



Received: 17 April 2018  
Accepted: 01 October 2018  
First Published: 04 October 2018

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## PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Critique of relational aesthetics and a poststructural argument for thingly representational art

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**Abstract:** Although relational aesthetics fulfills many poststructural criteria, I have identified three respects in which it does not. All are concerned with the preference of relational aesthetics for unscripted, participatory performance and the concomitant implosion of distinctions between art and life. More specifically, relational aesthetics eschews artistic thingness, capturing and preserving through reproductive technologies and artistic mimesis. Poststructuralism, by contrast, offers a strong argument for the continuing relevance of a thingly representational art which upholds, but complicates, straightforward distinctions between art and life. In conclusion, I suggest that we celebrate and not denigrate the differences between art and life, and that this holds in particular for those who side with creativity and the new.

**Subjects:** Art & Visual Culture; Visual Arts; Philosophy

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; capturing; metaphor; mimesis; poststructuralism; relational aesthetics; representation; thingness

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

We intuitively think of a visual work of art as a thing with mimetic properties. It is a peculiar thing, indeed, somewhat estranged from reality while it at the same time captures and extends it. However, counterintuitively, the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud currently champions non-thingly and non-mimetic *relational* aesthetics. Here the quintessential example is the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija cooking soup for people attending the gallery and engaging in convivial, open-ended chit-chat with them in the name of important art.

This essay critiques relational aesthetics by re-instating the centrality of mimetic things in our appreciation of art. I use poststructural theory to draw attention to how thingly mimetic art “disarms the real” and engenders experiences where one can “lose one’s sense of reality”, or where we may undergo a “suspension of disbelief”, or sometimes even “fail to distinguish between reality and fiction”. I suggest that such experiences are potentially life-enhancing.

## 1. Introduction

In 1913, Clive Bell (1913, p. 37), the highly regarded formalist art critic, claimed that “[g]reat art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world”. Of course, such elevated metaphysical claims have lost currency, and nowadays art is so much of the world that in many instances it is barely distinguishable from it. In 1964 Andy Warhol exhibited a work named *Brillo Boxes*, consisting of barely transformed copies of commercial Brillo boxes. This prompted Arthur Danto (1974, p. 149) to reflect on what exactly it is that distinguishes art from non-art, and to draw the conclusion that with the “eviscerated works the artworld now enfranchises, [it is] only the concept of art [which] keeps art from collapsing into reality”.

Warhol’s boxes, like Duchamp’s ready-mades, are, however, still artefact-like; they are things. We customarily and intuitively think of a *visual* work of art as a thing that one can walk up to and touch, archive and replicate, copy and fake, collect and preserve. It is an object with mimetic properties; it captures and transforms aspects of the life-world and, since the invention of photography, it can itself be captured with some fidelity without too much effort. Has the “thingness”, to use a Heideggerian term, of works of visual art become artistically *dépassé*? It appears so when, under the banner of important, cutting-edge contemporary *visual* art, the relational artist Rirkrit Tiravanija cooks vegetable curry or pad Thai for people attending the gallery, and engages in convivial, open-ended chit-chat with them in the name of important art; this is a “work” that is event-like, open-ended and participatory, and difficult to capture and preserve with a significant degree of fidelity. Mark Pennings (2005) has the following to say about relational aesthetics: “A fundamental proposition in Relational Aesthetics is that art is about “sets of relations” rather than objects. Importantly, these sets of relations are conceived of as “social relations”.

With regard to economic systems, relational art, because of its non-material form, supposedly parallels the shift from a goods-based to a service-based economy. On the political front, Bourriaud, the creator of the term “relational aesthetics” and the main antagonist of this article, champions *interstice* (2002, p. 16) and *precarious art* (2009) as strategies for opposing global capitalism. Following Marx, Bourriaud (2002, p. 16) describes interstice as marginalized or alternative “trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising, autarkic types of production”. He maintains that “[t]he main function of the instruments of communication of capitalism is to repeat a message: we live in a finite, immovable and definitive political framework”, and that precarious relational art “present[s] the reverse postulate: the world in which we live is a pure construct, a *mise-en-scène*, a montage, a composition, a story and it is the function of art to analyse and re-narrate it” (Bourriaud, 2009, p. 36). He describes precarious art as event-like, de-material, ephemeral, open-ended and radically impermanent, and writes: “Taken from magazines, television or Google search, they seem ready to return there, instable, spectral. Every original form is negated, or rather, abolished” (33). He further cites “ontological precariousness”, stating that such precariousness is the *foundation* of contemporary aesthetics (32).

The poststructural concept of *mediation* and the concept of *relational* both indicate a rejection of the modern notion of an essentialist, disinterested aesthetic that transcends human constructs. Poststructuralism specifically rejects the notion of a transcendental, essentialist aesthetic and replaces it with a surface aesthetic of intertextual play. Bourriaud (2009, pp. 33–36), too, speaks of non-foundational concepts such as “constructed reality”, the “story-like” nature of reality, “originality negated”, “inventing alternative modes”, and so on. What is more, three of Bourriaud’s main themes, interstice, precariousness and appropriation (he actually tries to show how relational aesthetics goes beyond appropriation by practicing a kind of super appropriation) resonate with the structural insight that meaning is constructed in the chain-like interplay between surface signs.

Moving away from parallels between relational aesthetics and poststructuralism, we note that relational aesthetics is a recent manifestation of a broader trend that has been with us for quite some time now. I refer here to a trend which, against the backdrop of a general disenchantment with disinterested formalist fine art and the rarefied, elitist museum conception of art, attempts to close the apparent gap between art and life through participation and other real-life interventions such as “discursive site specificity”, “dialogical art”, and “solution-orientated” and “negative intervention” art (Rasmussen, 2011, p. 205, 209).

However, Danto (1974), as mentioned, questions the collapsing of art into life, writing: “It seems to me that the importance of art must be bound up with the logical fact that it puts reality at a distance, though I have no good theory to offer as to why this is important”. Further, he draws attention to the mimetic joy derived from “disarming the real”, and states: “‘That it is not really happening’ remains even now an important contribution to our enjoyment of art which manages to distance the real and to disarm it” Danto (1974).

The concept of “distancing the real”, or, stated more broadly, participating in and thinking about the interplay between the real and representations of the real, is, of course, a major trope taking a variety of guises in art practice and academic discourse. For Plato, artistic mimesis is twice removed from truth, from the “ideal forms”, and in his judgement artists’ emotionally charged copies of the sensible world seduce and corrupt rational order. During the Middle Ages, art represented an otherworldly order, and during Renaissance humanism, scientific fidelity such as perspective was venerated. During the romantic era, Samuel Taylor Coleridge spoke of the “the willing suspension of disbelief”, and today Danto today speaks of “distancing the real”. I will submit that aspects of poststructuralism resonate with this broad tradition by offering an argument for the continuing relevance of a thingly, representational art that upholds, but also complicates distinctions between art and life.

The relational aesthetics notion of producing social relations in the form of microtopian conviviality when, in fact, democracy is characterized by contestation has received much critical attention (Bishop, 2004), as has Bourriaud’s rather, dare I say, naïve suggestion that a non-thingly, interstice-like relational art has the potential to be a significant force in undermining global capitalist exchange culture (Martin, 2007, p. 378). Although I agree with this critique, I work with a different criterion that weighs “thingly representational art” against relational aesthetics in terms of their respective efficacy for generating, and then disseminating, new meaning. By employing Derridian concepts in particular, and poststructural ones in general, I will consider what is at stake when we, like Bourriaud, underplay the fact that we humans for a significant part construct meaning by situating linguistic *and* thingly signs differently—when we underplay the fact that we humans for a significant part construct new meaning through thingly *re*-presentation and dissemination.

## 2. Thingness

Whereas relational aesthetics through the practice of open-ended, participatory performance eschews thingly art, I argue in this part that poststructuralism, by contrast, offers a strong argument for the continuing relevance of such art.

Like many others in discussing poststructuralism, for reasons that will become obvious I start with the structuralist Saussure (1986). It is well known that Saussure, because he realizes the lability of language, attempts to make the study of language manageable by focusing exclusively on *langue* and the synchronic dimension. Derrida, of course, rejects Saussure’s reduction, but apart from this difference, there exists another obvious, crucial, but often overlooked difference: whereas Saussure and the broad poststructural epistemology are concerned primarily with linguistic signs, Derrida’s poststructural deconstruction is not. Derrida’s deconstruction—although in the first place a method for critically exposing the aporias in philosophical texts—is a broader theory of signs or signification, a theory that opposes Saussure’s strategic reductions by suggesting that thingness should not be underestimated in the construction of human language and consciousness.

This is, of course, a contentious argument seeing that Derrida's deconstruction, as well as most poststructural strands of thinking, are often accused of the exact opposite—of entrapping us in a web of self-referential *linguistic* signs. George Steiner (in Degenaar, 1986, p. 111), for instance, speaks of the “autistic echo-chambers of deconstruction”. Speaking rhetorically, Richard Kearney (1988, p. 252) states: “The humanist concept of ‘man’ gives way to the anti-humanist concept of intertextual play. The autonomous subject disappears into the anonymous operations of language”. And, speaking as a “good” humanist, Christopher Norris (1992, p. 22) comments ironically on Baudrillard's (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation* as follows: “we might as well abandon talk of matters such as ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ and adapt to living in a postmodern world of proliferating language-games, signs without referents, and illusions that we could never recognize as such”.

Bourriaud, wittingly or unwittingly, starts from a similar, mistaken interpretation of poststructuralism, but suggests that important artists nowadays do not resist, but instead embrace what poststructuralism is accused of. However, the accusation of absolute precariousness and self-referential linguistic entrapment, and Bourriaud's appropriation thereof, is in my opinion based on a misreading of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1976/1967), especially when one considers his speaking/writing distinction (30–73). By interrogating this distinction, he deconstructs the primacy that has traditionally, as in Saussure's (1986) linguistics, been given to phonocentric speaking over writing. Derrida, 1976/1967, p. 7) writes as follows:

The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they *enter the game*. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. The advent of writing is the advent of this play

Most commentators on Derrida's speaking/writing distinction focus on his plausible argument that, although speaking seems more present and authentic than writing, both are in fact mediated, that writing is at bottom not a derivative, inferior copy of supposedly unmediated authentic speaking; fewer commentators draw attention to the fact that Derrida, by underscoring writing, highlights the *thingness* of language. By doing so he draws attention to the fact that inscriptions, books, paintings, sculptures, photographs, recordings, films, epitaphs, and scrolls are things that sometimes bridge time and place; that they are more historical than ephemeral, “precarious” speaking, for which you “have to be there”. For Heidegger, before him, even music, once it has been captured by a score, is a thing—Heidegger (2002, pp. 2–3) writes that “Beethoven's quartets lie in the publisher's storeroom like potatoes in a cellar”. Seen in this manner, even digital data capturing devices, along with the data they hold, are things; this, then, suggests that relational aesthetics is aligned with Saussurian speaking, whereas thing-like art is aligned with Derrida's writing.

Furthermore, Derrida (1984) unambiguously denies the accusation that deconstruction leads to linguistic entrapment:

Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the “other” of language. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the “other” and the “other of language” ... Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. It even asks whether our term “reference” is entirely adequate for designating the “other”. The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a “referent” in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term.

However, what is the “other” of language that Derrida speaks of, this referent “which is beyond language and which summons language”? In my reading of *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1976/1967, p. 30–73) (which came long before the cited passage above) he argues, as previously mentioned, that the inscribing and interpretation of physical, mark-like, thingly signs, or, for our purpose, thingly representational artefacts, is a major signpost along the way that language and meaning goes. Derrida (1976/1967) calls this proto-linguistic language arche-writing, suggesting that it is

physically inscribed, mimetic-like signs which summon language or cognition to appear—think, for instance, of an early human following the spoor of a wounded animal, or contemplating a handprint, or laying out a trail by stacking stones on top of one another; and think of an artist today capturing data and situating data or signs differently, and disseminating this through a reproductive technology such as painting, writing or film for others to contemplate.

Although Derrida is often said to find Saussure’s exclusive focus on the synchronic dimension of language reductive, fewer references are made to his attempts to overcome Saussure’s reduction by drawing attention not only to the historicity of linguistic signs, but also to the historicity of *nonlinguistic* signification. Derrida (1981, p. 26) argues that historical signs always come into play—that “traces” from the past, in other words both linguistic *and* nonlinguistic signs that are not currently present, always interact with present differences—and expresses this as follows: “Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces”.

So, whereas Saussure and the broad poststructural movement is concerned primarily with linguistic signs, Derrida’s deconstructive poststructuralism is a broader theory of signification that suggests that things, physical representations, mimetic copies, and signs that are archivable, replicable, capturable, and discardable are significant in the construction of language and human consciousness. In fact, as David Allison (In Derrida, 1973, p. xl) puts it: “[S]peech is possible only because a certain kind of ‘writing’ precedes it; the invisible and unconscious inscription of traces, the nonpresent and generative movement of difference that constitutes the system of language itself”.

“Elements”, “traces”, “arche-writing”, graphemes and things have a history, and although they cannot be fully extricated or pinned down, they are nevertheless less ephemeral and precarious than speaking. So, one can conclude here by suggesting that whereas Bourriaud’s precarious relational aesthetics resonates with reductive, poststructural phonocentrism (Saussure’s speaking), it does not resonate with Derrida’s more encompassing theory of signification which does not underestimate the role of things in the interminable construction and transformation of human consciousness; does not underestimate that for a significant part, our identities and belief systems are constructed in the interplay between humans and things, and that in this regard thingly art is paramount.

### 3. The politics of new-media

Whereas relational aesthetics demonstrates preference for immediacy, for an art for which you “have to be there”, I argue in this part for the moral high ground of an art for which you do not “have to be there”.

In conversation with Raymond Williams, Derrida (Derrida & Williams, 2013) remarks that “film is a kind of writing”, but does not elaborate much on this. His comment is puzzling, but I think that he has in mind that both film and writing are capturing and disseminating “devices” which, as I have suggested before, tend to give some stability to precariousness and ephemerality. Consider, for instance, that nowadays one of the safest ways to preserve one’s snapshots is to place them on the database of a social network.

By drawing attention to the above I am, of course, swimming upstream, seeing that prominent thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, André Malraux, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard and Richard Kearney, as well as many contemporary mass-media theorists tend to, broadly speaking, equate new reproductive technologies with the undermining of authenticity, and, in the extreme, with an unstable world in which it has become impossible to draw distinctions between reality and simulation. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1967) writes as follows: “The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered”. Speaking rhetorically, Kearney (1988, p. 2) writes “that images have displaced the ‘original’ realities they were traditionally meant to reflect. The real

and the imaginary have become impossible to distinguish”. For his part and with reference to the Gulf War, Norris (1992, p. 15) writes as follows about Baudrillard’s position:

So the Gulf War figures as one more example in Baudrillard’s extensive and varied catalogue of postmodern “hyperreality”. It is a conflict waged—for all that we can know—entirely at this level of strategic simulation, a mode of vicarious spectator-involvement that extends all the way from fictive war-games to saturation coverage of the “real-world” event, and which thus leaves us perfectly incapable of distinguishing the one from the other.

Regarding instability, Bourriaud (2009, p. 34) even refers to Derrida to defend a kind of precarious, “flickering” art, and writes: “This art of flickering (as a functioning mode of the artwork) is associated with a vision of a reality that also flickers: the present lags behind itself, as is pointed out by Marcel Duchamp (the *Bride Stripped Bare* described as a ‘delay in glass’) and later by Jacques Derrida (*Difference* as the gap between being and meaning)”.

It is most certainly true that according to poststructural tenets, signs are labile and the interplay between the real and the imaginary (or fiction) is complex, but the poststructural position is less radical with regard to signification and meaning than the quotes above imply. Derrida’s position on this is adequately explained by his polysemic neologism, “différance”. Johan Degenaar (1987, p. 5) explains the three meanings of “différance” as follows: “ (1) [A] ‘passive’ difference which has already been made and is available to the subject; (2) an act of differing which produces difference as it succeeds in situating signs differently; and (3) an act of deferring which refers to the provisionality of distinctions and to the fact that the use of language entails the interminable interrelationship of signs”. In short, *différance* means “difference-differing-deferring”.

It is true that the last two meanings of “différance” deconstruct stable relationships between signs (a point I will return to later), and between signs and things. However, Derrida’s first meaning of *différance* suggests that within a certain frame of time and place a distinction such as the one between reality and fiction, *can* in fact be drawn, as long as one keeps in mind that such a distinction is not substantial and a-historical, but conditional and provisional. Derrida’s point is not that we can never draw distinctions between the real and the imaginary; it is, more correctly, that within a certain frame of time and place representation sometimes wields more authority than reality, in other words, wields more authority than “being there”. In my view this is quite plausible, considering that we are, for instance, sometimes eager to see on television an event that we have ourselves witnessed, because the manner in which the media represents the event seems to be definitive. Derrida’s remark that film is a kind of writing draws attention to the fact that reproductive technologies are not as unstable and inauthentic as some make them out to be; that they in fact tend to give a degree of stability to ephemeral, precarious speaking. What is more, both writing and film aid memory (despite Socrates holding that writing makes memory lazy—but then, he never wrote a single word).

Furthermore, in the life-world the impact of thingly representation is escalating. In fact, the authority of capturing, transforming, disseminating, preserving and archiving through representation and things, for instance film, hard drives, memory sticks, supercomputers, databases, photographs, television, and books, often outweighs apparent direct perception, the notion of immediacy and presence, the priority that is traditionally given to speaking over mediated writing.

Like Bourriaud, Peggy Phelan (1993) however also resists new-media mediation by arguing for the precarious moment or event, the supposed ontological priority of precarious, event-like experience over captured representation. She does so by distinguishing between the performance, for which you, to use a previous colloquial phrase, “had to be there” and its reproduction (photographic or otherwise), which, supposedly, only manages to destroy the event’s precarious existence. Phelan (1993, p. 146) writes as follows:

Performance's only life is in the present, it cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance enters the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.

Leaving out of consideration the fact that mediation, as argued, precedes immediacy, I think it is true that writing and other reproductive technologies often break with and distort occurrences, but then it is also true that they have the potential to extend and disseminate them. James Murphy (2012, p. xii) succinctly explains dissemination through writing as follows: "An oral protest ... can be quashed by batons and tear gas, but in written form, it can be anywhere, anytime". However, no form of expression is superior because of the tools with or forms in which it is executed; what matters is the *how* and the *what*, and not just *how* life is captured and disseminated. Nevertheless, considering only the *how*, I would side with capturing and disseminating through devices such as those mentioned above over transitory, precarious, even precocious, relationships. I say so because the invention of the printing press arguably launched the most democratic, liberalizing social reform the world has known, and, furthermore, it calls one to responsibility when something stands written—when, for instance, a verbal agreement is captured in a document.

Bourriaud (2009) takes an opposite position in *Precarious Constructions*, where he targets new-media as well as other forms of art to champion a kind of ephemeral precarious art. Granted, against the backdrop of the grand narratives of modernism, the word precariousness has a nice, unassuming ring to it. However, there is nothing unassuming about Bourriaud's artistic, ontological precariousness, because, as mentioned, he suggests that such art has the potential to ignite a spark that may incinerate global capitalism. His argument goes something like this: Global capitalism has made the world a precarious place to live in, but a sophisticated, cynical communications network manages to hoodwink us into thinking that this is not the case (note that Bourriaud underestimates our intelligence).<sup>1</sup> However, by making *truly* precarious art, artists somehow unmask or draw attention to the precariousness of global capitalism and the fact that it is not set in stone, and that this has the potential to return us to true stability. I am unconvinced; I fail to see how this kind of Adornian-like negative dialectic can accomplish much on the political front. I will rather opt for narration and capturing through things and stories, often by naming a wrong,<sup>2</sup> and I specifically exclude eye-candy and art that is derivative or unchallenging, or where the outcome is obvious.

Expression of the precariousness of human life is undoubtedly a significant theme and is the focus of many outstanding works. However, to reserve cutting-edge art exclusively for *formal* "precarious constructions", in other words, art which is transitory, may literally collapse, has built obsolescence or is untraceable, is most certainly reductive. And then, to top it, claim that such art is a significant force in challenging global capitalism seems rather unrealistic. Furthermore, if it were at all possible to make art that leaves no "trace" (a challenge that some of Bourriaud's artists aspire to, and which he, by the way, thwarts by writing about it) it is a logical impossibility that such art would have any political effect whatsoever. Something untraceable cannot leave a political trace—if it did, it would not be untraceable.

I suggest that artists should rather continue doing what most do, namely capture, represent and disseminate—in other words, *liberalize* aesthetic content<sup>3</sup> and meaning. Moreover, if one sets up art for which you do not "have to be there" against art for which you do "have to be there", I suggest that the former is potentially less elitist than the latter.

In sum, I suggest that Bourriaud's main thesis in *Precarious Constructions* in particular is that important artists nowadays embrace what poststructuralism is incorrectly theoretically aligned with, namely the view that new reproductive technologies are "precarious" and responsible for the world falling out of grace. By contrast, I have indicated that Derrida aligns new reproductive

technologies with writing, with devices which capture, and give some stability and inclusivity to precarious, exclusionary speaking. In short, in reproductive technology humans potentially possess a powerful force for liberalizing information and spreading aesthetic experience.

#### 4. Mimesis and metaphor

Whereas relational aesthetics through the practice of open-ended, participatory performance eschews metaphorical mimetic art, poststructuralism presents an argument for the efficacy of such art. However, with a metaphorical mimetic poststructural aesthetic I do not have in mind the antiquarian-like notion of art as masterpieces, as mimetic commodities that merely mirror or copy the world in a second-hand fashion; nor do I have in mind either the modernist notion of mirroring a “deep”, essentialist, originary aesthetic, or an avant-garde, teleological aesthetic, the apparent premature mirroring of what is predestined to come. Instead, what I have in mind is the post-structural perspective that holds that aesthetic meaning is the result of the metaphorical, mimetic, differential, chain-like interplay between signs in an open-ended system. In the following, I attempt to show how this conceptualization of mimesis equates with a regenerative aesthetic. More specifically, I will argue that Derrida, through the second and third meanings of *différance*, not only critically deconstructs totalizing essentialism (the way poststructuralism and *différance* is generally interpreted positively), but also contributes to the conceptualization of a regenerative aesthetic.

In the previous section I pointed out that Bourriaud claims that important artists nowadays do not negate, but instead embrace precariousness. Following poststructural tenets, I suggest an alternative, affirmative way in which one can interpret the broad instability of signification, namely as creativity, as a celebration of the creation of new meaning through differentiation, through the act of situating linguistic *and* thingly signs differently. Degenaar (1986, p. 93) thus sums up a central tenet of deconstruction as follows: “Writing now becomes a term which refers to a fundamental way of producing meaning by means of making differences.”

This is best conceptualized as the mimetic, metaphorical creation of new meaning, which, however, is itself not fully explicable. Paul Ricoeur (2003, p. 39) expresses this inexplicability thus: “There is no discourse on metaphor that is not stated within a metaphorically engendered conceptual network. There is no non-metaphorical standpoint from which to perceive the order and the demarcation of the metaphorical field”. Despite this, what follows may be somewhat helpful.

Let us begin with the first meaning of *différance* (a “passive” difference which has already been made and is available to the subject), because one can then explain, as Lawrence Hinman (1982) does, that “Most attempts to define the metaphorical take for granted a fixed domain of literal meaning which then serves as a stable point of reference in contrast to which the metaphorical can be determined”. One can think of this as the mimetic (or thingly) component of a metaphorical equation (although even mimetic fidelity is preceded by difference). This starting point puts us in the position to conceptualize the metaphorical creation of meaning as a process whereby conventional, literal or mimetic fidelity gets disrupted by metaphors, which eventually turn into conventional, literal or mimetic fidelity itself, which in turn waits to be disrupted by new metaphors, *ad infinitum*. So, when we speak of the metaphorical creation of new meaning, this generally refers to creative processes where the relationship between some “original property of meaning”, as Derrida (1984) puts it (although he doubts whether it exists in any substantial form), and a figurative signifier has transformed into a new literal meaning. This transformability is aligned with the second meaning of *différance*, namely “an act of differing which produces difference as it succeeds in situating signs differently”.

The explanation above, however, implies an *analyzable* relationship between the literal and the figurative, the real and the imaginary, the mimetic and the transformed, and thus fails to capture something of the ambiguity, the paradoxical, the undecidability, sometimes even the catachrestic nature of metaphorical creation. In other words, it does not account for the third meaning of

différance, namely “the provisionality of distinctions”; or, put differently, it does not take into account that there are times when we *cannot* distinguish between the metaphorical and the literal, the imaginary and the real. Derrida often makes this point, as he does, for instance, when he shows that Aristotle’s appeal to avoid metaphorical language in philosophical writing for the sake of truth and clarity is itself riddled with metaphors.

At this point I want to suggest that it is precisely the human *incapacity* to draw consistent, analyzable distinctions between art and life that empowers mimetic metaphorical art to perform its magic. To explain: at face value there seems to be a big difference between reality and a representation of reality through art or some other reproductive skill or device. In other words, there appears to be a clear difference between actually smelling daisies, watching a documentary on people smelling daisies and watching a simulated, imaginary event depicting people smelling daisies. However, these distinctions do not consistently hold water. This is because while you are watching a movie, for instance, you consciously know you are watching a movie, but sometimes through empathy and imagination you lose yourself in a kind of “willing suspension of disbelief”, and you forget that you are watching a movie; it is as though you are “in it”—and summarily the distinction between the real and the imaginary, between life and art, is suspended. “When storied *empathy* is operating, the *empathetic* individual often does not distinguish between reality and fiction”, writes Lori Gruen (2009).

Whereas one could argue that a kind of transformed sense of reality applies in the case of a Tiravanija cooking piece as well, it ultimately boils down to a matter of degree. I say this because I doubt whether one can to any significant degree “lose one’s sense of reality”, or undergo a “suspension of disbelief”, or undergo “disarming of the real”, or “fail to distinguish between reality and fiction” when experiencing a Tiravanija cooking piece. These descriptions of aesthetic experience all indicate a creative, reciprocal, positive tension between art and life, a tension that is very different from negating mimesis (or second-order reality) by imploding distinctions, as in a Tiravanija cooking piece. Taking my cue from Danto, I suggest that with relational art for which you “have to be there”, it is only the concept of art (the setting in a gallery space and other formal art-world conventions) which keeps it from “collapsing into reality”.

## 5. Conclusion

I started by suggesting that relational aesthetics and aspects of poststructuralism have much in common, but after the work done in this essay I have now come to the conclusion that the overlap is quite superficial, even ironical. I say ironical because, broadly speaking, relational aesthetics embraces what poststructuralism is sometimes incorrectly accused of, namely of promoting a kind of absolute, ontological precariousness. Granted, both directions reject essentialism by emphasizing the instability of signs, but where this leads to ontological precariousness for relational aesthetics, for poststructuralism it leads to the celebration of the metaphorical creation of new meaning through the act of situating linguistic *and* thingly signs differently.

In terms of art, I called this mimetic metaphorical art, and described it as art where metaphorical interplay between reality and representations of reality occurs, a space where we fluctuate between being able and not being able to distinguish between the real and representations of the real, and I have suggested that this promotes infinite expansion and regeneration of meaning. I thus suggest that the differences between art and life should be celebrated and not denigrated, and that this applies particularly to those who side with creativity and the new.

Concerning the politics of representation, I have argued that when one weighs the preference of relational aesthetics for immediacy for which “you have to be there” against thingly representation, capturing and dissemination for which you do not “have to be there”, the latter occupies the emancipatory moral high ground, mainly because it liberalizes information and spreads aesthetic experience.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that we should not underplay the fact that for a significant part our identities and belief systems, our balances and imbalances of power, are constructed in thingly representation and interpretation. With such mimetic metaphorical art we not only capture aspects of the life world, but we also, by situating the signs we have captured differently, experiment with alternatives, and in so doing open up new futures. Plato may have been wrong for the right reason or, depending on one's own position, right for the wrong reason when he drew attention to the power of mimesis.

#### Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

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#### Citation information

Cite this article as: Critique of relational aesthetics and a poststructural argument for thingly representational art, Frederick Potgieter, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2018), 5: 1531807.

#### Notes

1. I acknowledge Rancière's (2004a) arguments in this regard.
2. I acknowledge Rancière's wording.
3. I acknowledge Rancière's (2004b) arguments in this regard.

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