

## English

---

### Fabiola Tasca

#### Between Nicolas Bourriaud and Santiago Sierra: antagonism as a relational strategy

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo

**ABSTRACT:** The text articulates approximations and distancing between the work of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra and the theoretical assumptions that guide the notion of relational aesthetics as drawn up by French critic Nicolas Bourriaud. By making use of *Tucumán Arde*'s situation, which is understood as an emblem of the aspirations of imbrication between the art and politics of a generation, the argument hereby presented underlines the aloofness of those aspirations represented by the work of Santiago Sierra, impounded from the term "relational antagonism". This text relies on the relevance of this concept enunciated by British art theorist Claire Bishop as a key to reading the critical character of the polemic artistic maneuvers finished in or through Sierra's work.

**KEYWORDS:** Santiago Sierra. Politics in art. Relational aesthetics. *Tucumán Arde*. Contemporary art.

One of Santiago Sierra's most visually impressive works consists in the word *SUMISIÓN* (submission), excavated in an empty lot at Anapra, a zone marked by conflict, situated at the western end of the city of Juarez, on the Mexico-United States border (Fig. 1). Juarez is one of the most conflicting areas in Mexico and can be considered as representing a series of problems, such as: urban poverty, informal and poorly paid work, immigration, crime and corruption.

The letters, Helvetic-shaped and 15 meters wide each, were dug until they resembled cesspits, with walls and floors covered with concrete to accommodate fuel in its interior and form the word

*SUMISIÓN* in flames. A thousand square-meters word that would burn into flames for half an hour.

The subtitle of the work *Sumisión* (former *Palabra de Fuego*) alludes to the ill-fated intention that the word was written in fire, since the local government, in an act which included the use of public force, prevented the consummation of the proposal.

Terms like "submission", "violence" and others no less troublesome, make up a semantic field for Sierra. Additionally, the adjective "relational" participates in this conceptual landscape. But, although the work embraces the literal establishment of relations between people – the artist, participants of their actions and viewers –, it is clear that these relations do not offer us a human experience of empathy, but rather confronts us with an uncomfortable and hostile proposal, to the extent that certain acts of submission are presented to an audience as works of art.

Far distant from relational practices developed by critic and French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, which emphasize the potential of art to work in the sphere of human relationships, the work of Sierra seems to not take us anywhere.

Art as a rendezvous is a core issue for Bourriaud, the author of *Relational Aesthetics*, the book that has become an important reference on the international contemporary art circuit. The book was organized in France in 1998 and has been so far translated to many languages. It is a collection of published articles from journals and catalogs that has been developing ever since 1995. In these articles, the author seeks to elucidate what he perceives as the most striking features of a certain 90's production, reaching as far as formulating the concept that the book is named after.

Bourriaud came up with the notion of relational aesthetics from his amity with a group of emerging artists in the 90's, amongst which there were Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Maurizio Cattelan, Vanessa Beeckroft and Dominique González-Foster. Although their works were very different from one another, these artists worked very often collaboratively, sharing the same worries about the relationships between artists, the social sphere and the spectator. Many other artists are in Bourriaud's book, which, although being acclaimed as a reference on the subject, does not develop an analysis of the work of these artists. What we see in *Relational Aesthetics* is more a diagnosis of the field of artistic production than an analytical approach about these works.

It is important to notice that Bourriaud tries to mark an irreducible distance between the practices of the years of 1990 and 1960, highlighting convergences and divergences.

---

E. N. This article was based on a chapter from Fabiola Tasca's PhD thesis *Por um conceito do político na arte contemporânea: o fator Santiago Sierra*, presented to the Fine Arts School (EBA) of University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in June of 2011. A draft of the ideas presented here was published in the e-journal A-Desk, no. 27, Barcelona, in June 10, 2008, under the title of "Bourriaud vs. Sierra: Santiago Sierra en la 27a Bienal de São Paulo".

English

The formation of social relations is a historical constant since 1960. The 90's resume this problematic, but without trying to come up with a definition of art, which was crucial to the decades of 1960 and 1970. The question is no longer to extend the limitations of art, but to test its resilience in the global social field. (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 43.)

Regarding Hal Foster's question, "how and where should political art be inserted?" (FOSTER .1996, p. 188.), Bourriaud would say that "social utopias and revolutionary hope gave way to everyday microutopias...", explaining that his understanding of the political character of the practices of 1990 is associated with the intention "to learn to inhabit the world better, rather than to try to build it from a preconceived idea of historical evolution" (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 18.). Inhabiting the world in a possible way instead of having the will to change it; would that be a reading of Bourriaud's book?

According to one perspective, this reading might sound too modest, and, to some, too convenient. So this is what one may expect from art? No riots or dissatisfaction, no ambition to change, just the discrete and safe movement of better inhabiting the world. Better to whom? That is questionable. This perspective would encompass Bourriaud's posture as vain, unable to promote revolution.

A revolution? Is that what this is about?

If we go back to the year of 1968, to an event we may consider symbolic, of the aspirations of cross between the art and politics of a generation, we will find ourselves facing an ensemble of artists that encompass the political as the work's proposal. For the artists involved in *Tucumán Arde* (Fig. 2) in '68, in Buenos Aires and Rosario, "political" means the engagement of an artist to a social, economic and political reality in which the artist wished to intervene.<sup>1</sup>

*Tucumán Arde* consisted in a series of actions that culminated in the public exhibition of visual, tactile and audible materials – in the context of a Union – that testified a situation of imperfectly developing that was over the province of Tucumán due to the closing of sugar mills and other measures taken by the government of Onganía. It was the biggest collective enterprise of Argentine avant-garde artists in the 90's. It was a collective proposal of production of a counter-informational circuit that contradicted Onganía's military government official propaganda on the situation, and was driven at a distinct audience from the usual art public, coming between an audience which included popular sectors.<sup>2</sup>

*Tucumán Arde* represented the culmination of a series of situations that, throughout the year of 1968, brought Argentine political artists closer. The movement, called *Itinerário de 68*, is a sequence of productions and public interventions carried out between April and December this year—reveals a growing estrangement of artists in regards to art institutions, until the definitive breakup exemplified with the exhibition.

The social problem caused by the closing of the sugar mills [in Tucumán], the consequent mass unemployment and protests of the population conducted by a combative trade union sector were questions that formed part of the political agenda these days.<sup>3</sup>

"These days" refers to the time when "everything was political", an era during which it was believed that everything concerned the powerful ones and their organization. An era that fought the artistic autonomy status, understood as the absence of social function, and evaluated the "quality" of art because of its effectiveness. María Angelica Melendi stresses that there was a wave of outrage washing down the decade,

a trait that aligned the Cuban revolution, the *Black Panthers*, the movements against the Vietnam war, the Bolivian *guerrilla*, May 68, the student revolution that exploded throughout the continent, from Tlatelolco and Berkeley to Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Montevideo, Córdoba, Buenos Aires. [...] The power of art as a political thing has never been so credited. (MELENDI, 1999, p. 134-135)

Nelly Richard defines the character of art and political relationship we have found diagrammed in the context of the 60's, in Latin America, as a polarization between "art of compromise" and "art of vanguard":

"Art of compromise" responds to the ideological world of the 60's in Latin America and requests that the artists put their creativity at the service of the people and the revolution. Therefore, not only the artist must fight against the forms of bourgeois art of alienation and the commodification of artwork, but should also help in the process of social transformation that "represents" (speaking for and in place of) the class interests of the privileged subject of revolution: the people. [...] According to that period's art of sociology, inspired by Marxism, the work should be a reflection of society, and a vehicle for the message of the artist that spells out her social engagement through the art conceived as an instrument of cultural agitation that must be functional to political activism. The theoretical tradition of Marxism which informs the thinking about art and society of the year of 1960 is characterized by a "content"

1. For further understanding of *Tucumán Arde*, consult Longoni and Mestman, 2008.

2. More than a thousand people came (LONGONI; MESTMAN, 2008, p. 200).

3. "El problema social causado por el cierre de los ingenios azucareros, el consiguiente desempleo masivo y las protestas de la población acaudillada por un combativo sector sindical, eran cuestiones que formaban parte de la agenda política de esos días." (LONGONI; MESTMAN, 2008, p. 180).

approach to work: a work whose (theme) pictures should form an aligned worldview with the people and the revolution as transcendental meanings. For the compromised rhetorics of art, ideology – contents and representation – precedes the work as if it should illustrate, be put into images.<sup>4</sup> (RICHARD, 2010)

However, although we are able to find elements that encompass Richard's characterization in *Tucumán Arde*, one should understand it precisely in these terms, since the "itinerary of 68 had put into play an intervention of art as action, rather than as illustration" (LONGONI; MESTMAN, 2008, p. 314). *Tucumán Arde* is best characterized as "art of vanguard", in the sense that it "does not seek to reflect social change, but anticipate and prefigure it, using aesthetic transgression as an anti-institutional detonator"<sup>5</sup> (RICHARD, 2010).

In its communication on the first national meeting of art of vanguard, in Rosario, León Ferrari explains what the artists involved in *Tucumán Arde* expected of art, at that moment, and how they understood it as action:

Art will be neither beauty nor novelty; art will be efficacy and disturbance. An accomplished work of art will be that which, in the artist's environment, can make an impact similar to the one caused by a terrorist act in a country struggling for its freedom.<sup>6</sup> (FERRARI, 2005, p. 27)

As accounted by Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman (2008, p. 157), people from Rosario and Buenos Aires involved in *Tucumán Arde*<sup>7</sup> discussed a "new aesthetic" that encompassed their inten-

tions in promoting a merge between art and life; what implied for them to conceive an art entered into a process perceived as revolutionary. Under such a perspective, therefore, they resume something of the ideal of historical vanguards to bring art into the vital praxis.<sup>8</sup>

However, the work categorized as relational databases aren't interested in expanding the boundaries of art. Relational art seeks to establish encounters between people, in which the meaning is elaborated collectively rather than being drafted into the private space of individual consumption. Instead of a one-to-one relationship between the work and the spectator, situations in which viewers are addressed as a collective are proposed. The work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, in which he cooks vegetables or noodles to people in museums or galleries, is an example of such.

According to Claire Bishop's comment (2004, p. 56), in *Untitled (Still)*, held in 1992 at 303 Gallery, New York (Figure 3), Tiravanija moved everything he found in the Office of the gallery and in the warehouse into the exhibition space, including the Director, who was required to work in public, amongst the food and dinner smells. In the warehouse, he installed something that was called by one reviewer a temporary refugees' kitchen, with paper plates, plastic cutlery, kitchen utensils, gas canisters, two tables and some folding stools. In the gallery, he cooked *curries* for visitors and utensils and packages of food became the art that was displayed when he wasn't there.

Many critics and Tiravanija himself stress that this involvement of the audience is the main focus of the work. The food is a mediating element, something that allows a relationship of coexistence between the audience and the artist. Bishop points out that we perceive in Tiravanija the desire to not only destroy the distinction between the social and institutional spaces, but between the artist and the spectator. The phrase "*lots of people*" appears regularly on their lists of materials, and we are offered the chance to create a temporary community in many of these works.

As explained by Bishop, what underlies the theory around relational art, in which the work is considered a social form, capable of producing human relations, is the premise that certain participative proposals are superior to the optical contemplation of an object. "As

4. El "arte del compromiso", que responde al mundo ideológico de los 60 en América Latina, le solicita al artista poner su creatividad al servicio del pueblo y la revolución. El artista no sólo debe luchar contra las formas de alienación burguesas del arte y la mercantilización de la obra. Debe, además, ayudar al proceso de transformación social "representando" (hablando *por* y *en lugar de*) los intereses de clase del sujeto privilegiado de la revolución: el pueblo. [...] Para la sociología del arte de esa época, una sociología de inspiración marxista, la obra debía ser *reflejo de la sociedad*, vehículo del mensaje del artista que explicita su compromiso social a través del arte concebido como un instrumento de agitación cultural que debe serle funcional a la militancia política. La tradición teórica del marxismo que informa el pensamiento sobre arte y sociedad de los años 60 se caracteriza por una aproximación más bien "contenidista" a la obra: una obra cuyas figuras – temáticas – debían subordinarse a una visión de mundo alineada con el pueblo y la revolución como significados trascendentales. Para la retórica del arte comprometido, la ideología – contenido y representación – precede a la obra como el *dato* que ésta debe *ilustrar*; poner en imágenes. (RICHARD, 2010).

5. "A diferencia del arte comprometido, el arte de vanguardia no busca *reflejar* el cambio social (un cambio ya dinamizado por la transformación política de la sociedad) sino anticiparlo y prefigurarlos, usando la transgresión estética como detonante anti-institucional". (RICHARD, 2010).

6. "El arte no será ni la belleza ni la novedad, el arte será la eficacia y la perturbación. La obra de arte lograda será aquella que dentro del medio donde se mueve el artista tenga un impacto equivalente en cierto modo a la de un atentado terrorista en un país que se libera". (FERRARI, 2005, p. 27).

7. The situation of *Tucumán Arde* was intended to generate a circuit of counter information that denied the official propaganda of the government of Onganía. The proposal of the event was to awaken the consciousness of moviegoers about the situation of Tucumán, as opposed to the official propaganda, which hid the problems in the region.

8. The prospect of inserting *Tucumán Arde* in the context of conceptual art is controversial. Some researchers consider it a movement that dilutes the critical potential and the political action, which is understood as the culmination of a strong politicization of Argentine artists. The Conceptualismos do Sul/Sur [Conceptualisms of the South] Network – an international platform of work, thoughts and collective positioning gathered in late 2007 by a group of 46 researchers and artists – develops arguments in this sense.

English

a consequence, the work is understood to be a political in implication and emancipatory in effect". However, Bishop asks: "what kind of politics is at stake here?" And rushes to answer: "because the work is inclusive and egalitarian in gesture, "political" here implies an idea of democracy"<sup>9</sup> (BISHOP, 2005, p. 118-119).

However, political theorists quoted by Bishop, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, have been busy in showing that "inclusiveness does not automatically equate with democracy: instead, the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its naturalized exclusions are taken into account and made open to contestation."<sup>10</sup> For these theorists, a democracy does not imply the disappearance of antagonism between people.

Chantal Mouffe clarifies that the goal of democratic politics is to transform the "antagonism" by which relations are established, in terms of friend/enemy, in "agonism" by which the other is no longer perceived as an enemy, but as a rival: "as someone whose ideas we're going to fight, but whose right to defend such ideas we're not going to question"<sup>11</sup> (MOUFFE, 2007, p. 19). In this sense, politics are far from being understood as a set of initiatives neutral techniques and procedures. Rather than that, it is a field where "the political" underlies as the dimension of antagonism present in every relationship.

Mouffe proposes a distinction between "the political" and "politics", punctuating that the first term is connected to the dimension of antagonism inherent in every human society.

[An antagonism that] can take multiple forms and arise in very diverse social relations. "Politics", in their turn, refers to the set of practices, discourses and institutions that strive to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially controversial, since they are affected by the "political" dimension.<sup>12</sup>

To deny this dimension of antagonism doesn't make it disappear, only leads to impotence on recognizing their different manifestations and on dealing with them. This implies that a democratic

approach have to accept the indelible character of antagonism.<sup>13</sup>

As an elaboration in this sense, the work of Santiago Sierra seems exemplary. Unlike the emphasis on coexistence, in partnerships, in trade, in collaborations, Sierra invests in what Claire Bishop describes as "relational antagonism": a project of display of the uncomfortable relations that are characteristics of life under advanced capitalism.

To the extent that, as Mouffe Chantall clarifies, "the political" is not something located in a concrete landmark, but rather something that arises from any relationship, I believe the work of Sierra establishes a space for this emergency of the political, in accordance with the antagonism suggested by Mouffe.

There is nothing further away from Sierra's project than the ideas developed by Bourriaud: the assertion that art offers tools to understand the world in a different and, let us say, positive manner, and it may change one's perception of reality whilst allowing one to create new forms of sociability, offering alternatives to the dominant models like contemporary capitalism. And this is an important issue: the relational art seems to be understood by Bourriaud as a practice that lies outside the spectrum of market relations and capitalist that arranges everyday life. How could this be a possibility? An exhibition of art is understood as a space of swap open to the participation of those involved.

This is exactly the nature of contemporary art exhibition in the field of trade representations: it creates open spaces, generates a rhythm contrary to durations that organize everyday life, favors a kind of human exchange different from "communication zones" that are forced upon us. (BOURRIAUD, 2009, p. 23)

Claire Bishop did not seem to be convinced by this. She was very determined to criticize the work of Tiravanija and Liam Gillick and the speculation towards relational art by Bourriaud. She questions the kind of relations of change that are established in events such as Tiravanija's dinners. It is convenient to reproduce here Jerry Saltz's report in *Art in America* about his experience with Tiravanija's work at 303 Gallery:

At 303 Gallery I regularly sat with or was joined by a stranger, and it was nice. The gallery became a place for sharing, jocularity and frank talk. I had an amazing run of meals with art dealers. Once I ate with Paula Cooper who recounted a long, complicated bit of professional gossip. Another day, Lisa Spellman related in hilarious detail a story of intrigue about a fellow dealer trying,

9. "As a consequence, the work is understood to be political in implication and emancipatory in effect. But what kind of politics is at stake here? [...] Because the work is inclusive and egalitarian in gesture, 'political' here implies an idea of democracy". (BISHOP, 2005, p. 118-119).

10. "[...] inclusiveness does not automatically equate with democracy: instead, the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its naturalized exclusions are taken into account and made open to contestation." (BISHOP, 2005, p. 119).

11. "como alguien cuyas ideas vamos a combatir pero cuyo derecho a defender dichas ideas no vamos a cuestionar". (MOUFFE, 2007, p. 19).

12. "puede adoptar múltiples formas y puede surgir en relaciones sociales muy diversas. La 'política', por su parte, se refiere al conjunto de prácticas, discursos e instituciones que intentan establecer un cierto orden y organizar la coexistencia humana en condiciones que siempre son potencialmente conflictivas, ya que se ven afectadas por la dimensión de 'lo político'". (MOUFFE, 2007, p. 18).

13. "Negar esta dimensión de antagonismo no la hace desaparecer, solo lleva a la impotencia al reconocer sus distintas manifestaciones y tratar con ellas. Esto explica que un enfoque democrático tenga que aceptar el carácter indeleble del antagonismo" (*ibidem*).

unsuccessfully, to woo one of her artists. About a week later I ate with David Zwirner. I bumped into him on the street, and he said, “nothing’s going right today, let’s go to Rirkrit’s”. We did, and he talked about a lack of excitement in the New York art world. Another time I ate with Gavin Brown, the artist and dealer... who talked about the collapse of Soho—only he welcomed it, felt it was about time, that the galleries had been showing too much mediocre art. Later in the show’s run, I was joined by an unidentified woman and a curious flirtation filled in the air. Another time I chatted with a young artist who lived in Brooklyn who had real insights about the shows he’d just seen.<sup>14</sup>

Bishop’s criticism is based at pointing out that, although there is debate and dialogue in Tiravanija’s culinary pieces, there are not enough friction, tension, or any other term that qualified it as democratic. The members of this temporary community, instituted by Tiravanija’s action, already identified each other, insofar as they have in common the fact they all belonged to the art world.

Everyone has a common interest in art, and the result is art-world gossip, exhibition reviews, and flirtation. Such communication is fine to an extent, but it is not in and of itself emblematic of ‘democracy’. To be fair, I think that Bourriaud recognizes this problem—but he does not raise it in relation to the artists he promotes: ‘Connecting people, creating interactive, communicative experience’, he says, ‘What for? If you forget the ‘what for?’ I’m afraid you’re left with simple Nokia art—producing interpersonal relations for their own sake and never addressing their political aspects.’ I would argue that Tiravanija’s art, at least as presented by Bourriaud, falls short of addressing the political aspect of communication.

Néstor García Canclini also criticizes Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics, arguing that he lacks a more solid social theory and, soon, a more complex reflection. As Bishop, his disagreement focuses on the quality of relationships imposed by relational exercises described by the French critic.

Temptation arises in the face of the unification of world without an unifying account, as in fundamentalism (and otherwise in relational

aesthetics), kicking the harmonious communities where each one occupies its own place in its ethnicity or class, or in a conceived artistic field.<sup>15</sup>

Miguel Ángel Hidalgo Garcia puts in doubt Bishop’s arguments, asking: “Is [the] art of Sierra and Hirschorn really more ‘political’ than Tiravanija’s? Is the community created in the work entirely absent of relational conflict or difference, as ensured by Bishop?”<sup>16</sup> And does it criticize Bishop’s interpretation of Tiravanija’s work, since it is exclusively based on the reading of a curator (Nicolas Bourriaud), and not in an effective movement analysis of the work of the artist. Also Liam Gillick (2006), in response to Bishop’s criticism, rebuts the reading, accusing it to have been based on a questionable critical methodology, insofar it makes use of texts from periodicals and catalogs (usually more superficial and quick), when it comes to talk about his work and Tiravanija’s while it is more systematic when arguing in favor of Sierra and Hirschorn.

Gillick’s remarks are true, but I believe that the target of Bishop’s criticism is the theoretical production by Nicholas Bourriaud. Tiravanija and Gillick appear as exemplary moments in which this criticism can be outlined and become visible.

On Hidalgo Garcia’s suggestion that the community created in relational work is also populated by conflict and difference, I would say that it is a possibility, but the point is that Bourriaud does not approach it under this perspective and, in this sense, any inference is already a remake of the description of Bourriaud’s project.

If we consider, then, that there is something about idealization in relational aesthetics, I propose that we analyze one of Sierra’s works that goes against the idealization. The work displays certain political aspects of communication in an exemplary manner. It is *11 People Paid to Learn a Phrase* (Figure 4), done in the *Casa de la Cultura de Zinacantán*, featuring eleven Tzotzil women who were paid to say to a video camera a sentence they did not understand, since they didn’t fully understand Castilian Spanish. Sierra hired the women for two dollars each to sit in the courtyards of *Casa de la Cultura de Zinacantán*, located at a municipality belonging to the State of Chiapas. They were wearing their traditional outfits and repeated the following self-referential phrase: “I am being paid to say something, the meaning of which I do not know”.

14. “At 303 Gallery I regularly sat with or was joined by a stranger, and it was nice. The gallery became a place for sharing, jocularly and frank talk. I had an amazing run of meals with art dealers. Once I ate with Paula Cooper who recounted a long, complicated bit of professional gossip. Another day, Lisa Spellman related in hilarious detail a story of intrigue about a fellow dealer trying, unsuccessfully, to woo one of her artists. About a week later I ate with David Zwirner. I bumped into him on the street, and he said, “nothing’s going right today, let’s go to Rirkrit’s”. We did, and he talked about a lack of excitement in the New York art world. Another time I ate with Gavin Brown, the artist and dealer... who talked about the collapse of Soho – only he welcomed it, felt it was about time, that the galleries had been showing too much mediocre art. Later in the show’s run, I was joined by an unidentified woman and a curious flirtation filled in the air. Another time I chatted with a young artist who lived in Brooklyn who had real insights about the shows he’d just seen. BISHOP, Claire. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. October, Massachusetts, n. 110, fall 2004, p. 67.

15. “Ante el desorden del mundo sin relato unificador surge la tentación, como en los fundamentalismos (y de otro modo en la estética relacional), de retroceder a comunidades armoniosas donde cada uno ocupe su lugar, en su etnia o su clase, o en un campo artístico idealizado.” (CANCLINI, 2010, p. 232).

16. “¿es realmente el arte de Sierra o Hirschhorn más ‘político’ que el de Tiravanija? ¿está la comunidad creada en la obra relacional totalmente ausente de conflicto o diferencia, como asegura Bishop?.” (HIDALGO GARCIA, 2005).

English

As a result of this action, a video documenting it was produced. The video begins with the empty bench seats of *Casa de la Cultura*, the stationary camera documents the occupation of these seats by women. They arrive gradually, with their traditional attire, and one or two children also come up in the scene. There is a man, non-indigenous, that we can with his back to the viewer, orienting women. Then he disappears from the frame and we only hear his voice repeating over and over again the phrase for the women to repeat after him. The women obey the command, amidst laughter and with some difficulty, they shyly repeat the text.

There is no communication playing in Sierra's piece, only submission. Sierra's piece shows us that language is "an instrument of power and of action as much as communication". (BOURDIEU; EAGLETON, 1996, p. 295) It is the instrument of a symbolic violence,<sup>17</sup> as coined by Pierre Bourdieu. What we see in Sierra's piece is the dimension of antagonism that, as emphasized by Mouffe, is the base of the political scope. The piece highlights the process of imposition of the dominant language over the afflicted, as noted by Cuathémoc Medina (2005. p. 110). Medina does a careful analysis of this work, using it as an example that Sierra's "political" can only be grasped if you look at the lack of morale in the actions it undertakes. Medina is arguing against some critics that address severe considerations of Sierra's work, due to the absence of "good intentions" in his procedures. Critics like Jerome Du Bois, Franklin Einspruch, or Cecilia Fajardo, the curator and art historian from Venezuela, assume a moral or political justification would have to be a logic part of the structure of Sierra's work. However, Medina's argument consists in emphasizing that this artist's work is political precisely because, on failing to include any trace of determined political militancy, it refuses to make allusions to any form of redemption.

We are therefore at the antipodes of the "political" as understood and articulated in *Tucumán Arde*. The Argentine artists of 68 do not only act according to certain assumptions, but also articulate them theoretically, explaining what they themselves understand as the place of art in society. In the Statement made by the avant-garde artists of the Committee for Artistic Action of the CGT (General Confederation of Workers) of the Argentines sets out the question of the function of art in capitalist society:

It will be said that what we propose is not art. But, what is art?

17. Symbolic violence is a concept devised by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and defines a form of coercion rooted in the recognition of a determined imposition, whether economic, social or symbolic. An imposition that denotes how the dominant discourse leads individuals to position themselves in a certain way.

Is it perhaps an elite form of pure experimentation?

Is it a matter of works that claim to be caustic, but actually meet the needs of the bourgeoisie that consume them?

Is art perhaps the words in books and the books in the libraries?

Dramatic actions on celluloid and on stage and these media in movie and other theaters?

The images in pictures and the pictures in the art galleries?

All quiet, in order, in a bourgeois, conformist order; all useless.

We would like to restore the words, the dramatic action, and the images, to places where they can fulfill a revolutionary role, where they will be useful, where they can be turned into "arms for the struggle".<sup>18</sup>

The diagnosis that these artists perform of the contemporary situation of art, at that moment, stressed the artist's isolation in the face of a complex and slow historical process that is responsible for the loss of its social function, a consequence of the divorce between artists and the society in the 19th century.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, Aracy Amaral presents quite congruent considerations with the calls of the artists involved in *Tucumán Arde*: "And as long as art doesn't rediscover its social function, it will continue in the service of the ruling classes, that is, those who hold economic and, therefore, political power" (AMARAL, 2003, p. 3).

The undeniable links between art and economic power or between art and ruling classes also serve as substance to the artistic production, as in Hans Haacke, as in Santiago Sierra, as in the production of art of institutional criticism, thus constituting an artistic production that feeds itself from the reflection about its limits and antinomies. If we consider that the access to art is a privilege of certain social circles, we can, in a sense, agree with Amaral and realize that art serves the interests of class distinctions that accumulate

18. "Se dirá que lo que proponemos no es arte. ¿Pero qué es arte?

¿Lo son acaso esas formas elitistas de la experimentación pura?

¿Lo son acaso las creaciones pretendidamente corrosivas, pero que en realidad satisfacen a los burgueses que las consumen?

¿Son arte acaso las palabras en sus libros y éstos en las bibliotecas?

¿Las acciones dramáticas en el celuloide y la escena y éstos en los cines y teatros?

¿Las imágenes en los cuadros y éstos en las galerías de arte?

Todo quieto, en orden, en un orden burgués y conformista; todo inútil.

Nosotros queremos restituir las palabras, las acciones dramáticas, las imágenes a los lugares donde puedan cumplir un papel revolucionario, donde sean útiles, donde se conviertan en 'armas para la lucha'." (LONGONI; MESTMAN, 2008, p. 236).

19. Aracy Amaral explains: "Prior to the artificer-artist separation, the one who started as an apprentice in a crafts corporation aimed at their own professionalization for one set goal: to be a royal painter, portraitist of the bourgeoisie, goldsmith, sculptor of commemorative pieces of personalities or events, producer of stained glass, furniture, constructor of images, upholsterer for luxurious environments, book illustrator, decorator, etc. From the 19th century on, after the Industrial Revolution and the advent of photography, we observed a change in the social function of art, and we saw artists (already precursors of a dysfunction?) that, while aiming at the sale of its production for its survival, paint in pure speculation (as the Impressionists did), without immediately concerned with the fate of their work". (AMARAL, 2003, p. 4).

cultural and financial capital. However, in another sense, isn't it possible that saying that art is at the service of the ruling classes would be to understand it narrow-mindedly and restricted to the complex role that art plays (or could play) in contemporary society?

In other words, I aim to question the claim for a "social function" of art. What I want to consider here is the possibility of art of developing a project for radical criticism against the capitalist bourgeois society, moved by an absence of social function, which I understand as something that points out an instrumental character of art. This is a risky tackle at the subject, since it seems to aim at disposing of any approaches to a relationship between art and society that are actually very welcome. But, my intention is merely to point to the concept of autonomy of art as a concept that deserves attention, if we are to assess the possibilities of the politicization of art.

Some will argue that the artist, as a producer of luxury goods, cannot articulate this radical critique the bourgeois capitalist society which is already part of the system it wants to criticize. But this is only reasonable if we consider an understanding of critique that takes for granted the distancing as a necessary condition for its exercise. In this regard, Nelly Richard brings relevant contributions:

It is true that the notion of *distance* – so crucial to the critical spirit – has become doubtful: there is no externality to capitalism because the system itself is a pure contiguity and promiscuity of signs invaded by its own branches of power and market. This means that there is no opportunity for art to distance itself, in matters of critic, from social-economics and techno-culture, thus occupying a crossing – *internal, as to the system* – from which the experience of seeing and thinking differs qualitatively from the programmed experience by dominant serialization modes? I don't think so. The critical and aesthetic must face the task of fostering a relationship in a sense to organize the materials of perception and consciousness according to alternate designs to those that are governing ordinary communication.<sup>20</sup> (RICHARD, 2010).

The relationship between art and politics is, therefore, an articulation understood distinctly at different times, in different historical artworks and in different critical readings. For the Argentine artists of 68, political art consisted of art made in the service of the socialist

20. "Es cierto que la noción de *distancia* – tan crucial para el espíritu crítico – se ha tornado dudosa: ya no habría externalidad al sistema capitalístico porque el sistema mismo es pura contigüidad y promiscuidad de signos cuyas ramificaciones de poder y mercado lo invaden todo. ¿Quiere decir esto que ya no existe oportunidad para el arte de desmarcarse críticamente de lo económico-social y de lo tecno-cultural, ocupando una franja – *interna al sistema* – donde la experiencia de mirar y pensar difiera cualitativamente de la programada por los modos de serialización dominante? Creo que no. A lo crítico y lo estético les incumbe la tarea de estimular una relación con el sentido que organice los materiales de la percepción y la conciencia según diseños alternativos a los que rigen la comunicación ordinaria." (RICHARD, 2010).

revolution. For Nicolas Bourriaud, acting amid intersubjective relations is developing a political project. For Claire Bishop, intersubjective relations presuppose more roughness, more conflict, more questioning in order to be constituted in relationships that involve the "political".

Suddenly, I thought of the place that Santiago Serra's "politically incorrect" work could have occupied on the 27th. Bienal de São Paulo, articulated around the theme "Como viver junto" (How to Live Together)". Considering the "relational antagonism" promoted and reiterated as a strategy in his work, I had envisioned that his participation in this Biennial would be something like this essential question: Whether or not does one want to live with others.

## REFERENCES

- AMARAL, Aracy. *O dilema da desfunção da arte*. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Arte para quê? A preocupação social na arte brasileira, 1930-1970: subsídios para uma história social da arte no Brasil*. São Paulo: Studio Nobel, 2003.
- BISHOP, Claire. Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. *October*, Massachusetts, n. 110, fall 2004, p. 51-79.
- BISHOP, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre; EAGLETON, Terry. *A doxa e a vida cotidiana: uma entrevista*. In: ZIZEK, Slavoj (Org.). *Um mapa da ideologia*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 1996.
- BOURRIAUD, Nicolas. *Estética relacional*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2009.
- CANCLINI, Néstor García. *La sociedad sin relato: antropología y estética de la inminencia*. Buenos Aires, Katz Editores, 2010.
- FERRARI, Leon. El arte de los significados. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Prosa Política*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, 2005, p. 27.
- FOSTER, Hal. *Recodificação: arte, espetáculo e política cultural*. São Paulo: Casa editorial paulista, 1996.
- GILLICK, Liam. A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics". In: *October Magazine*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n. 115, p. 95-106, 2006.
- HIDALGO GARCIA, Miguel Ángel. Curatorial Utopia. *Agência Crítica*. 2005. Available in: <[http://agenciacritica.net/archivo/2005/10/curatorial\\_utop.php#comments](http://agenciacritica.net/archivo/2005/10/curatorial_utop.php#comments)>. Access in: 28 nov. 2010.
- LONGONI, Ana; MESTMAN, Mariano. *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde": Vanguardia artística y política en el 68 argentino*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2008.
- MEDINA, Cuauhtémoc. Una ética obtenida por su suspensión.

English

In: *Situaciones artísticas latinoamericanas*. San José, Costa Rica: TEOR/ética, 2005.

MELENDI, Maria Angélica. *A imagem cega: Arte, texto e política na América Latina*. 1998. 521 p. Tese (Doutorado em Literatura Comparada) - Faculdade de Letras, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 1999.

MOUFFE, Chantal. *Prácticas Artísticas y democracia agonística*. Barcelona. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona y Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2007.

RICHARD, Nelly. Lo político en el arte: arte, política e instituciones. *Esfera Pública*, 28 de fevereiro de 2010. Available in: <<http://esferapublica.org/nfblog/?p=7696>>. Access in: 24 feb. 2011.

### CAPTIONS OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The images in this article can be viewed in the version in Portuguese.

Figure 1. Santiago Sierra, *Sumisión (formerly, Palabra de Fuego)*, Anapra, Juarez City, Chihuahua, Mexico, October 2006 to March 2007.

Figure 2. *Tucumán Arde*. Image of the access corridor to the exhibition in Rosario, Argentina. *Tucumán Arde's* archive (Graciela Carnevale), 1968.

Figure 3. Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Still)*, 303 Gallery, New York, 1992.

Figure 4. Santiago Sierra, *11 People Paid to Learn a Phrase*, Casa de la Cultura de Zinacantán, Mexico, March 2001.

---

**Fabiola Silva Tasca:** Artist and researcher. PhD in Arts from the School of Fine Arts at UFMG. Professor of Guignard School at UEMG. She develops the project *O trabalho de arte como prática de inserção e invenção de contexto* [The work of art as a practice of inclusion and invention of context] (2015-2016), PIBIC / UEMG / CNPq.