

“A Global Art World: Relational Aesthetics, New Media Arts, & Biennialization“

Three predominant phenomena to emerge in the contemporary art world are biennialization, new media arts, and relational aesthetics—terms mentioned time and time again, though typically only cursorily and whose interrelationships are left unexplored. Biennialization, a term formulated by Gerhard Haupt,¹ refers to the unprecedented multiplication of art biennials that began in the 1990s and continues today. With biennials established in Havana and Cairo in 1984, the multiplication in the 90s included, among others, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, Dakar, Istanbul, Guangzhou, Kwangju, Pusan, Shanghai, Taipei & Tirana, cities often considered peripheral to the artworld’s center. Ubiquitous on the “biennial circuit,” relational aesthetics,² a term coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, refers to artwork that is open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure.³ Relational art takes place in time and space and creates interactive communicative experiences and intersubjective encounters, in which meaning is elaborated collectively. Beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience, relational aesthetics takes as its theoretical horizon “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”⁴ Similarly, new media arts⁵ are averred as turning conventional ideas about art inside out, replacing the unique art object/singular artist-as-genius—the foundation of a multibillion dollar global art industry—with multiplicity, anonymity, unpredictability.⁶ New media arts, particularly via the internet and open source software, are thought to be opening up a space for cross-cultural, interdisciplinary collaborations, and all three phenomena are being heralded as bringing new possibilities of democratic access to fruition.

Though varied and complex, biennialization, new media arts and relational aesthetics, all of which began to take hold of the art world in the 90s, rely on and have been set in motion by recent technological developments and the subsequent advances in information and communication systems, which are indissociable from the processes of globalization. Biennialization, new media arts and relational aesthetics are each characterized by unprecedented openness and inclusivity as well as a more democratic approach to artmaking, the public in general and the artworld. But, have they realized a more democratic approach or have they become increasingly packaged, event driven spectacles? Could the openness associated with each be, paradoxically, replacing the national politics of the past—the foundation for the 1895 creation of today’s most established and oldest biennial, La Biennale di Venezia—with the global connectivity of cosmopolitan tourism? This paper further elaborates, critically explores and offers alternative ways of looking at and means of addressing these pressing issues. The work explored here is by artists/collectives that regularly traverse the biennial circuit and are commonly discussed within the context of new media art and/or relational aesthetics. This will include work by the Raqs Media Collective from Delhi, India, Kutlug Ataman, a Turkish born multi-media installation artist, Lebanese-born artist Walid Raad and his Atlas Project, and the online/offline collective based in Istanbul and New York, xurban.net.

¹ Gerhard Haupt is co-editor of “Universes in Universe—Worlds of Art,” which has been on the net since 1997 and is a non commercial information system on the visual arts of Africa, Latin America, Asia within the context of international art processes. <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/english.htm>

² Artists whose practices exemplify relational aesthetics are, among many, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno, & Pierre Huyghe.

³ See Nicolas Bourriaud, *L'esthétique Relationnelle*, (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).

⁴ Bourriaud, 14.

⁵ New media arts is an umbrella term, varying in definition depending on the scholar, for various art practices including: video art, multimedia installation, interactive performance, digital art (including analog practices such as film which are altered and edited digitally), animation, Internet art, virtual art, etc. To name only a few, see Michael Rush, *New Media in the Late 20th Century* (2001), Christine Paul, *Digital Art* (2002), Lev Manovich, *the Language of New Media* (2001).

⁶ See for example, Holland Cotter’s recent article, “Collective Consciousness,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2006.

