that we should return to art as an experience in order to bring it back into the context of the everyday. Granted the worship of art as object as opposed to the appreciation for art as part of the everyday has been encouraged by our capitalist society, and is not going to vanish any time soon. However, perhaps the two can coexist. It is in this way that Machine Project at LACMA functions to satisfy our desire to reincorporate art into the everyday and appreciate the social component that has frequently been lost or ignored.

Hilda Hein suggests that today’s museums have turned away from art objects and toward bringing out the thoughts and experiences of the viewer. The result of this trend is not a physical collection of objects, but a gained temporal experience. Artist Thomas Hirschhorn says, “I want to make an experience. An experience is something from which I emerge changed. An experience transforms me.”<sup>125</sup> Many would agree. In some way this mimics the general change from a goods based economy to a service based economy we are currently witnessing. Relational works however do exhibit material qualities in other forms beside the physical object, for example Marxist philosopher and post-structuralist Louis Pierre Althusser’s “materialism of encounter,”<sup>126</sup> to which Bourriaud applies relational aesthetics. Or in other words, according to Karl Marx, the essence of the human experience takes the form of interpersonal bonds, the set of

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<sup>125</sup> Thomas Hirschhorn, “24h Foucault,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 155.

<sup>126</sup> Bourriaud, 18.

social relations, which are “invariably historical,”<sup>127</sup> continuing an art historical trajectory. In this case there is “no such thing as any possible ‘end of history’ or ‘end of art,’ because the game is being forever re-enacted.”<sup>128</sup> Duchamp agrees when he says “*art is a game between all people of all periods*”<sup>129</sup> and thus there can be no end of art because there will always be people to play the game. This does speak to the appropriation of previous material as reincorporated in daily life, yet also to the never-ending expanse of original human interaction. As Bourriaud writes, “The work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum.”<sup>130</sup> Douglas Crimp believes that art degenerates as it approaches theatre, but if relational aesthetics takes on social interaction as a physical form as opposed to theatrics, then its essence is simultaneously the ‘end of art’ to which Crimp speaks, and its continuation.

Hilda Hein also addresses the simulacra as transfiguring reality, insinuating that media based interactive displays are an instance of the sign becoming more real than the real (the original art object). As this applies to Machine Project, I would in fact argue the opposite. The transition from art on the walls to art as enacted in the museum space is a shift in the opposite direction, inviting the reality of the lived experience to replace the object based representation of life. Machine is not always a representation of reality but frequently reality itself. The interactions that exist between people are not the simulacra, but in fact, the reemergence of the real within our twenty-first-century society.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 22.

## **Chapter Four**

### **David Michalek's *Slow Dancing***

*Slow Dancing* by David Michalek creates a durational dance photography. The work illuminates the split second shapes dancers' bodies pass through while forming movement, created by stretching five-second clips of each of forty-three dancers from around the world, into ten-minute films. While maintaining the necessary component of time that allows dance to exist in all dimensions, Michalek was able to dissect the movement of the dancers and the method of film simultaneously. *Show Dancing*, first shown as three simultaneous fifty-foot projections during the Lincoln Center Festival, July 12-29, 2007, surprised Michalek by capturing the attention of many viewers night after night. *Slow Dancing* highlights Michalek's experimentation with film that verges on a series of photographic stills. While originally intended for exhibition within a museum, *Slow Dancing* was very successful outside due to the engagement of the street audience who sat and watched, conversing amongst themselves, and relating to the work.

Michalek's *Slow Dancing* clearly meets the criteria of Bourriaud's explanation of relational work: "the work does not (offer) itself as a spatial whole that can be scanned by the eye, but as a time span to be crossed, sequence by sequence, similar to a still short-movie in which the viewer has to evolve by himself."<sup>131</sup> The congregation that developed as viewers watched the work unfold mirrored the collective described by Nicolas Bourriaud. "The aura of art no longer lies in the hinter-world represented by the work, nor in form itself, but in front of it, within the temporary collective form that it produces by being put on show."<sup>132</sup> This is the essence of *Slow Dancing* that defines it as relational aesthetics: the work becomes the interactions located in front of it. Not only does this work reflect the viewers, it relocates the heart of the work from what is being displayed to the display as well as the interaction in front of

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<sup>131</sup> Bourriaud, 73.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 61.

it. The physical object functions to produce a relational component, one that lies at the revised center of the work's focus; in Bourriaud's words, "The social bond has turned into a standardized artifact."<sup>133</sup> Not only had Michalek altered the movement of the dancers through time, he altered that of the viewers as well. Time stood still for the audience at Lincoln Center Plaza. It stood still to allow the dancers in Michalek's films to lose their stillness. Michalek transcended Manhattan time where an hour whizzes by in a second.

"As part of a 'relationist' theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its 'environment', its 'field' (Bourdieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice."<sup>134</sup> *Slow Dancing* certainly exists in this way. By displaying the films outside of the museum, Michalek transforms the core of his work, which explored the line between photography and film, to reside in the realm of film, that which captures the spectacle of movement. While film technically is his medium, the way in which he manipulates it causes it to function as both film and photography. However, the audience's durational interaction refuses the photographic interpretation of the piece, thereby transforming the setting, Lincoln Center Plaza, to the essence of the work itself. In Nicolas Bourriaud's words, "Producing a form is to invent possible encounters; receiving a form is to create the conditions for an exchange."<sup>135</sup> Under this definition Michalek's work is relational, because his medium allows for a variety of encounters and exchanges.

Professor Arden Reed addressed work similar to Michalek's in a lecture at Pomona College about his upcoming book *Slow Art*. His research focuses on the phenomenon of art that lags behind current tempos, that which walks the border between the moving and the still, art that

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 23.

resides in real time with little or no measurable action<sup>136</sup>. This art creates an awareness of perception, requiring an object with some sort of possibility for slowness, something temporal, ephemeral and or durational, in some respect. Slow art must resist instantaneous viewing and instead act behaviorally as a function of time. Movement is retarded until it seems still, or the still is rustled into motion. We experience the image as an event, posed between life and art. David Michalek's *Slow Dancing* is a perfect example of this temporal phenomenon which Reed proposes. It is *Slow Dancing*'s ability to exist simultaneously as moving and still that allows it to function in Lincoln Center as a relational work.

One of the key aspects of *Slow Dancing* is its duration. Durational art functions differently with regard to collection or commoditization than do static art objects. Instead of commodity, or gestalt, the work becomes a "period of time to be lived through."<sup>137</sup> Relational aesthetics is thus reduced to the following: "an art form where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the 'encounter' between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning."<sup>138</sup> Not only is being-together central to *Slow Dancing* in its presentation at Lincoln Center, it is critical to its identity as a relational work. Consider when *Slow Dancing* was presented in a museum setting; it was received very differently. Instead of capturing a crowd which sat and watched over time, museum visitors caught glimpses as they walked by the work or stopped to take it in as if it were a still photograph. In the museum the piece lacked the "being-togetherness" that it possessed outside in Lincoln Center Plaza during the festival. Another aspect of this being-togetherness is

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<sup>136</sup> Arden Reed, "The Movement of Slow Art," (lecture, Pomona College English Department, Claremont, CA, Sept. 30, 2008).

<sup>137</sup> Bourriaud, 15.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

the relationship between the content of *Slow Dancing*, dancers from around the world, and its ‘audience’. New York City is the historic doorway to the United States, and its inhabitants at the time of the festival, watching and interacting amongst fifty-foot projections of dancers from around the world, results in a whirlpool of global and cultural interaction and display.

What we call ‘art’ includes artifacts and events produced and organized with a certain conceptual framework in mind. Art is often categorized as something especially valuable and fine, and in recognition of this works of visual art often command high prices; ticket sales to events such as symphonies and operas may also be beyond the means of many. These facts may seem to imply that art is set apart from ordinary life, that it is captured and saved in galleries and museums and special venues of this nature. But we also need to remember that art is an activity that produces many forms, including popular entertainment such as movies and television series, pop concerts and radio broadcasts.<sup>139</sup>

Art that has moved away from the art object and toward a medium that cannot be physically possessed has forced a reconsideration of the art market, subverting the evaluation of art as something to be coveted and collected. As author Carolyn Korsmeyer mentioned, high ticket prices have for years indicated the artistic value of performances such as symphonies and operas. While these are ‘performances’ and considered to be in a slightly different genre than fine art, they are nonetheless considered with the same mentality as being elite, adding to high culture. Traditionally entering an opera house is similar to entering a museum- one must wear appropriate attire, be quiet, and able to appreciate the artistic brilliance that is displayed. Going to the movies or a concert or simply watching television at home have equally valid artistic merits, yet are not considered to be high art. So where does Michalek’s *Slow Dancing*, a piece intended for the prestigious setting of the museum, yet displayed as would be a movie with the most public accessibility possible lie in the larger framework? Is it the formalities such as setting

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<sup>139</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed. *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 1.

that have traditionally dictated fine art for which the art world of the present has begun to question and redefine?

Dr. Julian Stallabrass, professor at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, has studied the recent phenomenon of a changed museum experience. Instead of a place of quiet contemplation, the museum has become more of a popular social experience – solo interactions with paintings on the walls have been replaced by chatting, laughing people with cameras. “The value of our encounters with art is not only found in the works of art themselves but in our overall experience,<sup>140</sup>” according to theorist and art historian Hilde Hein. Relational aesthetics as a type of contemporary art is a significant contributor to this new experience. *Machine* at LACMA and *Slow Dancing* at Lincoln Center both function to create a new museum experience. *Machine* transforms the traditional museum space to function like the museum Stallabrass speaks of, and *Slow Dancing* creates a new space within Lincoln Center Plaza, one that functions similarly to *Machine* at LACMA as transformed.

The changing museum experience is possibly linked with short attention spans in the twenty-first century. And while this museum experience is not created intentionally to accommodate the fast-paced, interactive, and media based tendencies of our twenty-first century global society, the experience is certainly a product of it. It is in this way that *Slow Dancing* becomes increasingly powerful when brought out of the museum. When positioned in the museum one is asked to sit and contemplate it in a traditional manner, however, when brought outside the conventional gallery’s confines, one is able to interact with one’s fellow viewers, and *Slow Dancing* becomes more of a viewing experience. Placing *Slow Dancing* within the customary confines of the museum effectively eliminates the necessary means with which to

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<sup>140</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed. *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 76.



justifiably view the work. The work requires this new museum social experience in order for our fast-paced programmed selves to be able to read the work as was intended by the artist.

Writing in 1934, John Dewey noted, “The arts which today have the most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits.”<sup>141</sup> While written over 70 years ago, this quote is still relevant today, in 2009, a time during which many socio-cultural forums once part of American life have been lost, and a hunger for reintegration into community is growing. Today we could add to the list, along with movies and music, community and congregation. The art of today that seems satisfying masterfully completes the task “of recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal process of living.”<sup>142</sup> Not to be confused with equating daily life with art, works such as *Slow Dancing* incorporate art into habitual life by reincorporating aspects of life that have been lost, into art. “These days one might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so.”<sup>143</sup>

This raises the question: must art previously appreciated for its objectness, and recontextualized and appreciated for its relational aspect be durational in nature? Must we differentiate between static and durational art with regard to relational aesthetics? Clearly the work must resist instantaneous viewing and instead must incorporate time. In fact art has always

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<sup>141</sup> John Dewey, “The Live Creature,” in *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 6.

<sup>142</sup> Dewey, 10.

<sup>143</sup> Arthur C. Danto, “The Artworld,” in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 34.

had an inherent social component. Art history would not exist if art didn't have a relational history. The necessity of dialogue governs art historical practice and theory.

"Some believe that art is too varied and disparate a phenomenon to admit of any single definition at all; others believe that there is a common creative impulse that produces artifacts in all societies, and that despite differences they bear enough similarities all to merit the label 'art'."<sup>144</sup> Whether one believes art to be definable, or too varied to be summarized into one line, it should be agreed that relational aesthetics, as a new category, has taken a step into the murky waters where the labels of high art and low art no longer have any meaning. Marcel Duchamp undeniably broke ground by introducing *Fountain* into the Society of Independent Artists' exhibit in 1917, thereby asking people to judge what is an art object and what is not. However relational aesthetics has gone a step further by asking the people to evaluate what is an art interaction and what is not. Relational aesthetics has become the Dada and Pop Art of the intangible experience that which is "unequivocally not containable in time or space."<sup>145</sup>

Not all of Michalek's work, unlike *Slow Dancing*, is so unclassifiable. His photography has been featured in publications such as Vanity Fair, Vogue, Interview, and The New Yorker; he has shown internationally with recent solo exhibitions at The Brooklyn Museum, The Kitchen and Yale University Art Gallery. These photographs reside safely within their traditional artistic category. However, *Slow Dancing* is not the first work of Michalek's to break into the realm of relational aesthetics. In *14 Stations* from 2004, Michalek purposefully developed a photographic work around the whole of social relations, and thus positioned it within the realm of relational aesthetics.

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<sup>144</sup> Korsmeyer, 2.

<sup>145</sup> Hilde Hein, "Museums: From Object to Experience," in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 108.

*14 Stations* is modeled on the traditional Stations of the Cross, a processional Christian devotional rite in which different persons assume the role of the Christ. In *14 Stations*, Michalek worked with men and women transitioning out of homelessness, members of the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing, a not-for-profit located at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, where he was the artist in residence. Michalek worked with his subjects for weeks, developing a relationship with each and every one before he began photographing. He asked for volunteers for each Station; for example, in Station Five –Simon helps Christ carry the Cross, the central figure chose this role because when he was down and out his friend rescued him from a park bench and helped get him back on his feet. He wanted to show the recognition he has for his Savior by enacting the Fifth Station but also reenacting his own past life.

The element of individual connection with the sacred narrative may have been necessary to get such heartfelt and genuine photographs. However for Michalek they are the heart of the piece, so much that the men and women represented in these photographs were incorporated into the full exhibition. The resulting photographs were displayed, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine for the initial full exhibition, as well as at the Brooklyn Museum and Yale Divinity School. However the performance of *14 Stations* became the real piece. Presented as a “town hall” style gathering, it was organized into four parts. To start the visitors were invited to examine the initial element of the project, the photographs of the 14 Stations. Next there was a panel discussion with politicians, homelessness experts, scholars and homeless individuals, followed by personal testimonials by the transitioning homeless people from the photographs. Finally, participants, guests, politicians, scholars, and homeless individuals joined together for a dinner and conversation. The photographs destined for museum collections became minor

players in a much larger game of social activism within the community. By featuring transitioning people in his work he brought them together with the politicians who influence their lives, as well as the general public. This aspect, in his own opinion, is Michalek's greatest artistic feat.

The crux of David Michalek's work is in developing the relationships necessary to capture his subjects on film. The importance of the photographs themselves is obvious, yet these two-dimensional objects have stopped being the most important aspect of his work. It is the multi-dimensional relationship that is fundamental to his practice and becomes the work itself. The nature of the liaison between the relationships and the photographs has changed: previously individual relationships facilitated the photographs, but now the photographs facilitate a much larger sort of social relation that operate in the realm that Bourriaud describes as relational aesthetics. Not so different than what John Dewey said in the 1930s, "The *product* of art – temple, painting, statue, poem – is not the *work* of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties."<sup>146</sup> Relational aesthetics expands upon this individual interaction, and creates a relational web.

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<sup>146</sup> John Dewey, "The Varied Substance of the Arts," in *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 214.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Critique**

In previous chapters, I have addressed the issue that relational aesthetics did not emerge from thin air but rather is related to participation-based predecessors. At the same time, while there is a solid history to support relational aesthetics within a historical trajectory, there are reasons why relational aesthetics emerged at this specific moment in time. In Chapter Three relational works were discussed as functioning similarly to church, or other community-based clubs or groups that played a large role earlier in the twentieth century. The current generation of adults in their forties is perhaps the first generation to have missed out on the close-knit community based clubs and organizations of generations past. Born primarily in the 1960s, this generation experienced an entirely different sort of community experience. While mass gatherings certainly existed face-to-face, they were on the fringe, a sort of alternative practice existing for the counter culture. The 1960s may be best known today for Woodstock, tie-dye, long hair, and John Lennon, however the partakers of peace and free-love were not the established mainstream, and the children born out of the era were subject to a changed America. This was the beginning of the end of core communities that helped to define American culture.

With the invention of the Internet just two decades later, America was well on its way to becoming a front runner in the global society of the twenty-first century, light years away from the social clubs of the early and mid nineteen hundreds. Now people are “brought-together” in the privacy of their own homes, sitting in front of their computer screens. And all of the generations following those born in and around the 1960s have had little or no experience with clubs and organizations as did their parents and grandparents. Thus while the industrialized west was developing its globalized society, it was becoming fragmented by forms of communication and interaction. The social role promised in relational aesthetics is substantially different than that of the participatory work of the nineteen hundreds. As influential as those forms were within

the art world, relational aesthetics is unique in its ambition in society today, to restore community to people who lack rich face-to-face interaction.

While the Internet has been discussed thus far as seeming to interfere with face-to-face interaction in that it allows for communication and isolation simultaneously, it also, of course, has greatly increased and strengthened communication. Allowing for simple and instantaneous interaction with people far away, the expansion of cyberspace has made our world a lot smaller. Relational artists employ this technological advance to their advantage, calling people together, face-to-face or virtually, to create new communities to fill the void that has emerged in the last fifty years. The problems associated with today's technologies also offer solutions.

Claire Bishop found much to criticize in Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, in particular her sense that relational aesthetics is too much a "work-in-progress,"<sup>147</sup> lacking the sort of concreteness that defines a distinguishable artwork. She argues that "Such work seems to derive from a creative misreading of poststructural theory: rather than the *interpretations* of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art *itself* is argued to be in perpetual flux."<sup>148</sup> She finds two inherent problems with this art: the discernability of such work, and the tendency for it to be identified as "a space of leisure and entertainment."<sup>149</sup> It is clear Bishop believes art and leisure entertainment are valued differently, and that somehow a work is not a work if it cannot be clearly defined, outlined or contained. While a discussion of these qualities is important to evaluating relational aesthetics and the trajectory of art history in general, a solid judgment should not be assumed one way or another regarding the negativity or

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<sup>147</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October Magazine* 110 (Fall 2004): 52.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

positive association of these qualities. By introducing a discussion of the definability of relational aesthetics works of art, as well as their relation to entertainment, Bishop has highlighted perhaps one of the most crucial issues regarding contemporary art of this nature. Bishop points out quite accurately,

The implication is that this work inverts the goals of Greenbergian modernism. Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience. Moreover, this audience is envisaged as a community: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective, social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be.<sup>150</sup>

In a sense with her observation of the audience as a community Bishop answered her own question. She touched on the precise reason why relational aesthetics appeared manifested during the contemporary timeframe, how it relates to previous work, and how it differs.

When considering relational aesthetics' relation to entertainment and leisure, it is necessary to examine art's relationship to entertainment and leisure within a larger context. While painting was originally used as a sort of documentation, particularly in portraiture, art quickly involved an aspect of enjoyment that could easily be seen as being derived from entertainment and leisure. The works of Giotto, Michelangelo, Van Gogh, and Picasso, the tableau vivant, and much more, while all different and some religious, have all been incorporated into society through aesthetic pleasure, viewed as a sort of entertainment by people during their leisure time. Relational aesthetics is in no way different. Associating art with entertainment and leisure is not unique to relational aesthetics, nor does the association belittle art, nor compromise any significant messages the art may convey.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 54.



In fact art contributes, in all of these ways- as leisure, entertainment, etc., to society. Bishop states that “Bourriaud’s defense of relational aesthetics is indebted to Althusser’s idea that culture – as an ‘ideological state apparatus’ – does not *reflect* society, but *produces* it.”<sup>151</sup> While one could argue that culture both reflects *and* produces society, the composite idea of Bourriaud and Althusser does bring up an interesting relationship between art, culture and society. For those who have followed the “hippie” generation, America is losing the community structures it once had, and in a sense requires something to recreate the togetherness a society fosters in its people, a role relational aesthetics successfully plays. America has recently been relatively cultureless- marked by individuality and being fast paced. Bishop asks “how we decide what the ‘structure’ of a relational art work comprises, and whether this is so detachable from the work’s ostensible subject matter or permeable with its context.”<sup>152</sup> Difficult to nail down as Bishop indicates, or not, Bourriaud’s description of relational aesthetics as “the *structure* of an art work produces a social relationship”<sup>153</sup> is precisely what a commodity-based society with a global consumer culture, like America, needs to breathe life back into its otherwise empty culture. Subject matter, context, every aspect can and may help define the structure of the work, proven time and time again to be different with each piece and artist, with or without consequence. Bishop mistrusts relational aesthetics as a remedy to consumerized culture. She writes “One could argue that in this context, project-based works-in-progress and artists-in-residence begin to dovetail with an ‘experience economy,’ the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences.”<sup>154</sup> “The

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 52.

quality of the audience relations it produces”<sup>155</sup> is what will make relational aesthetics successful in its ability to fight America’s current tendency to eliminate experiences in exchange for tangible commodities, enabling the ability for a re-initiation of culture and society to take hold.

Discussing the relationship between art, culture and society is difficult because it can tend to blur the line between art and life, a distinction that, as observed by Bishop, Bourriaud leaves out of his text. As discussed in Chapter Three, Bishop asserts that “art has become all too subsumed into everyday life”<sup>156</sup> and argues that a clear distinction must be made to maintain the autonomy of art. Mark Allen eloquently describes the relationship between the two as one’s ability to move from one to the other, art and life, responding to Bishop’s query by suggesting a permeable boundary as opposed to one that is rigid. In 1934, John Dewey asked “Why is there repulsion when the high achievements of fine art are brought into connection with common life, the life that we share with all living creatures?”<sup>157</sup> Bishop’s critique initiates further discussion of relational aesthetics, conversations that can benefit one’s understanding of contemporary work and are worthy of consideration. Dewey’s question and Allen’s explanation offer a template for living. There is no reason why art and life should be held apart, preventing any interaction.

Bishop claims that relational aesthetics “relies on its presence within a gallery to differentiate it from entertainment.”<sup>158</sup> However in the context of Stallabrass’ new museum experience, the gallery is not much different from the outside world. Once sterile with its nose held high, the museum now purposefully lacks those qualities that Bishop believes helps to define art. Examining Bishop’s statement in light of Michalek’s *Slow Dancing* complicates the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>157</sup> John Dewey, “The Live Creature and ‘Etherial Things’,” in *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 20.

<sup>158</sup> Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 69.

issue further. It is specifically *Slow Dancing*'s presence outside of the gallery that activated its relational qualities, blurring the distinction from entertainment.

Consider another possible venue for an artistic exchange. This form of artistic production is perhaps attractive at this moment in time not only because it meets a need for community connection lost in fragmented culture but perhaps also because of the way the majority of artists are now trained. Aside from the more public venues of museums in which art incorporates the social, there are also social artistic experiences the typical art viewer is not privy to. A critical element in the art making process, no matter what the medium, time period, or context, is the critique, or crit, an essential element of current day Masters in Fine Arts programs. As Sarah Thornton rightly points out, "Indeed, crits are not normally considered art world events, but I think that the dynamics in this room are vital to understanding the way the art world works."<sup>159</sup> She describes an experience viewing a student critique during one of Michael Asher's classes at CalArts.

The students leave, but I stay to take one last look at the abandoned room. Huge piles of trash-filled grocery bags, orange peels, and snack wrappers litter the floor. The space no longer feels dry and institutional but complicated and inspired. Whether it's deemed art or not, the Post-Studio crit is Asher's greatest and most influential work. It's a thirty-year institutional critique that reveals the limits of the rest of the curriculum. It's also a sound piece where Asher has been at the quiet eye of a multivocal storm. It's a minimalist performance where the artist has sat, listened with care, and occasionally cleared his throat.<sup>160</sup>

Thornton's description of the critique is quite similar to many descriptions of relational aesthetics. People are often ambivalent about its classification as art, but no matter, relational

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<sup>159</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 47.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 73.

aesthetics is some of the most influential work of the last hundred years. Complicated, confusing and vaguely intangible, relational work of the 1990s and early twenty-first century not only continues the art historical trajectory of the twentieth century, but also plays a key role in today's culture and society.

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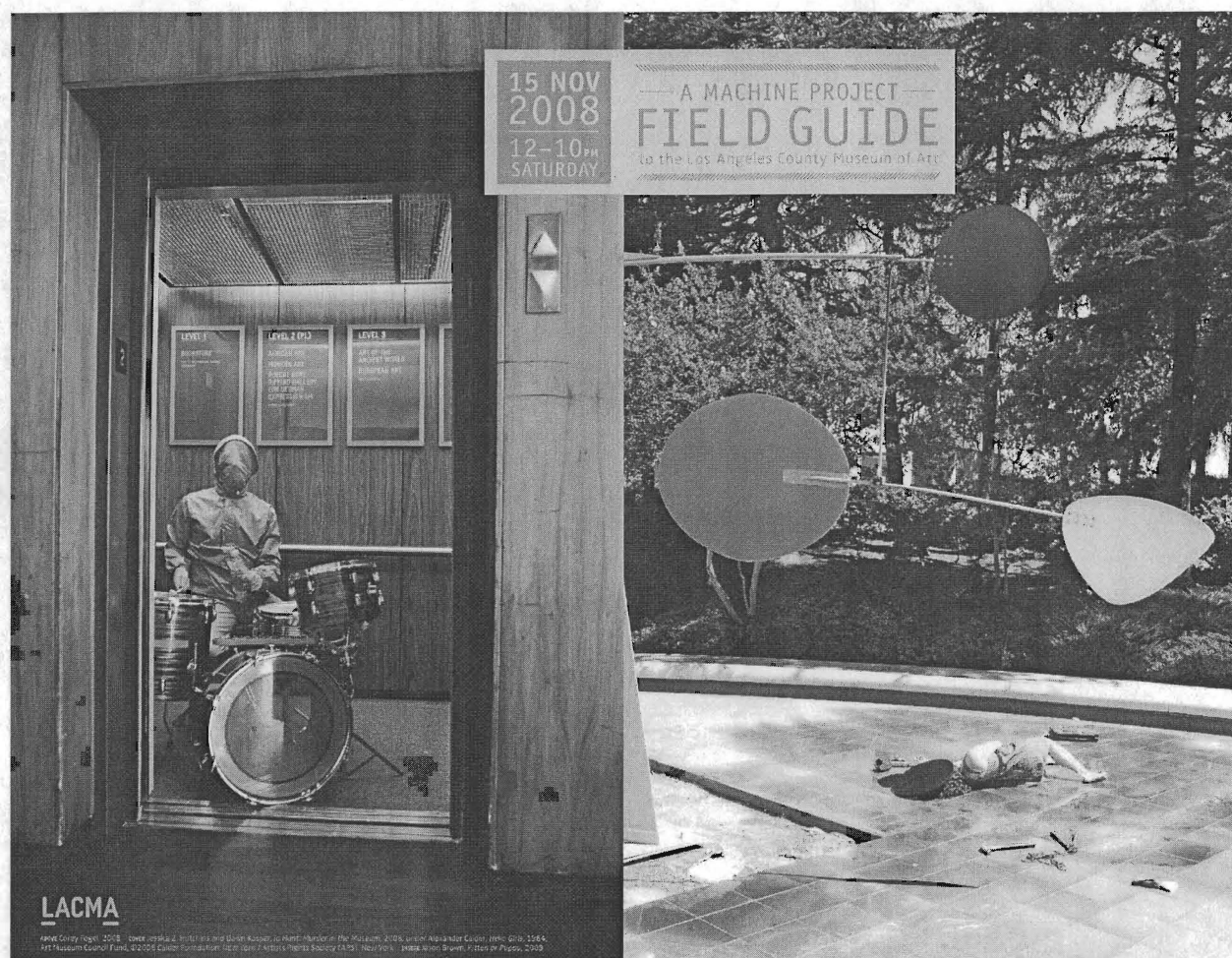
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## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1



Gothic arch speed metal, robotic Netsuke head,  
kinetic art companions, ambient rumble modification,  
glow-in-the-dark unicorn, a man in a suit made of  
pepper cans, a painting reproduced in flowers.

Craft workshops, wandering minstrels, gallery  
massages, hum quartet, clapping ensemble, murder  
mystery, musical aliens, trash replicas, a lost nose.

And inside a large existing wall vitrine, an animatronic  
sleeping kitten or puppy is observed gently breathing.

On November 15, 2008 Machine Project will celebrate ten hours of performances, workshops, and events which complement LACMA's interdisciplinary efforts and expansive grounds. Featuring over 40 projects designed to challenge, inspire, and engage visitors, the event is an opportunity to explore the museum in new and unexpected ways.

Machine Project is a Los Angeles based social experiment which blends art, science, technology, nature, history, music, and poetry through collaboration and conversation.

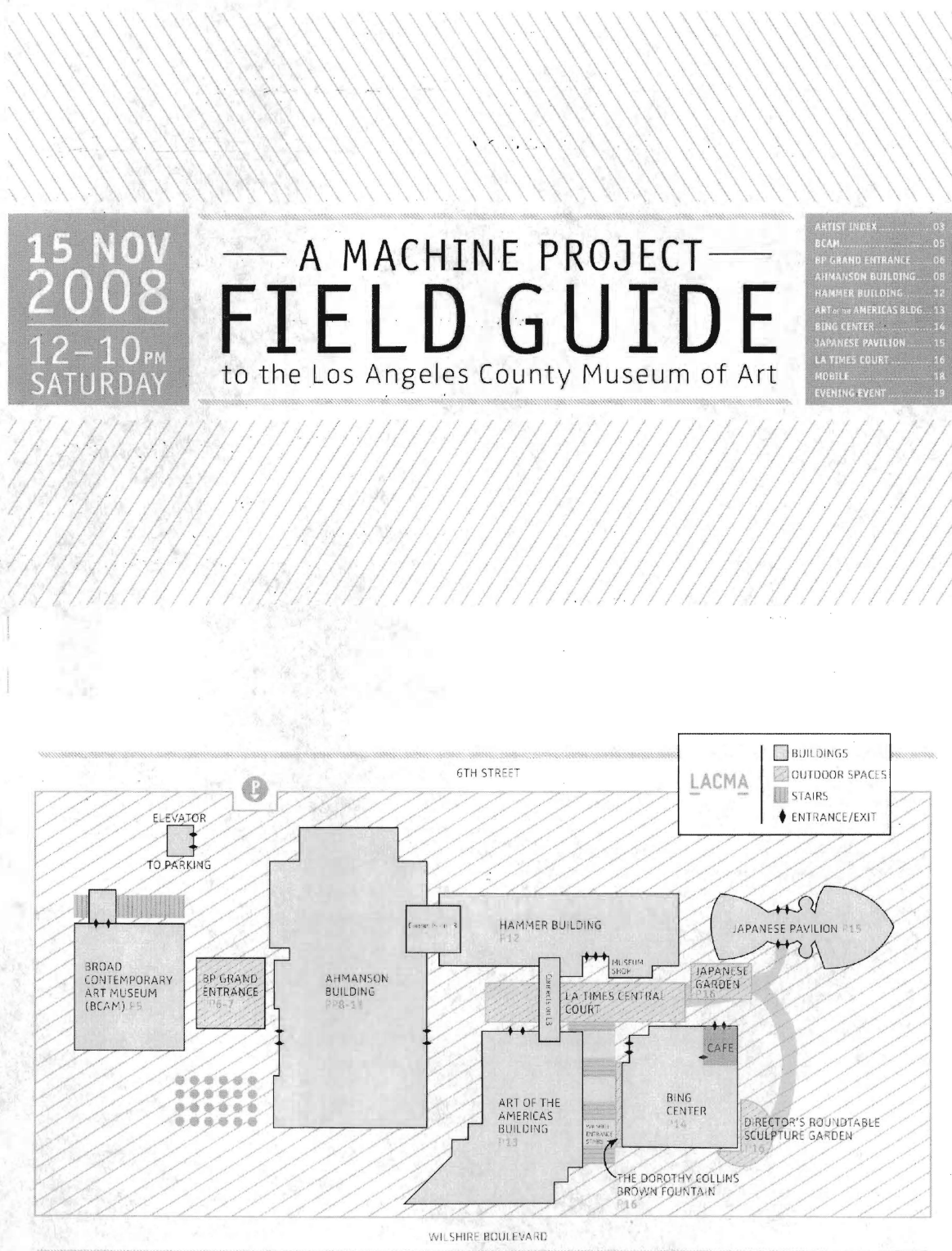
[www.lacma.org/machineproject](http://www.lacma.org/machineproject)

Poster (front and back) for  
*A Machine Project Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art,*  
at Los Angeles County Museum of Art on November 15, 2008

Courtesy of Machine Project



Figure 2



## 4 WELCOME

Usually when we visit a museum, we treat it like a slumbering organism with priceless artifacts held in protoplasmic suspension. We stay at a respectful distance, move at a measured pace, keep our voices down. Today, we're going to try something different. LACMA invited us to rethink what can happen in a museum. So we've organized site-specific installations and performances throughout the collections and grounds, giving special attention to the treasure-filled oubliettes of its farthest reaches.

We're calling this experiment a field guide because we're trying to research new ways of engaging and collaborating with the museum. And honestly, we're just as curious as you are how this experiment is going to turn out. We put this booklet together to help us keep track of everything that's going on — a field guide to the field guide. You can follow the schedules and maps to the performances. Or you could just stroll around LACMA and sooner or later you'll come across something unexpected.

Love,  
Machine

### THE PUBLIC SCHOOL Richard Serra Reading Room

In the weeks leading up to November 15th, The Public School hosted a series of seminars inside Richard Serra sculptures. Classes included *One Place After Another is Never the Same Place*, *Blubber Boylines and Boat Hulls*, *The Economy of Giant-Ass Sculpture*, *the Democratic Museum*, and *Ekphrasis: Writers as Artists Reacting to Art*. [www.thepublicschool.org](http://www.thepublicschool.org)

INSIDE RICHARD SERRA'S *SEQUENCE AND BAND*  
SUNDBEE'S PRIOR TO THE EVENT OCTOBER 19TH NOVEMBER 9TH



### FIND THE LOST NOSE



### SOLVE THE MURDER IN THE MUSEUM

Look for the pipe on the following pages to gather evidence. Cues are on page 17.

10



## AHMANSON BUILDING LEVEL THREE

### A CENTER FOR TACTICAL MAGIC *Wands*

A collection of contemporary wands calls attention to the manner in which archaic or irrational magical themes are re-articulated through consumer products and gizmos.

BOLDER GALLERY HALLWAY (1.3)

### B DOUGLAS LEE *Glass Harmonica*

Glass Harmonica virtuoso Douglas Lee will harmonize with pitch perfect water glasses.

THE MR. AND MRS. HARRY CHANDLER GALLERY (1.3) 2-3PM

### C GOTHIC ARCH SPEED METAL *Performance to be viewed via Telescope*

In a remote location, a guitarist will perform one minute of speed metal in a replica of the *Doorway with Arms of the Courts of Chozoy*. Arch replica by Christy McCaffrey and Sara Novcovy.

THE BARBARA McHENRY PAULEY GALLERY OF ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN SCULPTURE (1.3) EVERY HOUR ON THE HOUR

### D JOSHUA BECKMAN AND ANTHONY MCCANN *Distance Learning*

From a remote location viewable by telescope, poets Joshua Beckman and Anthony McCann will read poems for individual listeners over the telephone.

THE BARBARA McHENRY PAULEY GALLERY OF ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN SCULPTURE (1.3)

### E LEWIS KELLER *Thornton Room Rumble Modification*

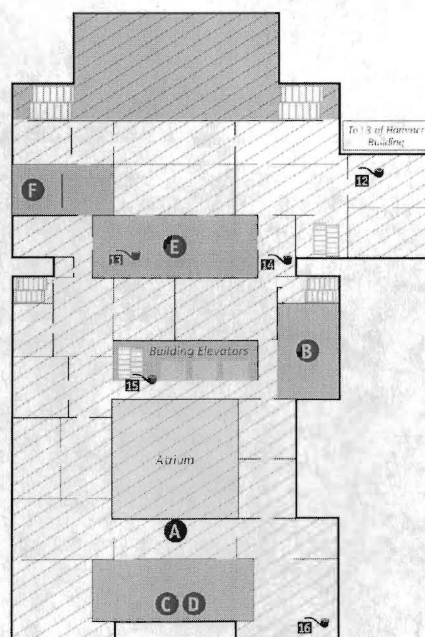
A live remix of the ambient drone of the air conditioning system.

THE CHARLES R. AND FLORA L. THORNTON GALLERY (1.3)

### F LAURA STEENBERGE *Melancholy Contrabass Improvisations*

Laura will play amongst the Dutch paintings for really kind of a lot of hours.

CAMELLA CHANDLER-FROST GALLERY (1.3)



18



## MOBILE THROUGHOUT LACMA

### A BARBERSHOP HUM QUARTET

A quartet of overtone singers harmonize wordlessly with the flickering lights, hidden fans, and LACMA's electrical current.

MOBILE NOON-2PM

### B COREY FOGEL

#### *Counteraccumulative Marcotting*

A dance and noise improvisation for performer and three hundred aluminum black pepper shakers. A kinetic Corey sculpture with recursive narrative — vertical, and without beginning or end.

MOBILE NOON-2PM

### C ING

#### *Slow Walking Color Takers*

Two travelers from another dimension are transported to LACMA in search of vibrant color combinations. Upon discovery, specific colors elicit mysterious sounds from the alien tourists.

MOBILE NOON-6PM

### D ANNE K. O'MALLEY

#### *The Phenomenon of Intersection: Three Tours*

Join Anne K. O'Malley for one of three tours exploring the nexus of art and science. Tours include *LACMA During the Pleistocene Epoch*, *The Music of the Spheres in Paint*, and *The Industrial Sewing Revolution*.

DEPARTS FROM MISSION CONTROL AT  
2PM (PLEISTOCENE) / 4PM (SPHERES) / 6PM (SEWING)

### E JACINTO ASTIAZARÁN, FRITZ HAEG, AND FLORA WIEGMANN

#### *Alpha Lacma Majoris*

Flora Wiegmann, Fritz Haeg, and Jacinto Astiazarán will move through the campus charting constellations and star maps. When viewed as a whole, a collective motivation may become clear.

MOBILE NOON-6PM



FIND THE LOST KITTENS

Excerpts from *A Machine Project Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*,  
at Los Angeles County Museum of Art on November 15, 2008

Courtesy of Machine Project

Figure 3



*Hyperbolic Crochet Plastic-Bag Workshop by The Institute for Figuring  
during A Machine Project Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art,  
at Los Angeles County Museum of Art on November 15, 2008*

Photography courtesy of the author



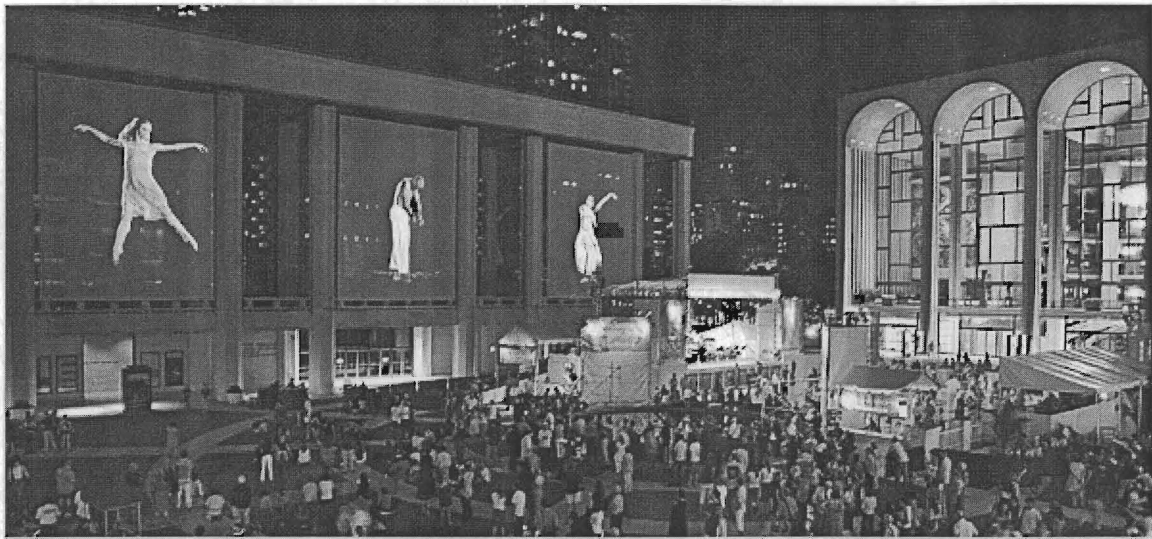
Figure 4



*Gothic Arch Speed Metal*, performance to be viewed via telescope,  
during *A Machine Project Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*,  
at Los Angeles County Museum of Art on November 15, 2008

Photography courtesy of the author

Figure 5



*Slow Dancing* by David Michalek,  
at Lincoln Center Festival, 2007

Photograph courtesy of the New York Times