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Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics

Helena Reckitt

Among the more than thirty contributors to *c.7,500*,¹ the landmark 1973 exhibition of female conceptual artists curated by Lucy Lippard, there was one artist whose work could almost not be seen. Rather than having been withdrawn for reasons of fragility or propriety, this artist's work was hidden in plain sight. Its everyday nature was so convincing that, to many viewers, it didn't register as art at all. The work in question, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Maintenance Art*, merged art's high cultural status with the lowly status of routine institutional maintenance. Over two days during the exhibition's run at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Ukeles carried out banal cleaning and security tasks. For instance, in *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, Ukeles dusted the vitrine housing an Egyptian mummy and then dated and stamped it as a *Maintenance Art Original*, thus legitimizing it as an artwork and shifting responsibility for its care from the janitorial staff to the curatorial team. Similar interventions to recode everyday actions as art followed. Ukeles locked and unlocked office and gallery doors, and went down on her knees to scrub the museum's front stairs and mop its marble-floored gallery housing the Mannerist sculpture, *Venus with a Nymph and Satyr*. Each time, a twist called attention to these generally overlooked acts: Ukeles secured gallery staff in their offices, poured water down the museum's entry steps, and used her baby's diapers to clean uncomfortably close to visitors' feet. While employees tried to flee, gallery goers

calmly viewed pictures, apparently unaware of the art being made beneath them – although photographs of the event show children cheerfully mopping alongside Ukeles.

In the years leading up to c.1970 even the art world found Ukeles's work a little hard to believe. Having read about Ukeles in an article discussing the avant-garde's demise, Lippard called the artist and asked, 'Are you real, or did Jack Burnham make you up?'.ⁱⁱ Burnham's article highlighted Ukeles's critique of the modernist denial of maintenance labour, which she had launched in her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!: 'Care' A Proposal for an Exhibition*. Having recently become a mother, Ukeles realized that the principles of artistic liberation and autonomy that she was schooled in conflicted with her new domestic responsibilities. Trying to eke out studio time would not change her situation. Instead, in a Duchampian gesture of appropriation and performativity, she announced her decision to recode all her activities as 'art'. The *Manifesto* rejected habitual distinctions between avant-garde progress and the cyclical processes of affective labour, recognizing that: 'Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials'. Pointing to the cleaning and care that sustained artistic and left-wing culture—and anticipating the Wages for Housework campaign that began the following year—the *Manifesto* pointed to 'The sour ball of every revolution', namely, 'who's going to take out the trash on Monday morning?'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ukeles' interest in categories of clean and unclean—what the anthropologist Mary Douglas terms 'matter out of place'ⁱⁱⁱ—converged on the Egyptian mummy, an

object corpse that cleansing and preservation transformed into a revered artifact. By recoding her bodily labour as art, Ukeles also revised Hannah Arendt's distinction between 'labour', which concerns life and death's eternal processes, and 'work', which produces objects and things.^{iv} Moreover, Ukeles linked domestic work to that of producing and sustaining human labour—the labour of creating life. While acknowledging women's complicity in maintaining male domination, Ukeles did not condemn women as passive, but placed the power for renaming and revaluing their activities in their hands.

Working at the threshold to the museum, Ukeles drew attention to institutional mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, validation and denial. As she has recalled:

These were the days of the Vietnam War, when institutions by their very nature were understood to be inherently corruptible. During these days many artists (myself among them) chose to do most of their work in the streets. We were very wary of 'going inside.' We dematerialized our art as much as we could. We needed to be unfettered, unowned.^v

Her actions underscored the institution's contradictory role as champion of artistic expression, cultural gatekeeper, and preserver of the past. Focusing on the 'supplement', Ukeles mirrored conceptual art's inscription within walls, floors and other architectural or decorative surfaces. But here the supplement concerns the

'back half': invisible human efforts.^{vi} As such, Ukeles also critiqued minimalist and process art's disavowal of labour, which had created a situation in which artists were 'lifting industrial processes and forgetting about the whole culture that they come out of. So Serra was this steel worker without the work, without the workers. And Judd was this carpenter without workers.'^{vii}

Marking absence

Although unnoticed by many museum visitors, and barely recorded in the museum archives,^{viii} *Maintenance Art's* critique of 'art's' division from 'work' resonated within feminist, performance and environmental circles. Some twenty years later, Janine Antoni's *Loving Care*, 1992, riffed on Ukeles's tribute to the low-down work of female domesticity. Saturating her hair with Loving Care dye, Antoni used it to clean the gallery floor, crawling backwards and dragging a bucket of dye behind her.^{ix} Photographs from the opening night depict guests edged into a corner by the leotard-clad artist, who eventually pushed them from the room.

Antoni's actions feminized several iconic moments of male-dominated modernism, from Jackson Pollock's paint poured down a stick onto the canvas to Franz Kline's black brushstrokes on white, and Yves Klein's 'living paintbrushes'. Recording her actions in permanent dye that will nonetheless fade with time, Antoni registered the unstable processes of memory and memorial, including her former ignorance of feminist art. Her teacher, artist Mira Schor, had urged her to research artists like Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, and Carolee Schneemann. 'I looked at this

work', Antoni remarked, 'and I thought, "I'm making the work of the seventies."'x In an act that is elegant and abject, seductive and antagonistic, assertive and subservient, Antoni performed a link to these pioneering artists, an act of 'loving care' that pays them their belated due.

Yet, at that moment, the feminist advances upon which Antoni built were under attack. In the same year as *Loving Care*, Susan Faludi chronicled the intensifying anti-feminist climate in *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. A 1998 article about Antoni, 'ART; Women's Work (or Is It Art?) Is Never Done', by Kay Larson, remarked on this period of backsliding. Larson also referenced Lippard's 1993 essay, 'Moving Targets/Concentric Circles', which called for the continuation of the women's movement at a time when it was 'painfully obvious that a woman's work is never done.'^{xi} These anxieties about feminism's denigration and survival echo in Antoni's powerful yet vulnerable homage.

Micro-utopias and social relations

The early 1990s, as a moment of feminist/anti-feminist recovery and counterpunch, coincided with critic/curator Nicholas Bourriaud's elaboration of his interest in socially-oriented art that he termed 'relational aesthetics'. Starting with his contribution to the *Aperto* section of the 1993 Venice Biennale, and including such group exhibitions as *Commerce* at Espace St Nicolas in Paris, 1994, and *Traffic* at CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 1996, Bourriaud heralded a younger generation of artists whose art echoed the networked, do-it-yourself relations of the

burgeoning Internet age. For Bourriaud, the network captured both how people operate within social systems and the open-ended circulation and mutation of objects, images and ideas in the information era. Reflecting the shift from a First-World economy based in manufacturing and Fordist production to one grounded in personal services and human encounters, relational aesthetics positioned viewers not as autonomous beholders of static works, but as active co-participants and co-producers of art's meaning. Bourriaud tracked this trend in his 1998 essay collection *Esthétique relationnelle*, which was published in English in 2002.

Bourriaud's exhibitions shifted attention away from the focus on the artist's body seen in the works of Antoni (and Ukeles) to forms of interaction between members of the public. Emphasizing temporal above spatial conditions, his uncluttered installations, with their notable absence of dividing walls,^{xii} evoked the mood of a flea market. His exhibitions were designed to encourage visitors to sit, read, talk, eat, listen to music and engage in other everyday activities, in a manner recalling the tactical occupation of city space described in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (French 1980; English 1984). From Felix Guattari, Bourriaud borrowed the term 'everyday micro-utopias' to favour 'small local stories and gestures over the greater ambitions and metanarratives associated with modernity', as Kathleen Ritter observes.^{xiii} So visitors to *Traffic* could receive floor plans by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster based on their childhood homes, rifle through books and second-hand ephemera gathered in East Berlin by Christine Hill, gather sheets of paper from one of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Stacks*, or converse with Jes Brinch and Henrik Plenge Jakobsen inside their live-in installation, *Alternative*

Society.^{xiv} *Traffic* also featured Rirkrit Tiravanija, who is probably the definitive relational artist, and whose work illustrates the cover of Bourriaud's book (which Tiravanija nonetheless claims not to have read).^{xv} Tiravanija's gallery installations involving free Thai curries, table tennis games or —as in *Traffic*—mini-bars with furniture fabricated from cardboard, exemplify Bourriaud's interest in art that performs, rather than depicts, human encounters and that eschews didacticism and overt political content. George Baker, in a 2004 issue of *October*, relates the rise of this trend to the failure of the French Left to challenge society's drift towards neoliberalism.^{xvi} Subsequently, Liam Gillick, in his retort to Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', which appeared in the Baker-edited *October* issue that dealt largely with Bourriaud's ideas about relational art, pointed to artists who resist direct representation and transparency by adopting 'veils and meanderings' as more effective aesthetic means to intervene in 'the chaotic ebb and flow of capitalism'.^{xvii} Few could have anticipated the eventual impact of Bourriaud's ideas, given their initial lukewarm reception. Reviewing the CAPC show in *frieze*, Carl Freedman concluded, 'With the primary beneficiaries of "Traffic" tending to be the participating artists and their associates, Bourriaud may need to look at what actually constitutes the socio-political determinants of his "interhuman space"'.^{xviii} Neither were all the exhibiting artists convinced of Bourriaud's premise. After four initial days of public events, the only artists left producing interactive gallery projects were Brinch and Jakobsen. 'We were reduced to actors performing in a sculpture', they recalled, and decided to leave Bordeaux early.^{xix} When *Esthétique relationnelle*

was published, neither it, nor its subsequent English translation, were reviewed in the art press, Bourriaud has claimed.^{xx}

Yet *Relational Aesthetics*' influence soon became undeniable. Despite – or perhaps thanks to – its fragmented and impressionistic nature, it became seen as 'the definitive text of relational practice.'^{xxi} As inaugural Directors of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris from 1999 to 2006, Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans (his co-editor of *Documents sur l'art*, where many of his essays first appeared) tested their ideas. Housed in a deliberately unfinished former grand pavilion, the institution fostered relational artworks within a laboratory environment, commissioning Michael Lin to design a floral café floor, and establishing a gallery schedule that abandoned 'bankers' hours' to remain open from noon until midnight.

At once elusive and polemical, Bourriaud's consideration of a specific group of artists rapidly broadened to become a catch-all term that referred to a wide range of practices – from gallery-based social installations that matched Bourriaud's definition to community-oriented, activist, public and site-reflexive projects that had little to do with it. Part of relational aesthetics' influence stems from the time that it took the kind of socially-based curatorial platforms which curators in continental Europe like Maria Lind and Hans Ulrich Obrist had developed extensively throughout the 1990s to reach the UK and North America.^{xxii} That the *anyspacewhatever* survey of relational art opened in 2008 at New York's Guggenheim Museum hints at its delayed trans-Atlantic passage. So in Anglo-American art circles, Bourriaud's text was greeted as a valuable introduction to an unfamiliar field. To many it seemed to offer a new approach to process, time and experience-oriented art that aesthetic criticism's

emphasis on the static object of contemplation had hitherto found difficult to evaluate. Where public and community art had become mired in bureaucratic requirements of accessibility, populism and usefulness—what Mark Fisher has termed ‘a culture of aims and objectives’—Bourriaud’s projects seemed refreshingly free of dogma and didacticism.^{xxiii} Embracing the social and gesturing towards the collective, but operating largely in the gallery and highlighting the work of individual artists (many of whom were highly successful), Bourriaud’s approach dovetailed with the art market’s operations and mentality.

Memory lapse

Yet while Bourriaud championed key contemporary artists, he disregarded practitioners and movements from former eras. Where Antoni looked back in order to move forward, Bourriaud claimed that relational artists ‘in no way draw sustenance from any re-interpretation of this or that past aesthetic movement.’^{xxiv}

The absence of feminism is especially problematic in this context given how closely Bourriaud’s projects emulate forms of affective and immaterial work that have long been areas of female activity and feminist analysis. Bourriaud thus reiterates the classic capitalist exploitation of not only those who work directly for capitalism, by creating surplus value, but also domestic labourers of social reproduction who don’t. In Bourriaud’s critical and curatorial projects, the gender politics of all featured artists’ work went unexamined. Bourriaud even discussed Christine Hill, whose art mimicked classically female service roles such as masseuse, aerobics instructor,

tour guide, librarian and sales assistant, in gender-free terms. He introduces Hill by suggesting that: 'Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond.'^{xxv} This blandly ameliorative view denies her art's feminist analysis of how certain tasks, objects and people are rewarded and others are devalued, as well as her attention to the service-nature of the contemporary artist's labour.

Relational Aesthetics presents the artist as a universal figure, unmarked by sex, race or class. In his book Bourriaud dismisses 'feminism, anti-racism and environmentalism' as 'the most die-hard forms of conservatism', characterizing them as 'lobbies playing the power game by enabling it never to have to call itself into question in a structural way.'^{xxvi} In another bizarre interpretation, Bourriaud writes off what he sees as efforts to reduce the art of Gonzalez-Torres 'to a neo-formalist set of problems or an agenda for gay activism', while praising Gonzalez-Torres's work's 'ability to side-step community-oriented identifications to get to the heart of the human experience.'^{xxvii} Bourriaud's account of Gonzalez-Torres's *Stacks* and candy spills as vulnerable to disappearance at the hands of visitors who take them away with them negates the role played by gallery staff in replenishing them, Shannon Jackson points out. This is a symptom of Bourriaud's blindness to the role of human and institutional structures of maintenance and support, Jackson argues, in a compelling analysis that draws centrally on the work of Laderman Ukeles.^{xxviii} Although commentators including Baker and Gillick have noted Bourriaud's suppression of feminism, successive accounts of relational art only repeat it. Claire Bishop, while contesting Bourriaud's eclipse of conflict and antagonism in 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', nonetheless repeats his denial of feminist

precedents.^{xxix} Of the twenty-six contributions to her 2006 reader, *Participation*, not one highlights feminist artistic or theoretical perspectives.^{xxx} The emphasis on 'conviviality' in relational aesthetics that Bishop critiques is problematic in **feminist** terms because it ignores the antipathy and ambivalence of women in their stereotypical, feminized roles, as well as that of affective workers, to the expectation that they supply service with a smile. Commenting on this emphasis, Ritter observes that in Bourriaud's writing on Tiravanija's *Untitled (Pad Thai)* works, 'It strikes me as extremely odd that the negative impact of the work is never discussed, given that Tiravanija left the remnants of the meals to rot in the gallery over the duration of the exhibition to eventually be cleaned up by the gallery staff.'^{xxxi}

Bourriaud's disembodied and affectless conception of the social realm ignores feminist insights into how people come to understand themselves in relation to other sexed bodies, simultaneously as objects and subjects. It fails to account for the haptic and reciprocal nature of human encounters that Jennifer Fisher has termed 'Relational Sense'^{xxxii}, and the subjective, emotional and 'interrelational' dimensions of art's potential impact on the beholder of art that Amelia Jones urges us to consider.^{xxxiii} Given Bourriaud's expressed interest in what happens to and among art audiences, his discussions pays scant regard to public responses to or phenomenological perspectives on his exhibitions. Also missing is an understanding of how public performances of intimacy and sexual kinship can inspire and sustain collective action. Aimed to provoke participation, Bourriaud's exhibitions often left visitors unclear about what form their engagement should take. The curator Bettina Funcke recalls her uncertainty about 'which role the viewer was supposed to play—

an accomplice, piece of decoration, or an equal participant,' noting 'I often had the sense that I had missed the central event, that I had arrived “after the party,” as it were.^{xxxiv} And, according to Gillick, visitors to *Traffic* took its purported interactivity literally, destroying several works during the opening.^{xxxv}

Too female

Relational aesthetics' dominance sheds light on feminist art's critical and commercial reception, especially where that art is read as 'feminine.' Lippard—who had worked to overcome her initial reservations about craft-based women's art —remarked on the risks of ghettoisation for women artists who used traditionally female imagery.^{xxxvi} In her 1971 review 'Household Images in Art', she discussed how contemporary women artists hesitated to use the colour pink and to depict domestic themes, understanding how such choices stereotyped them. Had the first Pop artists been women, she suggested, the movement might never have left the kitchen.^{xxxvii} Conversely, Lippard might have added, male artists like Donald Judd or Carl Andre who used industrial processes and materials were not presumed to be performing or proving their masculinity. In the opposite direction, in recent years we have seen male artists who appropriate feminine materials and methods celebrated as bold and transgressive—think of Mike Kelley's stuffed toys and second-hand blankets, Grayson Perry's quilts, or Tirivanija's curries.^{xxxviii} Despite the feminist and queer energy that fuels male-only exhibitions like *Boys Who Sew* (2004) or *BoysCraft* (2007), ultimately they perpetuate the idea that men enacting feminized artistic

activities are doing something exciting and risqué that in female hands would seem unremarkable.^{xxxix}

The problem for female artists is that their use of domestic and utilitarian media is too easily read back into their identities and their bodies. Meanwhile, the use of feminized tropes by male artists does not pose such problems.^{xi} In considering the positive reception to Robert Morris's *Felts* in the late 1960s and 1970s, art historian Elissa Authur has explained 'how an essentially physical response to media (recognition of its tactility, beauty, or voluptuousness) could be accepted when framed intellectually and, crucially, when these aspects of the work were seen as simply stylistic choice made by the artist rather than an extension of his gender.' Femininity for Morris therefore was 'perfectly acceptable as long as it was understood as a contingent rather than essential aspect of the artist's practice.'^{xli} The Kantian critique of purposiveness, and the related modernist denigration of the arts of the senses and of contact, can still taint artworks rooted in domesticity, craft and service, especially when made by women.

Yet not all feminists support the reappraisal of traditionally female realms. To Griselda Pollock, writing in the late 1990s within a psychoanalytic framework:

This is a prime instance of being trapped in a binary where reverse valuation of what has hitherto been devalued does not ultimately breach the value system at all [...] This interest in art that stays close to the practices of everyday life also keeps this art tied to the realm of the Mother. The tropes of Other and Mother, always powerful resources for resistance, none the less

trap us in a regressive compartment of a patriarchal narrative and mythicisation of Culture as the realm of the Father and the Hero.^{xlii}

Precarious times

The conversational and interactive encounters envisaged by relational aesthetics reflect—perhaps too neatly—the Post-Fordist socio-economic era from which the trend emerged. In their 1999 study of French management literature from the late 1980s/1990s, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello emphasize the value placed by managers on social, communicative and team-oriented attributes. Where assembly lines treat workers as machines who clock off after their shift to begin ‘real life’, the new economy is more subtly and intangibly manipulative. Exploiting workers’ full imaginative, conceptual, communicative and social capabilities, new labour expectations chip away at the gap between ‘work’ and ‘life’. Whereas in the 1960s the division between work and private time was vigorously maintained, in the 1990s ‘management authors rebel against this separation, which is deemed deleterious inasmuch as it leaves no room for affectivity, and at the same time inefficient because it runs counter to flexibility and inhibits the multiple skills that must be employed to learn to ‘live in a network.’^{xliii} Denunciating hierarchies and advocating autonomy in rhetoric that co-opts the spirit of May ‘68, neo-capitalism also appropriates traits associated with artistic work:

Autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphous capacity, multitasking (in contrast

to the narrow specialization of the old division of labour), conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts.^{xliv}

Although Boltanski and Chiapello have been criticized by Jacques Rancière (for misrepresenting the artistic critique) and Isabelle Graw (for denying May 68's progressive gains and creating false oppositions between artistic and social critique),^{xlv} their conclusions resonate with today's workplace pressures, especially in the art world.^{xlvi} The figure of the flexible worker who travels constantly, networks endlessly, is always contactable, and develops temporary projects with different people under short-term contracts is increasingly common. Privileging professional relationships above all others, the demands of the neo-liberal workplace deny the labour involved in parenting, and put all manner of affective bonds under stress. Ironically, these requirements for flexibility link life under capitalism's most advanced forms to the plight of undocumented immigrants and people from impoverished and war-torn regions who must similarly adopt 'flexible' lifestyles, finding work where they can while often being denied citizenship or a living wage.

Affective labour puts the full gamut of our communicative, imaginative and sociable resources to work. Encompassing all our relationships and time, it lends itself to radically exploitative working conditions. This is especially so in a 'prestige' field like art where labour supply exceeds demand and workers accept unstable

conditions and low – or no – pay to do what they love.^{xlvii} In the wake of reduced funding, public arts institutions internalize the logic of precariousness, embracing privatization and depending more than ever on the labour of unpaid interns and volunteers.^{xlviii} The need to stay on good terms with people you might one day work with or for has fostered a culture in which cooperation replaces critique. 'Few people can afford to publicly perform their opposition, as your enemy of today might be someone you desperately need to cooperate with at a later point,' observes Graw. 'It is "contacts" that you define as the new currency in a world that forces us to cooperate. We have to accumulate "contract capital".'^{xlix} Thus, a recent ad for a Course Director at Rotterdam's Piet Zwart Academy that listed 'extensive networks of people' as a prerequisite of employment. As friendships become instrumentalized and colleagues are treated as friends, the distinction between private and professional relationships erodes. In a class of postgraduate curating students recently, an independent curator advised the group that they should befriend every artist with whom they worked.

Established curators and museum directors are constantly at work, 'collecting collectors' and other benefactors who might lend art for their shows, donate works to their collections, or endow their institutions. The need to be always 'on' resonates with Nina Power's chapter 'You're like an Advert for Yourself' in her 2009 book, *One Dimensional Woman*.¹ The celebrity status attributed to artists now accrues to art professionals, with institutional ambitions becoming embodied in 'star' curators and directors. As outlined in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, charismatic 'leaders' convince others of their 'visions', with press conferences, openings, dinners and panel

discussions providing forums for them to perform their dynamism and to promote their institutional brands. At events like the Venice Biennale or Art Basel, being seen only counts if you're seen by and with the right people. As a public art gallery director once tried to convince me, 'It's all about the optics.' Because contemporary art's meaning is elusive and its value unstable, and because artists' careers can quickly rise and fall, the validation of key critics, curators, dealers and, increasingly, collectors, is vital. Even academics, supposedly independent from market concerns, contribute to the knowledge and the reputation economies, their scholarly labour adding to art's symbolic value.ⁱⁱ This is especially the case when the scholar and the curator are the same person, as happens increasingly within today's flexible educational market.

Symptomatic of the biopolitical turn, artists are expected to mediate their work at public events and to attend intimate salons with art sponsors and donors. This desire for access to the artist and to first-hand 'experience' also finds expression in biennales and city-sponsored art festivals that promote urban regeneration and court tourist revenue. 'Starchitect'-designed museums encourage the staging of spectacular artistic events, and frequently overwhelm the art entirely.ⁱⁱⁱ Andrea Fraser has considered the challenges facing artists like her who make project-based 'artistic service work'ⁱⁱⁱⁱ at the invitation of institutions. Contracting herself out to the EA-Generali Foundation as a provider of 'interpretive' and 'interventionary' services in 1994 she gave a talk entitled, 'What do I, as an artist, provide?' 'All of my work is about what we want from art, what collectors want, what artists want from collectors, what museum audiences want,' she has claimed. 'By that, I mean what we want not

only economically, but in more personal, psychological and affective terms.^{liv} She has explored these reciprocal projections and desires in different guises throughout her work: giving gallery tours as a volunteer guide (*Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989; *Welcome to the Wadsworth: A Museum Tour*, 1991); mimicking hyperbolic speeches by artists and their supporters while stripping down to underwear and heels (*Official Opening*, 2001); and being filmed having sex with a collector for an unnamed sum (*Untitled*, 2003). Although Fraser's career developed coterminously with Bourriaud's, he seemed not to share her concern with the dangers posed to artistic autonomy by the complicit relationships that she explored. He also leaves aside the history of socially-based, participatory curatorial formats organized by feminists, from Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison and Martha Hunt's 'Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry', 1973-75, to Martha Rosler's 'If You Lived Here ...', 1989. Despite a shared vocabulary of informal, process-based display, the self-reflexivity of such exhibitions contrasts with Bourriaud's aversion to criticality. He makes this stance clear in *Postproduction* (2002) where he admits to having 'neither the passion for objectivity of the journalist, nor the capacity for abstraction of the philosopher,' but to 'think with' artists, and to lack the distance required to critique their work or, implicitly, the systems within which it operates.^{lv}

The economically precarious environment within which relational aesthetics has flourished has become a catalyst for recent feminist artistic and activist energy. Inspired by feminist Italian autonomists of the 1970s such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, current artist/activist groups such as *Precarias a la deriva*

(Precarious women workers adrift) and Carrot Workers fight precarious working conditions and seek more agency in their lives. Drawing on Paolo Virno's ideas about the multitude as a force of resistance and liberation, rather than trying to reform the workplace they contest the demand that the whole of life is put to work. Saying no to productivity, their work chimes with current feminist explorations of the radical potential of exit, defection, and refusal.

Yet as these collectives acknowledge, exploitation does not only come from the outside, but emerges when subjects participate in their own submission—processes of internalized surveillance and control that Foucault characterized as biopolitics.^{lvi} Within this context Fraser is joined by other contemporary feminist-oriented artists including Saskia Holmkvist, Tanja Ostojić, Barbara Visser and Carey Young, who have explored their collusion with the art world's biopolitical demands. Hyperbolically performing their contradictory positions, their work embodies what Angela Dimitrakaki characterizes as an 'over-identification with the object/subject of critique.'^{lvii} They work from the premise that no pure oppositional place exists. As Fraser insists, '[T]he institution is us. Every time we speak of the "institution" as other than "us" we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions. We avoid responsibility for, or action against, the everyday complicities, compromises, and censorship...which are driven by our own interests in the field and the benefits we derive from it.'^{lviii}

Who counts, what counts

In 1998, twenty-five years after its original enactment, Ukeles restaged *MAINTENANCE ART WORK* at the Wadsworth Atheneum, as part of a retrospective organized by the feminist curator Andrea Miller-Keller.^{lix} While the institution barely registered Ukeles' earlier actions, Miller-Keller, along with many of the emerging artists that she commissioned for the gallery's Matrix programme, appreciated its pioneering role.^{lx} 'The museum is remembering all this now', Ukeles wrote. 'A fog lifts. Suddenly, graciously, it sees something it didn't see within itself originally, or not for more than a moment.'^{lxi} Two years earlier Miller-Keller had organized the first US museum performance of Antoni's *Loving Care* in the site of Ukeles' original actions.^{lxii} In contrast to Ukeles' piece, which barely left a trace, Antoni's tone was overtly erotic and narcissistic, with the 'work' of maintaining female youthfulness and beauty merging with that of cleaning/dirtying up. The belated recognition of Ukeles's art signaled by Miller-Keller's curating and Antoni's art reminds us that history is not fixed, and that once-overlooked practices can be revisited for latent meanings and currency. In giving bodily form to earlier artistic moments, these works recall Elizabeth Freeman's evocation of queer temporality as 'a non-narrative history written with the body, in which the performer channels another body ... making this body available to a context unforeseen in its bearer's lived historical moment'.^{lxiii}

This archival spirit of recovery has informed important recent exhibitions of feminist art such as *Personal & Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969–1975*^{lxiv} and *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*.^{lxv} By increasing and complicating public understanding of art that emerged from the women's movement, these exhibitions play a major role in resisting the amnesiac fate that has befallen feminist

work at the hands of curators like Bourriaud. However, presenting art by feminists as a separate category has its limitations, or so the curator Helen Molesworth has argued. Believing that such initiatives make it easier for the mainstream to ignore feminist work, and deny feminism's impact on the wider artistic culture, Molesworth has forged a different curatorial path. In exhibitions like *'Part Object, Part Sculpture'*, 2005, which revisited modernist sculpture and the readymade from the perspective of plumbing, object relations and polymorphous sexualities, Molesworth employs feminism as a critical tool that enables a thoroughgoing revision of art history and cultural value. Within a curatorial framework that is searchingly feminist, and queer, Molesworth presents Marcel Duchamp as an important figure for feminism. Even more relevant to this discussion of gender and labour is Molesworth's 2003 exhibition *Work Ethic*.^{lxvi} Here Molesworth read the dematerialized artistic practices of the 1960s against the shift from manual to managerial work in a context that is alert to the politics of gender as well as of race and class.

A feminist spirit of self-reflexivity that highlights the terms of its operations played out powerfully in the 11th Istanbul Biennale curated by the Zagreb Collective, What, How & for Whom (WHW) in 2009. Taking seriously Fraser's admonition that 'the institution is us', curators Ivet Curlin, Ana Devic, Natasa Ilic and Sabina Sablovic made visible the economic and labour conditions within which they acted. The exhibition budget – who provided funds, how they were spent, where the income was projected to come from – was presented in charts and diagrams within the show and the catalogue. Graphics also indicated participating artists' ages, genders, gallery representation status, national backgrounds and locations. These statistics

showed that most artists had been educated and still lived outside the West, and reflected the curators' efforts to conduct on-the-ground research into artists beyond the familiar biennial circuit. Furthermore, the politics of artistic labour were highlighted in Aydan Murtezaoglu and Bülent Sangar's installation *Unemployed Employees / I Found You a New Job*, 2009, which featured individuals folding and unfolding t-shirts like so many Benetton shop assistants. The piece recalled the conditions under which artists accept nominal fees (or, in the case of this exhibition, none at all) to participate in prestigious exhibitions.^{lxvii} WHW's transparency reflects their call for a 'politicization of culture' to contest the 'culturalization of politics.'

Where his personal ties to many of the artists that he curated were an implicit but not an explicit part of Bourriaud's practice, the organizers of the 2005 queer feminist show *Shared Women* provocatively laid bare the conflicts of interest and incestuous relationships that underpin their curatorial process. A.L. Steiner, Eve Fowler, and Emily Roysdon described their exhibition as 'dependent on cronyism, feminism and nepotism', claiming, 'We sleep with each other, inspire, plot, plan, respond, complain, collaborate, and analyze [...] Maybe some artists in this show have slept their way to the middle.'^{lxviii} In a different register to *Shared Women's* deliberate appropriation of sensationalist media hype, Ritter has advocated 'furtive' curatorial and artistic stances. Contesting our culture's emphasis on spectacle, Ritter posits near-invisible artworks, often collectively or anonymously authored and staged in everyday spaces, that question the usefulness and even the recognizability, of art. As a counterpoint to Bourriaud's emphasis on service, the cult of the artist and the reification of the gallery, and with a nod to Ukeles's barely-there

maintenance works, Ritter's proposals are sly and modest at once.^{lxi} Also grounded in performance and performativity, with an avowed debt to feminism, the curatorial platform, *IF I CAN'T DANCE, I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION* takes its name from Emma Goldman's famous (albeit misquoted) pronouncement through a peripatetic series of performances, exhibitions, screenings, talks and events. This loose structure enables curators Frédérique Bergholtz and Annie Fletcher to react quickly to artistic developments and collaborative opportunities and to resist the demands of funding, staffing and programming a bricks-and-mortar institution – a flexible approach that is both a response to and a symptom of economic instability. More recently, Artistic Director of *dOCUMENTA 13* Carolyn Christof-Bargargiev has announced an open-ended and collaborative path of research for the exhibition through a series of discussions, meetings and letters with large international group of predominantly female 'agents'. Designed 'to create a generative process that is organic and affective, open to change,^{lxx} and to counter some of the egotism associated with curating what is probably the world's most important contemporary art exhibition, Christof-Bargargiev's project embodies a feminist commitment to reflexive and relational practice.^{lxxi}

It's hard to think of an artistic term of the past twenty years that has been as widely adopted, debated and contested as relational aesthetics. Bourriaud even hints at this in the revised edition of *Postproduction*, where he writes of 'a certain misunderstanding, if not malevolence' that has developed in response to his work.^{lxxii} At once slippery and prescriptive, broad and specific, Bourriaud's efforts to claim

new ground whiff of over-compensation, as if to acknowledge his historical antecedents would cast doubts on his programme's professed originality.^{lxxiii} The neoliberal environment that saw the 'rise of the curator' in which Bourriaud emerged placed unprecedented demands on curators' affective, communicative and entrepreneurial labour. As the conduit between artists, institutions, funders and the public, curators have been described as middlemen or mediators.^{lxxiv} They have come to occupy a highly feminized position that calls on typically female forms of facilitation, and that operates under the unstable work conditions that Cristina Morino characterizes as a symptom of 'the feminization of labour.'^{lxxv} Curators' names increasingly function as products or brands. They are deployed in marketing and fundraising campaigns, and have assumed a dominant role in the growing literature of curatorial studies. Yet while Bourriaud and the artists that he championed popularized feminized forms of art practice, emulated feminized labour traits, and created 'relational' art institutions like the Palais de Tokyo, feminist artists such as Ukeles, Antoni and Fraser mostly remained marginalized as its 'forgotten relations.'

The self-reflexivity that provoked Fraser to explore the values that people project onto art, artists and art institutions plays no part in relational aesthetics. Enacting micro-politics without a broader macro-politics, the relationships Bourriaud envisages seem unmoored in site, context or consequence — staged in the gallery and designed to take place 'anytime, anyplace, anywhere', in the words of the 1980s Martini ad. In an approach to the status quo that has been characterized as adaptive rather than resistant, relational art promotes a user-friendly version of the art institution that, Walead Beshty argues, promotes the 'corporatisation of the

museum', rejecting strategies of institutional critique that 'always reasserted the material conditions of space'.^{lxxvi} Stripping socially-based art of its criticality and ambivalence, Bourriaud invites museum visitors to come together in what Jackson terms 'a frictionless environment, unencumbered by the claims of responsibility.'^{lxxvii} An artistic appropriation of the everyday that denies its underlying politics, this framework suppresses the key feminist insight that neither 'art' nor 'work' are ever **just** that, but are always subject to conditions of who does what, for whom, and under what terms.

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NOTES

ⁱ The exhibition debuted at The California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA, in May 1973 and traveled until June 1974 to venues throughout the US and to the UK including the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

ⁱⁱ Mierle Laderman Ukeles with Bénédicte Ramade (*Speech Interviews*, January 25, 2008), www.speechinterviews.blogspot.com/2008/01/interview-with-mierle-laderman-ukeles Accessed 9 March, 2012.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1991[1966]).
- ^{iv} Julia Bryan-Wilson makes this point in her fascinating book *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, 2009), 166.
- ^v Mierle Laderman Ukeles, '25 Years Later', *Mierle Laderman Ukeles / MATRIX 137*, exhibition catalogue (Hartford, CT, 1998), 10.
- ^{vi} Sherry Buckberrough and Andrea Miller-Keller, *Matrix 137* exhibition catalogue (Hartford, CT, 1998), 2.
- ^{vii} Bartholomew Ryan, 'Manifesto for Maintenance: A Conversation with Mierle Laderman Ukeles' (*Art in America*, 20 March, 2009), <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2009-03-20/draft-mierle-interview/> Accessed 9 March 2012.
- ^{viii} Andrea Miller-Keller, *Janine Antoni: MATRIX 129*, exhibition catalogue, (Hartford CT, 1996), 6.
- ^{ix} When she first made the piece, for the 1992 exhibition *The Auto-Erotic Object* at Hunter College, New York, Antoni exhibited the painted floor as the 'relic' of a private act. She publicly performed the mopping/painting for the first time in 1993 at Anthony d' Offay Gallery, London.
- ^x Janine Antoni, interviewed in the film *!Women Art Revolution* (2010), directed by Lynn Hershman Leeson.
- ^{xi} Stacie Lindner's unpublished master's thesis, 'Janine Antoni: Finding a Room of Her Own' (Georgia State University, 2006), connects Larson's article to Lippard's.
- ^{xii} I am grateful to Gilda Williams for this observation.
- ^{xiii} Kathleen Ritter, 'At the Doors to the Gallery' (unpublished Masters Thesis, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, 2005), 50.
- ^{xiv} See Tim Griffin, 'Post-Script: The Museum Re-Visited', *Artforum* (Summer 2010), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_10_48/ai_n57707573/ Accessed 9 March 2012.
- ^{xv} Rirkrit Tiravanija, talk with Charles Reeve, Ontario College of Art and Design (April 2007).
- ^{xvi} George Baker, 'Introduction to "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" by Claire Bishop', *October*, 110 (Fall 2004): 49 – 50.

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- ^{xvii} Liam Gillick, 'Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics"', *October*, **115** (Winter 2006), 106.
- ^{xviii} Carl Freedman, 'Traffic', *frieze*, Issue 28 (May 1996), <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/traffic/> Accessed 9 March 2012.
- ^{xix} Griffin, 'Museum Re-Visited', 2010.
- ^{xx} Tom Morton, 'Tate Triennial 2009', *frieze* 120 (January-February 2009). http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/tate_triennial_2009/ Accessed 9 March 2012.
- ^{xxi} Griffin, 'Museum Re-Visited'.
- ^{xxii} See Griffin, 'Museum Re-Visited'.
- ^{xxiii} Mark Fisher, *Useless*, Lecture in the Art Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 5 December 2011.
- ^{xxiv} Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, 1998/English translation 2002), 44.
- ^{xxv} Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 3.
- ^{xxvi} Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 61.
- ^{xxvii} Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 50.
- ^{xxviii} Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Abingdon and New York, 2011), 46
- ^{xxix} Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79.
- ^{xxx} Perhaps the tide is turning. The 2012 exhibition *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*, at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, juxtaposes works by feminists including Suzanne Lacy, Bonnie Sherk and Barbara T. Smith with those by artists associated with Futurism, Fluxus, Arte Povera, site specificity, performance, and relational aesthetics.
- ^{xxxi} Ritter, 'Gallery Doors', 56.
- ^{xxxii} Jennifer Fisher, 'Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics' *Parachute* **87** (Summer 1997), <http://www.david-howes.com/senses/Fisher.htm> Accessed 11 March 2012.
- ^{xxxiii} Amelia Jones, 'Performance: Time, Space and Cultural 'Value'', in *One Day Sculpture*, ed. David Cross and Claire Doherty, (Beilefeld, 2009): 31-37.

^{xxxiv} Bettina Funcke in 'IT'S ALL A MATTER OF TIME: A Roundtable Discussion on 'Il Tempo del Postino' with Bettina Funcke, Erika Hoffmann, Nina Pohl, André Hoffmann, and André Rottmann, *Texte zur Kunst*, 75 (September 2009), 139.

^{xxxv} Gillick, 'Contingent Factors', 97.

^{xxxvi} Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 168.

^{xxxvii} Lucy Lippard, 'Household Images in Art,' (*Ms*, March 1973), reprinted in Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York, 1976): 56-59.

^{xxxviii} Not that these artists are unaware of the gender politics surrounding their work or that they disavow the influence of feminist art and feminist artists on them. See Mike Kelley's interview in Leeson, *!Women Art Revolution* (2010).

^{xxxix} *Boys Who Sew*, Crafts Council Gallery, London, 5 February - 4 April 2004; *BoysCraft*, Art Gallery of the University of Haifa, 2007.

^{xi} A similar fate greets black artists, argues Darby English in *How To See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), as preexisting knowledge about artists' identity influences public perception of their work.

^{xii} Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art, 1960 – 1980* (Minneapolis, 2009), 63.

^{xiii} Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London, 1999), 25.

^{xiiii} Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* trans. Gregory Elliott (Paris, 2005), 98.

^{xlv} Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit of Capitalism*, 97.

^{xlvi} Isabelle Graw, 'Response to Luc Boltanski', in *Under Pressure: Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. D. Birnbaum (New York, 2008), 78.

^{xlvii} A flurry of exhibitions and art events reflect anxieties about current labour conditions, including *Under Pressure* (2008), *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* (e-flux/Sternberg Press, 2011), and *All I See Is the Management*, Gasworks, London, 7 October - 11 December 2011.

^{xlvii} See Gregory Sholette's *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London, 2011).

^{xlviii} A museum volunteer, who was named 'Volunteer of the Year' at a public art gallery awards ceremony in 2011, described her unpaid work as 'chocolate for the soul'.

^{xlix} Graw, 'Response to Luc Boltanski', *Under Pressure*, ed. Birnbaum, 76.

^l Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman* (Ropley, 2009): 23-26.

^{li} Victor Burgin noted this development in 'The End of Art Theory' in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Basingstoke and London, 1988): 140-204.

^{lii} See James Meyer, 'No More Scale: The Experience of Size in Contemporary Sculpture,' *Artforum*, (Summer 2004): 220-228.

^{liii} Andrea Fraser, 'What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?' *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 111-116.

^{liv} Andrea Fraser quoted in Guy Trebay, 'Sex, Art and Videotape', *The New York Times* (June 13, 2004)

^{lv} Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Preface to the Second Edition', *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York, 2002; reprinted with a new preface 2005), no page number given.

^{lvi} Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1978).

^{lvii} Angela Dimitrikaki, 'Labour, Ethics, Sex and Capital: On Biopolitical Production in Contemporary Art', in 'Biopolitics' special issue, *n.paradoxa: an international feminist journal* 28 (July 2011): 5-15.

^{lviii} Andrea Fraser, 'From Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', in *Institutional Critique and After, Volume 2*, ed. John C Welchman (Zurich, 2006), 133.

^{lix} Ukeles has noted that the 'Keeping of the Keys' was not part of the exhibition; on meeting the Head of Security "he looked at me and he says: 'don't even think about it. I don't know why we ever let you do that before. " Ukeles, '25 Years Later', 1998.

^{lx} Andrea Fraser's 'Welcome to the Wadsworth' was just one of the significant commissions that Miller-Keller initiated as curator from 1975-1998 of the MATRIX programme, the first contemporary art programme within an encyclopedic museum.

^{lxi} Ukeles, '25 Years Later.'

^{lxii} *Janine Antoni, MATRIX 129*, January 7 – April 28, 1996, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

^{lxiii} Elizabeth Freeman, 'Introduction', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13:2-3 (2007): 156-76.

^{lxiv} August 10 until October 20, 2002, Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY.

^{lxv} 4 March – 16 July, 2007, curated by Connie Butler, Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, traveled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Brooklyn, NY, and Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC.

^{lxvi} The Baltimore Museum of Art, October 12, 2003 - January 11, 2004; the Des Moines Center for the Arts, May 15 - August 1, 2004; Wexner Center for the Arts, September 17, 2004 – January 2, 2005.

^{lxvii} Tirdad Zholghadr's indication that 'workers' employed to staff the piece were paid less than they would to work in an Istanbul shop, in his review in *Frieze* ('11th Istanbul Biennial', *frieze* 127 (2009), http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/11th_istanbul_biennial/, last accessed 12 March 2012), was refuted by the organizers in an email of 16 February 2012 to the author.

^{lxviii} *Shared Women*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Feb 28th - April 8th, 2007. <http://www.emilyroysdon.com/index.php?/projects/shared-women/> Accessed 9.3.2012.

^{lxix} Kathleen Ritter, 'How to Recognize a Furtive Practice: A User's Guide', in *Lieux et non-lieux de art l'actuel* (Montreal , 2005).

^{lxx} 'DOCUMENTA 13', *Universes in Universe*, <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/documenta/2012> Accessed 9 March 9 2012.

^{lxxi} Thanks to Alex Ross for this reference.

^{lxxii} Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (2002), no page number given.

^{lxxiii} Thanks to Marina Vishmidt for making this point in an email to the author.

^{lxxiv} See Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, 'The Middleman: Beginning to Talk about Mediation', in Paul O'Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects* (Amsterdam 2007): 20-30

^{lxxv} Cristina Morini, 'The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism', *Feminist Review* **87** (2007): 40-59.

^{lxxvi} Walead Besthy, 'Neo-Avantgarde and Service Industry: Notes on the Brave New World of Relational Aesthetics', 'Institutionaskritik' (*Texte Zur Kunst*, **59** (September 2005), <http://www.textezurkunst.de/59/neo-avantgarde-and-service-industry/#container> Accessed 11 March 2012.

^{lxxvii} Jackson, *Social Works*, 46