# Transformations

## 2012 Issue No. 21 — Rethinking the Seasons: New Approaches to Nature

## Recuperating Relational Aesthetics: Environmental Art and Civil Relationality

By *Monica Westin*

In considering the theme of new approaches to nature, one of the most privileged sites for reconfiguring our relationship to the natural world would seem to be environmental art, where nature's role in the human imagination is embodied and challenged – or what rhetorical theorists Chaïm Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca refer to as a rhetoric of "presencing," or endowing ideas with elements which act directly on our sensibility (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 116-117). And, I will argue, there is in particular a body of environmental art, of which I've chosen British artists David Nash and Andy Goldsworthy as exemplary figures (in many ways they are pioneers of this field of work), that substantively opens up the possibility for recasting this relationship. However, this type of environmental art, which occupies a conceptual middle ground between activist ecological art and formal earthworks or land art, has been lacking a common vocabulary until relatively recently, when a kind of convergent evolution occurred with another tradition of art-making: the socially interactive installation, which originated in the happenings of the 1960s but reached its zenith as a form in the 1990s gallery circuit, when it was famously coined "relational aesthetics" by contemporary art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud (Bourriaud 14). Part of my argument will simply be that we ought to use Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics in thinking about this type of environmental art – and in distinguishing it from either straightforward activist art or purely formalist environmental art, a distinction that will be helpful in categorising and theorising this work.

This body of environmental art also utilizes a rhetoric that visual culture theorist Ariella Azoulay has called the "civil gaze" (*Civil Contract* 16), also showing that Azoulay's own model need not be limited to her field of photography, specifically photojournalism. Ariella Azoulay's notion of the "civil gaze" is the concept that helps to specify what I will argue is a more substantive relational aesthetics. Here, Azoulay's civil gaze can act as a standard sort out the types of relations that might be useful for producing significant ideological changes regarding our relationship to nature, separating substantive relational art from what we might call "mere participation" and common weaker forms of relational aesthetics. The realm of relational environmental art helps to articulate the objects that might fit into this niche. Ultimately, this body/field of environmental art offers an example of a more general aesthetics of what I will call "civil relationality," a theoretical standard that can then be applied to other genres of art.

Moreover, this genre of environmental art, which I have labeled "civil relationality," can also be understood to help rescue Bourriaud's original concept of relational aesthetics – one of the most controversial terms in recent art theory – from its biggest weaknesses, which is a tendency toward hermeticism and contentless gesture that hollows out any ostensibly political content. The other major thrust of my thesis will be not only that the key terms of relational aesthetics can help to

distinguish, articulate, and critique this body of environmental art, but also that this work helps to recuperate the major problems of relational aesthetics, especially in its current limited usage as a key term for gallery installations.

**The third case of environmental art: between formalist land art and activist art**

The emergence of land-based environmental art initially had as its impetus a conceptualist undertaking by a small group of 1960s minimalist and conceptualist artists attempting to break out of the commodification system of art. Site-specific land art and earthworks projects by Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Robert Morris created the vocabulary for environmental art that is still in place today: land as simple source material and a way to escape the entailments of art institutions and markets. In his introduction to Brian Wallis's 2010 survey of environmental art, editor Jeffrey Kastner describes these environmental artists as sharing "a conviction that sculptural gestures could have a life away from the institution, out in the world, inflected by a variable and 'organic' location" (Kastner and Wallis 13), a movement beginning as an "apotheosis of formalism" (15).

In the introduction to his 2004 collection of interviews with contemporary environmental artists, John Grande contextualizes this ideology: "the art remained an imposition on the landscape, and this, in an era when space exploration, the landing on the moon, was experienced abstractly, as imagery on the television set. . . . Landscape was real estate" (Grande xviii). In contrast, the focus for his collected interviews is on a different tradition: "For the past fifteen years, artists worldwide have been developing a completely new approach to site and environment . . . involved in large-scale projects [like *Spiral Jetty* and other monumental land art work], but with a difference" (xviii). Grande is less interested in formalist land art projects or overtly activist/pedagogical ecological art. Instead, he focuses on artists who set up a contingent, local *relation* between art, land, and spectator; this differentiation is not typical.

Kastner and Wallis's otherwise excellent introduction to environmental art divides it into three major categories: first, ur-earthmovers like Smithson who used "landscape as a material" (45); second, those who "sought to change our emotional and spiritual relationship with [nature]" *and/or* "literally 'environmentalist' artist" who attempt to "remedy damage" (17); and third, those who use land as a metaphor or symbol (174). There are two section headings for the first category: "Integration," typified by Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, and "Interruption," epitomized by Christo's land-wrappings. "Implementation" is the single heading given to a group of artists in the second category, where a prologue describes this work concerned with nature itself as "contesting the perception of nature as a blank canvas . . . combin[ing] incisive critique with practical and redemptive strategies" (136). A variety of artmaking practices and philosophies are included here, grouping together Hans Haacke's institutional critique and Helen Mayer's activist problem-solution ecological arguments with Robert Morris's reclamation of the Johnson gravel pit.

Clearly a new vocabulary is needed to classify, theorise, and critique the work that gets left out of, or is blurred by, current categorisations of environmental art, where Kastner and Wallis are a typical example, though their survey is more comprehensive, insightful, and theoretically grounded than most. The type of environmental art that I am considering here varies wildly in terms of form, but it utilises visual and material rhetoric that creates a relationality between spectator, nature, and art without overt activist statements. The examples I will use here are Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash, both well-known artists and in their own ways innovators of this field of environmental art and who, while deeply influenced by land art, make work that typifies my theoretical interest here.

Despite new commitments by artists like Nash and Goldsworthy, the predominant critical discourse is still for the most part operating using key terms that stem from the conceptualist and formalist projects of 60s earthworks and land art. Surveys of environmental art, such as Kastner

and Wallis's, have consistently conflated various genres and modes of art that put forth appeals regarding the human-nature relationship, so that along with activist art there remains a partially obscured, and in my view much more productive and interesting, art that simply hasn't had the shared vocabulary to address its rhetoric – at least until the past decade or so, when new sets of vocabulary, initially used to describe different kinds of artistic practice, offer the potential to think critically and theoretically about the tradition of art that interests me here.

## Relational aesthetics and its discontents

In his 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics*, culled from a number of articles (mostly published as catalogue essays and reviews in *Documents sur l'art* in the nineties) championing artists he admired, Nicholas Bourriaud, writer and curator of Palais de Tokyo, calls for a new approach to understanding particular modes of participatory contemporary art that goes beyond the tools and models of 60s postmodernism, when most of today's discourse about interactive art (just as much of environmental art discourse) was established.

Bourriaud argues that the current "general reification" (9) of social life, from post-Internet culture to globalisation writ large, has most affected "the space of relations" between people so that the "social bond has turned into a standardised artefact" (9). Thus for Bourriaud, artistic praxis is now a "rich loam for social experiments" (9) that can create real change by teaching us to "inhabit the world in a better way . . . within the existing real" (13) in order to "tighten the space of relations" (15). For Bourriaud, the work that art does is literally to suggest changes in the relations that exist in the real world. The art Bourriaud champions attempts to act as a kind of "social interstice" encouraging "free areas" that encourage interrelational practices that are different from the sorts of zones imposed on us. In other words, art as a state of encounter . . . with artists who "fill in the cracks in the social bond" (36).

To get a sense of the artists Bourriaud champions as those who could reconfigure the social bond, we can turn to one of Bourriaud's most privileged examples of relational artists: Rirkrit Tiravanija, an Argentinean-born artist whose environmental installations often use gallery space to create areas for sharing meals and socializing. Many of his pieces merely comprise seating areas in galleries for talking, or ingredients to cook meals left out for visitors to use. In a piece typical of his work on the social, Tiravanija turned the New York David Zwirner Gallery into a temporary kitchen for cooking food.



*Rirkrit Tiravanija, "Untitled 1992 (Free)" 1992 - 2007 (Refrigerator, table, chairs, wood, drywall, food,*

*and miscellaneous garbage variable). Image courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery*

Bourriaud reads this work as opening up the possibility to re-imagine or reconsider our relations to one another. If we can cook in an art gallery, collaborating with other museum visitors whom we would usually avoid even speaking with, how else might we change the social bonds at large within the gallery space, between spectators of art more generally? Bourriaud puts the case most strongly when he introduces what he calls the "co-existence criterion" (109) for judging whether art has succeeded as being relational: "Does this work permit me to enter into a dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?" (109). For Bourriaud, this question can help us to discover which work (for all art, he points out, produces some model of sociability that transposes reality somewhat) is truly relational. Ultimately, relational aesthetics is thus an aesthetic theory that judges artwork on the basis of the inter-human relations that they prompt/produce (108).

Relational aesthetics has quickly become not just theory but an immensely popular program for curatorial work. Museums in particular, partially as a strong populist impulse and appeal to democracy, and partially due to financial and cultural pressures to stay relevant and bring in visitors, are taking up the rhetoric and ideal of a relational form in contemporary shows. (The role of audience interactivity in art has a long and complex history, but it has only been in the last few decades that museums and galleries have taken seriously the agenda that art can reform our relationships not with the work itself, but with *each other*.) But as more and more artists and curators take up its tenets to present work that asks us to re-imagine social relations, more critics of Bourriaud point out the inability of relational aesthetics in a gallery to advance any substantive politics of relationality that holds up under serious scrutiny.

Art critics and theorists Hal Foster and Claire Bishop provide the most well-known articulations of what they see as the weakness of Bourriaud's model. Both these critiques of relational aesthetics point to the fact that when relation *itself* is the meaning of a work, art can potentially lose both criticality and substance. Hal Foster's reservations about this type of relational, collaborative installation rest on his fears that interaction itself will be confused for politics or art: "politics are ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society, as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community or . . . an egalitarian world. . . . Collaboration, too, is often regarded as good in itself . . . today simply getting together sometimes seems to be enough" (Foster 193-194). Claire Bishop goes even further, condemning this type of work for dropping the conflicts out of real democracy and dialogue, in addition to being utterly ill-equipped to countering shifts in the current political economy. Relations themselves, Bishop points out, are not democratic. (Bishop 22). In the past decade or two, there has been an explosion of critique and debate in the popular sphere about relational aesthetics, mostly negative and increasingly pejorative in tone (for instance see Russeth's "The Fall of Relational Aesthetics"). However, I will argue that where the relational aesthetics of a gallery or museum installation is ultimately too hermetic to meet its social goals, environmental art can overcome this tendency and use relational aesthetics to alter both real and imagined human-nature relationships.

**Relational Aesthetics and Environmental Art**

If the space of human relations at an art gallery doesn't have the potential for substantive configuration, a work of art that could reconfigure the relations between spectators and nature might. Andy Goldsworthy's work illustrates this difference: his work, which often uses delicate objects from nature (sticks, flowers, fallen leaves) and arranges them in ephemeral geometrical forms, gives form to the fragility of nature, making this quality visible for audiences and creating a new way of seeing our interventions and relationships with natural material.

As an example, we might read Goldsworthy's 1988 Knotweed Stalks installed in Derwent Water, Cumbria. The piece is first and foremost exquisite and delicately constructed through the stalks of

plant, resembling both a spider web and the beginnings of a human dwelling. That the sculptural arrangement is so visually pleasing brings to mind David Levi Strauss's argument against the commonplace that the aestheticised image is less politically valuable: "Why *can't* beauty be a call to action? . . . To represent is to aestheticise; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice *not* to transform, not to change or alter what is being represented" (Strauss 9).



*Andy Goldsworthy, "Knotweed Stalks" Derwent Water, Cumbria, March 8, 1988. Image courtesy <museumuesum.tumblr.com>.*

Goldsworthy's work is sculptural and necessarily has installation elements because of its site-specificity in particular natural environments. And this is where we begin to see its potential as a site of relational aesthetics. In recasting nature as a site for an interactive installation – one can imagine walking around and even through the piece – Goldsworthy has created a place where our relationship to nature might be re-imagined, in its delicacy and vulnerability as well as aesthetic potential. In many ways, it can be read as a direct counterargument to Heidegger's bemoaning in "The Question Concerning Technology" that after modern technology, we see nature only as a source of potential energy to destroy for our own use (and Heidegger in fact argues in "The Origin of the Work of Art" that perhaps only art can unconceal the truth of the world again for us). Goldsworthy forces us to see these stalks (that could presumably be used for kindling or paper) as valuable, even priceless, by recasting them in an aesthetic mode.

Similarly, David Nash, a contemporary of Smithson (one of the original formalist land artists), is just as interested, if not more interested, in getting viewers to see nature in new ways than in the project of using nature to make art. In Nash's 2004 interview with John Grande in his book *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*, Nash describes how he was influenced by David Long, who introduced earthworks art to the UK. Long extended the concept of earthworks art to include living elements such as trees with redirected growth and ground paths created by walking. In following Long's work, Nash's "Sheep Space" uses a felled tree to create a sheltered environment for sheep, who wore a patch into the ground as they walked and rested on the earth in a living installation. While the piece resembles Long's land art in a formal sense, it is more "about building a relation between the art and the animals" (Grande 13). For Nash, as for

Bourriaud, it is the relationship between the art and the world that counts (and not the art work with itself, as it does in Long's). Thus the content of the relationality in Nash's piece is about a human-artistic-natural interface through the human-redirected movement of the animals on the earth. In contrast to Bourriaud, though, Nash's rhetoric here is about real interdependence and the scale of human control in the natural world.



*David Nash*, *"Sheep Space," photo by Alfio Bonanno for* Sculpture, *1993.*

While Grande suggests making a distinction between "earth-sensitive" art in our era and land art, Nash also points out that we must distinguish between two other terms that are too often conflated: site appropriate art and site specific art. Nash's differentiation can be seen as part of Grande's project to combat seeing environmental art only through a formalist lens. He argues that "site specific is not a good enough term. It is too loose. The land is absolutely fundamental and has to be in the front" (Grande 10). In other words, nature must be a substantial part of the content as well as form, in the environmental art he finds important. In their own way, Goldsworthy's and Nash's works make a particular call to action that substantiates their relational aesthetics because there is an inherent stake in the viewer's relationship to the artwork itself, as opposed to, say, Tiravanija's gallery restaurant, which simply serves up a conversation piece amongst an insular art crowd in a hermetic environment rather than a catalyst for change.

**Azoulay's "civil gaze" and the field of "civil relational aesthetics"**

In their own way, Nash and Goldswothy's work combines characteristics of relational aesthetics with what Ariella Azoulay calls a "civil contract." Azoulay's main work is in photographic journalism, but there are aspects of her concept of the civil contract that can be applied productively to contemporary environmental art.

Azoulay defines the "civil contract" as a contractual relation created between the subject of a representation (for her, someone pictured in a photograph), the creator of the representation, and the audience who would look at it and react to it. For Azoulay, this "form of relation that exists and becomes valid only within and between the plurality of individuals who take part in it" (*The Civil Contract* 85) is required for the type of politically and socially sensitive looking required for acting civically. In other words, the spectator and creator must both abide by a "certain pact or agreement" (105) regarding the "balance of power" (106) that enables the vulnerable subject of representation (in Azoulay's examples, victims of state or institutional violence, especially in Palestine) to present powerlessness and injustice. The civil contract is thus a condition of seeing that allows for real changes in ideology and relation amongst the world's citizens.

It is the merging of these two concepts: the civil contract and relational aesthetics, that gives the first form and the latter substance. Where relational aesthetics is often criticised for its utopianism in terms of reconfiguring social relationships through an installation in a gallery, resulting in weak democratic rhetorics that do no substantive work, the concept of relational aesthetics gains

real traction in this realm of environmental art overtly concerned with reconfiguring our relationship to nature. The content of this work is the natural-human interface itself, a core of meaning where a gallery installation can offer only the kinds of fleeting pseudo-communities that exist between spectators in a space.

The substance of such environmental art lies in the civil contract that it enables between nature and spectators through what Azoulay calls the "civil gaze" (*The Civil Contract*, "The Ethics of the Spectator"). Azoulay illustrates her concept of the civil contract of photography using photographs that range from photojournalism to art photography, all of which point to and make visible some instance of what she calls an "emergency claim" (*The Civil Contract* 197-198) for what are normally undocumented, everyday "near emergencies" on the "verge of catastrophe" (289) – from the Israeli occupation of Palestine to the rape of women – and engage the civil contract, in which the subject of the photograph, the photographer, and the viewer all take responsibility for the image's demands and make the invisible visible (306). Azoulay defines the civil contract of photography in a number of ways that shift slightly with regard to different photographs, but all "attempt to anchor spectatorship in civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven't stopped being 'there,' toward dispossessed citizens who, in turn, enable the rethinking of the concept and practice of citizenship" (17). This act of turning-citizen occurs through the spectator understanding the urgency of the photograph, somehow "rehabilitating" the citizenship of one who has been stripped of it (117).

Azoulay's civil contract is contingent, open-ended, and while dependent in her examples on the circulation of photography, not medium-specific. Azoulay's civil contract is ultimately defined only through the sense of responsibility invoked in the spectator. Azoulay calls for far more than looking with a certain affect – empathy, compassion, cosmopolitanism; despite her background in art and museum practices, she avoids the sort of weak appeals to internationalism that strongly characterizes the current global art world, and which turns out to be relational aesthetics' biggest weaknesses in Bourriaud's conceptualization.

Azoulay's concept of the civil gaze can distinguish types of relations that might be useful for producing important relational changes, separating more substantive "civil relational" art (as I am calling it) from mere participation. To return to my examples, Tiravanija's piece would not in any way inspire a civil gaze in Azoulay's model, meaning that it could not affect a truly public or civic sphere or instill a strong sense of social responsibility. For this kind of piece, the lack of a civil gaze means that the relational aesthetics collapses into the fleeting interpersonal relationship between the spectators only. In contrast, Goldworthy's woven branches, precarious rock formations, and delicate flower arrangements inspire a gaze of concern and an understanding of nature's vulnerability that is in line with Azoulay's call for a civil contract that emphasizes political imbalances and the responsibility of the spectator. Thus where Bourriaud's relational aesthetics only creates an appeal to intersubjective relations rather than a felt contractual obligation, the political work in Azoulay's civil gaze operates in the relation between the art work, the creator, and the spectator, and not between the spectators in a week intersubjective relation alone.

**Expanding the field of "civil relationality" to a larger current in contemporary art**

What hopes can we have for what I am calling civil relational aesthetics?  At best, this work might literally change our politics through its aesthetics, embodying Jacques Ranciere's sometimes impossibly-seeming idealist "distribution of the sensible" (12) his call for a conjunction of aesthetics can can change our ways of seeing the world in a way that creates a new "emancipatory" politics (86). Such a model would seem impossible in a museum or gallery space creating an interactive installation (as Bishop and Foster have convincingly argued), but I wonder if we could imagine environmental art fulfilling this paradigm – it is easy to imagine a viewer turning from Nash or Goldsworthy with a renewed sense of responsibility to the environment.

Or, to quote Azoulay in "The Ethic of the Spectator," our ideal might be to create a spectator who is "called to take part, to move from the addressee position into the addresser's position and to demonstrate responsibility . . . by addressing [the work] even further, turning it into a beacon of an emergency" (44).

My major intervention here has been to call for the creation of new ways of understanding and differentiating between different approaches to a "third case" of environmental art that is both relational and civic in its rhetoric; my goal is to make suggestions as to how this less overtly activist but ultimately deeply politically concerned work can be articulated, using key terms that are have recently emerged primarily in installation art and photojournalism. I would now like to gesture at how the resulting concept of "civil relationality" might be applied across a larger field of contemporary art, where we are beginning to see an emergence of art taking up this theme of audience interaction in a civic relationship across genres and modes.

In fact, contemporary architecture discourse is already taking up this very challenge, where new technology and approaches are helping to "make the invisible visible," particularly in contemporary architectures of art-nature-human relations, as Michael Wang argues compellingly in *Artforum* in May 2011. Wang describes the inadequacy of "green" architecture and overtly environmentalist rhetoric to provide a "language for a changing ecology." Where architecture has traditionally emphasized (with or without environmentalist rhetoric) the boundary between "inside and outside . . . now that this boundary is everywhere and nowhere, can architecture still make meaningful distinctions . . . and make them visible?" Wang describes the work of Bernard Schumi, who uses polluted air and the atmosphere *itself* as material for design, as taking up an architectural project such that "public encounter becomes an aspect of the weather – and both become media for architecture." The critical role of artists working in this kind of site-integrating particularity, as described by Smith and others in reaction to dominant art world forms, is taken up in architecture so as to make visible "the dynamism of the environment as the defining site of urban experience today" (Wang).

I understand Wang's arguments about "making the invisible visible" to mean that his privileged form of architecture allows viewers to come to new understandings about the environment via visualizing their relationship to the environment – in this case the atmosphere itself. Our interactions with Schumi's work become part of the work's meaning. Within our recent modern and postmodern history of segregating art from nature, a similar return to real and shared space with the natural world in environmental art-- and a vocabulary with which to describe it – are a significant part of the current conversations about localism, site-specificity, and ways of being in the world that are happening in a wide cross-section of contemporary art.

Against the now hyper-familiar backdrop of tension between local art practices and the global art circuit, there has in recent years been a sea change and a strong call for a new kind of aesthetic localism: work that is site-specific and anchored in a particular place, as though to create intentional friction within the art world's cosmopolitan smoothness. Recent biennales and other major exhibitions have taken up this cause, attempting to counteract to an extent the smoothness of contemporary art with installations that are part of local cityscapes. The call to localism has been as loud in the past few years regarding contemporary art as in many other economic arenas; Okwui Enwezor's consistent and rigorous critiques of globalization homogenization of the art market, in particular his essay in 2010's *The Biennale Reader*, are typical of this rhetoric. In his sweeping phenomenology of contemporary art (2009's *What Is Contemporary Art?*), Terry Smith advocates for artists who "seek to arrest the immediate, to grasp the changing nature of time, place, media, and mood today" (8, 265). In addressing the problems of the art world's weak internationalism and ethos of cosmopolitanism that has caused a loosening of spectators and spaces, we might turn to the notion of civil relationality to mark art that would distinguish art-making practices that are rigorously unhermetic and anchor us, and our sense of responsibility, firmly in the world immediately around us.

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