

The Ambiguity of Micro-Utopias

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Abstract

“Micro-utopia” is one of the central concepts of relational aesthetics. Nicolas Bourriaud promotes such relational art projects that construct “hands-on Utopias”, “micro-utopias”.

The present paper considers the concept of “micro-utopia” ambiguous and analyses this ambiguity by reconstructing the conceptual framework of relational aesthetics, based on three notions: the concept of “society of the spectacle” (Debord), the concept of artistic critique (Boltanski and Chiapello), and the concept of “pragmatic utopia” (Vieira).

I argue that the concept of micro-utopia as tool of interpretation does not function without any problem. It can be proved on some of the works of Rirkrit Tiravanija, the famous artist of relational art that the ambiguity of micro-utopia leads to conceptual problems within the framework of relational aesthetics. There are concern that Tiravanija’s cooking-performances are utopias only for few, because these events strengthen the exclusivist harmony among the natives of the art world. Then I turn to such artworks that thematise the labour process. In these cases works imagined as alternatives against the current capitalist system illustrate or reproduce the very functioning of capitalism.

The difficulties of the concept of micro-utopia suggest that nowadays we cannot think coherently about the utopia, not even in the world of art which is the land of freedom.

Keywords: micro-utopia, relational art, contemporary art, Nicolas Bourriaud, Rirkrit Tiravanija.