

The Illusion of Inclusivity: Exclusionary Mechanisms and the Dilemma of Public Participation in Relational Aesthetics

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Abstract: The principle behind Relational Aesthetics is the social connectivity to generate artistic significance and proposes an open participatory model as art, interactive in nature to fill up the divide between the conventional art and the ordinary spectators. But in actual practice most of these artistic efforts are not genuinely inclusive. Rather, there would be some discreet and multi-layered obstacles which can prevent authentic involvement of people. This article relies on both theoretical frameworks presented by Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop and has its empirical basis on the examples that took place within the Tate Modern and the Shanghai Biennale and used it as the support of the research. Cultural capital differences, spatial imbalancing of powers, restrictive participation clauses, monopoly of aesthetic discourse, infiltration of market logic, and all other factors combine into a hidden exclusionary mechanism that leaves the population as a whole in a passive and powerless position when participating in an art event. This paper addresses these dilemmas by analyzing the practical flaws of contemporary participatory art, aiming to uncover the surface of empty inclusiveness and offer practical paths for constructing a fair and inclusive public art participation framework.

Keywords: Relational Aesthetics; Exclusionary Mechanisms; Public Engagement; Participatory Art; Inclusive Art.

1. Introduction

In the 1990s, French critic Nicolas Bourriaud first proposed the theory of relational aesthetics, which has been officially included and annotated in the Encyclopedia of China. Bourriaud defines art as a "practical activity based on interpersonal relationships and their social context", with the core being to break from the artist-centered narrative shackles of traditional art, advocating that the construction of artistic meaning cannot be separated from public interaction and participation, achieving equal dialogue with the public and breaking down the barriers between art and everyday life. With the spread of relational aesthetics, its influence has gradually extended to the global art world. Institutions such as Tate Modern and the Shanghai Biennale have launched participatory art projects, with the core promotion orientation of "inclusiveness" and "universal benefit", to attract public participation [1]. The public art project in collaboration between Tate Modern and Uniqlo has always been aimed at "making art accessible to everyone"; the 15th Shanghai Biennale in 2025, with the theme of "Do Flowers Hear the Bees?", is curated with an open and wandering approach to create an atmosphere of natural encounter between the audience and the works. However, Claire Bishop questioned this concept of "inclusivity". The "inclusivity" advocated by relational aesthetics is often superficial, with hidden exclusionary mechanisms that are difficult to detect. These mechanisms are presented through cultural capital differences, spatial layout, and participation restrictions, ultimately limiting the true participation of the general public. This criticism has also become a core issue in contemporary participatory art research. This article takes the practices of Tate Modern and the Shanghai Biennale as the starting point for investigation, combined with Bourdieus cultural capital theory and relying on its publicly available empirical data, to analyze the specific manifestations and reasons for the

formation of exclusionary mechanisms in relational aesthetics, explore the dilemma of public participation, and provide practical references for achieving true inclusiveness in participatory art.

2. Theoretical Presuppositions of Relational Aesthetics and the Construction of "Inclusiveness" Discourse

Bourriaud proposed in his 1998 book "Relational Aesthetics" that the core of this theory lies in "creating a shared presence between people". He believes that art does not have to be isolated and static works, but can become a medium for promoting interpersonal interaction. Artists are not just one-way creators, but can also act as organizers and guides of interactive scenes. He hopes to use art to repair the increasingly distant interpersonal relationships in modern society, with tolerance, equality, and participation as the core, breaking down the long-standing elite barriers in art, allowing ordinary audiences to experience and jointly construct meaning through personal participation, and bringing art closer to the public. The "Transports" at the Bordeaux Museum of Contemporary Art in France in 1996 was the first systematic practice of this idea. Artists such as Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe used interactive works to build open communication spaces [2], allowing equal dialogue between the audience and the artworks, as well as between audiences themselves. This has become a representative starting point for the practice of relational aesthetics.

However, this inclusive definition is bound to have some obvious constraints right off the bat [3]. The view of the general populace as an undifferentiated mass by Bourriaud disregards the real differences in classes and cultures and the distribution of resources. He also does not address other pragmatic matters like education level, artistic literacy, and

cost of time, which pose secret threats to implicit exclusivity in the later process of participation. Claire Bishop harshly criticized this in her book "Artificial Hell". This apparently indiscriminate acceptance is de facto the evasion of the actual social contradictions and the openness form conceals the filtering mechanism, which is inclined towards those who have cultural capital. Art not only fails but also accentuates the inequality within the sphere of art. There is no analysis of the power system in this discourse and finally it could not really change the art world elite tradition.

The concept of inclusiveness in relational aesthetics is typically only on the surface in realistic projects. National studies indicate that most participatory projects in big museums of art include both art students, and professionals. The reason why the percentage of active participation among normal people are low, and the fact that the audience structure is homogeneous, is because there are limits on cultural capital, time, and cognitive level. Most people can only passively watch, making it difficult to achieve deep participation, which intuitively reflects the gap between the concept of relational aesthetics and practical reality that is difficult to bridge.

3. Cultural capital differences: implicit thresholds for public participation

Bourdieu pointed out in "Cultural Capital and Social Alchemy" that cultural capital exists in three forms. The amount of cultural capital that people possess directly affects their ability and opportunities to participate in cultural activities, which is also clearly reflected in the practice of relational aesthetics [4]. The interactive participation advocated by relational aesthetics does not mean free participation without any conditions. People who want to participate in such artistic practices need to have basic aesthetic judgment, artistic common sense, and simple expression ability, all of which rely on the long-term accumulation of cultural capital to gradually form. The cultural capital gap between the general public and cultural elites has become an invisible threshold in participatory art.

According to data released by Tate Modern in 2025, visitors aged under 35 accounted for only 30% of total attendees in its 2025 regular exhibitions. After collaborating with Uniqlo to launch a low threshold interactive project, the proportion of viewers in this age group has risen to 70%. However, most of these young participants have art related learning or practical backgrounds, and it is still difficult for the general public to truly participate in the deep interaction of art [5]. The organizing committee of the Shanghai Biennale announced that the total number of visitors to this exhibition has reached 170,000. As one of the top contemporary art exhibitions in China, its core audience still consists of highly educated individuals and art enthusiasts, while the participation level of ordinary working-class and middle-aged and elderly groups has always been at a relatively low level.

The Silvia Bellezza team from Columbia Business School conducted a special survey of 6935 respondents in the UK, and the results showed that in high-end cultural experiences, cultural capital has a much greater impact on peoples participation behavior than economic capital. Even if the general public enters art venues, they may not be able to integrate into the interactive activities on site due to a lack of cultural capital, and it is even more difficult for them to participate in the construction of artistic meaning. They can only passively observe the works. This implicit threshold for

participation will also be transmitted intergenerationally through family upbringing and educational resource distribution, constantly solidifying the class differentiation in the field of art. This also forms a very intuitive contrast with the inclusive and equal concepts advocated by relational aesthetics.

4. Spatial power and participation clauses: practical manifestations of explicit exclusion

The participatory art practice of relational aesthetics often relies on professional venues such as art museums and art centers. The spatial planning and participation rules of the venues will directly restrict the participation of the general public. The Turbine Hall of Tate Modern is the core exhibition area for participatory art, with interactive projects often located in high-rise exhibition halls. In addition, the on-site signage is not clear enough, making it difficult for ordinary audiences to locate the participating area smoothly [6]. According to public data from the museum, the proportion of visitors under the age of 35 in regular exhibitions is only 30%. After collaborating with Uniqlo to launch a low threshold interactive project, the proportion of this group has risen to 70%. However, the majority of people who deeply participate in the interaction are still those with art learning or professional backgrounds, making it difficult for ordinary people to truly integrate into the complete process of art interaction.

The total number of visitors to the 15th Shanghai Biennale has reached 170,000, and the organizers have launched a total of 30 public education activities. Most of these activities require online reservations in advance, and the process of reservation and on-site check-in is relatively complicated. For ordinary audiences who are not familiar with online operations and do not understand venue regulations, the actual participation threshold is still high [7]. This type of participation setting excludes the working class and middle-aged and elderly groups, and the actual participants are mainly students and young people with flexible time, which is obviously contrary to the inclusive concept advocated by relational aesthetics.

The traditional exhibition requirements of art museums can sometimes be a barrier to participation, including bans on making noise or touching exhibits, which do not correspond to the daily conduct patterns of the population. There are visitors who willingly miss out on the interactive experiences as they are unaware of the venue regulations and fear of being seen as doing something inappropriate. The source of this phenomenon is also the difference in the amount of cultural capital among various social groups. Based on a survey carried out by Silvia Bellezza research team at Columbia Business School on 6935 respondents across the UK, the cultural capital had significantly more influence on the participation behavior in the high-end cultural setting compared to the level of economic capital. Although regular people come inside art places, because of their lack of cultural formation, they can merely view the exhibitions but take no part in its creation of artistic value. The spatial layout, participation process, and cultural capital jointly construct barriers to participation, solidifying the hierarchical differentiation of the art field, and making the concept of equal participation advocated by relational aesthetics difficult to truly implement.

5. Monopoly of Aesthetic Discourse and Market Logic: The Strengthening Path of Exclusion Mechanism

The illusion of inclusiveness created by relational aesthetics will continue to strengthen under the dual effects of aesthetic discourse monopoly and market logic. This illusion will eventually form an exclusionary mechanism that is difficult to break through. The dominant power of aesthetic interpretation has long been held by elite groups such as curators, art critics, and creators. The aesthetic experience and expression of ordinary audiences are often difficult to effectively recognize. Claire Bishop proposed in "Artificial Hell: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship" that many participatory art projects advocate open public expression. The ultimate interpretation of artistic meaning remains firmly in the hands of the elite group. Public participation mostly remains at the formal level and cannot enter the core of meaning construction. The public information of the 15th Shanghai Biennale shows that more than 400 public guided tours were held during the exhibition. The core of the entire tour is the authoritative interpretation of professional practitioners. The personalized aesthetic judgment of ordinary audiences is difficult to incorporate into the artistic interpretation system. The audience can only passively accept established interpretations and cannot participate in the co-creation of artistic meaning [8].

The intervention of commercial capital is constantly eroding the public and inclusive nature of participatory art. The UNIQLO Tate Play project, a collaboration between Tate Modern and Uniqlo, has indeed significantly increased the number of young audiences. The activity design of this project has a clear brand communication purpose and prioritizes serving the needs of commercial cooperation. The genuine participation needs of the general public have been continuously weakened. A study published in *Frontiers in Sociology* in 2025 mentioned that after the entry of commercial capital, many participatory art projects have experienced an imbalance between commercial attributes and public value. The various constraints imposed by sponsors indirectly narrow the scope of participation of the general public and make the exclusivity of the art field more prominent.

The Silvia Bellezza team conducted a survey of 6,935 respondents in the UK. The research results confirm that in high-end cultural experience scenarios, the impact of cultural capital on public participation behavior is much greater than that of economic capital. This conclusion coincides with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. The cultural capital gap between different groups is the core reason for the formation of barriers to artistic participation [9]. This type of gap will be transmitted intergenerationally through the educational environment and family upbringing. The stratification in the field of art has also been continuously solidified as a result. The concept of equality and inclusiveness advocated by relational aesthetics has always been difficult to truly implement.

6. Breakthrough Path: Practical Exploration from "Illusionary Inclusiveness" to "Real Participation"

Resolving the exclusionary structure of relational Aesthetics and solving the problem of public participation should be based on practical experience. The balance between artistic professionalism and public inclusiveness is the key to building a highly practical participation system.

The implementation of tiered participation in projects helps to lower the entry threshold for cultural capital. Interactive forms without professional foundation restrictions can be designed for the general public. The Philadelphia Mural Art Project offers a zero-barrier creative platform for local residents, allowing different groups to achieve cultural identity integration [10]. With the support of the UK KYN Cultural Development Fund in the UK, Cambridge Community Arts has established art inclusion workshops for disadvantaged communities. There is no requirement for professional artistic skills, and the workshops are conducted for 3-hour weekly sessions for 8 consecutive weeks. This normalized model has effectively increased the artistic participation of disadvantaged groups, and the relevant practical results have been included in the official cultural effectiveness evaluation report.

The spatial planning and participation rules of the venue also need to be adjusted accordingly. In July 2025, the Tate Modern optimized its opening hours, not only extending the opening hours every Friday and Saturday to 21:00, but also adding a free interactive experience area in the lobby on the first floor. This adjustment has increased the proportion of young viewers under the age of 35 from 30% to 70%. The 15th Shanghai Biennale can learn from this practice by adding weekend and evening public education activities and streamlining the registration process. The data from the 15th Shanghai Biennale is sufficient to confirm this point: the total number of visitors during the exhibition reached 170,000, and 30 public and educational activities attracted nearly 80,000 participants. Over 400 public guided tours were held, with weekend participation exceeding 60%. The optimization of the opening hours can effectively stimulate the public's enthusiasm for participation.

The monopoly pattern of aesthetic discourse also needs to be eliminated. Art museums can establish a public aesthetic expression platform, by setting up public review zones and opening online communication ports, integrating the aesthetic cognition of ordinary audiences into the art interpretation system, and changing the situation where elites have exclusionary interpretation power.

The coordination between market logic and public value cannot be separated from the clear boundary of commercial sponsorship constraints. A study by *Frontiers in Sociology* in 2025 suggests that excessive involvement of commercial capital can exacerbate the exclusivity of participatory art. It is advisable to establish a commercial sponsorship control mechanism, always with public participation as the core purpose, to prevent art activities from becoming a carrier of commercial promotion.

The implementation of these strategies can break the illusory inclusivity of relational aesthetics, return participatory art to its public nature, and truly serve the entire public [11].

7. Conclusion

Relational Aesthetics takes inclusiveness and public participation as its core theoretical propositions, opening up new paths for the development of contemporary art. But during the implementation stage in reality this theory will evolve into a covert form of exclusionism. Public participation remains largely nominal, and elite domination in artistic practice persists. The inclusive idea they are proposing eventually turns into an illusion that is not based on reality.

The article is based on empirical facts and case studies of both Tate Modern and Shanghai Biennale to provide an overview of the diversity of exclusionary mechanisms. The cultural capital gap represents an implicit participation barrier, whereas the spatial arrangement of the venue and participation regulations represent explicit barriers. Furthermore, the monopoly of artistic language and the market logic penetration creates a superimposition of different components, creating a closed-loop exclusion system. The general public is therefore unable to truly participate in the production and construction of artistic meaning.

Empirical analysis shows that inclusive participation with practical significance cannot be limited to theoretical expression. Researchers need to base themselves on social reality, face up to the resource differences of different social groups, and solve the practical difficulties of public participation by lowering the cultural capital threshold for participation, optimizing the practical plans of art projects, breaking the aesthetic discourse dominance of elite groups, and coordinating the relationship between commercial capital and public culture.

This study only selected two representative art institutions as case samples, and the coverage of the cases is limited, which is also a limitation of the research. Subsequent research can expand the scope of case selection and conduct more detailed investigations in conjunction with more community art practices.

In order for relational aesthetics to truly realize its

theoretical value, it must break through illusions of inclusiveness, address and resolve exclusionary issues in practice, and build a fair and accessible public participation system. Returning art to a public position and serving the general public is also the core essence of achieving long-term development of contemporary participatory art.

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