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How Are the Concepts Used in Gillian Wearing's Art Reflective of the Relational Art Movement?

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Abstract

This essay examines the question, "How Are the Concepts used in Gillian Wearing's Art Reflective of the Relational Art Movement?" The paper opens as it introduces Relational art as a movement and its context in Contemporary art. With this, the definition and interpretation of Relational art through the writings of curator/art critic Nicolas Bourriaud are examined. The essay then continues to introduce Gillian Wearing, a British artist whose work is reflective of the Relational art movement. With research and investigation, the presence of Relational art in Gillian Wearing's pieces is revealed through comparisons of her work to aesthetic, cultural, societal, and political influences.

Beginning with the aesthetic decisions and influences of Wearing's work, the essay discusses how choices in lighting, sets, and film compromise to form a trend which Wearing follows throughout her art. As a result of these trends, Wearing is successful in creating a sense of anxiety within her work, establishing emotional vulnerability in both her subjects and viewers. Immediately following is a section discussing the social and cultural impacts of Wearing's work through examining a variety of pieces whose influence can be felt throughout modern and premodern society. As a final body, the essay then extends to consider the ways which Wearing's work both influences and is influenced by politics. In attempting to normalize societal taboos such as sexual transgression, alcoholism, and criminal behavior, Wearing stands against social ostracization and the segregation of those who stray from the norm.

By the end of the essay, the conclusion is reached that the concepts used in Wearing's artwork are, in fact, reflective of the Relational art movement as they interact with what

Nicolas Bourriaud defines to be core components of Relational art. Such factors include aesthetic, social, cultural and political influences within Wearing's art.

Contemporary Art, Relational Art and Gillian Wearing

During the late 1990's, curator Nicolas Bourriaud was one of the first to attempt to identify a completely new realm of Contemporary art. A domain of aesthetic expression that dealt in the interactions and behaviors of humans through focusing on the way society functions and the complexity that lies within the human race. Bourriaud coined the term "Relational Aesthetics", before soon changing it to "Relational Art"- a title to match the trends he noticed in artistic practices which created art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context. Characterized as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space", (Bourriaud, 1998: 24) Relational art can be seen as a practice in which the artist is the catalyst rather than the center. In short, Bourriaud accredits a number of categories as the core values associated with Relational art, those of which being the aesthetic, social, cultural, and political impacts of the work. In his book *Relational Art*, Bourriaud states that the artistic practice "sets its horizon on the dimension of human interactions and its social context, pointing to the upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural, and political goals", (1998: 24). As stated in a *Tate* article, "He [Bourriaud] saw artists as facilitators rather than makers and regarded art as information exchanged between the artist and the viewers. The artist, in this sense, gives audiences access to power and the means to change the world" (1998: Relational Aesthetics).

Relational art has also proven itself to be acritical component of the Contemporary art community. Bourriaud writes the ways in which Relational art rejects as well as assimilates the important themes Contemporary art is comprised of. Bourriaud states "It is not modernity that is dead, but its idealistic and teleological version" (1998). Through this quote he exclaims that the once ambitious artistic muses of the past have worn thin in Contemporary art. Therefore, art no longer draws its inspiration from such utopian visions and has instead turned to less assuming subjects. "Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modeling possible universes, microcosmic universes of authentic human sociability" (Bourriaud, 1998: 46). In this sense, Bourriaud explains that Relational art is simply a reaction to the complexity of human interaction in our present world, rather than the ideological inspirations of the past.

In addition to defining the practice and assuring its significance, Bourriaud also cited a multitude of artists who he considered to be pioneers of the Relational Art movement. One of which being an English artist by the name of Gillian Wearing, whose work has contributed to the very foundation of Relational art. During the early 1990's, Wearing and her artwork successfully influenced a variety of emerging relational artists. However, the impact of her work is not contained within the 20th century as the presence of her pieces can still be felt today. When looking at the meaning of relational art, it is essential to understand the beliefs and work of the artists behind it. The purpose of this paper is not to understand Relational art as a whole, but rather to divulge how the concepts used in Gillian Wearing's art are reflective of the Relational art movement.

Gillian Wearing and Her Work

Born in 1963 in the town of Birmingham, England, Gillian Wearing is a conceptual as well as relational artist who focuses her work on exploring the public personas and private lives of the human race. Winning the Turner Prize- an esteemed annual award presented to British visual artists- in 1997, Wearing has established a dignified name for herself, as she is featured in revered galleries and museums such as The Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, as well as the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Wearing's work and inspiration draws from fly-on-the-wall documentaries, reality TV, and the techniques of theatre to explore how we present ourselves to the world. Through her often dark and thought provoking art, Wearing has proved herself to be a crucial contributor to the Relational art movement as she influenced and was influenced by aesthetic, social, cultural, and political components of Contemporary and Relational art.

Aesthetic Influence

As defined by Nicolas Bourriaud, the aesthetic choices of artists are some of the many fundamental, core values found in relational art. Throughout Wearing's artistic history, the pioneer artist has continuously followed specific aesthetic trends in her pieces. Through this practice, Wearing has further dignified herself as a relational artist, with work that is both unique and easily identifiable as her own.

Figure 1: Screenshot from "2 into 1", 0:37, Wearing (1997) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Art in the City.

When looking at the various photos and films Wearing has produced, the lighting as well as the filters used within the work

follow a specific trend. Each piece seems to be paired with either very dim, ominous lighting, or the opposite, bright fluorescent lights with harsh undertones. Whether the piece is blinding or understated, Wearing's use of lighting works to instill a sense of anxiety in the viewer. Wearing exercises this practice in her piece *2 into 1* (1997). In collaboration with one English mother and her two sons, Wearing attempts to visually portray the power parents hold over their children in her short film. Shown in the video are two young boys wearing suits while mouthing along to the words of their mothers recording. Here, they mouth expressions of their mother's exasperated love for them "I think Lawrence [her son] is absolutely adorable, he's gorgeous, I love every inch of him…But he's got a terrible temper" (Wearing, 1997: 2:30) In other scenes, the mother sits on a bench against the same wall, but without the company of her two sons, mouthing their words and thoughts, "I love my mother, but she can be very annoying. My dad's got a better way of handling arguments, but my mother is a bit over dramatic. She's very caring but sometimes she doesn't think." (Wearing, 1997: 1:47). While the disconnect between the mother and her sons, as well as the formality of the young boys clothing all contribute to the mood of the video, it's the aesthetic decisions made with Wearing's choice of lighting that subconsciously puts the viewer in an anxious or uncomfortable state of mind.

Beyond the lighting used in her work, Wearing also creates a unique signature with her photographs and videos boasting a worn and tired look. For instance, in her photo series *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say* (1992-93) Wearing features photos with a uniquely aged aesthetic. For this project, Gillian Wearing roamed the streets of London, asking the general public to write down anything they pleased. With their permission, she then photographed them holding their signs and statements. However, the use of worn photos and grainy film is a method that transcends time and the growth of technology as it can also be seen in Wearing's recent works. Pieces such as Wearing's 2011 project *Self-Made*. In her first feature length film, Wearing practices her technique featuring members of the public, and subjecting them to highly uncomfortable and reactive situations. In this particular piece, Wearing exposes her subjects to a multitude of exercises used in method acting, many of which come across as extremely off putting or even disturbing to the viewer.

Figure 2: Photograph from "Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say"- 'Wicked and Wild!', Wearing (1992-93)) Wearing, Gillian. White Hot Magazine. White Hot Magazine, 2012. Web.

Figure 3: Screenshot from "Self-Made", 23:45, Wearing (2011) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Self Made. Gillian Wearing, 2011. Web.

Similar to her nature of featuring the general public in her art, Wearing also continues her aesthetic trends of distressed or worn film, and lighting made to put the audience in a troublesome state of mind.

Figure 4: Screenshot from "Secrets and Lies", 3:43, Wearing (2009) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Art Net. Art Net, 2011. Web.

Amongst her many trademarks, Gillian Wearing's use of manufactured sets in her artwork also contributes to both the visual aesthetics of her pieces as well as the viewer's interpretation of the work. In a review written by Ben Luke, a British art critic working for the London *Evening Standard*, he states that "[Wearing's] use of coloured spotlights, with various closed sets leaves you under no illusions that as well as being art, her work is artifice." (2011). In writing this, Luke suggests that Wearing's inclusion of everyday subject matter, as well as the very real people who are often her protagonists, constantly confuses the viewer in choosing to believe what is real and what has been constructed. One very significant piece in which the aesthetics choices in sets and construed reality skew the viewers interpretation would be Wearing's 2009 short film, *Secrets and Lies*, a sequel to her first piece *Confess all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* or *Confess All* (1994). In her nearly hour-long video, wearing features men and women who answered

Figure 5 Screenshot from "Confess all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian", 4:10, Wearing (1994) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Arts Collection. Arts Council Collection, 2013. Web.

her ad asking for subjects willing to confess their secrets in front of a camera. Their monologues are rich with explicit drama, including murder, incest and sexual transgression. Each subject wears identity-concealing masks, cut out around mouths and eyes. In staging such a fabricated environment, Wearing forces the viewer to choose what to believe. Curator Russell Ferguson argues that *Confess all* "simultaneously involves an 'uncomfortable' level of intimacy and a feeling that 'we have heard nothing we can be sure of" (2012: Whitechapel Gallery). In creating this type of environment throughout her work, Wearing closes the space between private and public life, between reality and fiction.

Whether working with lighting, filters, or sets, Wearing's artistic decisions all work to create an uncomfortable viewing experience for her audience. In doing so, Wearing has made her aesthetic choices integral to her intention: creating a sense of anxiety within her work, and in turn creating emotional vulnerability in both the subjects and viewers. In an interview from *The Telegraph,* a United Kingdom news source, Wearing is described to "have the ability to predict the mood of the moment before it fully crystallizes" (Sooke, 2012) in reference to the mood she sets for her films and photographs, specifically produced to register a desired reaction from her audience.

Social and Cultural Influence

Along with the artist's aesthetic trends and choices, Nicolas Bourriaud also describes the social and cultural impacts of Relational Art to be a paramount aspect of the artistic movement. When examining Wearing's work, a method that remains relevant in both her early and later works is her perpetual documentation and or fabrication of

moments of sociability. Whether Wearing is composing photo series, short films, or full length movies, the subject of her work continues to focus on humans, and the social interactions they share. Through her work socially, Wearing is able to impact the surrounding world culturally.

Figure 6 photograph from "Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say"- 'I'm Desperate", Wearing (1992-93)) Wearing, Gillian. White Hot Magazine. White Hot Magazine, 2012. Web.

In what is considered to be her breakthrough piece, Wearing interacts honestly and socially with the general public through *Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say* or *Signs* (1992-93). While Wearing had been using video and photography since the early 1990s, her 1993 photo series would be the first of many collaborations with members of the public. Whether it be a confession, statement, or thought- Wearing photographed her subjects responses plastered across the white signs. Wearing eventually accumulated over 50 photos, many of which reflect the cultural occurrences of the early 1990's. In a quote taken from a *Tate* article discussing her work, Wearing states that her intercommunication with the public "interrupts the logic of photo-documentary and snapshot photography by the subjects' clear collusion and engineering of their own representation." (2012). And while the individuals photographed did have control of their

Figure 7 Photograph from "Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say"- 'Will Britain Get Through This Recession?', Wearing (1992-93)) Wearing, Gillian. White Hot Magazine. White Hot Magazine, 2012. Web.

own responses, Wearing's relinquishment of artistic control resulted in vulnerably raw and incredibly compelling photos documenting strangers' innermost thoughts. Amongst the number of Wearing's photos which nod to cultural occurrences and recent happenings, is the photo of a man holding a sign reading "Will Britain ever get through this recession?" However most photos portray the personal convictions or emotional confessions of the subjects. One picture depicts a policeman, gripping a sign saying "HELP", while a different photo pictures a smirking, young woman whose sign states "My grip on life is rather loose!" In Wearing's most recognizable photo, a smartly dressed man in a black suit and tie holds a sign which simply reads "I'm Desperate", which is assumed to again, reference the British economic depression of the late 20th century. While the individuality in each response remains evident, a sense of intimacy serves as a driving force connecting each confession to the next. Through her work with *Signs*, Wearing managed to surpass art which is controlled, and began to create work in which she had very little authority in examining the relationship between public image and private identity.

Figure 8 Photograph from "Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say"- 'HELP', Wearing (1992-93) Wearing, Gillian. White Hot Magazine. White Hot Magazine, 2012. Web.

Wearing's societal impact through *Signs* is pivotal. In her monumental piece, each of the 50 plus subjects were not only forced to interact with Wearing herself, but they were also pushed to look inside their own lives and experiences to choose exactly what was right to print upon their signs. But beyond the indisputable effects *Signs* left on

Wearing and her community, the impressions of her work can be seen culturally as well. "It's always important as an artist to find a unique language, and that's why the Signs excited me," says Wearing. "They ["Signs"] felt new. But I didn't realise they were going to be so influential, on everything from advertising to people doing signs for their Facebook page." (Sooke, 2012: The Telegraph). Not only can the influence of Wearing's work be seen in television advertisements or the pages of Facebook, but also in the way society has grown to interpret the concepts of confessions and susceptibility. Now, the use of written words and signs has become a sort of channel for the expression of emotional honesty. As *The Telegraph* observed, there is even a scene in Richard Curtis's 2003 film "Love Actually" where a main character chooses to profess his love through the use of handwritten signs in the streets of London (Sooke, 2012). As Daniel Herrmann, the curator of Wearing's Whitechapel exhibition, states: "Artists are like seismographs registering quakes to come. Gillian coined a number of aesthetics during the Nineties that are mainstream now. She was 20 years ahead of her time" (2012: Whitechapel Gallery).

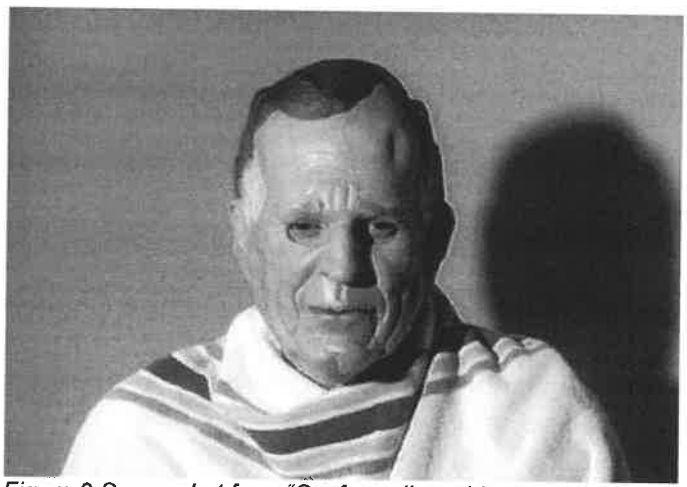

Figure 9 Screenshot from "Confess all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian", 0:53, Wearing (1994) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Arts Collection. Arts Council Collection, 2013. Web.

In addition to pioneering the way artists interact with public subjects, as well as the ways emotional honesty is conveyed, Wearing also succeeded in socially and culturally impacting those around her through her confessional videos. In her 36 minute film *Confess*

all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian (1994) Wearing attempts to channel the bridge between private and public life. The project began when Wearing placed an advertisement in the magazine *Time Out* that read: "Confess all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian". The video consists of ten subjects corresponding with ten separate scenes, each individual confessing their own secret or story. All of the speakers model costume store masks, accompanied by harsh lighting and strong shadows. The disguises vary in personality, some chose to cover their face entirely, while others wore wigs or other accessories to partially cover their face. No matter the preference, the faces of each subject remained only partially visible. This practice in turn liberated the participants, by concealing their identities, to disclose their secrets in an honest and raw tone. While the confessions vary in length and structure, each falls under the category of sexual acts, criminal behavior, or instances of revenge. For example, two of the ten speakers divulge their nights spent with prostitutes, while another recalls the story of how he stole a school computer. In an interview featured by *The Telegraph,* Wearing states "I work within a language that I feel I created," she says, "within that realm of documentary, fiction, portraits, people – all the things that really matter to me." (Sooke, 2012)

Figure 10 Screenshot from "Confess all on video. Don't worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian", 4:42, Wearing (1994) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Arts Collection. Arts Council Collection, 2013. Web.

Much like *Signs*, Wearing's *Confess All* video had an intense, yet extremely unforeseen, cultural impact. After the creation and following popularity of *Confess All*,

Wearing accredits her work as a contribution to the rise of reality television. In a multitude of interviews, Wearing references the reality show "Big Brother", in which the actions and reactions of willing participants are documented for the world to see. "When Big Brother came out, I think my work contributed in some way – or if it didn't contribute, then it was part of something that was going to happen." (Luke, 2012: The Evening Standard) Wearing also comments that "Creating a structure called Big Brother allowed us to see how life was elsewhere – and that's what I do in my work…Intuitively, I find ways to reflect life back, and the audience relates to it" (Luke, 2012: The Evening Standard)

Political Influence

Finally, the political focus as well as their impacts continue to be underlying factors in what is considered to be relational art and what is not. Throughout many of Wearing's pieces, she aims to normalize societal taboos. Sexual transgression, alcoholism, sexuality, regrets, and criminal behavior all adorn Wearing's work. Through including these often ignored and outlandish subjects, Wearing takes a political stand against societal expectation, and the segregation of those who stray from the norm. "My work is relatable because there isn't any judgement. That's one thing I would never do in my work: judge people." says Wearing (Sooke, 2012: The Telegraph).

In her 1997 screenprint titled *The Garden*, Wearing features societal outcasts in a way that neither exposes nor humiliates them. Rather, in this particular piece Wearing stands beside her subjects, as equals. *The Garden* (1997) displays a photograph containing four women wearing only long t-shirts bearing comic statements. The models

are arranged by height (tallest to shortest) and stand against a garden backdrop. The photo is black and white, discluding the colorful statements on the t-shirts that read: "I'm unreliable, immature, undisciplined, insufficient, unorganized, inconsistent AND unmotivated, but I'm FUN", "Am I cool or what!", "I may not be brilliant, but I've got great breasts", and "I'm shy, but I've got a big dick!" Gillian Wearing is pictured amongst the other women wearing a shirt featuring the cartoon character Garfield with the slogan 'Am I cool or what! As for the rest of the models, Wearing invited a transvestite, a prostitute and an escort to choose from a range of t-shirts she had bought, and in the unscripted video from which the screen print was taken, the four participants are seen drinking wine and frolicking about in the garden. The coincidental statements on the t-shirts pose questions about the relationship between a woman's visible/public identity and her private life, especially in terms of gender and sexuality. This concept can be further supported by a statement made within an interview orchestrated by curator Donna De Salvo. Here, Wearing states "We all start making up our minds when we see someone; we all get ideas based on how people look, even though we know these ideas can be knocked out of us as soon as we get close to them or start talking to them" (De Salvo, 1999: Gillian Wearing). Although the statements on the shirts could easily be interpreted in a demeaning or negative way, the photograph is not critiqued as slanderous propaganda. "By including herself in *The*

Figure 11 Screenprint from "The Garden", 3:25, Wearing (1997) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. National Galleries. National Galleries Scotland, n.d. Web.

Garden, Wearing extends the work's exploration of identity into a consideration of her own role. Her collaborators are always consenting and Wearing, aware of her own fallibility, is never patronizing or judgmental, often including herself in a work to prove the point" (Button, 1997: The Turner Prize).

Figure 12 Screenshot from "Drunk", 2:40, Wearing (1999) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Gillian Wearing (1997-9) 'Drunk'. WordPress, 23 Dec. 2011. Web.

Beyond the sexual liberation and empowerment of women, Wearing also turns her political focus to those affected and shamed for their substance abuse in her film *Drunk* (1999). For her video, displayed in black and white across three screen projection, Wearing invited several alcoholics into her studio and filmed their antics and tendencies for over two years. Then, after accumulating the desired footage, wearing strings the film together into a short film, claiming a time of just under 30 minutes. In her video, Wearing depicts the highly intoxicated men and women as they interact with one another. Staggering from side to side, Although Wearing exercises her practice of a constructed environment, and extracted the characters from their regular surroundings, the stark reality of their behavior remains true. While her video leaves room for the redemption of featured characters, Wearing does not

Figure 13 Screenshot from "Drunk", 4:02, Wearing (1999) Wearing, Gillian. Digital image. Gillian Wearing (1997-9) 'Drunk'. WordPress, 23 Dec. 2011. Web.

deliver. Instead, she leaves the audience in a distressed state, with a group of individuals who seem to have hit a dead end, lost in their own self destruction. In doing this Wearing takes her own stand against society's thirst for regulation and redemption, to rid the flaws of all those who are troubled.

It can be easily seen that throughout her work, Wearing frequently interacts with people criticized by society, such as the homeless, transsexuals, drunks, or convicts. In an interview with *Dazed Wearing* has said 'A great deal of my work is about questioning handed-down truths... I'm always trying to find ways of discovering new things about people, and so in the process discover more about myself.' (Oliver, 2011: Dazed). Through this, Wearing uses her art to work politically towards normalizing the social taboo's which inhabit society.

Conclusion

When looking at the meaning of relational art, it is essential to understand the beliefs and work of the artists behind it. Gillian Wearing proved herself to be a visionary, a pioneer leading the Relational Art movement. Through the aesthetic, social, cultural, and political influence of her work, Wearing's art can be directly compared to, and included in the realm of Relational art. Beginning with the aesthetic decisions and influences of Wearing's work, choices in lighting, sets, and film compromise to form a trend which Wearing follows throughout her art. As a result, Wearing creates a sense of anxiety within her work, establishing emotional vulnerability in both her subjects and viewers. When examining the social and cultural impacts of Wearing's work, a variety of pieces, including "Signs" and "Confess all", result in a lasting influence which can be felt

throughout modern and premodern society. Finally, Wearing's work both influences and is influenced by politics through her to normalize societal taboos such as sexual transgression, alcoholism, and criminal behavior. In her art Wearing politically stands against social segregation of those who are different. As a result of Wearing's inclusion of core values associated with the movement, concepts in Wearing's work are in fact a reflection of Relational art as they interact with aspects of aesthetic, social, cultural and political life.

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