

Aesthetic Reconfigurations of the Common Relational Aesthetics as a Learning Process

Olaia Miranda Berasategi
University of the Basque Country
olaia.miranda@ehu.eus

Abstract

According to Jacques Rancière, the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is both a political and aesthetic form of distribution which shapes place, time and the ways in which we establish the common. Aesthetic configurations, as shapers of experiences, can result in important learning processes when they bring forth other subjectivities and ways of experiencing the common. Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory on relational aesthetics together with Claire Bishop’s critical review of this have been taken into consideration to portray relational aesthetics as a more experiential, affective and relational learning process in Pre-School Education. Subsequently, the concept of relational aesthetics as an art form which can reshape other ways of experiencing the common in Pre-School Education will be laid out.

Keywords

Distribution of the sensible, common, relational aesthetics, antagonism, learning processes, experiential.

The distribution of the sensible

According to Jacques Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is both an aesthetic and political order which refers to the ways in which space, time and the common are determined¹. That is to say, any distribution of the sensible establishes a common by setting the divisions of what may be perceived as either shared or exclusive parts within this common. The distribution of the common is hence established based on the division of space, time and types of activity. Rancière describes this concept in his book “The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible”, as follows:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (Rancière, 2011, p. 12)

In accordance with Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is therefore a system of ways which consequently determines what will be experienced: “it is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise” (Rancière, 2011, p. 13). It is both a political and aesthetic distribution which establishes what is seen and said.

Based on this initial argument, Rancière raises questions about aesthetic practices. If aesthetic practices are considered modes which determine the ways in which the sensible is ex-

¹The term ‘common’ refers to that which brings people together and constitutes us as a community.

perienced, they also play a role in the representation and reconfiguration of what is common. According to Rancière, aesthetic practices are “ways of doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility”. (Rancière, 2011, p. 13) Therefore, these distributions of the sensible revealed through art practices can both represent and reshape those activities which establish a common. It is through this sensible delimitation of the common (the community) that aesthetic and political relations exist together, through the forms of visibility and order established by these artistic practices. Their political value resides precisely in these distributions of the sensible and the ways in which we experience them, not only to instil a same order but also to subvert it. In the words of Rancière:

The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation (Rancière, 2011, p. 19).

Based on the idea that artistic practices, insofar as shapers of experiences, can give rise to other subjectivities and ways of experiencing the common, the possibilities offered by spatial structures (as relational spaces) will be examined, in order to create other ways of experiencing the common in the field of pre-school teaching.

To do so we must firstly reconsider the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud’s conceptualization of “relational aesthetics” at the end of the 1990s. It gathers together, in an original manner, certain contemporary artistic practices which try to establish “ways of living and models of action within the existing real” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13). In this way, the aesthetic practices gathered

in Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics" seem to fit perfectly in accordance with how aesthetic practices reconfigure other constituents of the common, both aesthetically and politically. Consequently, the potential and possible use of Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics" (founded on the analysis of his publication "Esthétique Relationnelle", 1998) within the context of pre-school education as a "way of doing" will be examined. In accordance with Rancière, this "way of doing" gives meaning and rise to the creation of a common based on life experiences.

Relational Aesthetics and Antagonism

At the end of the 1990s Bourriaud described "relational aesthetics" as being a combination of contemporary artistic practices taking as their theoretical and practical horizon "the realm of human interactions and its social context" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 14, p. 112). With a clear desire to create relational spaces ("rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space"), Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as a form of art which centres itself around the concept of "being-together, the encounter and a collective elaboration of meaning" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 15). The political significance of relational aesthetics is therefore represented by those "human relations" that produce or bring about works of art, through what Bourriaud calls the "co-existence criterion". In keeping with the words of the author, this co-existence criterion can be outlined as the distribution of the sensible and political value of the ways in which any work of art produces a model of sociability which "transposes reality or might be conveyed in it" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 109). As a result relational art should therefore, by means of its models of sociability, try to provide an explanation for the following questions: "How is an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 16).

With the collapse of the great metanarratives of modernity (as claimed by Jean-François

Lyotard in the late 1970s), and the rejection of the possibility of art as a way of completely transforming society, Bourriaud says that the role of art “is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” (Bourriaud, 2002, pg13). According to Bourriaud, modernity continues to exist today as a “tenant of culture” and an “invention of the everyday” (paraphrasing various assertions made by Michel de Certeau). Rather than thinking about what the future holds, the concept of modernity here deals with how contemporary artistic practices “inhabit the world in a better way”; that is to say, create modes of existence in order to live in relation to the real and the existing (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13).

Within this conceptual framework construed by Bourriaud, the names which emerge most often in terms of relational aesthetics include: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Phillippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Christine Hill, Dominique González-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Maurizio Cattelan and Vanessa Beecroft; whose works are well represented in the many exhibitions commissioned by Bourriaud himself. However, perhaps the most paradigmatic models theorized by Bourriaud as being aesthetic structures that enable social intersubjectivity would be those such as: the thai food offered by Rirkrit Tiravanija at galleries and art centres, Liam Gillick’s steel and pexiglas stage designs turned “think tanks” which are open to the public, or Dominique González-Foerster’s aesthetic installations which aim to encourage reading and reflecting.

Over the past few decades, Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics” has been one of the most widely recognised and debated contemporary art theories. Bourriaud’s approach to contemporary art, in the absence of other conceptualizations, is undoubtedly fascinating. However, his boldness can also be sometimes perceived as a weakness. Claire Bishop makes some very interesting points in her critical review “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, published in 2004 in October magazine; and must be read before performing any analysis of relational aesthetics.

In accordance with Bourriaud’s theory, Bishop takes the work of artists Liam Gillick and

Rikrit Tiravanija as being clear examples of relational art. She questions whether these relational structures are adequate in terms of whether they bring about relational intersubjectivity. Bourriaud argues that “the *structure* of an art work produces a social relationship”. According to Bishop however, distinguishing the structure of a piece of relational art is not a simple task, and is made even less so when these works directly depend on the public’s interaction and take on an “open-ended” form (Bishop, 2004, p.63). Bishop raises doubts about Bourriaud’s notion of “structure” which he bases on the “political value of forms” and “criteria of co-existence”, since we are led to contemplate the type of social model produced or evoked by the piece. Bishop questions why in Bourriaud’s opinion the what, how and for whom Tiravanija cooks is less important than the fact “that he gives away the results of his cooking for free”. In her view, “we need to ask, as Group Material did in the 1980s, ‘Who is the public? How is a culture made, and who is it for?’” (Bishop, 2004, p. 64).

Bishop does not suggest that relational art need offer a greater social commitment and give, for example, free curries to refugees. Instead, she addresses the need to question this relational art structure which according to Bourriaud should be examined based on the co-existence criterion. In other words, how should we interpret or come to understand this relational art structure? Is it separable, and therefore able to be projected beyond the context in which it has been construed? Bishop’s critique reflects back on the fact that Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics appears to obliterate the type of relations it forms. When Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them”, the type of relations created through this form of art do not appear to be of much importance or relevance. To be more specific, Bishop claims that any relations allowing for dialogue to take place can be considered democratic, and hence as something positive. However, she asks the question of what democracy really means within this context: “If relational art produces human relations then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?”(Bishop, 2004, p. 65).

Regarding “dolce utopia” in relational art (in reference to the artist Maurizio Cattelan’s use of the expression), Bishop mentions Rosayn Deutsche as she argues that the public sphere is democratic only when its exclusions are shown and these are open to critique: “Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence” affirms Deutsche (Bishop, 2004, p. 65). Moreover, these ideas also allude to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theory in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), from which Bishop takes the concept of “antagonism” to analyse relational aesthetics in yet further depth.

In accordance with Laclau and Mouffe’s arguments, a democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have been eradicated but rather where conflicting relations are sustained, hence constantly redefining that which constitutes a society (and identity). Antagonism illustrates our society’s limits, making visible the impossibility of it being complete and closed. Just as Mouffe points out: “As conditions of possibility for the existence of a pluralist democracy, conflicts and antagonisms constitute at the same time the condition of impossibility of its final achievement” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Coming back to relational aesthetics, Bishop argues there is no place for antagonism in this so called “togetherness”, whereby the community is perceived as a whole. To paraphrase the words of Bishop: “there is debate and dialogue in a Tiravanija cooking piece, to be sure, but there is no inherent friction since the situation is what Bourriaud calls ‘microtopian’” -where its members all have something in common (Bishop, 2004, p. 67). Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* in which he recreates his own flat in Cologne for it be experienced in a public manner, was described as “a kind of ‘asylum’ for everyone”. Bishop poses the question of who “everyone” refers to. She explains that “it is tempting to consider what might have happened if Tiravanija’s space had been invaded by those seeking genuine ‘asylum’” (Bishop, 2004, pp. 67-68).

Despite all of the above, the idea of democracy as being created from antagonism (which shows its own impossibility of becoming complete) does not signify “the expulsion of utopia from the field of the political”. On the contrary, Laclau and Mouffe maintain that without the concept of utopia, there is no possibility of a radical imaginary (Bishop, 2004, p. 66). An ideal imaginary together with a real understanding of society (a “hard core of reality” as described by Thomas Hirschhorn) is hence necessary; whereby antagonism is essential for its existence. Bishop finds this standpoint in the works of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn.

For example, a large part of Hirschhorn’s work is known for the way in which he transforms traditional spaces. By means of radical subjectivity, Hirschhorn reinvents those subjects and values commonly associated with the elements used in his structures such as monuments, pavilions and altars. His series of monuments dedicated to his favorite philosophers such as Spinoza, Deleuze, Bataille or Gramsci are widely known. He uses basic everyday materials (cardboard, cheap wood, aluminium foil, packaging tape...) and creates his art in peripheral locations. One of his most characteristic examples of this concept is his *Bataille Monument* (2002), created for Documenta XI in Nodstadt, in the suburbs of Kassel, away from the principal venues of the event. The *Bataille Monument* was made up of various unstable structures (a tree, a library, a room with a TV...) with an aim to make Bataille’s work approachable. On the other hand, the bar and taxi services used to get to the artwork’s location were allocated to the families from the same neighbourhood. By erecting the Bataille Monument in the suburbs of Kassel far from the artistic and tourist crowds, and in addition to turning the inhabitants of this particular neighbourhood into potential readers of Bataille, Hirschhorn is able to “destabilize (and therefore potentially liberate) any notion of community identity or what it might mean to be a ‘fan’ of art and philosophy” (Bishop, 2004, p. 76). As opposed to a unified subject this work of art reveals a fragmented one, which is only partially identifiable. It is a disorientated subject, open to a constant flow of that which constitutes the limits of what is common. In this respect, Bishop

concludes as follows:

This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other. (Bishop, 2004, p. 79)

Relational aesthetics as a learning process in Pre-School Education

The relational spaces as laid out by relational aesthetics, taking into account the antagonist factor that is inherent to living in this world, can form learning processes which offer great potential in terms of creating other subjectivities and distributions of the common.

As Rancière pointed out, artistic practices are ways of doing things that determine the different forms in which the sensible is experienced, and are therefore capable of shaping the way in which we see and represent our surroundings. According to Rancière, this distribution of the sensible “is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution” (Rancière, 2011, p. 12). For this reason the arts, as forms of divisions of the sensible, play a role in “the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization” – which is where Rancière believes the relationship between the aesthetic and political lies (Rancière, 2011, p. 18).

Taking all of the above into account, relational aesthetics, in terms of shaping the ways in which the sensible is experienced, can form significant artistic practices during those stages in life when one’s own subjectivity is as important as creating a common. As a consequence, relational aesthetics can hence be portrayed as spatial arrangements which enable a more experiential, affective and relational learning process in pre-school education.

It is important to point out that in 1938 John Dewey had already defined the term experiential as “an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education”. According to Dewey, “every experience enacted and undergone modifies *the* one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences” (Dewey, 1938). It is known that the experiential creates affect, particularly when dealing with a significant experience for the subject. This affect leaves a lasting impression on the subject and produces a change which, in turn, leaves an even greater mark on the learning process.

Considering the above and when looking at the current pre-school education guidelines, it is possible to say that the educational recommendations for the early stages of children’s development are based on various fields of experiences, which are also linked to children’s own experiences. An example of this can be seen in The Basque Autonomous Community (CAPV)², in the case of the decree 237/2015 of 22 December, whereby its Pre-School Education syllabus is laid out as follows:

The educational approach in this first stage of childhood development is linked to the experiences had by children and, as a consequence, educational recommendations are based on different fields of experiences. Children work towards the levels of achievement corresponding to Pre-School Education guidelines in terms of basic transversal and disciplinary skills through different areas of experiences such as: «Creating personal identity, a social and physical environment» and « Creating personal identity, communication and representation » (BOPV, 2016, p. 4).³

²The Basque Autonomous Community (CAPV) is an autonomous Spanish community which corresponds to the Basque territory, namely The Basque Country, situated between Spain and France. This paper makes reference to the decree which regulates pre-school education in the Basque Autonomous Community, since this is the field in which the concept of relational aesthetics has been proposed as the shaper of experiences, which leads to other subjectivities and other ways of experiencing the common, in pre-school education.

³Taken from the decree 237/2015 of the 22 December, which establishes the Basque Autonomous Community’s

The idea of «Creating personal identity, a social and physical environment» can be represented through spatial configurations since these are ways through which the world of the sensible is experienced and, in turn, create affect. This affect, whether affecting or being affected, is necessary for the process of subjectivation which should be part of all learning processes. Dennis Atkinson describes this concept in relational terms as follows:

Subjectivity, or subjectivation, the process of forming a subject, is conceived in relational terms, whereby what we call a subject is viewed as a temporal phase consisting of a number of relational processes in and of a world composed of a series of intensities, thoughts, affects and actions. The notion of “becoming with a world” is central to the process of subjectivation discussed in the book and the process of becoming is conceived as constituted through several registers, including feeling, thinking, attuning or mattering, making, seeing and risking. Becoming with a world is a relational becoming that includes relations between human and non-human actants (Atkinson, 2018, p. 10).

In accordance with Atkinson’s claims, the concept of “becoming with a world” involves a “relational becoming”. This is because the construction of the subject goes through numerous relational processes, during which not only should human relations be considered but also the different types of relations between humans and non-humans. That is to say, we create ourselves in relation to others as well as in relation to all that which circles us and constitutes our surroundings. For example, when creating relational spaces in the context of pre-school education, we inhabit a place in relation to other human beings, trees, insects, stones, the ground, the air... If we wish to create a more habitable world, it is vital that we work on this idea of being/existing in relation to something else, or rather as Atkinson describes it, this “relational

Pre-School Education syllabus: <https://www.euskadi.eus/bopv2/datos/2016/01/1600142a.pdf>

becoming”.

Furthermore, these aesthetic arrangements of a relational nature intensify our perception of the different characteristics of things and their affection (their ability to affect and to be affected), making us more aware of the experiences and relations they shape. They allow us to understand and feel the significance of aesthetic dimensions as we go about organising everything that surrounds us, and ultimately inhabit this world appreciably. In accordance with Dewey’s aesthetics (Dewey, 1934), it is the continuity of aesthetic experiences together with those vital processes that make us (Agirre, 2006).

We are therefore led to believe that spatial arrangements (as shapers of experiences and relational spaces) make up a learning process in which the need to inhabit in relation to something applies, where friction and antagonism are consubstantial with this process of shaping the common. Referring back to the pre-school education syllabus, these spatial configurations enable the occurrence of situations which favour “the expression of one’s feelings, thoughts and wishes in an assertive manner, at the same time as actively listening to the feelings, thoughts and wishes of others” (BOPV, 2016, p. 27).⁴

“The system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Rancière, 2011, p. 12) may be seen more clearly in the collective arrangement of spatial configurations. At the same time, these are “ways of distributing the sensible that structure the manner in which the arts can be perceived and thought of as forms of art *and* as forms that inscribe a sense of community” (Rancière, 2011, p. 14). That is to say, they are artis-

⁴According to the decree 237/2015 of the 22 December, which establishes the Basque Autonomous Community’s Pre-School Education syllabus: “Situations that favor the expression of one’s own feelings, thoughts and desires in an assertive way are to be facilitated; such as learning and working in groups, taking responsibility for oneself and being co-operative in tasks with a common objective: situations in which they learn to behave in accordance with ethical values as set out by human rights and social norms stemming from basic social standards; situations in which conflicts can be solved by means of dialogue and reason” (BOPV, 2016, p. 27).
<https://www.euskadi.eus/bopv2/datos/2016/01/1600142a.pdf>

tic practices through which it makes sense to instil a common, and through which the possibility of building a common can be felt.

Referring back to Rancière, the political value of aesthetic configurations lies precisely in the distribution of the sensible and through the ways in which we experience it. Art plays a role in the reproduction or reconfiguration of what shapes the common, by means of “bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible” (Rancière, 2011, p. 19).

Aesthetic reconfigurations of the common

In art, and consequently in art education, the physical action of doing and the theoretical reflection of thinking are interlinked (Borgdorff, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to analyze how relational aesthetics generate other subjectivities and ways of living the common through the practice of doing, in the context of pre-school education. This must be done not only with children, but also with current and future teachers. It is from the same experience of building these aesthetic configurations that we are made aware of the divisions “of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution” (Rancière, 2011, p. 12), both at and outside of school.

As a result, the aesthetic configurations created, together with the Pre-School University students point to the idea of creating situations which encourage us to think and act as relational and critical subjects. We can use our knowledge to think about and question these situations, as well as decide the kind of spaces, times, and forms of activity we build. Within the field of education, it is also essential to consider for who, on behalf of whom and how, these spaces, times, and forms of activity are created, as well as in accordance with Bishop: “what *types* of relations are being produced” (Bishop, 2004, p. 65). This ultimately deals with the “relational

antagonism” that Bishop describes, that is to say: “rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other” (Bishop, 2004, p. 79). This concept should be made compulsory in schools, as well as how we express and put this relationship into practice within the educational institution.

Considering the overloaded and very structured teaching schedules which lack the availability of both time and space, creating situations to discuss and rethink these reconfigurations of the common are essential. Referring back to Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics”, it is vital to provide “free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the ‘communication zones’ that are imposed upon us” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 16). Our current primary and higher educational systems focus primarily on total productivity and these time spans are now therefore more necessary than ever. They should not be wasted and thought of as being non-productive as, in capitalist terms, art practices are,⁵ whereby we think, argue, discuss, get bored or desperate, re-define ourselves, experience these practices and maybe not even create hardly anything at all. Or maybe, since this supposed non-productive art can potentially turn into a critique of this world which revolves around productivity and practicality, it is in fact important. This is how we can face the reconfiguration (and not the reproduction) of the common with critique and autonomy. This, of course, is not something which can be achieved immediately. Quite the contrary, it will require time and effort, practise and experience and a strong standpoint. From a critical and relational stance, and with a focus on facing the antagonism inherent to this world and school, relational aesthetics can undoubtedly form powerful artistic practices which help us reconfigure other ways of experiencing the common. To conclude in the words of Rancière:

⁵It is interesting to point out Mark Godfrey’s thoughts here in relation to Francis Alys’ art as being non-productive: “As Georges Bataille argued in *The Accursed Share*, though Western economic discourse has always privileged production and efficiency, the problem for what he termed ‘the general economy’ has always been expenditure: taken together, all life forms produce more energy than they can use, and so ways have to be found to expend wealth and energy. For Alys, Bataille’s account of economy has a critical force: by initiating projects that waste energy, he has found a way to contest Western bourgeois principles of efficiency and progress” (Godfrey, 2010, p. 19).

The important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at this level, the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization. It is from this perspective that it is possible to reflect on artists' political interventions, starting with the Romantic literary forms that aimed at deciphering society, the Symbolist poetics of dreams or the Dadaist or Constructivist elimination of art, and continuing up to the contemporary modes of performance and installation (. . .) To this effect, the arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation. (Rancière, 2011, pp. 18-19)



Figure 1: Reconfigurations of the common: Exercises of spatial constructions created with Pre-School University students in art workshops. University of the Basque Country, 2018/2019.



Figure 2: Reconfigurations of the common: Exercises of spatial constructions created with Pre-School University students in art workshops. University of the Basque Country, 2017/2018.

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