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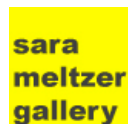
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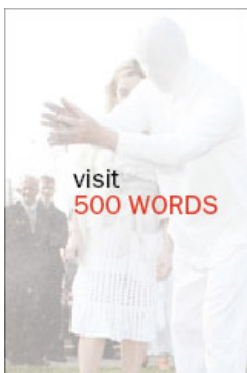
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# Service Aesthetics

STEVEN HENRY MADOFF ON PERSONAL TRANSACTIONS IN ART



Bert Rodriguez, *In the Beginning . . .*, 2008, mixed media and performance. Installation view, Park Avenue Armory, New York. From the 2008 Whitney Biennial. Photo: James Ewing.

**THE ATTITUDES AND TECHNIQUES** of artists have clearly buckled and changed many times over the past century, as industrialism became postindustrialism and first-world enterprise shifted from goods to services while manual production was shunted to outlying zones of cheap labor. The significance of these shifts is a central focus of Helen Molesworth's 2003 essay "Work Ethic," in which she describes how artists—in their working ethos, methods, and social legitimacy in relation to other workers—are strapped to the twin engines of the economy and the technologies that drive it. Art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh explored related issues when he formulated the notion of an "aesthetic of administration" in a piece in *October* in 1990, arguing that the postwar period's concentration of power in the hands of managers "administering labor and production (rather than producing)" became a working model for Conceptual artists in the 1960s and after.

How have more recent artists modified their practices in view of our own epoch's social and economic tumult and transformations? During the '90s, critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud famously looked at one strand of recent art that he characterized using the term *relational aesthetics*. His unique formulation of a kind of socially based art took shape just as the separation of art and life, author and audience, manual workers and knowledge workers, and the art market and artists' resistance to it all reached what seemed a historical point of tension, if not outright implosion. The art that Bourriaud focused on—by Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, among others—mapped and reflected this moment.

In the "culture of use," as Bourriaud aptly phrased it, artists were attempting to make socially relevant art outside the constraints of the market, pitting commodified objects against the slipperiness of a post-Duchampian Conceptualism that broke the logic between labor and exchange value, production and worth, use and uselessness, author and audience, centralized power and autonomous agency. The artists of relational aesthetics critiqued the power of the State and of capital by emphasizing the power of the crowd that participates in and completes their artworks. Yet it is becoming ever more clear today that there is another category of art that offers a different way to define artistic work in relation to social praxis and the issue of identity: an art that focuses not so much on the social relations of the artist and audience but on the atomized power of individual relationships within the social whole; an art focused not only on the artist's autonomy but also on the contested idea of the self in our post-Fordist era.

For example, at the Whitney Biennial in New York last March, artist Bert Rodriguez presented *In the Beginning . . .*, 2008. The piece consisted of a simulacrum of a generic psychologist's office—complete with de rigueur stuffed leather chairs and potted plant—in which the artist (although he is not a trained therapist) held forty-five-minute personal consultations. By nature, these sessions were intensely personal for both the subject and the artist, moving toward a symbolic enactment of therapeutic release. In the same month, at Eyebeam gallery in New York, artist Natalie Jeremijenko presented *Environmental Health Clinic*, an ongoing performance piece and working clinic begun in 2007, where people come to report environmental issues affecting their personal health and the well-being of their neighborhoods. Visitors, whom Jeremijenko calls "impatiens" because of the sense of urgency they feel about their situations, log their complaints on a detailed form, and the clinic's lab-coated staff prescribe some local intervention in response, such as the establishment of a small park area near the client's home. Last January, meanwhile, for an exhibition at the Sundance Film Festival, artists Stephanie Rothenberg and Jeff Crouse presented *Invisible Threads: Virtual Sweatshop in*

*Second Life*, 2008–. The project, which employs pattern makers in the online virtual environment of Second Life and uses a large-scale printer in the real world, critiques outsourced labor practices while printing out individually customized patterns for cotton canvas jeans that are cut and assembled for visitors on the spot. *Invisible Threads* is remarkable not only for its forward-looking technological means but also for the very real application of the kind of just-in-time production that is reshaping factory economics in the twenty-first century—consumer benefits and worker exploitation in tow.

A few months earlier, at a panel discussion about performance art in New York, artist Marina Abramović screened a piece titled *At the Tips of Your Fingertips (Towards a Clean Money Culture)*, 2007, by the young artist and self-styled lifestyle consultant Ana Prvacki. The video is a conceptually based commercial for wet wipes that “launder” money clean of germs, which was a component of a performance—a service piece, Prvacki calls it—held in the headquarters of the financial company UBS in New York. In fact, all of the works discussed here engage with the idea and practice of service, and they form what seems to me a distinct category—one that is best described as *service aesthetics*.



Barbara T. Smith, *Feed Me*, 1973. Performance view, Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco, 1973. Barbara T. Smith.

**AS A FORM OF ART**, service aesthetics can be traced to the social activism of the '60s, but while it often shares a critical stance toward issues ranging from the environment to labor, and from capitalism itself to the familiar status of art-as-commodity, what sets it apart from the activism of the '60s as well as from relational art is that the practitioners of service art are not drawn primarily to collective experience. The models they use typically replicate the transactional sites that fill the landscape of the service economy: doctor's offices, clinics, hair salons, and shops. The audience is not seen as an ad hoc participatory community for social disquisition, but each viewer is instead implicated as an individual participant—implicated not in the general sense as an audience member but specifically as a client to be served. These service acts do not necessarily imply, as Joseph Beuys posited in his idea of social sculpture, that every person harbors an inner creativity. Instead, the works simply reflect the most common aspect of service economies in developed nations: Everyone is an individual holder of legislative rights and a consumer of commercial services. Within service economies there are entrenched infrastructures that provide services of every kind, which consumer-clients depend on as entitlements of social good (particularly in countries where they are distributed fairly) and as staples of private well-being.

Precedents for contemporary works of service art have continuously appeared over the past few decades. The commodification of experience that is intrinsic to the service economy (so easily captured in those commercial terms *customization* and *personalization*) has always been the subject of service aesthetics, which attempts to rescue the service act from anonymity, standardization, and indifference through personal attention and its implicit claims for the sovereignty of personal agency, individuality, and difference. And while the settings of service pieces may have been updated with the times, the establishment of an ethical transactional gesture remains at the core of this art, which also recognizes that reciprocity between individuals is at the heart of every service act, though often buried under the mechanisms of capital.

For Barbara T. Smith's 1973 performance *Feed Me* at San Francisco's now-defunct Museum of Conceptual Art, the artist made herself the raw material of service—available to anyone who came into a closed room to do anything they wanted with her that was representative of “feeding,” including physically interacting with her. In 1979, artist Robin Winters, one of the most important precursors of today's service-oriented art, joined with Peter Fend, Coleen Fitzgibbon, Jenny Holzer, Peter Nadin, and Richard Prince to open an office on lower Broadway, where they provided “practical aesthetic services” including curatorial feedback for artists. In 1989, Winters posted a sign in the window of Willoughby Sharp's gallery in New York that announced FREE CONSULTATIONS and gave advice to walk-in clients for a month. More recently, Michael Bramwell performed *Building Sweeps*, 1995–96, in which he swept the halls of 64 West 128th Street in Harlem for a year, and in 1998, Lee Mingwei's



*Dining Project*—a piece in which Lee cooked private dinners after-hours in the staff kitchen, hosting a single guest at a time—took place at the Whitney Museum. (Other food-related works may spring to mind, such as Gordon Matta-Clark's restaurant *Food* in '70s SoHo or Tiravanija's many cooking pieces, but what distinguishes those works is that the author is dissolved into the group and the enunciation is collective, while in service art proper the author remains very much at the center of the work's transaction with its single benefactor and collaborator.)

Some of the works that might be considered through the lens of service aesthetics no doubt use the service model to focus more emphatically on their ideological critiques. Fabrice Hybert's *Salon de coiffure*, a working hair salon set up in Paris in 1995 at the Centre Pompidou, is an example of this approach: Clients were served while hair fashions were equated with the art world's fetishism of the new and its continually ephemeral measure of value. Andrea Fraser combined Smith's notion of the artist as the material of service with an ironic critique of the market when she slept with an unnamed art collector, who acted as both client and collaborator, for about \$20,000 in 2003. Or consider Eduardo Sarabia's *Tequila Sarabia* project, presented several times since 2002, most recently this past summer at the 21c Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, and at the Whitney Biennial, where he installed his *Salon Aleman*—a functional (and free) bar in which his expensively produced and packaged tequila (in handblown glass bottles, with numbered certificates) is consumed—along with its critique of Mexican labor practices and art-market rarefaction. Many more works could be mentioned: The ongoing history of service aesthetics is waiting to be written.



Ana Prvacki, *At the Tips of Your Fingertips (Towards a Clean Money Culture)*, 2007, mixed media and performance. Installation view, UBS Art Gallery, New York.

**SERVICE ART IS MOST OFTEN**, though not exclusively, presented under the aegis of art institutions and galleries. Just as the Duchampian readymade slipped out of the real world into the space designated for art, sowing irony and criticality, these works can also be read as ironic through their placement. A schism is established between the conventions of the art space and the insertion of a site plucked from a wholly other realm (therapist's office, catered dinner, etc.). But this familiar conceptual inflection is only one *détournement* undertaken by service aesthetics, and there is a crucial distinction from the work of Duchamp. While the setting may still be ironic, the execution of such work is generally intended to frame a sincere transaction, with the priority of rendering an actual service—giving something of real use to the client in an act of functional benevolence. Ana Prvacki captures this attitude perfectly:

*I seriously admire what Martha Stewart and people who have imitated her have done with their projects to improve your life. It doesn't matter if it's done for money. I grew up under a Communist regime in Serbia, and the rhetoric we heard every day was about the enjoyment of all, which was a fantasy. Everybody got paid regardless of how they behaved. What I do in my own work responds to that scarcity of spirit, to a real generosity. It's perfectly logical to use the methodology of the service industry. Personalization, customization, lifestyle, these are all words of generosity.*

Seen in this light, service art deploys its mimetic relationship to the sites and actions it replicates not to demolish with irony but to rediscover and recuperate the service act's essential munificence. This inversion of institutional critique's antagonism toward its subjects, which is to say the embrace rather than the negation of the institutional model as a way to transform the viewer's understanding of it, is one radical aspect of service aesthetics, along with its uncovering of the vestigial good at the heart of individual consumerism. Service art shows a way to counter the uniformity of experience in our culture by looking inside its bureaucracy, its commercially charged insincerity, and its frequent indifference—and by mining what is antithetical to them within their own modalities.

To the extent that the unity of our consciousness and the quality of our authenticity are put under strain by our technologically diffracted and mediated culture, service aesthetics intends to satisfy the viewer-client not only in the fulfillment of the specific service rendered but in offering precisely that generosity invoked by Prvacki, which affirms a sense of self for the individual client that may have gone missing in the congestion, freneticism, and disenfranchisement of service culture. An intimacy in the charged space of the performance of a service is central to these works, and the psychological status of the client is an active element. In fact, server and client ratify each other's identity in the process of the transaction. They enter into what the sociologist Erving Goffman calls a "state of talk," the performative interplay in which a tacit agreement of identity is made, which is one sort of supply and consumption, along with the supply and consumption of the service itself. In the specular field of service aesthetics, the art performance replicates the real world's service acts in order to magnify their potential beneficence.

The artists I have discussed are engaged in the state of talk without alienation, deploying their service scenarios as correctives, without confrontation, and most often for their generally therapeutic value

through attention and care. Such helpfulness may not sit easily with contemporary sensibilities that remain rooted in modernism's stance of rationalized distance from its subjects, but benevolence in its therapeutic form is an essential aspect of service art. It is clear, in fact, that a restorative space is opened up in the institutional recontextualization of the service enterprise. Consider the sincere intentions of Mark Bradford's hair salon, *Shop*, created in 2002 at Art Basel Miami Beach, which stands in contrast with the chilly ideological critique of Hybert's *Salon de coiffure* at the Pompidou. As Bradford said:

*I wasn't trying to educate and enlighten with some critical discourse. It's just that I was formerly a hairdresser, and it's the same hands I use in my art practice as the hands I used as a hairdresser, so I wanted to bridge the contemporary art world and the service industry. It was about moving across cultural borders, class borders, work borders, aesthetic borders to offer something for free that people enjoyed. The piece was successful because the service we were providing was authentic and good.*

Art work and work in the mainstream of labor are once again fused here—the service act highlighted in its offering of “good use.”

It might seem that the logic of service aesthetics drives it inevitably toward the conclusive act of disappearance into the workplace, so that Bradford's hair salon is only a hair salon, the symbolic aspect of the performance subsumed by the performative aspect of the service economy itself. This circle of completion is interesting to consider, but it would suggest a utopian fantasy of art's ability to transform the world by actually dissolving the distinction between the artist and any other kind of worker. Instead, the art of service aesthetics does what it can, proffering closeness and connection, comfort, and, in some cases, aid.

Of course, it is crucial to remember that the benevolence implicit in service aesthetics has its limits. The nature of the art is inextricably tied to the nature of the service. The work is finished when the transaction is completed and the service is rendered. This art is a form of ventriloquism, throwing the voice of the service economy and redirecting its methods in what might be called a transaction of bestowal. What the viewer-client does afterward is a different process, outside the transaction of the work, while the artist's responsibility is in the rendering of the service and the ethics of reciprocity that it instills. As Stephanie Rothenberg says, “Sometimes the critique itself is the act of giving.”

All works of art could be said to provide a service: self-reflection, political discourse, the embodiment of ethical concern, aesthetic pleasure, spiritual value, and so on. Yet service aesthetics appends its vocabulary and dynamics to a range of economic and social practices at a time when the spread of consumer capital and the identification of citizens as clients within titanic market structures is everywhere visible. The restitution of the self is not a preordained feature of the global economy, nor are service transactions necessarily based on generosity and benevolence. But the rehabilitation implicit in the aestheticization of service inflects this work toward social good, just as it underscores the usefulness of art. Critical, complicit, celebratory, and ameliorative, service art offers its own distinctive insights into the possibilities of social praxis and the artist's legitimation as producer. This is something to pay close attention to as the more general features of culture in the twenty-first century begin to coalesce.

*Steven Henry Madoff is a frequent contributor to Artforum.*

— Steven Henry Madoff

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