



'theanyspacewhatever', Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

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Some claim that art historians and curators, like fashion designers in search of fresh inspiration, pillage the past chronologically. And because such fascinations, whether critical or sartorial, expend themselves quickly - it takes less than a decade to assess an earlier decade - the gap between present and past seems ever narrower. After the canonization of the "Pictures" generation and the recent upsurge of interest in the art of the 1980s (witness, for example, *Artforum's* issues of March and April 2003 or the 2006 - 2007 exhibition "The 80s: A Topology" at the Museu Serralves in Portugal), attempts to categorize and historicize the art of the '90s are undoubtedly near.

With "theanyspacewhatever," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum curator Nancy Spector took one of the first shaky steps toward imposing a historical structure upon the seemingly untameable aesthetic proliferation of the decade just past. The exhibition's ten artists - Philippe Parreno, Angela Bulloch, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Jorge Pardo, Liam Gillick, Carsten Höller, Maurizio Cattelan, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Douglas Gordon - were all participants in "Moral Maze," a 1995 exhibition organized by Gillick and Parreno for Le Consortium in Dijon, as well as in French curator Nicolas Bourriaud's 1996 exhibition "Traffic," held at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux. They were also, in varying ways, associated with "relational aesthetics," the term Bourriaud coined two years later in his book of the same name. Despite Bourriaud's expansive definition of "relational aesthetics" as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space," some of these artists, of course, felt the term fit them like a corset.[1] Their discomfort surely increased during the ensuing decade, as "relational aesthetics" became a label applied to nearly any artistic gesture, however unsubtle, that actively engaged viewer-participants - as if relational art was something to be subcontracted by museum education and programming departments. In "theanyspacewhatever" catalogue, Spector herself makes a point of

distancing her show's thesis from Bourriaud's overarching framework. The exhibition's fascination ultimately owed less to the artworks it included than to this effort.

The regal glitz of Parreno's all-white, message-free theater marquee, which hung above the museum's entrance, was something of a red herring because there were few such iconic objects within. Spector instead emphasized the artists' shared interest in expanding the definition of an exhibition. Indeed, the strongest contributions to the show were ephemeral, invisible, or to be experienced outside of the Guggenheim. Among them were Gonzalez-Foerster's opening-weekend performance *NY. 2022*, a collaboration with the musician Ari Benjamin in which theatrical vignettes were performed to live music by an orchestra whose members slowly exited one by one; Parreno's audio guide for the exhibition (*Audioguide II, Guggenheim, NY, 2008*), in which world-champion memorizer Boris Konrad recited information about artworks and artists included in the show without the aid of notes he had scanned only once; and Huyghe's book of iron-on patches depicting the museum's interior and exterior spaces (*theanyspacewhatever transfer book, 2008*), available in the museum's gift shop. Such interventions as Parreno's and Huyghe's creatively tweaked ossified museum conventions, a necessary effort at any cultural moment.

Yet however important it may be to think beyond the traditional exhibition, "theanyspacewhatever" foregrounded the way such thinking can also create an attenuated experience for museum visitors. For example, Carsten Höller's inspired contribution to the show, a miniature

hotel room on rotating platforms (*Revolving Hotel Room, 2008*), provided a singular encounter for only the few individuals wealthy or connected enough to secure a night's stay. Those visiting during regular hours were left with an inherently frustrating imaginative exercise while looking at Höller's unexceptional objects. There was likewise little reason to engage with Gillick's S-shaped benches or hanging stainless steel signage, the latter of which conflated institutional, theoretical, and vaguely poetic language to describe aspects of the exhibition or the building ("RIRKRIT FILM YOURSELF," "CUCKOO SANCTUARY," "VARIED ADMISSIONS," "EXTERIOR INFORMATION," read some). Gillick also contributed the show's title, lifted from Gilles Deleuze; the "any-space-whatever" was the late French philosopher's term for the peculiar brand of space created when disparate, but equally anonymous, film scenes are seamlessly cut together.[2]



In the exhibition's less successful works, the "activation of the social" that Spector champions necessarily rubbed against the behaviorally chastening environment of the institution, with its explicit and implicit rules and conventions.[3] This friction is useful as a test of institutional flexibility in the face of radically new (and often difficult to categorize) art practices. It also prods those practices themselves, which are - until their presentation in a museum context - often sequestered within a realm of mutually recognized specialized knowledge that can stunt their broader effectiveness. Still, interesting as these considerations are, the particular experience of visiting this show was less rewarding.

There were other encumbrances. "theanyspacewhatever" aimed to make sense of what Spector sees as a shift away from mimetic representation that characterized the art of the mid-'90s, yet it used artworks almost exclusively created during the past two years to illustrate this point. The result was not the first American survey of the mid-'90s relational/social/non-mimetic moment - which, since this moment occurred largely in European kunsthallen and museums, would have benefited American audiences - yet neither was it a coherent snapshot of any trend now taking place. Since the artists were first corralled, their individual practices have necessarily diverged. Though they occasionally collaborate and, as Spector notes, their affiliation is still "grounded in friendship," their interests are perhaps not as closely aligned as they once were.[4] Originally invited to collectively formulate a scenario for the

exhibition, it seems the ten artists met the prospect of erecting a monument to their past selves using current artworks with a profound ambivalence, a feeling everywhere apparent along the Guggenheim's spiraling ramp.

Irrespective of how one feels about these artists, their contribution to recent developments in art is incontrovertible. (To be clear, I myself am sympathetic to the art's ends, skeptical of many of the means employed by the artists, largely disappointed by the art's effects and suspicious of the ongoing credibility afforded several of them despite this gap between rhetoric and accomplishment.) Wrestling control over the narrative of their contribution from Bourriaud's catchy, all-pervasive and decreasingly meaningful shorthand is an appealing challenge - one Gillick, in particular, has set for himself in his own writings on maintaining critical relationships to society. But any attempts to do so in a museum environment will require more clearly delineated countervailing principles than this muddled exhibition offered. Instead, "theanyspacewhatever" made clear that the insertion of these practices into accepted art history will require a more thoughtful consideration of how they function *outside* the contemporary art world's cocoon of benign acceptance.



Notes

- 1 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (English edition), Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002, p. 113.
- 2 The "any-space-whatever" first surfaces in Deleuze's *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 (English translation).
- 3 Nancy Spector, *theanyspacewhatever*, New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2008, p. 18.
- 4 *Ibid*, p. 16.

Images

- 1 Philippe Parreno, *Marquee*, Guggenheim, NY, 2008. Acrylic, steel, LEDs (light-emitting diodes), and incandescent, fluorescent, and neon lights. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008. Photo: Kristopher McKay
- 2 Carsten Höller, *Revolving Hotel Room*, 2008. Wood, leather, silk, feathers, cotton, horse hair, latex, lightbulbs, fluorescent lamps, mirrored glass, acrylic glass, metal, and motor. Courtesy of Esther Schipper, Berlin, and Gagosian Gallery, in cooperation with the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Austria. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008. Photo: David Heald
- 3 Liam Gillick, *theanyspacewhatever signage system*, 2008. Powder-coated, water-cut aluminum pieces. Courtesy the artist, Casey Kaplan, New York, and with thanks to José

Noé Suro, Guadalajara, Mexico. Pictured with *Audioguide Bench*, Guggenheim, NY, 2008. Dyed medium-density fiberboard. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008. Photo: David Heald

4 Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Ari Benjamin Meyers, *NY.2022*, 2008. Orchestra installation for Works & Process, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, October 24 and 25, 2008. Photo: Kristopher McKay

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