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## ARTFORUM

## Social Problem

HELEN MOLESWORTH ON CATHERINE OPIE AND "THEANYSPEACEWHATEVER"

MUSEUMS ARE MACHINES of amelioration. A Frank Stella on one wall, a Morris Louis on the other; it's all good. Even though the scholarship of the past thirty years has argued that aesthetic choices are not mere evidence of the progression of style but have ethical implications—whether you pool paint on canvas or paint stripes the width of a store-bought brush means something—museums still prefer to disregard the philosophical discomfort of such tensions. The exhibition "The Desire of the Museum," mounted in New York in 1989 by the Whitney Independent Study Program, suggested that it was not individual curators, directors, or trustees who intentionally perpetrated this leveling of difference, but an institutional unconscious that silently engendered such placating gestures under the aegis of ideological constructions such as Art, and that old sawhorse Genius.

Recently, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York presented two concurrent exhibitions—"Catherine Opie: American Photographer" and "theanyspacewhatever" (curated by Jennifer Blessing and Nancy Spector, respectively)—and unwittingly staged a crucial aesthetic and ethical debate, which, put succinctly, pits "identity politics" against "relational aesthetics." Opie was in the tower galleries, which meant that her work of the past fifteen years was displayed on several floors: traditional space for traditional art. "Theanyspacewhatever" featured ten renowned artists—Angela Bulloch, Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas

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Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Jorge Pardo, Philippe Parreno, and Rirkrit Tiravanija—all of whom made work specifically for the exhibition and occupied the ramp, the ceiling (Bulloch's *Firmamental Night Sky: Oculus.12*, 2008), the entry foyer (Cattelan's *Daddy Daddy*, 2008), the building's exterior (Parreno's *Marquee*, Guggenheim, NY, 2008), and even the air itself (Gonzalez-Foerster's sound piece *Promenade*,

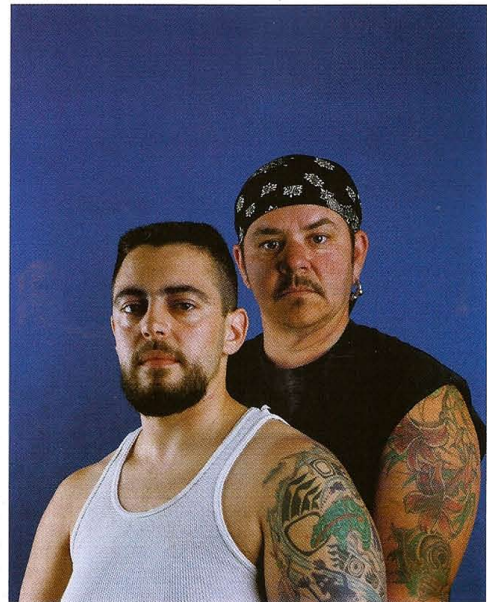
2007). It appeared the comparison was all contrast: midcareer survey versus group show; American versus global; "straight" photography versus poststudio activity; talk of identity and community versus talk of micro-utopias and the social. It is hard to imagine that anyone would have consciously set out to spatialize this contemporary schism about what art is, what it can do, and what its aims might be. Indeed, I'm not certain I could have even characterized the debate as such before this mash-up—but there it was, the dual trajectory of 1990s art come to full maturation.

Opie's career rode the slipstream of a post-ACT UP wave of queer liberation and visibility. Her portraits emerged out of the framework of documentary photography and elicit a frisson of truth because Opie was a self-described member of the "leather dyke" community she was imaging. And community lay at the heart of the matter. Rejecting any putative universal subject, art of the '90s insisted that the identities of maker and viewer were crucial to art's meaning. Foregrounding subjectivity meant a renewed commitment to figuration, and Opie's work was exemplary of this trend. The emphatic frontality of her subjects and the baroque lushness of her backgrounds gave her portraits a bracing sense of immediate address. The portraits, particularly her self-portraits, insisted on the visceral nature of identity—DYKE tattooed on the back of a freckled neck; PERVERT cut into Opie's chest in florid script; a crude drawing of two girlish stick figures holding hands etched into Opie's back, fresh with blood. Each picture made identity linguistic and embodied and, more important, argued that it was inescapable and permanent. Photographs of friends in her s/m dyke scene in San Francisco intimated that not only was identity indelibly marked on the body, it was also what garnered community.

Despite the formal beauty of Opie's pictures, their identity-equals-community logic always made me nervous. Community, far from being a model of inclusion, is a very precise exercise in exclusion; a device to

monitor the borders, to keep people out rather than let them in, a mode of privileging sameness even when summoned in the name of difference. But this survey served Opie well, as it elucidated her contrapuntal oeuvre. For every work that images and imagines community as inclusive, there is another that addresses the affect of outsidership. Her early forays into architectural photography—pictures of affluent suburban homes, closed up tight as drums, complete with "security by" alarm systems advertised on their front lawns ("Houses," 1995–96)—are utterly explicit about issues of inside and outside, of policed barriers, and of imagined differences.

The "theanyspacewhatever" crowd, on the other hand, eschewed such concerns in favor of a lively and convivial model of the social. Instead of fixed identities and community, they offered provisional gatherings, ad hoc groups temporarily forming around similar interests. Rather than marked bodies and specific locations, they offered food and movies and the potential of the space one found oneself in at any given moment. This freewheeling model of the social perhaps accounted

Catherine Opie, *Mike and Sky*, 1993, color photograph, 20 x 16".





Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Chew the Fat*, 2008, mixed media. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. From "theanyspacewhatever." Photo: Kristopher McKay.

for the ambivalence many of the artists participating in "theanyspacewhatever" expressed about the group identity being conferred on them by the exhibition itself. During the past decade, relational aesthetics has become commonplace, taught in undergraduate courses and routinely encountered on the global biennial circuit. The familiarity of the term notwithstanding, it is useful to return to Nicolas Bourriaud's foundational essays for a description of the practice and its implications. For Bourriaud, art is a way of "learning to inhabit the world in a better way"; it's not about "utopian realities" but "ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist."<sup>1</sup> Further, "the exhibition is the special place where such momentary grouping may occur," because it "give[s] rise to a specific 'arena of exchange.'" And the criterion for judging this new work, Bourriaud proposed, would be "the symbolic value of the 'world' it suggests to us, and the image of human relations reflected by it."<sup>2</sup> This work was suffused with the energies of democracy in *potentia*, fueled by the new political aspirations of a postwall Europe and a Clintonian America; with Reagan and Thatcher banished and repudiated, art would help transform the traditionally bourgeois institutions of the public sphere.

Despite the seductive rhetoric surrounding the practice of relational aesthetics, "theanyspacewhatever" was disappointing. I wanted to like the show; I wanted to be a part of a provisional gathering; I wanted to participate in transforming the museum from a space of contemplation to a site of experiments in "how to live." And the experience started out well enough—I took a photo of my girlfriend underneath Parreno's marquee for anonymous stardom—but coffee on the

about the "visitor services" component of the museum. When an artist friend of mine heard this, he quipped, "They're like the avant-garde for the service economy." And it's true: The show included a superhip hotel room (Höller's *Revolving Hotel Room*, 2008); cool room-dividing partitions that were as West Elm as they were Charlotte Perriand (Pardo's *Sculpture Ink*, 2008); and a pillowed lounge area for tired tourists (Tiravanija).

Is this "the symbolic value of the 'world'" on which this work should be judged, not to mention "the image of human relations reflected by it"? Yes, the Pardo "disrupted" the flow of viewing, but to what effect? And I suppose I could have lain down in Tiravanija's lounge and, instead of putting on headphones and watching him interview his friends in his video *Chew the Fat*, 2008, started up a conversation with the other folks in from out of town. But the image of the social on view seemed to be that of people in a queue or sprawled-out bodies enervated by museum fatigue and tourist ennui.

One coincidental effect of the exhibitions' being split between the ramp and the tower was that I kept wending my way back into the tower galleries to catch the next floor of the Opie show. The top floor displayed intimate pictures of domestic life and outdoor shots around the artist's neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles awkwardly interspersed with Polaroids shot off the television (from the series "In and Around Home," 2004–2005). The horror of the past eight years—from the Iraq war to Terri Schiavo—punctuated an otherwise sun-dappled view of middle-class American life. Another floor paired two series, "Surfers," 2003, and "Icehouses," 2001, both quiet and nearly monochromatic: Fourteen images of surfers in a calm ocean

ramp (Gordon and Tiravanija's *Cinéma Liberté/Bar Lounge*, 1996/2008) and Gillick's *Audio-guide Bench*, Guggenheim, NY, 2008 (designed to promote seating arrangements that facilitate talking), only made me wonder whether the sinuous red benches would look good where I worked, or whether the registrars would have let coffee be served if objects from the collection had been on view. In other words, I was deep into my work identity, and rather than pondering utopian realities I was worrying

waiting for the next wave were installed in a line on one wall; across from them hung fourteen pictures of icehouses (for fishing) on a frozen lake in rural Minnesota. As mood and viewers shifted from gallery to gallery, people reencountered one another, for rather than moving in a linear progression (so perfected by the ramp), in the towers people had to double back. This had a funny effect: As people started to reencounter one another, an air of mild flirtation emerged. (It was like a Woody Allen movie—people in New York trying to pick each other up in the museum!) Ironically, in the spaces dedicated to contemplation (complete with images that rewarded it), another form of looking emerged, one that sparked a provisional social situation decidedly tinged with desire.

One by-product of the Guggenheim's staging of the ethical implications of community versus the social, or identity politics versus relational aesthetics, was the disparity between the rhetoric around the work and the work's actual effects. As enamored as I was of the *idea* of relational aesthetics, "theanyspacewhatever" felt less like a challenge to traditional experiences of art than it did an extension of the changes wrought by the nearly total absorption of the museum into experience and tourist economies. And rather than feel essentialized by a notion of community or retrograde in my appreciation of beautiful pictures, as Opie's pictures toggled between inclusion and exclusion, sameness and otherness, I got caught up in their articulations of longing—for others, for community, for solitude. "American Photographer" was filled with desire (in no small measure because of its old-fashioned belief in visual pleasure), and it queered the public space of the museum, transforming it into a slightly libidinous one, while the microutopias produced by "theanyspacewhatever" did less to convert the museum into (yet another avant-garde) "machine for living" than to be comfortably subsumed by it. If every work of art smuggles in a model of subjectivity and all aesthetic choices are emblematic of ethical ones, then it is fair to say that both exhibitions emerged from and extended our conceptions of democracy. That one did so with desire and longing and one didn't was the stark choice offered by the Guggenheim, however unconsciously. □

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NOTES

1. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Dijon, France: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 13.

2. *Ibid.*, 17–18.