

JENNIFER ORPANA

Signs of Life: Relational Aesthetics and the [murmur] project

The [murmur] project was first developed in Toronto's Kensington Market in 2003 by Shawn Micallef, James Roussel, and Gabe Sawhney. [murmur] is a documentary oral history project that utilizes signs and cellular telephone technology in order to prompt interactions between strangers and to offer an opportunity for people to hear narratives about seemingly unexceptional surroundings.¹ [murmur] monumentalizes street corners and small businesses, thus augmenting institutionalized discourse about honoured architectural and historical landmarks in the urban environment. In this respect, [murmur] archives, and makes accessible, unfamiliar stories which contribute to the oral history of a neighbourhood in an attempt to influence the way in which people think about social interaction and the significance of place.²

Despite the rapid proliferation of [murmur] in Toronto and in other urban neighbourhoods worldwide, to date there are few scholarly articles about the [murmur] project which offer an in-depth theoretical analysis of the work. In "For an Art against the Cartography of Everyday Life," Ryan Griffis utilizes [murmur] as an example of a contemporary art practice that incorporates locative media and geo-spatial technology. He notes that many art practitioners employ "geo-spatial technology to attach stories, sound, and relationships to locations such that an intersection between virtual/networked space and geographic space can be used to visualize invisible or imaginary realities."³ The article credits [murmur] for establishing geographic intersections where illusion and reality meet. However, what is the purpose of creating such intersections in the urban environment? What can be said about how the [murmur] project engages the participants, how the artists collaborate with communities, how the project plays with concepts of urban sociability, and about the relationship that exists between the [murmur] project

and more predominant urban narratives? Through further theoretical analysis, the artistic and social significance of the [murmur] project and its vital contribution to the urban environment can be further elucidated.

[murmur] requires subject collaboration and participation, which relate to preceding art theoretical discourse that emerged in the late 1990s about participatory art practices. During this time there was much uncertainty about theoretical vocabularies, the changing artistic landscape, and the evolving roles of artists, viewers, and curators.⁴ Highlighting specific components of new participatory practices, scholars offered a plethora of names for emerging art including new genre public art, littoral art, dialogue-based art, and dialogical art.⁵ Articles emerged seeking to define the use of 'interactivity,' 'participation,' and 'collaboration' in art, such as "Working on the Community, Models of Participatory Practice," written by Christian Kravagna in 1998.⁶ The same year, curator Nicolas Bourriaud wrote a book of essays on the subject entitled *Relational Aesthetics*.

"Where do the misunderstandings surrounding the 1990s' art come from," he begins, "if not a theoretical discourse complete with shortcomings?"⁷ In an attempt to clarify the discourse Bourriaud provides a definition of relational aesthetics, which is "an artistic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of inter-human relations which they represent, produce, or prompt."⁸ He suggests values for critiquing relational art by stating that works of art must be judged by evaluating the coherence of form, the symbolic world a work creates, or the image of human relations that the work represents.⁹ In summary, relational art aims to address human relations and social contexts and to promote new models of sociability and inter-human exchanges. Due to the authoritative tone of the book and the open-ended theories hailing social interaction as a medium in contemporary art, *Relational Aesthetics* remains a notoriously debated theoretical work.

Despite numerous criticisms of Bourriaud's ideas, an application of some key passages provides an interesting point of departure for a theoretical discussion about the [murmur] project. For instance, Bourriaud describes art as a "social interstice," a space in social relations. More than simply an interactive art form, relational

aesthetics represents art in which 'sociability' is the main object.¹⁰ The term 'sociability' simply means the quality or state of being social, and relational art aims to provide an environment that facilitates social acts. The term 'interstice,' derived from Marx's description of commercial trading exchanges, is used by Bourriaud to suggest possibilities for forms of exchange that exist outside of mainstream systems of communication. Bourriaud promotes art that functions as social interstices; [murmur] explores ideas of human relations and environment by marking new social interstices in the urban landscape. The following essay will engage Bourriaud's critical language to draw parallels between the theory and practice in a discussion of [murmur] as 'signs of life,' markers of relational aesthetics.

THE MURMUR EXPERIENCE

Prior to embarking on a theoretical discussion, a basic description of [murmur] and how the work engages participants is useful. In order to establish [murmur] in a community, the artists embark on a collaborative process which entails getting feedback from local people in order to identify sites of interest. Often two or three stories will be selected for each site in order to excavate multiple layers of history at one location.

Sites are indicated by signs, which are erected in clusters. To date, clusters of [murmur] signs are located in urban neighbourhoods which are recognized for unique cultural or historical significance, such as Toronto's Kensington Market, the Annex, Little India, and the Junction. For instance, the Junction, a neighbourhood surrounding Dundas St. West and Keele Street, is a neighbourhood which has changed dramatically over the course of Toronto's history and continues to transform to this day. Barbara Myrvold, Senior Service Specialist of Local History at the Toronto Public Library notes that "prior to European settlement, two native trails intersected in the area, forerunners of Davenport and Weston roads."¹¹ The area was given the title the "West Toronto Junction" in the 1880s to identify the location of major intersection for the railway companies, including the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Grand Trunk and the Toronto, Grey & Bruce.¹² In the past



Fig. 1. On-Line Map of [murmur] in Kensington Market.



Fig. 2. [murmur] Sign & Participant. Signage design: Isako Shigekawa

several years, the Junction has experienced much urban transformation associated with economic booms and busts; so much so that the neighbourhood was recently discussed in a *New York Times* Travel section article brazenly entitled, “Skid Row to Hip in Toronto.”¹³ Thus, in the Junction, there is a great deal of potential to create a diverse collection of oral histories; as is the case with the other neighbourhoods in which [murmur] has been established to date.

[murmur] signs are supplemented by a website,¹⁴ though nothing on a sign suggests to the viewer to go on-line for further information. The website serves as an informative archive for all [murmur] projects, media, stories, and maps (Fig. 1). Micallef compares the experience of accessing [murmur] stories on-site versus on-line by explaining:

Listening to the stories in the place that they’ve happened is much different than listening to them on-line or at your desk. At first we were going to just deliver the stories in situ like by cell phone and not on the web because we thought that might ruin the experience. But then we thought, not everyone has a cell phone and there’s people not living in Toronto. It felt just stupid from a marketing point of view not to do that. [...] More people do listen to the [murmur] stories over the web than by phone, but they are missing 80% of the experience. Actually being in the spot... it becomes the stage where the story takes place. So you get to mix what you are hearing with what you’re seeing.¹⁵

Thus, since the website is viewed as more of an accessibility and marketing tool, this essay focuses on the in situ experience.

A [murmur] sign is a green, metal sign that is approximately one foot high and shaped like an ear (Fig. 2). [murmur] signs are most often located outdoors on telephone poles or in other discrete locations.¹⁶ Each [murmur] sign has white text which states, “[murmur] hear you are” followed by a phone number and a six-digit numeric code. The telephone number is connected to a computer that plays MP3s which are streamed out over Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP).¹⁷ When a call to [murmur] is connected, the listener is greeted by a recorded voice that



Fig. 3. View of the Moonbean Café.

says, “This is Murmur. What’s the code?” After entering the code, there is a new recording – a voice that is both friendly and genuine. This voice tells a story that relates to the exact location of the person listening. The story demands that the listener also become a viewer by referring to specific visual details in the immediate environment, animating a scene which plays out in the listener’s imagination against the urban backdrop.

The following transcript demonstrates the way in which a [murmur] story connects to a visual landscape, in this instance the Moonbean café (Fig. 3). A male storyteller shares a personal memory about the Moonbean in the following candid monologue:

The first apartment I ever had was right here, right above the Moonbean café. The time that I lived there it was a t-shirt store called Alter-Natives and I had a crush on the guy who ran it. So I’d sometimes go in there to look at the t-shirts but mostly to look at him. And what was the back of the Moonbean café was in fact my living room. So they sliced up what used to be the house that I lived in and if you go to the very back of the Moonbean that’s where I used to chase a cat around. It was the filthiest apartment you ever saw in your life. It was my first apartment and apparently the first apartment of the people I was living with as well. Boy was it filthy. I lived with a dominatrix who had a rooster alarm clock that she would leave on even when she wasn’t in the house. Anyway there is a story about how it is I left this place. Essentially, I was there in the summertime one day in my bedroom which is at the back of the house, (you can’t see that), and I heard what sounded like wood being broken – as if someone was breaking wood over their knee. So I descended the stairs and went out through the front door that’s just to the right of the door that you see in front of you. I opened the door and I was hit by a wall of heat that actually made me step back and shut the door. The wall of heat was so intense and this wall of heat was generated by the flame emanating from the building directly across the street from the Moonbean and basically the entire building was on fire. I went upstairs and looked out the window you can see above the Moonbean and saw that one of the electrical wires, I guess as a result of the fire, that connected our building to their building, had somehow disconnected and was exploding sparks and [I] basically stood

there for a while in shock watching the building across the street burn. It was a big fire and what was interesting about it was that it became for me a symbol that it was time for me to leave. And so I moved out shortly thereafter and I always think that the turning point when I really decided to go was when the fire happened. My name is Chris Williamson.¹⁸

In the process of listening to the story, the subject's imagination is engaged in several significant ways. First, the subject is called upon to imagine a time before the Moonbean existed, visualizing the preceding residential and commercial uses for the space. Secondly, the viewer is called to note specific details: the door, the windows, the wires, and the building located across the street, which is behind the viewer. The subject listens as the dramatic action unfolds, involving the fire, the sparks, and the narrator's consequent epiphany. By listening to the story and imagining the details, the subject is immersed in the scene and realizes that the location in which they stand was once engulfed by flames, under a shower of electrical sparks. Furthermore, by listening to this story, one discovers a moment that might otherwise be lost in the history of this location – one location of many which are continuously subject to urban transformation and change.

After hearing the first story, a recorded voice offers the subject two options. Option one is to excavate another layer of history from that place by listening to another story. The second option is the opportunity to record a personal story about the same location, for future listeners to hear. Of course, there is also the option to simply hang up the phone and continue walking.

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AND the [murmur] project

For Bourriaud, definition of relational arts is broad. For instance, there are no stylistic, iconographic, or thematic concepts that can be used in order to identify relational artists. However, artists working within the realm of relational arts share one interest, working within the “sphere of human relations.”¹⁹ Thus any artist who creates “life-structures that include methods and ways of life” rather than what might be considered more traditional art objects, such as paintings or

sculptures, works within the relational art practice.²⁰ In addition, there is one oft-quoted line that defines the role of relational artists, which is that “through little services rendered, the artists fill the cracks in the social bond.”²¹ The author or artist according to Bourriaud is an “entrepreneur/politician/director,”²² responsible for orchestrating social situations, which offer solutions to communicative issues in society.

Some artists championed by Bourriaud in Relational Aesthetics include Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Tiravanija is recognized for such work as organizing a dinner in a collector’s home and leaving the ingredients for Thai soup, and Gillick for offering “scaled-down models of communicative systems” through projects such as the Pinboard Project (a bulletin board that included instructions for use, 1992).²³ These artists are interested in establishing relationships rather than creating art objects and their work requires participation in order to achieve fruition. As Gillick explains, “Without people, it’s not art.”²⁴ The role of the artist for Gillick and Tiravanija is directing social and communicative acts.

An application of the theories of relational aesthetics to the [murmur] project generates a series of critical questions about the significance of the project. Is [murmur] filling in the “cracks of the social bond”²⁵ through this service? Does this mode of interaction respond to or indicate a concept of degenerating social relationships in the urban environment? Does the [murmur] project offer a new mode of sociability? What does the [murmur] project tell us about our relationship with history, place, and community? Bourriaud’s discussion of the medium, artist, viewer, and space helps to inform the answers to these questions.

The role of the artist for the [murmur] project is that of a journalist/facilitator/archivist. When developing [murmur] in a new neighbourhood, the artists solicit “neighbourhood-level”²⁶ voices that tell the stories for a given community through talking to people directly and placing advertisements in community newspapers. In this respect the artists’ role is to encourage people to tell stories and to validate personal experiences by integrating the recorded stories into the city’s narrative.

The artists must facilitate the recording of the stories and all of the other aspects of the project, including designing and erecting the signs, and establishing the telephone codes for each story and location. Finally, the artists act as archivists by selecting which stories to include in to the [murmur] archive, and which to omit.

Facilitating opportunities for the exchange of “day to day stories that make up the city”²⁷ is a main goal of the [murmur] artists and also a way in which the project differs from the work of other artists producing soundscapes. For instance, Micallef recognizes the work of Janet Cardiff as an influence, though he notes a difference in authorial voice. Cardiff’s “heavy art voice”²⁸ is not present in [murmur]; the voices of [murmur] are more heterogeneous and informal. Therefore, rather than creating a highly composed sound piece to function as art, [murmur] focuses on excavating and providing access to simply narrated community stories. In respect to relational art practice, the art is created through three social exchanges: the collaboration between artist and storyteller; the creation of a social context for the [murmur] story to be listened to by another subject; and the opportunity for the listener to record a personal memory of the same place.

Through the [murmur] project, the artists render a service that fills the “cracks in the social bond.” The “cracks” refer to the ways in which individuals have disconnected relationship with space, other inhabitants, and history of the city. Furthermore, [murmur] recognizes the need to diversify the narratives which speak to the history of a community and offers a platform on which people may be heard. The urban environment can be described as “a fraught, dystopian social space which not every individual has the cultural confidence to claim as his or her own and where not all voices will be heard.”²⁹ In “Emotion and Urban Experience,” Aušra Burns describes the way in which the city environment creates a culture in which people are disconnected from one another. Burns refers to Walter Benjamin’s observations that people became more socially withdrawn and unable to create personal relationships in reaction to the masses of strangers in the urban environment.³⁰ Burns explains that in reaction to such conditions, society adopts qualities of reserve and impersonality, leading to a form of social crisis. Burns

comments on the importance of resolving disconnected relations by stating that “people’s ties, relationships, and attachments to their particular territorial niches in the metropolis [are] significant because it is in these niches that they ‘come to have some control,’ where they ‘are able to develop the sense of identity and comfortableness that one large downtown world makes impossible.”³¹

[murmur] addresses urban impersonality by infusing communities with personal narratives: “The stories are as personal as the relationship people have with the spaces they inhabit.”³² The project also strives to connect people to the history of place and to other people by instigating a social exchange that encourages curiosity about unfamiliar people and places. [murmur] gives people the opportunity to assert cultural confidence by staking claim to various locations in the city and adding to the city narrative. Finally, [murmur] signs signify a history of social relations and human experiences which make up the history of the city.

Now to turn to how the definition of the subject described in the theory of relational aesthetics relates to the demands on the subject from the [murmur] project. Bourriaud states that “the status of the viewer alternates between that of a passive consumer, and that of a witness, an associate, a client, a guest, a co-producer and a protagonist.”³³ Subjects of the [murmur] project are called upon to fulfill multiple roles as well. Alternating between listening, viewing, consuming, and contributing, the subject takes on the required roles as they listen to the stories. Relational art theory also recognizes that the viewer is transformed into such roles as neighbour and interlocutor.³⁴ The language used by Bourriaud is similar to the language used in a description of the [murmur] experience, which states that the stories are always told from “a personal point of view, as if the storyteller was a neighbour or a friend.”³⁵ Engaging the listener in such a manner suggests a more personal connection between the narrator and the listener.

However, the subject of the [murmur] project plays another role. In order to notice a [murmur] sign the subject must be a pedestrian, and one that is engaged in an interested observation of the neighbourhood. Thus the subject of the [murmur] project also naturally plays the role of flâneur. The term “flâneur” was developed

by social theorist Walter Benjamin, as an embodiment of the urban character of the nineteenth century.³⁶ Flânerie involves strolling through the city and engaging in “activities of observation (including listening), reading (of metropolitan life and texts) and producing texts.”³⁷

Micallef explains that the concept of flânerie deeply influenced the production of the [murmur] project through his own personal interest in walking and enjoying the aesthetic of the city.³⁸ He describes the way in which playing the role of a flâneur affects the way in which one listens to the [murmur] recordings by noting that, “It’s the stuff you overhear. You are not part of it completely. You’re not 100% participating. You are 50% watching from the side. I think listening to murmur you don’t have to get deep into it; you don’t have to meet the people [...] you get to overhear stuff. Kind of like being a flâneur in a grocery store. You get to hear people an aisle over.”³⁹

Playing the role of flâneur, as well as the role of a ‘friend,’ suggests an interesting contradiction for the subject. The subject engages in an act of flânerie by calling a telephone number on a sign, and is welcomed as a ‘friend’ into the narrative of the space. By disrupting the expectation, [murmur] plays with the concept of urban spectatorship and impersonality. Thus, [murmur] indicates and scrutinizes the concept of degenerating social relationships in the urban environment.

One might argue that by using cellular phones and recordings, [murmur] utilizes automated systems that Bourriaud deems responsible for reducing relational space and developing anti-social behaviour. For instance, Bourriaud states that due to industrialization, many communicative systems became impersonalised and automated, and that the purpose of relational art is to resolve communicative failures imposed by such systems.⁴⁰ Bourriaud states: “The general mechanization of social functions gradually reduces the relational space... and professional behaviour is modelled on the efficiency of the machines replacing them, these machines [in turn] carrying out tasks which once represented so many opportunities for exchanges, pleasure and squabbling.”⁴¹ While pre-recorded stories do not have



Fig. 4. *The Poet, The Fever Hospital*. Bernie Miller, 1992.



Fig. 5. *Éloges de Fontanelle*. Royden Rabinowitch, 1984.

Images and descriptions of these and the other public art works in the 2003 Art Walk, go to: http://www.toronto.ca/culture/pdf/artwalk_nov4_03.pdf

the same effect as a person-to-person exchange, efforts to personalize the [murmur] experience have been noted earlier in the discussion of the way in which the listener is greeted by the storyteller as a neighbour or a friend.

Furthermore, Bourriaud adds that contemporary art develops a political project by using the relational realm to address automated interactions by turning them into an issue.⁴² [murmur] participates in a political endeavour by utilizing cellular telephones and voice recordings in a new and refreshing way. Often people walk determinedly through the city, engaged in conversations on cellular phones and completely disengaged with their surroundings. [murmur] subverts this behaviour by utilizing the cellular telephones to engage subjects with the environment and the experiences of other people. Thus, [murmur] uses technology to suggest to the subject a new form of sociability.

Often discussions regarding relational aesthetics address artists who engage participants in gallery spaces, though not all works discussed by Bourriaud are located in a gallery exhibition context. Relational art works can be located in other institutionalized spaces, such as homes, public squares, and venues with particularly familiar or recognizable ideological narratives. [murmur] is exhibited in the ideological institution of the city in which the project is located, and more specifically, the neighbourhood in which the project is mounted. By addressing the spatial and historical context of the work, one understands the way in which [murmur] addresses society's relationship with narratives about history, place, and community in the urban context.

The following example illustrates how outdoor neighbourhoods become part of the institutionalized space of the city by noting one of many city narratives against which [murmur] may be considered. In 2003 the City of Toronto developed Art Walk, which promoted various public art works through brochures and websites and was hailed as "Toronto's Outdoor Art Gallery."⁴³ Organized by the City of Toronto Culture Division, whose mandate is to promote public art, the Art Walk highlighted such works as Bernie Miller's tower of granite, steel and bronze entitled, *The Poet, The Fever Hospital* (1992) and *Éloges de Fontanelle* (1984), Royden Robinawitch's

convex and concave sculptural forms (Fig. 4 & 5). As Judith A. Baca explains, the issue with considering such public arts works as a representation of Toronto's cultural landscape is that public art work often supports developers' agendas rather than supporting community identity.⁴⁴

[murmur] participates in the concept of an "outdoor art gallery," however the project engages in a process of identifying and animating monuments which have existed and functioned as a part of a neighbourhood based on the input of community participants. By offering an alternative narrative to predominant urban discourse, such as the City of Toronto's Art Walk, the [murmur] creators seek to promote real human experiences that animate the city, rather than participating in politically and economically motivated celebrations of "skyscrapers, sports stadiums, and landmarks."⁴⁵ Thus, the [murmur] project reflects Robert Park's description of the city as "a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it."⁴⁶ By recognizing and celebrating the inter-human relationships which contribute to the history of a place, [murmur] addresses the human need to make meaning within the community and to participate in the narrative of constantly transforming urban space. [murmur] is a network of social interstices that weaves community voices into the narrative of the urban landscape.

With an understanding of the way in which [murmur] addresses "cracks in the social bond," one may critique the effectiveness of the project and the inter-human relations initiated by the work. Parallels may be drawn between the criticism of relational aesthetics and issues with regards to the [murmur] project. For instance, the following political critique of Bourriaud's theory suggests a potential issue with the subversive agenda of the [murmur] project:

Bourriaud claims that the new relational models are principled responses to real social misery and alienation. But he acknowledges that the artists he writes about are not concerned with

changing the system of social relations – capitalism, in our language. Relational artists tend to accept what Bourriaud calls “the existing real” and are happy to play with “the social bond” within the constraining frame of the given. Bourriaud tries to put the best face on this kind of practice, characterizing it as “learning to inhabit the world in a better way.”⁴⁷

This description in essence is the code of conduct that the [murmur] project pursues. [murmur] represents quiet activism that does not take a strong public stance against the predominant urban narratives. The project offers an alternative that peacefully co-exists among a plethora of dominant urban, cultural, political, and economic discourses within the city. The utopian nature of relational aesthetics in this instance can be recognized in the [murmur] project. However, this suggests that the goal of [murmur] is to demonstrate that all layers of city narrative are valuable and co-exist in the urban environment. Instead of “stance against” other city narratives, [murmur] encourages and makes accessible stories that enrich the prevailing city narratives by offering new insight into the various urban neighbourhoods.⁴⁸ This insight involves an awareness of the interactions that make up daily life that exists in the shadows of skyscrapers.

Another critique of [murmur] could be inspired by the way in which many theorists question the effectiveness of relational aesthetics to resolve the lack of inter-human relationships within the urban landscape.⁴⁹ Questioning whether [murmur] is successful in encouraging inter-human relationships reveals that is that there is little qualitative feedback in terms of the effect of the [murmur] experience on the viewer. One may only suppose that if a story is truly engaging, a subject may be inspired to continue learning about the history of a community by becoming more actively engaged listening to the people that inhabit the community or by exploring historical associations, many of which also archive oral histories.

By utilizing the critical theories of Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics as a point of departure in the discussion of the [murmur] project, one develops a better understanding of the meaning and significance of the project to urban participants. [murmur] signs indicate spaces in social relations – ‘interstices’ – at

which participants may learn more about the interactions that make up daily life within the urban environment. The [murmur] project offers a gentle critique of the degenerating social relations in the city and the lack of awareness of community history. [murmur] signs reflect Bourriaud's assertion that contemporary artists "fill the cracks in the social bond" through small services rendered and by offering a new mode of sociability. Finally, [murmur] speaks to society's relationship with history, place, and community through the landmarks that are chosen and the stories that are told. Thus, Bourriaud's theories help to examine [murmur] signs as 'signs of life' and markers of relational aesthetics.

While this essay uses relational aesthetics in a theoretical discussion of the [murmur] project, there is much more that can be written about this collaborative art project. For instance, while the project aims to make neighbourhood stories accessible, one could critique the possible barriers to accessibility such as language. Additional questions can be considered, including: whose voices have yet to be included? Are there further "cracks in the social bond" which [murmur] could address? One hopes that this paper may encourage further consideration of the [murmur] project's engagement with communities.

JENNIFER ORPANA is an MA student at the University of Western, Ontario, in the Department of Visual Arts. Her current research interests include photography, museum studies, collaborative art projects, and community outreach.

ENDNOTES

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