

Good times & friendship: Artist initiatives and relational aesthetics

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Simon Barney: *No ideas*, 2005; *Archive of dud slides*, 2002; and *Briefcase works – Product*, 2005. Anne Kay & Jane Polkinghorne, *Artist archive* and *Artist archive map*, 2005. Installation view, *Situation*, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005. Photo Vicki Irving.

Hot on the heels of her keynote address on artist-run initiatives at the Adelaide Fringe Festival, Lisa Kelly is behind the bar at the launch of Loose, one of the latest of Sydney's artist-facilitated ventures. Kelly, co-founder of the now defunct gallery Blaugrau, and editor and founder of the journal *Uniglory*, is now a member of the Loose collective, a group of artists who have pooled resources to support artist's projects. Loose, with its concept of collectively 'gifted space', is a further evolution in the fluid and shifting experimentation that characterises artist-funded initiatives. Kelly's core concept, as articulated in her address for Artists' Week, is sustainability: artists, while not cash rich, have other assets of friendship and goodwill through which to build networks of support and sustainability to create the necessary conditions for the production of work. The result is a working model that is decidedly horizontal and not top-down as in the traditional dealer-artist or funding body-artist models of gallery organisation.

Contrast Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics and a form of art practice that is likewise based on

friendship and a politics of sociability. There are obvious parallels and shared concerns. Bourriaud, after the philosopher Levinas, prioritises ethics and the relationship with the Other over ego-driven practices. Friendship is a foundational value which can be shared in the exchanges of art: relational aesthetics opens a space for works that are profoundly social in their goals. Given the shared emphasis on friendship and the social, one can expect a cross-over between relational aesthetics and the objectives of artist-run and artist-funded initiatives; both sets of practice imply not only a repair but a radical rebuilding and reconception of the social fabric, one which is based on local networks, much in the way in which Michel de Certeau challenged the top-down hegemonies of media, fashion and advertising ordained within pan-capitalism and globalisation. De Certeau, in *The practice of everyday life*, argued for the resistance of the local, demonstrated by local styles of cooking, walking and making fun. Within the context of 1960s radicalism the Situationists likewise banded together and developed the idea of 'mapping psychogeographies', the itinerary one travels when taking

a walk. Ardently anti-capitalist, the taking of a walk through the neighbourhood can't be owned. Walking can be a constructed, creative act that is shared and is social.

A project like Loose with its donations bar likewise encourages conviviality, in the consumption and even the sale of art, only there's no dealer in the wings and any profits are fed back into the group to fund further shows. The idea is to generate a self-sustainable practice in which artists also provide mutual critique and discussion for the further evolution of their practices.

But to what extent does conviviality or the ethic of friendship, as the basis for artists networks and initiatives, carry over into the kind of art produced? Consider, in more detail, the paradigms of relational aesthetics. Ever since Nicholas Bourriaud coined the term he has raised anew awareness of community issues: the notion of community in itself is ethical, foregrounding social relationships as central to being human. Bourriaud follows post-structuralism in a radical re-centring of the subject – that fundamental shift in metaphysics that places the core notions of identity and subjectivity in the service of the relationship with the Other. Thinkers as diverse as Lacan and Levinas have foregrounded how the sense of self is first of all dependent on the Other.

In Levinas's famous reversal of egocentric metaphysics, he argues that it is from the other's acknowledgement or confirmation of myself that I obtain my sense of self. We relate to each other through the society, culture, and the language which creates us (like Lacan's 'we are structured through language'), and the ethics or moral principles through which all of us, each an infant bundle of drive and desire, are socialised. This new metaphysics, grounded in the ethical relationship with the Other contrasts with the egocentric metaphysics of Plato (founding the subject in assertions of self, beginning with the utterance, 'I am') and, more famously, the Cartesian I-who-doubts, but who inevitably has to seek reassurance.

How is this fundamental metaphysical shift reflected in art? Bourriaud acknowledges this shift in artistic practice, notably that of Rirkrit Tiravanija, the artist who famously cooks, entertains, and makes coffee, as a form of art. What have the arts of the table and sharing a meal to do with art, if not to move the emphasis from the scopic model of consumption of art – looking at things – to the interpersonal relationship? Of course, Bourriaud has had his share of critics, including those as notable as Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss. What is to stop a Tiravanija event – either sharing one of his Thai soups or hanging out drinking coffee and reading magazines in the gallery back room which he has fastidiously installed in the main gallery space – from merely becoming an arty party? How does one differentiate?

For a start there is nothing resembling art to look at; but the framing itself around this absence of art is enough to set one to a more reflective mode of thought. The effect is to put art back into social relationships; to see relationships and conviviality as worthy objects

conferring value. Indeed, the question of value has always circulated through art – as aesthetic value, and as monetary exchange value. Recently the Russian artist Alexander Brener scandalously spray-canned a Malevich with a green dollar sign, ostensibly to reinvest Malevich's abstract white square with the spirit of the age of Russia under capitalism. Relational aesthetics is likewise concerned with critical and cultural value, though in a less hostile form of hegemonic critique, through using art to promote simple ethical social values inherent in such actions: in for example the generosity of sharing and extending hospitality to the Other. It's easy to dismiss a practice in which nothing happens other than that which already happens in everyday life: people meeting, sharing a meal, showing consideration to one another, and which most often manifests in something as small as the mundane everyday practices of etiquette – saying thank-you, nodding in gratitude, in the context of one of his events – all everyday rituals of politeness which serve no function other than to acknowledge the Other and confirm the ethical relation. Getting across the principles of relational art can be a similar exercise.

Apart from the setting up of everyday social situations, how else can the artist manifest concerns that are at best abstract, and can't be encapsulated within the usual parameters of performative art? Maurizio Cattelan, who has a diverse practice, is more flamboyantly funny in those works singled out by Bourriaud as evidence of relational aesthetics. 'Table football' played in Italian cafes became a point of social focus and conviviality when he installed an extra-long version of the game that could be played by two full teams of footballers. Cattelan took an Italian team and a black North African team off serious football's field of contest, and put them together in the spirit of fun. Frans Alÿs's *When faith moves mountains 2002* likewise employed goodwill around an absurdist gesture when he assembled 500 people with buckets on a sand dune in order to move the crest a few centimetres. Some works can be so low key as to disappear, like Tiravanija's hammocks, installed down on the pier by the water outside the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Sydney, for the 1998 'Every day' Biennale of Sydney.

The question now is to test the principles of relational aesthetics against ideas in circulation in artist-run initiatives. Certainly the values of goodwill and generosity towards the Other abound in the spirit of collaboration in artist-funded events, given the necessity to raise funds and means together. Of course, a distinction must be made between artist-funded and artist-run spaces. Both non-mainstream forms aim to develop work which might not fit a commercial bill; and such spaces, particularly the government funded ones, biennales included, have done much to foster installation and non-commercial work on a global scale.

Without the circuits of biennales and publicly funded art institutions, the kinds of work now described as relational aesthetics would have had much more difficulty being realised. There is an understanding

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Sarah Goffman, *Refuse*, 2005. Installation view, *Situation*, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005. Photo Greg Weight.

among government and corporate/commercial interests alike that the risk of innovative art's failure is so great that without the aid of scarce and visionary benefactors (the Guggenheims for example) art is in danger of falling into replication of safe, predictable, and value-holding patterns. Rare, forward thinking commercial galleries aside, the non-commercial spaces are where much experimental and ground-breaking thinking takes place, the kind that keeps art relevant and responsive to change and issues, and to the evolving nature of art itself.

Therefore when the MCA staged *Situation* last year it was an important acknowledgement of the vital contribution made by artist-run and artist-funded spaces, a collaboration on a grand scale, across three continents, Europe, Australasia and Asia. The aim was not to belie the myth of artist initiatives as a kind of waiting in the wings for a real chance in a grown-up gallery – the teething rings concept of finally an opportunity to strut one's stuff – but rather to focus on the kinds of practices facilitated. Much of the work was deliberately low budget, involving reused, recycled materials, zine culture, a spirit of collaboration in respect of shared projects and ideas, and that all-important peer critique – decisions taken by artists for artists.

But perhaps the core exhibit was the artists' network itself, as a set of connections which could cross territories and cultural boundaries as the underside of pan-capitalist exchanges. The blog that was set up was integral to the project, given that not all participating artists could attend in person. The idea was that the work extended beyond

what was on show. Jane Polkinghorne and Anne Kay's mapping project of 'artists met that day' was extended through fifty hours of video interviews with artists, shown on six monitors. As the individual interviews were long and unedited, the gallery goer could do no more than sample the network. As with many of the events defined by relational aesthetics the work is not finished. Like a 1960s happening a finite outcome is not assured.

The Asian contingent was more in tune with the central notion of the gift: to have your photo taken in a diorama of Singapore (Kai Lam); to chew gum and then collaborate on a group 'gum painting' on the wall (Lee Wen). Otherwise, the Europeans were more in the mode of inviting gallery-goers to write, to blog in visitor's books or, in Alex Gawronski's case, to telephone from booths constructed in Gawronski's trademark plywood and record comments on the show into tapes which could then be played back. Like the blog modulations of the group conversation, the accumulative group photo extended the work through involvement with the gallery goer who was less a viewer than a chewer, photographer, zine reader, writer and caller.



Sarah Goffman, *Shop*, 2005. Photo Greg Weight.



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Lisa Kelly, *Long conversation, working notes, studio situation*, 1992–2005, 2005 (detail).
Photo Lisa Kelly.

The viewer was constantly challenged as to where to locate the art and, ultimately, it was less to do with the product than with the gesture of doing this together, even if the relations still tended to be artist directed and therefore prescriptive. Perhaps it's unfair to assess *Situation* in the context of relational aesthetics; *Situation* set itself up through an entirely different brief of the collaboration, critique and discussion of artist-run and artist-funded initiatives. But the exhibition had a literal emphasis on collaboration, also with the audience, in the spirit of the evolving social relations, (who makes what and with whom), and inevitably the value lay in this group discussion.

Perhaps the show mostly resided in the blog where responses were testing what art was about, but because there were still art-like, art-making activities – photography, people writing, drawing, sticking gum – the question of 'what is art?' was consistently raised within the terms of a 'directed collaboration'. *Situation* delivered two palpable remainders. Firstly the question, 'what is art?/what is collaborative art?' Here, the answer returned either to fun or the intellectual activity of critique. Like the works claimed by Bourriaud under relational aesthetics, in which, after the event, the work disappears like the sand on the dune, or when the game is over, there was little 'artworthy' material remaining. But perhaps, overall, in the action of directed art-activities, there was less of a sense of an ethical relation, manifested through etiquette,

that becomes most apparent when the art-like stuff is removed, and the art is only the enframer.

The second remainder was the network itself, as a set of sustaining and sustainable relations from which more work will come. Already *Situation* is the result of artist-funded networks, as others have evolved from previous networks. The aforementioned Loose is the direct product of two coups of goodwill: the collective had already found each other through showing at the now defunct Scott Donovan gallery. The curator/dealer moved on to freelance curatorial projects but the artists stayed in the building buoyed by the further good fortune of having d'Lux Media Arts' move back and offer the gallery as a sublet. Sydney Ladies Artists Club (SLAC) combines art projects with social events like 'netball gala day'. Socially aware Squatspace has been offering 'tours of beauty' of the Redfern housing commission towers.

So, unlike relational aesthetics in which the focus is on what the viewer gets out of the experience (an enframed social space and conviviality

as the content of the work) artist-funded initiatives use sociality and conviviality with a view to networking and meeting the very difficult demands of sustaining practice. Of course, there's a degree of overlap, and relational aesthetics is an artist-friendly idea to the extent that it gives a formal acknowledgement to the constructive powers of goodwill.

But, ultimately, artists just want to make art. The two strongest works of art to emerge out of *Situation*, by Lisa Kelly and Sarah Goffman respectively, had no collaborative aspect, even though they were brought into existence as installation through the collaborations of the network. Both were installations: Goffman memorably combined an aquarium display of submerged items, semi-living or dead, with perforated designer shopping bags subjected to the finer art of her papercutting skills, then hung as heraldic banners with a wanton domesticity, all combined with further found inanimate objects and living apples and carrots that suitably wilted and decayed. Goffman's art combines found object accumulation and juxtaposition, with witty hot glue texting, and cutting out, courtesy of the goodwill of the street.

Lisa Kelly likewise sets up an accumulation work with a found object quality: rolls of fabric meticulously cut out and stencilled along the edges, puns, and empty abstract space, which gestured to the unmade and the unfinished, as to potential. Both are gleaners, working

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Lisa Kelly, *Long conversation, working notes, studio situation*, 1992–2005, 2005. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photo Lisa Kelly.

with the leftovers of capitalism, De Certeau-esque, in their use of humour and detournment (the Situationist term for putting to other uses).

Neither work overtly fits the concept of relational aesthetics but, through the address of its humour, oozes goodwill, as does the convivial tone of an environmentally friendly *glanage*. There's thus an ethics, and even an etiquette, of employing a joke rather than an ideological harangue, or the come-down of the abject, in these challenges to capitalism through arrangements of things. The ethical and social aspect of relational aesthetics, however, thrives as a praxis within artist networks, which Lisa Kelly terms 'expanded organisational practice'. Without political compromise, good times and friendship are explicitly the order of the day.

Situation was on exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, from 6 June to 21 August 2005. The *Situation* blog is at www.squatspace.com/situation. Further information is available on Loose Projects at www.looseprojects.net; SLAC, the Sydney Ladies Artists Club, at www.sydneyladiesclub.blogspot.com; and Squatspace, Redfern at www.squatspace.com/redfern.

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