

Relations in Real Time: A Conversation with Maria Lind

Carlos Motta

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Carlos Motta: *theanyspacewhatever* is the title of an upcoming exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum that will feature work by several of the artists associated with "relational aesthetics" (Angela Bulloch, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija and others). You have contributed a text to the catalog, have closely worked with many of these artists over the years (Liam Gillick most notably) and you have been involved with this art practice, yet from a rather different lens as it is generally thought of. Can you define what you understand as a relational art practice and explain your points of interest in it, which seem to me to be less about the construction of discourse (Liam Gillick again) and more about direct engagement with social and political realities?

Maria Lind: I am not particularly interested in the notion of "relational aesthetics" as such. I am however, deeply engaged in the work of a number of the artists who have been associated with that notion. Let me mention that in the early 90s when Nicolas Bourriaud published his first essays on this subject he was the first one who in writing tried to come to terms with what these artists were doing. He spotted something significant and he tried to connect and analyze what from a formal or stylistic perspective could appear as quite different. Many people in the art world in Scandinavia, the Netherlands and France read his writing at the time and discussed it extensively. Personally, I never thought of his writing as aiming at formulating a theory, as has been claimed by some of the many critics and art historians who discovered – and bashed - his writing and the work of the artists mentioned above in the years around 2000. Instead, I took it as poignant observations, although a number of the artists, which he connected to "relational aesthetics" already then fell outside of my frame of engagement. It should also be remembered that he brought up issues of resistance against capitalist consumption culture and the possibility of parallel "micro-utopias" at a time when, at least in Scandinavia, the climate in the art world was largely de-politicized. When the concerns of the vociferous curators and critics in Stockholm were rather Gerhard Richter and Jeff Koons.

I also came to know the work of the artists mentioned in the early 90s, independently from Bourriaud's writing and I started to work on projects with some of them. What was interesting to me at the time, and this remains interesting to me, is how they often engage directly with their surrounding reality, whether it's a social or a even a political reality. The discursive aspect was highly relevant too. The way in which they brought up the function of decision making processes, the importance of biography and desire, as well as how collaboration and temporal aspects were foregrounded was very inspiring to me.

At the time it was extremely refreshing to work with artists that weren't necessarily concerned with the production of images and objects. We had had a big wave of pictures, and a lot of talk about of representation. These artists had absorbed those discussions but moved on and they weren't so much concerned with objects but rather with *performative* structures that would involve images, objects, etc. Their work wasn't *arty* like much other art at that time, and it seemed to lack the kind of pretentiousness, which was in the air. Today their bodies of work have changed and evolved, some in more interesting ways than others. I would like to quote Rirkrit Tiravanija, with whom I have worked a number of times over the years, who says that he has indeed used the word relational, and the word aesthetics, but *never* together.

When I organized group exhibitions that included some of these artists, I always included other artists' works. Because I see their practice in a larger context in relation to many other artists' work. Some of which work more directly with agency in terms of political action etc. and sometimes also operate within a more expressive paradigm. It has been fascinating to follow the reception of on the one hand Bourriaud's writing and on the other hand the work of the artists he is referring to, and what has subsequently been the historicization of all this. Because I have been "on this train" for parts of the journey I am astonished not only at the sloppiness and level of inaccuracy with which they have been met but also the hostility. Sometimes it seems as if "relational aesthetics" and the artists connected with it are treated as bastard siblings discovered late in life and who then have to be discredited and even denounced.

In terms of the relationship between the discursive and the direct engagement with social and political realities, I don't see any contradiction. I think those approaches are highly relevant. It has more to do with the there, and then. In other words, what is most productive at a particular time and particular place.

CM: Some of the projects that I have in mind are about creating temporal spaces for staging conversations and *constructing* discourse, but not necessarily address issues of community, say for example Gillick's *spaces* where the objects in them *per se* play a secondary role, that of framing a set of discursive relations. Other projects however, create this kind of space as well but intimately relate to specific social conditions. That is why I place them side-by-side, but not necessarily making them exclusionary to one another.

ML: Let me give you one example there, the work of the artist Philippe Parreno, which has influenced my curatorial practice. One of the things he has dealt with is the relationship between the individual and the group, the relationship between one subject and a possible community. Is it possible to think of situations where both are taken into account? In a way it appears as a quest for what some of the post-structuralist feminist theoreticians called "difference without hierarchy". His work doesn't involve large groups of people and doesn't manifest itself in him engaging with public group activities. At the same time I am also very interested in the work of 16 Beaver, which is a group of people who engage in intensive discussions and actions of political nature in New York. I don't think these two entities would have a lot of interest, or even respect for one another. But for me they are equally interesting and not contradictory.

CM: You are organizing a large-scale exhibition titled *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* at the Center for Curatorial Studies, in the premises of the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College. The title uses the metaphor of the "green room," which is the room of the theater, TV sets, etc. where performers rest and await going on stage. It is paradoxical that this metaphor serves as a point of departure to speak about the construction of facts (responding to reality), a prominent feature of documentary practices. The "green room" is a transitional room to prepare for the performance and creation of fiction. How does the construction of

this fictional space work within the content of these "documentaries," and what is your strategy to articulate this relationship?

ML: My take on the "green room" is more as a pre, and post space than a space in the limelight, which of course is literally where you meet before and after a performance or broadcasting. It's not at all a fictional space - it is a very real, very concrete space, but it isn't a space that is focused upon things that are being delivered. Because it is not getting maximum attention, it is also a space where you can conduct discussions, have encounters that are potentially more complicated and difficult, as well as more improvised and playful. In fact, it is the specificity of the temporality of the "green room" that is interesting to me rather than any kind of possible fictional aspect of it.

The Greenroom... is a long-term research project done in collaboration with the artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl. The exhibition, curated by myself and in which you are also participating, kicks it off as the first big public event. This is a reversed process compared to a number of exhibitions wanting to look at a set of problems or thematic where you typically would do a lot of research before hand, and then present the result in the form of the exhibition. The project looks at the land lies in term of documentary practices and contemporary art. The show presents already existing work with one exception of out of more than 40 projects. It is looking at what is already out there, assembling it in a particular constellation filtered by me. This is then the basis of continuous research and discussions. Similarly, we now have assembled a number of existing essays on the documentary and contemporary art that have been published over the last seven years all around the world, co-published with Sternberg Press. In two years there will be a second publication and exhibition as a culmination of the research on this subject.

CM: I do think however, that you are constructing the space of the "green room" within the museum in such a way that is a form of representation or a space that belongs to a real arena thus transforming it into a fictional one, where you attempt to "simulate" the temporal encounters of a pre, and post event.

ML: Well, I have to insist that my intention is to situate the exhibition as a green room of sorts, as a space in which works which are already made and discussions already had can be debated in a semi-formal way. The works and discussions have left the limelight and are now within the zone of the "green room". Likewise I hope that this "green room" will be a "pre" situation for a number of works and discussions to come. Thereby literally functioning as a "green room". Funnily enough, the only work which has been commissioned, by Olivia Plender who is designing the discursive space, is going to be reminiscent of a 70s TV studio. Not a "green room". So representational thinking is not really at play here the way you described it. Or at least it is in the background.

CM: Do you think of *The Greenroom...* as a concept or a form of documentary in itself?

ML: Perhaps. But I think of it more as an essay. An essay can have documentary aspects, but it can also have poetic aspects, it can have fictional aspects... It is definitely a document. It's a subjective document of a particular strand within contemporary art in relationship to particular discourses about the real.

I guess it's masquerading. Masquerade is to appear in one way although there may be other realities behind. But it is a real experience. Think of what Joan Riviere wrote in her classic essay *Womanliness as a Masquerade*, about femininity being always a performance of some sort, something that appears to be naturalized and self-evident is in fact highly constructed. Something similar is true of the documentary. It seems to be natural, it seems to be a faithful registration of facts, but each such attempt is by necessity a construction. There is a fictional element in there ontologically from the beginning.

CM: *The Greenroom...* makes use of three distinct architectural spaces, each of which demands specific social and political considerations, as well as expectations from an audience. First, the idea of a "green room" within the theater, which he have discussed above, second the museum as a monolithic social construction in itself, and third the cinema black box, a space where one traditionally watches

(documentary) films. You introduce a kind of *socio-architectural* clash within *The Greenroom*... and I wonder whether or not the exhibition takes a self-critical stance on these issues, which ultimately speak about the institutionalization of "the documentary," not forgetting that the subject of the exhibition is a form of address that is intimately tied to social and political realities.

ML: There are three aspects there. We will have a black box cinema, modest in size, but still a cinema type space. There will be works on display, one project per room, a large room will present an installation of the documentary works from the Marieluise Hessel collection, and Olivia Plender's "discursive space," which references TV studios.

Regarding "the museum as a monolithic social construction," I cannot accept this as a general fact. Of course it is true in many cases but there are significant exceptions. One of the challenges for me as a curator has been to reformulate the function of an institution, whether museum, *kunstverein* or state agency for artistic exchange. With the aim to foreground art and artists, particularly those which traditionally have been marginalized in those contexts: performative, discursive and research-based art. Art which questions status quo.

I'm interested in displacement and what displacement as a strategy does to signification. Obviously, if you move something from one context to another context a lot of interesting things can happen, but I think simultaneously it is important to go with the stream. I would say that in *The Greenroom*... as in some of my other projects, you follow the convention but you also simultaneously displace it and therefore also work against it. The idea of displacement is conscious for me and also because it allows me to speak in different manners.

In terms of institutionalization what we are dealing with here is contemporary art, a lot of which is made within an institutional framework, but not all of it. For instance, if we take your own work in the show as an example, it is a work that directly refers to an outside reality and you take the occasion of an invitation to an exhibition to produce new editions of a newsprint publication with a powerful listing of interventions by the U.S. in Latin America. It is something you can take away as a visitor in the gallery space. It is the kind of work, so to speak, that is out of context

within an institutional context. I think that the institutionalization of documentary practices has already happened within contemporary art. One could argue that what art contexts, venues and institutions can do to documentary film, if we speak about institutional definitions of documentary film, in other words, documentary film belonging or feeling at home in the film world, is that the art context seems to have a kind of liberating effect. What you can do within the art world, as a filmmaker is something you most likely can't do within the world of film. I have heard people like Chantal Ackerman and Peter Watkins speak about this.

CM: I would like to propose a *critique-of-capitalism* approach to the idea of the institutionalization of documentary work. It seems to me that there is sometimes a clash between the content of the work and the museum as a space of presentation. Maybe we can continue with my own work as an example, a work that strongly denounces the use of military violence for the expansion of a capitalist regime. It is a work that uses a particular mode of distribution to address problems of power, hegemony, and intervention. Then there is the museum, in this case the CCS Hessel Museum, which originates from a private art collection. A collection is an inherent element of the logic of the capitalist system. As an artist this is something I ask to myself often, what are the strategies you need to use in order to comment about institution from within? I used that particular mode of distribution to subvert the traditional presentation and "collection" of art within the museum, the work resists being collected, it offers itself for free...

I think this is a relevant question in relationship to *The Greenroom*... at large given the fact that you are bringing in so much work that discusses social and political realities; work that contests them.

ML: I don't have *fear of proximity*. I don't think there is any clean situation or a clean space that is washed and laundered in terms of its problematic aspects, connections etc. We are all complicit, albeit to different degrees. As cultural producers we should engage with the spaces that we have access to, within reason. And I believe that this is within reason. We cannot afford ending up only screaming in each other's kitchens. Furthermore we know that even works based on the paradigm of the gift – think Felix Gonzalez Torres – can easily be collected. And if a collection as such is considered complicit with the logic of capitalism then a public

collection is as implied in this. In fact today a museum like Moderna Museet in Stockholm, which is state funded, is probably courting the art market as much as any private collection, if not more.

In this case, the Center for Curatorial Studies, which was set up by Marieluise Hessel, the collector, is a unique place for the type of discussions that I am interested in. Not only is it unique institution in the U.S., it is unique globally as a spot to set up a discussion. I am very happy to be able to use CCS, it is refreshing and comfortable to do a project like the *The Greenroom*... there since I don't think any other institution in the whole world would be prepared to do it the way we are doing it. Due to the nature of the institution, including its location in the countryside outside New York City, it is not the right place for a pervasive mass-event, the way a project at MoMA in New York City or Tate Modern in London could be. They function more like mass media. Here at CCS the circumstances lend themselves more to concentrated discussions, to encounters, which can hopefully lead to some new ideas.

I don't mean that one shouldn't criticize the institution, and one could also criticize this one, but I don't think you have to do it in every project and you certainly don't have to do it in ways that are immediately obvious. There is a tendency in the art world to want to do everything at once, to kill as many flies with one stone as possible. It's all about engaging in a debate that moves in and out of these questions.

CM: So, you want to think of the space as a space for discussion and conversation, but not necessarily to engage in a critique of the institution...

ML: Discussions, conversations, debates, exhibitions, projects – they are part of an ongoing critique but not only of something “other,” something beyond themselves. Sometimes direct critique is productive, but often it is not. It is the same problem as with jokes: if you state that you will tell a joke, or that what you are going to say will be funny you are likely not to be funny. The joke won't work with a warning. Curatorially, I have often been thinking about the role of the institution. I think that goes through many of my projects as a wrap of thread, but I think it tends to be more relevant when it's combined with something else or partly embedded with something else. That's when things can start.

CM: You have throughout your career closely worked, produced and collaborated with artists in most of your projects. You are now the director of a curatorial school that exists within a museum. As an artist, I am curious about the direction that you will give this school given the general tendency of art museums to work with artworks but not necessarily with artists. `

ML: The graduate program at the Center for Curatorial Studies is known mostly for its academic part, which is strong. There has been less focus on as you say, working directly with artists, or commissioning work. I want to introduce more of a hands-on approach to the students. I want them to be able to work with more projects from an early stage at the program. Now we are having an artist in residence per semester. In spring 2008 it was Lisi Raskin and in fall 2008 it is Bernd Krauss. During this residency whether their work is being produced on site or not, the students will be involved. We will have scheduled studio visits, something that has happened in the past CCS, but a little bit more randomly. I am also encouraging students to work directly with artists for their thesis projects. In the past the thesis had to be an exhibition, and a formal group exhibition with some exceptions over the years. Considering the frame work, the budget that they have, the time frame, the context with CCS etc., I think one of the best ways they can make use of their thesis project is actually to work with an artist.

CM: I heard somebody complain once that curatorial schools don't teach curators how to do studio visits.

ML: Yes, that is exactly what I've heard too (laughter). Sometimes it is an issue of simply of etiquette, but it's worth addressing.

CM: In terms of its academic history, is there some direction that you are going to take?

ML: Academically it should be a little updated. It has fairly been U.S. centered, a particular strand of art history which is relevant, but it's just one amongst many. And there are many interesting young art historians in the US – they should be involved with CCS. There has been quite a lot of faculty coming from Latin America, and that

has been fascinating. I think we should continue that and also expand it to other cultural and political contexts. Specifically, we will think more closely about relationship between art and economy, also art and issues of intellectual property.

CM: Thanks Maria, and good luck.

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Carlos Motta is a Colombian born, New York based artist whose work has been individually presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia and included in recent group exhibitions such as at The Greenroom, CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY and Convergence Center, Democracy in America, Creative Time at Park Avenue Armory, New York, NY, USA. He was named a Guggenheim Fellow in 2008.

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