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Relational Art as Social Semiotic

Howard Riley

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Relational Art as Social Semiotic

Howard Riley, Swansea Metropolitan University, Wales, UK

Abstract: This article, a revised and extended version of a presentation to the “6th International Conference of the Arts in Society,” Berlin, May 2011, elaborates the dialectical relationship between visual art forms and the social structures in which they are produced, by extending Robert Witkin’s taxonomy first presented in his 1995 book “Art and Social Structure.” Witkin tracked the history of visual art from pre-modern times, for which he invented the label “invocational art,” to the advent of Modernism, described in terms of “evocational” and “provocational art.” The article then extrapolates from Witkin’s model to include post-Modernism, for which the author’s term “revocational art” has been coined, and goes on to discuss Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of “Altermodernism,” his term for describing the relationship between contemporary art practices and the social conditions of today, for which the author suggests an alternative-“convocational art”-a synonym for Bourriaud’s term “relational art.” The paper then introduces a systemic-functional semiotic model for the analysis of relational art, and concludes with a demonstration of the model as applied to the work of Anton Vidokle.

Keywords: Revocational Art, Convocational Art, Social Semiotics, Relational Art

Types of Social Structures and Related Artforms

IN HIS BOOK *Art and Social Structure*, Robert Witkin (1995) identified three distinct types of social structure, and proposed three types of art forms which correspond with those structures: A *co-actional* structure, Witkin argued, describes social relations in which each member plays a pre-determined role. Each separate role cues the others, rather like orchestral players. Such societies, low on the scale of individualism, with social roles integrated in a collective, are described as co-actional.

An *inter-actional* structure is characterized by the kind of social relationship found in an urban, industrialized society. Complex division of social labour leads to development of social differentiation and individualism, as well as interdependence with others.

In Witkin’s *intra-actional* social structure, subjects construct their social being directly in and through the process of relating to others. The disintegration of established social systems and the subsequent fracturing of a sense of identity are symptomatic of a society such as that of 19th-century Western Europe.

Witkin (1995: 55-6) suggested three categories of artform which correspond to his three types of social structure: *invocational*, *evocational* and *provocational*.

(Incidentally, this categorisation draws attention to the essentially *vocative* nature of all images: they address the viewer, and the viewer is positioned. The categories are extendable, as we shall see).

Invocational art is motivated by a theology of a primitive kind. In a *co-actional* social structure, typified by the Nascans in southern Peru for example, there is no attempt to portray individuality in their carvings of humans, animals and gods, either on their pottery or on the huge glyptic designs marked out upon the Pampa in the Nazca desert from c400BC. In

such belief systems, a model invokes the real. The aura associated with the image is directly attributable to the referent: sign and referent are one.

In an *inter-actional* social structure typified by Renaissance Italy, image-making was motivated by a spiritual theology. The attributes of individuals, their features and their personalities, were depicted as lifelike as possible because the function of these pictures was to *evoke* the spirit residing in, and animating, every individual. This was the religious spirit that permeated all society. In *evocational* art, the image was understood to be separate from the spirituality it evoked; the sign is distinct from its referent.

For example, to examine Leonardo's anatomical drawings today is also to recognise the power of *evocational* art. It may be argued that the materials—the ink and chalk marks, the surfaces upon which they were made, the protective frames and subdued lighting in which they are displayed—themselves constitute a signifier of fragility, age, preciousness, indicators of the individual. At a deeper level of connotation, those drawings viewed in today's context evoke nothing less than the myth of Leonardo as the epitome of Western values. We learn to value such drawings because they confirm the dominant ideology that holds empiricist science to be the prime means of cultural progress. These drawings stand for ourselves; they allow us to look inside ourselves. We are in awe of the delicate intricacies of our organisms, and this awe is evoked through the drawings. We feel the fear of death in the directness of these drawings, yet as anyone witnessing a public exhibition of them will affirm, they are hypnotic to members of a culture in which the reality of death is cloaked in religious ritual. Moreover, ironically we are filled with admiration for Leonardo's daring to breach the *taboos* we ourselves have inherited. Today, Leonardo the enigmatic master of evocational art is synecdochical of a general unease and ambivalence towards the power of Art, symbolising its potential for challenging society's most revered conventions at the same time as revealing to us the inevitability of death.

A third type of artform, *provocational* art, was motivated not by any religious or spiritual source, but by the humanism that evolved from the Enlightenment and socio-technological revolutions of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in northern Europe. These Modernists shifted the emphasis from the relationship between the sign and its referent altogether—and drew attention instead to the *process of signification* itself. The primary function of art was no longer to do with representing anything, but a means of provoking viewers into a state of awareness of their own responsibilities for making sense of images. Marcel Duchamp was the *agent-provocateur par excellence!*

In a previous article (Riley 2004: 298) I could not resist the temptation to extrapolate from Witkin's model and propose a fourth type of social structure: a *multi-actional* one:

Such a *multi-actional* structure was typified by a post-Modern period in which has been seen the development of a plurality of approaches to art practice and an eclecticism of styles. This period was one in which the constructions of an individual identity were complicated, not only by the fluctuating states of possibilities of relationships between individuals but also by an expanding range of available social positions made possible through an expanded awareness of the multiplicity of ideological positions. What kind of art form could represent the complexities of such a society? A *revocational* one, at once motivated and unmotivated by a plethora of influences, including the historical and the contemporary as well as the spiritual and the material. Such art revokes all previous laws and restrictions so that contradictions and contravisuals abound, words

become images and *vice versa*, realities may be virtual, and the virtual becomes a reality. Attention is drawn to the very membranes themselves that separate internal from external, signifier from signified. In a post-modern period, the Saussurean sign itself has been split, and signifiers float free as we that observe float between them.

For example, we floated through Damien Hirst's cows in his 1996 *installation Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, (Figure 1) where the boundaries between inside and outside, front and rear of the two beasts were reversed, interpenetrated.

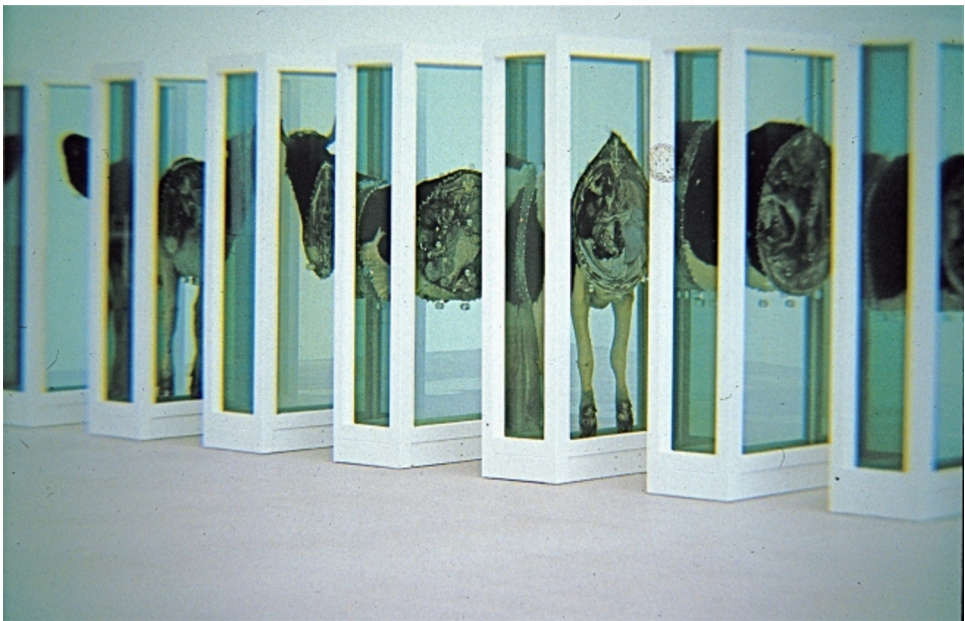


Figure 1

But we were denied entry to Rachel Whiteread's *House* constructed in 1993, (Figure 2) whilst, paradoxically, having access to the interior surfaces of the rooms which formed the exterior of the sculpture.



Figure 2

After Post-modernism: *Altermodernism*?

In his recent book *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Jacques Ranciere (2009: 53) identifies four major “figures” or sub-classes of shift from “...yesterday’s dialectical provocations to the new figures of...artistic *dispositifs*...” which he labels *Play*; *Inventory*; *Encounter* and *Mystery*, and here the recent writing of an influential contemporary curator/theorist to whom Ranciere alludes, albeit only in a footnote, becomes relevant: Nicolas Bourriaud was cited by Ranciere as the main theoretician of *Relational Aesthetics*, the title of Bourriaud’s book first published in English, 2002. Relational art corresponds to the third of Ranciere’s sub-categories of contemporary art practice, elaborated under his sub-class *Encounter* as activities to which the artist/curator invites—I shall use the phrase *calls together*, for a reason clarified below—visitors in order for them to encounter, to participate within, to relate to some sort of event.

Perhaps one of the most celebrated of these sorts of events was Anton Vidokle’s 2007 *Unitednationsplaza*, for which he brought hundreds of people to a disused supermarket site in Berlin (Figure 3, not far from the venue at which a version of this article was presented to the 6th *International Conference of the Arts in Society* in May 2011), where they participated in seminars, discussions and performances concerned with the circulation and exchange of ideas about art and society.



Figure 3

Such events, championed by Bourriaud's curatorial practice as a typical example of the contemporary social situation after post-Modernism, one he has labelled *Altermodernism*, no longer attempts to respond to the excesses of commodity culture and the fragmentary, revocational nature of a post-modern social structure, but rather attempts to address the lack of social coherence in a social structure formed by a post-industrial, service economy. As Ranciere (2009: 56-7) puts it:

Relational art... aims no longer to create objects, but situations and encounters. In so doing, however, it relies on a simplistic opposition between objects and situations, effecting a short-circuit where the point is to carry out a transformation of those problematic spaces that once contrasted conceptual art with art objects/commodities. The former distance taken with respect to goods is inverted and a proposition made about a new proximity between individuals, about building new forms of social relations. Art no longer tries to respond to an excess of commodities and signs but rather to a lack of bonds.

Steven Henry Madoff (2011: 56) describes how Vidokle responds to such a lack of bonds:

By establishing a financial engine that competes with advertising in art magazines; by creating *e-flux journal*, which vies with such publications as *October* and *Artforum*; by offering for sale artworks hocked by more than 60 artists in *Pawnshop*, 2007; by creating circulating libraries of artists' videos and books; by mounting its nearly innumerable conferences and seminars...

Vidokle is creating a power structure of entwined institutions—the press, the school, the store, and the bank—whose business is in no small part to critique institutions themselves.

Bourriaud (2002: 36) himself is more succinct, though perhaps a little cruder in translation: "Through little services rendered, the artist fills in the cracks in the social bond." He takes from Felix Gautari the idea that a work of art is a *process of becoming*, to articulate an explanation of his term *Altermodernism* as a collectively-produced open-ended flux of social activities and encounters that resists fixed interpretation or closure, typical of an Internet culture, in which the global realm of human interactions becomes the arena for art practice, rather than any notion of private, individually-based response.

And so we can neatly extend Witkin's useful taxonomy of social structures and their corresponding artforms even further, to form a coherent pattern which began with invocational art, moved through evocational art, provocational and revocational art, to include the contemporary situation in which artists and curators call together participants in a co-operational social structure in the attempt to resolve social fissures: a *convocational* art practice of relational aesthetics, situated in this contemporary context of *Altermodernity*.

In this extension of Witkin's taxonomy, *convocational art* becomes a rather more useful term than Bourriaud's own *relational art*, since it relates, through its etymology, to the historical development between artforms and social structures adumbrated above. Surprisingly, Bourriaud himself makes no reference to the social semioticians who have been elaborating similar interpretations of the social function of art. Here, then, is proposed a useful connection between relational art and the social semiotics of art:

The Social Semiotics of Relational Art

In the materialist sense, art is produced through the selection and combination of particular materials, processes and contexts. However, *semiotically speaking*, both producers and viewers of art take up positions, adopt attitudes and points of view which are influenced by their positions within their sets of social relations. Such an ideological positioning involves a specific way of using signs (a semiotic), and a structured sensibility (an aesthetic) both grounded in a particular system of social relations. The way the producer selects and combines the compositional elements of the artwork or event, and how the viewer relates to that artwork or event, are both functions of the social contexts in which the work is (re) produced. This is the essence of what Bourriaud has called *relational aesthetics*. *Note that to say art simply reflects social structure is too passive: art not only expresses the social context, including viewer-participants, but is also part of a more complex dialectic in which specific artworks actively symbolise the social system, thus producing, as well as being produced by, the ideological framework of a society.* Variation in ways of producing and making available artworks is the visual expression of variation in society. Artworks and events are produced within society and work to effect change in the social structure in their turn. This dialectical relationship is what the socio-linguist Michael Halliday (1978: 183), was discussing long before Bourriaud, in the phrase “social semiotic”. It might be time to refresh our understanding of Halliday in the light of contemporary thinking about relational art, and to draw attention to the visual social semioticians he has inspired, in particular the work of Michael O’Toole (2005, 2011), which might now be utilised to demonstrate, through visual semiotic analysis, the relations between art and society alluded to in Bourriaud’s phrase *relational art*.

As a linguist, Halliday proposed that language operates through three functions: firstly, to convey some aspect of our experience of the world; secondly, to express the communicator’s attitude or mood regarding the experience, and also to position the receiver in terms of mood and attitude; thirdly, to structure these two into a coherent, perceptible form. The first two functions Halliday labelled the *ideational* and the *interpersonal*; the third he termed the textual function.

The parameters of social context—field, tenor, and mode—are systematically related to the functions of the semiotic system (Figure 4). In fact, those meanings that constitute our understanding of any particular social situation are made visible through the selection and combination of elements within the semiotic system.

Parameter of social context	Function of artwork through which a social situation is realised
Field (what is happening)	Ideational function
Tenor (who is taking part)	Interpersonal function
Mode (what part the semiotic code plays)	Textual function

Figure 4

Halliday (1973) elaborated upon this basis to provide a model which identified the *systems of choices*—the range of available alternatives—from which specific selections may be related to the functions of language in specific social contexts.

O’Toole (1990) was one of the first in print to demonstrate the power of Halliday’s insights when they are applied to the analysis of visual codes of communication. In an article developed from a seminar paper delivered at Sydney University in 1986, he offered a systemic-functional model of painting in which he used the labels Representational, Modal, and Compositional to identify the functions that Halliday originally termed Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual., and he proposed specifically visual systems of choices available to painters working upon various levels of engagement within the composition (levels which relate to O’Toole’s term *Unit*), thus forming a systemic-functional semiotic model, illustrated in Figure 5:

Unit \ Function	REPRESENTATIONAL	MODAL	COMPOSITIONAL
WORK	Narrative themes Scenes Portrayals Interplay of episodes	Rhythm Gaze Frame Light Perspective	Modality <u>Gestalt</u> : Framing Horizontals Verticals Diagonals Proportion Geometry Line Rhythm Colour
EPISODE	Actions, events Agents—patients—goals Focal/side sequence Interplay of actions	Relative Prominence Scale Centrality Interplay of Modalities	Relative position in work Alignment Interplay Coherence } of forms
FIGURE	Character Act/Stance/Gesture Clothing Components Object	Gaze Stance Characterization Contrast: Scale Line Light Colour	Relative position in episode Parallelism/Opposition Subframing
MEMBER	Part of body/object Natural form	Stylization	Cohesion: (Parallel/Contrast/Rhythm) Reference

Figure 5: (O’Toole 2011:24)

O’Toole (2011) also demonstrates the versatility of Halliday’s model by adapting it to theorise how sculpture and architecture may be understood in relation to their social contexts. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) have also used Halliday’s insight to illuminate the study of graphic design and other forms of visual communication. They have argued that visual codes of communication may be construed as rational expressions of cultural meanings, amenable to rational accounts and analysis. The problem, they claimed, has been that cultures which are historically biased towards literacy as the preferred medium of cultural discourse have “...systematically suppressed means of analysis of the visual forms of representation, so that there is not, at the moment, an established theoretical framework within which visual forms of representation can be discussed”. (Kress & van Leeuwin, 1996: 20-21). This article goes on to demonstrate how such a framework might now be applied:

In order to analyse an example of convocational art, I shall employ an adaptation of O’Toole’s model for painting, presented in Figure 6. (Instead of the Representational function identified in Figure 5, I shall use a term more appropriate to the experience of negotiating a three-dimensional installation: an *Experiential* function.)

		EXPERIENTIAL FUNCTION	INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION	COMPOSITIONAL FUNCTION
WORK IN CONTEXT	MATRIX OF SYSTEMS OF CHOICE	Functions of spaces: public/private work/leisure activities	General Ambience: formal/relaxed fun/serious active/passive	Intertextuality of spaces: general arrangement range of lighting systems range of acoustic systems
SECTIONS OF THE WORK		Activities: circulation patterns reading/browsing/chatting	Activities: movethrough/seated participatory/solo	Layout of objects/spaces: pathways: 'throughfare'/blocked visual pattern & rhythm scale and proportion
COMBINATIONS OF ELEMENTS		Sub-functions: Individual study/group interaction	Affordances: degree of accessibility/interpersonal contact temporary/permanent aesthetic level of comfort	Combinations of elements in: objects/circulation space range of 'fixing' details scale/proportion
VISUAL ELEMENTS		Orientation of planes: experience of individual spaces solid/void	Perceptions: light/dark heavy/light smooth/rough	Materials & finishes: shapes/colours/textures 'fixing' systems
MATRIX OF SYSTEMS OF CHOICES				

Figure 6: Systemic-Functional Model for Installation Works

One of the participatory events ensuing from Vidokle’s *Unitednationsplatz* project occurred at the New Museum in New York City in 2008, labelled *Night School* (Figure 7 shows a reconstruction in the Knoxville Museum, Tennessee).



Figure 7a



Figure 7b

Here, a multi-functional space for a variety of participatory activities is arranged, made available—offered—utilising the full range of selections from the matrix of semiotic systems identified in the chart (Figure 6): materials and their finishes, for example, all of which carry contradictory connotations between public and private; the systems of lighting varying from the garish neon of *night school* to the subdued film-viewing space; the opportunities to acquire information from a full range of media normally associated with separate, discrete spaces—shop, library, cinema, study: newspapers, journals, books, television, video, internet. This plethora of affordances made available in a space conventionally identified with rather more passive relationships between visitors and exhibits serves to encourage participation, negotiation, interpersonal interaction, the essence of a *convocational* experience. One facilitated all the while by what Madoff (2011) termed the *artist anonymous*, aka Anton Vidokle!

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Howard Riley studied at the Hammersmith College of Art, Coventry College of Art, and the Royal College of Art. He holds a doctorate of the University of Wales in the practice and pedagogy of drawing. He taught at various art schools in London before taking up a post in the School of Art and Design, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, where he worked with Professor Michael O'Toole, a pioneer of visual semiotics at Murdoch University in Perth. He has published in the areas of visual semiotics, generative art and multi-modality. His drawings have been exhibited in Australia, Malaysia, Finland and the UK. Currently, Riley is Professor of Visual Communication and Head of the School of Research & Post-graduate Studies at the Dynevor Centre for Arts, Design & Media, Swansea Metropolitan University, Wales, UK.

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Conference

Members of the Arts Community meet at the [International Conference on the Arts in Society](#), held annually in different locations around the world in conjunction with global and local arts events.

The inaugural Conference was held in conjunction with the Edinburgh Festivals, Edinburgh, Scotland in [2006](#), and in [2007](#), in collaboration with the Documenta12, Kassel, Germany. In 2007 an International Symposium on the Arts was also held during the Armory Show in New York and in co-sponsorship with the Center for Art and Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. In [2008](#), the Conference was held at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK, with a special theme of Art and Communication. In [2009](#), the Conference was held at Venice, Italy in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. In [2010](#), the Conference was held at University of Sydney, Sydney College of the Arts, Australia. In [2011](#), the Conference was held at Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, Germany. In 2012, the Conference will be held in Art and Design Academy, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging artists and scholars. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

Online presentations can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

Publishing

The Arts Community enables members to publish through three media. First by participating in the Arts Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. [The International Journal of the Arts in Society](#) provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series [The Arts in Society](#), publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposal and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our [news blog](#), constantly publishing short news updates from the Arts in Society Community, as well as major developments in the various disciplines of the arts. You can also join this conversation at [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) or subscribe to our email [Newsletter](#).

Common Ground Publishing Journals

AGING Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://AgingAndSociety.com/journal/	ARTS The International Journal of the Arts in Society. Website: www.Arts-Journal.com
BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	CLIMATE CHANGE The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	DESIGN Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	FOOD Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	HEALTH The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	IMAGE The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
LEARNING The International Journal of Learning. Website: www.Learning-Journal.com	MANAGEMENT The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: www.Management-Journal.com
MUSEUM The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: www.Museum-Journal.com	RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: www.Religion-Journal.com
SCIENCE IN SOCIETY The International Journal of Science in Society Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com	SOCIAL SCIENCES The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com
SPACES AND FLOWS Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: www.SpacesJournal.com	SPORT AND SOCIETY The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal
SUSTAINABILITY The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability Website: www.Sustainability-Journal.com	TECHNOLOGY The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society Website: www.Technology-Journal.com
UBIQUITOUS LEARNING Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal Website: www.ubi-learn.com/journal/	UNIVERSITIES Journal of the World Universities Forum Website: www.Universities-Journal.com

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