

RELATIONAL ART AND INFORMATION SOCIETY

ARTA RELAȚIONALĂ ȘI SOCIETATEA INFORMAȚIONALĂ

CHIRIAC H. C.

“Gh. Asachi” Technical University of Iasi, Romania

Abstract. *Nowadays, Relational Art seems to be an interesting candidate for a new artistic trend or a new “-ism”. Starting from the characteristics emphasized by Nicolas Bourriaud, we can say that Relational Art corresponds to a specific need of contemporary people of putting in common intimate experiences with other members of the community. Present paper starts with the remark that such a characteristic can also define the so-called “information society” and makes us wonder if we can trace a possible link between the two concepts.*

Key words: Relational Art, new artistic trend, information society.

Rezumat. *Arta relațională pare să fie un candidat destul de interesant la statutul de nou curent artistic în zilele noastre. Plecând de la caracteristicile pe care i le scoate în evidență criticul de artă Nicolas Bourriaud, putem afirma că ea corespunde nevoii omului contemporan de punere în comun cu ceilalți membri ai comunității a unor experiențe din ce în ce mai intime. Lucrarea de față pleacă de la observația că o astfel de caracteristică este proprie și societății informaționale, ceea ce ne duce cu gândul la o posibilă conexiune între cele două concepte.*

Cuvinte cheie: Arta relațională, nou curent artistic, societate informațională.

INTRODUCTION

Relational Art is a concept introduced by the art critique Nicolas Bourriaud through which he intended to characterize a wide range of artistic activities emerged in the 90's. Starting from certain features characteristic for the art work of personalities like Gabriel Orzoco and Jens Haaning and taking into consideration the remarks of Jean François Lyotard according to which the artists of this category use art for learning how to make present world a better place instead of creating a new world starting from the preconceived idea of an historical evolution of the world, Bourriaud tried to synthesize specificity of a new kind of artistic discourse. For him, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.” (Nicolas Bourriaud, 2002)

His conceptual effort was expressed in the book entitled „Relational Art” and can be justified by the need of understanding the new coordinates of the interaction between the public and some of the recent contemporary art works. From a historical perspective, one can observe important changes in the evolution of the relation between the artist and his public. This relation is very often

mediated by the artistic discourse and its impact upon the receivers it is addressed to and the historical transformations of this relation can be quite well characterized using communication theory. The gradual increasing of the target public determined enlargement of the variety of addressing means and formulas used by the artist. In the same time, the artist became aware of the increasing interpretation possibilities of his discourse and took into consideration this element in the process of assembling his artistic discourse.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Starting from some distinct features of Relational Art and from some characteristics of the communication process in information society, we will try to link the two concepts and to acknowledge the idea that Relational Art, also seen as specific type of Garden Art, responds to a deep need for sharing at the communitary level, the experience of real time and real space in such a way that the difficulties of computing mediated communication could be surmounted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

One of the most important problems arised in the context of information technology development refers to the connection among the evolution of the communication system, the structure of society and a possible change of the relation between individuals and groups determined by this evolution. A considerable number of specialists regarded with deep interest these transformations and tried to characterize as precisely as possible the features of contemporary society in this regard.

Some of them talk about „information society” with new hierarchies and new communication rules, others try to identify specific ethics for this type of society and to understand the impact of the new mentalities on social interactions. They talk about a new kind of tribalism favored by a new relation of communities with time and space, which has been shaped by the birth of cyberspace. Therefore, we can talk about a new morphology of communication, characterized by specific codes, new semantics and pragmatics that are influenced by computer as a privileged communication tool. We have to remark also that, in this new context, not only the message and its significance are re-created by the communicational environment, but also the communication identities of the partners. The cyberspace is characterized by a particular morphology of communication. More and more of what was considered before as being part of private space becomes part of public space. Moreover, public space becomes more and more one characterized by radical diversity and radical freedom.

On one hand, *the other*, the one we communicate with, could be *different* in geographical and cultural sense. On the other hand, his feedback, as a reaction to our messages, could be *only* a written or a verbal message, which is quite different from direct communication, as regards the authority aspect. And a low authority favours a high level of freedom. As to violence it does not disappears, rather it takes a written or verbal form.

Moreover, a high degree of freedom and the clushess between different value systems do not determine the lack of hierarchies on cyberspace. Because the information is the only indispensable resource on the internet, the structure of the elites and hierarchies depends directly on the access to information. But the access to valueable information cannot be controlled and limited by the state. The only condition one has to meet in order to gain a high freedom of moving in the net refers to being capable of putting to practice his knowledge in informatics. The one who is enough smart and patient to go thoroughly into the computer science misteries, paying enough attention, both in software and hardware fields has this privilege of network freedom beyond any institution control. In this regard, the hackers communities benefit by a freedom of information access which cannot be limited and efficiently controlled by the state and as a consequence they gain a specific power in cyberspace (Pekka Himanen, 2001).

Thus, the new hierarchies of cultural values are not configured anymore exclusively in local geographical areas. A well person today is accustomed to get in contact with a diversity of opinions regarding a certain issues which are delivered by different sources on the internet. Despite of the influence of local cultural identities which did not lose completely their importance, the attachment to them is dropping down occasionally because of arising cultural pluralism on cyberspace.

Information society is a network type one, a multilevel one, in which we are given different identities and profiles like in a world of mirrors which do not reflect their images towards us, but also towards the others. Our image which is delivered to the others does not belong exclusively to us, but it is sometimes built or rebulit by the others independently from our dirrect intensions. We are the text which is written on our behalf by the others, but without wanting it and knowing it. Sometimes this image distorts us comparing with what we believe ourselves. Sometimes, this image anticipates our evolutions and when we succeed to know this image about us, we have the feeling that we are not only recreated by the others, but even antecreated as identities in comparison with what we allow ourselves to be. The creation of an own identity in information society depends on us, but in a less and less intentional and personal way.

Pekka Himanen emphasized this aspect in his book when he talked about the shaping of a certain profile of the consumer in the virtual world by use of specialised software dedicated to the surveliance of the consumers behaviour. This software is dedicated to the accounting of the connection to certain sites in a certain period. (Pekka Himanen, 2001)

The communication space is considered, traditionally, as a partial superposition of the characteristic anticipations of the participants to the communication process. Actually, human communication takes place between two limits, which are represented by *total difference* and by *total identity* of communicators. Both of these two limits make the communication impossible.

If the partner seems completely and definitely different from us, then we have no possibility to address to him. We have no common code and we can build

no one. We do not have an open channel for communication, or a channel to help us surmounting the background noise. (Claude E. Shannon, 1948) We cannot have a common syntax, nor a semantics at least partially shared, or a set of plausible anticipations of the partners, concerning their pragmatic reactions. Without any sort of shaped identity for the partner, we do not have *to whom* to address the message because there is *nobody* for whom to formulate it.

On the contrary, in the case of *total identity* with the partner, we do not have anything to transmit towards him, just because the value of any message, which is directly proportional with the degree of novelty or improbability of the message for the partner, becomes practically zero. (J. Van Cuilenburg, O. Scholten, G.W. Noomen, 2004)

Therefore, in order to be able to communicate with the partner, we need to share with him a common awareness of the partial identity, which unifies us, which makes in the same time the communication possible and interesting between us. Any difference between us can be identified and defined only in comparison to this partial identity that links the partners. For communicating with the partner, we need that at least *a part* of what we consider as representing us in front of him to be already known and accessible for him. Thus, the problem of identity in communication becomes extremely important in this context. The very shaping of this identity in information society is a very specific one.

Because the communicative interaction takes place somehow independently of spatial borders, in information society context the responsibility regarding the message we transmit to the others is defined in comparison to very specific guide marks. One cannot be *immediately* punished for what he communicates to the others, but in the same time, one cannot be sure that the meaning of his words was decoded in a manner somehow closed to what he was expecting. Cyberspace, as communication space, is an independent one with respect to communicators. It is a place of deep awareness of radical differences. The availability for communication becomes actually the only element that unifies the communicators. However, given this element, one cannot be sure for the last time about the fact that the others become aware in the same manner as he does of the differences among communicators that are present throughout the entire process. This type of awareness, as a preemptory condition for communication, varies in the case of information society from person to person in a very prominent way, comparing with other types of society, especially because space matters less than time in this kind of society.

In network communication, the lack of nonverbal and preverbal means for optimizing the communication makes the adaptation process more difficult. While our communicational identity continues to evolve, what we actually deliver to the others represents a *succession of hypostasis* of us throughout the dialogue with them, which we become aware of and we manage to put in order for creating our own mark. This problem deepens in information society case also because we are not the only source for building a fragmentary identity of us, which is put into relation with our communication conscription. As P.H. remarks, on cyberspace our actions are continuously monitored through specialized software and the rate

of accessing certain sites becomes an important indicator in our profile as internet communicators. According to this web profile, some institutions elaborate special advertising strategies and sometimes even political messages. These profiles of us created by the others are overlapping the fragmentary image we create about ourselves and deliver to the others.

Consequently, inside of the network society, as Manuel Castells calls it, not only the message is recreated, but also the participants in the communication process are recreated as far as their external identity and their internal identity, their way of seeing themselves, are concerned. The portrait shaped by the others and assigned to us in the social space anticipates many of our actions and gives us the impression that other people are capable of knowing who we are and what will we do in different circumstances just before we know it. This is an aspect, which could induce us a supplementary state of alienation. Among others intimate elements that became public in contemporary period, including the naked human body, identity becomes also more and more a public issue, in continuous reconstruction. In network society, the others are different from us in various ways; each participant to the communication process is building and rebuilding his own image for himself and for the others as an expression of the interactions with the others. The groups on the internet have sometimes a tribal character, which could be due to the need of tracing again a clear line for separating “me” from “the others”.

In this context, we pose naturally the question if the need for an extensive interaction with the works of art, in other words the need for building and shaping in a *communitarian* manner the artistic discourse space used by the artist in relational art case, represents a characteristic symptom of information society. The need for direct communication as major component in the effort of affiliation to the group, a very deep need of many people nowadays, could be caused by the intense technological mediation of any communication in information society. Therefore, the need of sharing real space and real time with other members of the community could be satisfied by relational art, including a garden relational art. Participating in common projects capable to redefine not only the relations among participants, but also the participants identities could be for the benefit of various geographical communities and could be occasioned by relational garden art. However, for meeting the conditions of relational art, garden art projects, including any sort of green space in the town, should be characterized by a dynamic morphology; each member of the community should have the possibility of participating in the shaping process of the general communicational context. Although a rained artist initiates a relational art project, no one knows for sure what would be the final shape of the project, provided the fact that the artist could be also the one who decides when to stop the successive transformation of the work of art— in our case, of the garden - as a result of the contributors activity.

In contrast to its traditional function as space dedicated to the inter-communitarian dialogue, as important element of the cultural identity of a town, the new function of the garden is oriented mainly to the communication process

inside the community. Thus, the relational garden becomes a place where every member of the community can express his feelings through a precise action, which enables him to change something in the final form of a communitarian project. This fact has a good psychological influence on the equilibrium and transparency of the community. There is, of course, the risk of chaos in this continuous process of artistic interaction among participants. The artistic object, the garden itself becomes in the same time the result and the environment of this interaction, but this way, the degree of sincerity in communication increases very much. Consequently, the cultural message embodied in the final shape of the garden becomes more representative for the communicational particularities of the community. Each participant to the project expresses himself in front of the others, witnesses the expression of the others in front of him, but more important, feels *as being expressed* by the others, as part of a semantically live project regarding the relation between the part and the hole.

CONCLUSIONS

A garden relational art can be seen as a modality of recreating the others inside of the community. The identity of the viewer is recreated by the artist, who invites him to participate in shaping the final form of the work of relational art. This kind of artistic production is the expression of the relation between two identities and can be analyzed as process using the message-feedback model. It is possible in this way to emphasize the way the participants recreate each other inside the *relation* that the art object *became*. The very artist exposes himself to the process of identity transformation by the others and this style of conceiving the artistic discourse could be the result of a specific need, characteristic for information society.

REFERENCES

1. Bourriaud N., 2002 - *Relational Esthetic*. Les Presses du Réel, Paris.
2. Himanen P., 2001 - *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*. Random House Trade Publishers, New York.
3. Shannon E. C., 1948 - *A mathematical Theory of Communication*. The Bell System Technical Journal, Vol. 27, pp. 379-423, 623-646, July, October.
4. Van Cuilenburg J., Scholten O., Noomen G. W., 2004 - *Știința comunicării*. Ed. Humanitas, București.