

Be Real. Play Nice.

Jeff Nye. 1

An Introduction to *Open Engagement: Art After Aesthetic Distance*

“*Open Engagement* is aligned with influential artists and thinkers who are making and informing socially-engaged art work. It is also positioned as a project that will contribute to contemporary discourse by calling for the creation of new works that question and push many of the existing understandings and applications of relational practices.” ~ Jennifer Delos Reyes, Conceptual Director - *Open Engagement: Art After Aesthetic Distance*

Open Engagement: Context and Background

Open Engagement is an intense and immersive, around the clock experience, an exhibition/performance venue, a mini-residency, a workshop, and a conference. It is situated in the space between theory and practice, where participants and audiences will also engage in art works. From October 11th to the 13th, Regina will host over 70 national and international artists. Coming from Japan, The United Kingdom, Israel, France, Ireland, Denmark, Canada and the United States, these artists will gather to contribute their knowledge and share their practices at the conference. The artists involved in *Open Engagement* were selected because their work challenges our traditional ideas of what art is and does. Their projects mediate the contemporary frameworks of art as service, as social space, as activism, as interactions, and as relationships. Art historian Miwon Kwon stated that such work “no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process.”¹ The implied directive for these projects could be stated as *Be real and play nice*. They rely on productive collaboration and engagements in everyday life.

Participants will partake in experiences that connect them with each other, and with artists, art institutions, audiences, and arts communities. The topics to be explored include: What would new relational models of artwork, theory, and writing look like? What is the social role of the artist? What happens when people really connect with each other or with art? What could we do in our daily lives to form meaningful connections and build communities? What should art do? Can art provide an alternative? Can art provide an answer?

¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*. (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, Paperback edition 2004), p. 24.

An Introduction to *Open Engagement: Art After Aesthetic Distance*

These questions are posed as topics for the conference. They are also at the heart of the conference's conceptual director's art practice. Jennifer Delos Reyes has come to view the conference as a relational art work in itself, and as an evolution of a practice that consistently involves participatory and socially-engaged art forms. She has produced participant activated installations, multimedia works, and performance pieces, which have been clustered around the idea of getting people together through art, music, and team work. Like many of the artists participating in *Open Engagement*, Delos Reyes is interested in making work that inhabits, values, and poses questions about various spaces and forms of social interactions. This conference is her way of contributing to the discourse around how such work is disseminated, evaluated, and what these relational or socially-engaged art practices address about contemporary culture. Delos Reyes wrote the following statement that establishes some of the conceptual underpinning for this conference, which is also her Master of Fine Arts thesis project: "*Open Engagement: Art After Aesthetic Distance* views organizing and planning an event, social gatherings, living life for art and the pursuit of fostering creativity as an artistic practice and it calls on others to do the same."

The kind of art work addressed within *Open Engagement* has developed out of the realisation that, situated beyond of the institutional periphery of the art world, are meaningful ideas, identities, and voices. Their exclusion has emerged as a central concern for many artists, particularly of contemporary installation and performance art. The work of contemporary artists like *Open Engagement's* key note presenter Harrell Fletcher, for whom social engagement is part of the work's content, has developed within the pluralism that marks the contemporary art world. This is an art with grassroots using dialogic or relational strategies to dissolve the borders between art and everyday encounters.

In a such a pluralist epoch, the choices that are available for artists hinge on how, and for whom, the work is intended. By creating moments that cross between the dualities of the aesthetic and ethical realms, formal or relational theory, and virtual and physical interactions, socially-engaged artists reconfigure the traditional precepts of art to open new spaces for artistic practice that are situated between former practical or theoretical models. At this point in time the borders and

assumptions, which keep art as an unmarked location on the maps of too many lives are being tested.

Like the co-ordinates on a map, the moments and spaces inhabited by relational art pieces, like *Open Engagement* are located at the nexus of multiple lines of motivation. The momentary dots on the map are home to several twinned concepts; the artist and the artwork; the viewer and the artwork; the artist and the viewer; the private and the public; theory and practice; and finally art and life. The relational artist's activity is also an instant of crossing over, at the crux of the aesthetic and social/ethical worlds. The spaces of relationships and inter-human interactions that socially-engaged art works occupy are established upon ethical currency, specifically trust. For example, one goes to a food related event by Rirkrit Tiravanija trusting that the artist's intent is not to poison his audience. When an artwork is aimed beyond the aesthetic realm towards the realm of social engagement, the ethic of the work becomes key to its meaning and interpretation. The subtitle for *Open Engagement , Art After Aesthetic Distance*, is illuminated in the moments of trust that will be encountered by its participants, where nearness and all of its implications will be most deeply felt. The close engagements that will be put into motion during the conference will cause participants to place trust in the artists' motives. *Art after aesthetic distance* presupposes that, before relational art, art occupied a space that was philosophically separate from life.

Concerning Aesthetics and the Evaluation of Relational Art

For Nicolas Bourriaud, relational aesthetics consists of “judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt.”² Expounding upon this theory, Grant Kester proposes a “dialogical aesthetic.”³ Dialogical and relational aesthetics expand upon previous formal aesthetic assumptions, which were based upon a conception of what is beautiful

² Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2002), p 112.

³ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community & Communication in Modern Art*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). p. 68.

or artistically valid. Each aesthetic theory is based on a foundation of certain value systems. Kester, like Bourriaud, proposed an aesthetic theory based on a value system that prizes forms of dialogue and interaction over, or in addition to, the visual quality of physical forms. As a result Kester advances that “the evaluative framework for these projects is no longer centred on the physical object... it resides in the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself.”⁴ Kester also emphasises the importance of the provisional status of dialogical art, in which each reciprocal interaction between an artwork and a viewer is a step toward “mutual understanding” rather than toward a fixed meaning.⁵ Such an evaluative framework destabilises the centrality of art objects within aesthetic discourse. This is especially true when an art object, such as a painting, is regarded as a finality—an artefact whose meaning was frozen in the context of its own time.

The imposition of relational or dialogical aesthetic theory into the art world could only come to exist in a historical moment of aesthetic plurality such as ours, where we find ourselves in a theoretical stew of overlapping aesthetic systems. The philosophical work of Arthur Danto provides a historically-based perspective on art that can be applied to this current moment. Danto has argued that the historical narrative of art’s development has entered into a pluralistic age in which anything is possible.⁶ This pluralistic climate has enabled the development of new approaches of art-making such as relational art and dialogic art. Following Danto’s description of ours as a time of aesthetic pluralism, artists have a choice. Artists can choose to continue along a path, which will lead toward what is left of the established art world, or they can begin a process of looking for possibilities beyond of the normal processes and contexts involved in the traditional production of art.

Many artists are expressing anxiety regarding the monologic quality of discourse about art within the art world. By recontextualising the acts of art making into a socially responsive activity, artists are able to engage people outside of the art world’s normal borders. Because works that

⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 125.

are made in a relational framework tend to happen as public encounters or interventions—consider Diane Bursato’s *Touching 1000 People*—those who try to access the work through a non-relational aesthetic may be at a loss.⁷ An architectural model may help those in distress to come to terms with this surge of nearer-to-life forms of art. The model provides an illustration describing the dialogic relationship between art and life: Life is a house, and art is the bedroom. Art is the place wherein people become dreamers. While dreaming a person experiences something akin to a double-mediated terrain, in which he or she can be in the house and not in the house, simultaneously. Dreaming is not waking experience nor is it death, just as art is not the same as life, but neither is it death. The placement of art outside of life situates it too far from the embodied core of experience and too close to death. Artists and audiences do not leave life to enter art, but rather, by entering art we also enter more deeply into life. By exploring life’s rich details, and then dreaming them anew, artists gain a more acute sense of life’s construction and its constituent elements, making it possible to provide new visions of the architectonic whole. In a socially-engaged artwork, that visioning process is done collaboratively.

In a time after aesthetic distance artists are urged to answer for the art that they make, to explain what it means to them, and to dialogue with others to find out how their work is being interpreted. In so doing we, as a community of artists and audiences, arrive at fluid and deeper understandings of the work’s meaning as a dialogic whole. That is Jennifer Delos Reyes’ hope for *Open Engagement*. That artists and audiences will contribute, engage and participate, be real, and play nice, and experience what can happen when art and life get close.

⁷ For her 2001 work *Touching 1000 People*, Diane Bursato set out into the streets of Montreal to touch 1000 people. Her intent was to better the city by promoting touching.