

Relational Art and the House of Eternal Return

M. Schippling — 7/18/16 - 11/06/16 - v1.3

I live on the outskirts of a small town that is reputed to be the third largest art market, by dollar volume, in the United States. It is the only municipality of note in a 2000 square mile county of 150,000 people and accounts for about half of that population. It has world class restaurants, opera, and chamber music festivals, and is surrounded by stupendous views and exhilarating outdoor activities. It hosts four small specialist colleges, plus the first and foremost center for complex and interdisciplinary scientific study in the world. It has a reputation as a haven for artists and free thinkers.

However, the average age of the residents is over 50, and at last count less than 20% of the art sold is produced locally. I have dropped "Artist" as an occupational description because it's too tiresome to explain that, not only do I not paint coyotes riding into the sunset or crumbling buildings, I can't even draw. Plus I can't buy supplies that I could use to make art here anyway. There's not a single stepper motor on the lot.

I'm a life-long Dadaist and Duchamp-head. However both of those 'movements' are a century old now and are in need of, not recapitulation, but ground up re-formation. I blame them for the prevalence of Look-At-Me and Look-What-I-Found Art. Don't get me wrong, both have their place and expert practitioners, but producing interesting and evocative work out of your personal history and/or detritus you've found by the side of the road is not as easy as it looks.

Nothing is.

So. We are in need of something else. Something completely different. Which is, of course, what Duchamp and the Dadaists thought in their time too.

And, there is something new afoot in my tiny community. Over the past decade a group of mainly young, local, folks has created a collective, under the Dada inspired name of *Meow Wolf*, that produces large Art Installations. This has provided a reason for some to stay in town — and even attracted others to move here — rather than escaping to someplace with a lower average age and decent jobs.

Their latest project has revitalized a semi-industrial area of town that had previously housed some artists' studios but not much actual art. It has employed over one-hundred people in its development and, now, operation. The fact that the whole thing was backed by J.R.R.Martin of Ring of Clones fame — yup, that's two attempted puns — has given it an extra sheen which has attracted

international attention, hundreds of thousands of visitors — yes, they claim more than a 150,000 in the first two months — and much positively glowing press. In place of repetitively descriptive details I will just quote from their own brochure and direct you to a selection of excited reviews:

House of Eternal Return is an interactive art experience featuring a wild new form of non-linear storytelling which unfolds through exploration, discovery, and 21st century interactivity. The experience is appropriate for people of all ages, supplying children with a fantastic world to play within and giving adults a sophisticated artistic experience with narrative depth.

[And here are some reviews to give you a feel for the work itself.](#)

As mentioned in the Hyperallergic review, during the run up and opening there was some of the predictable whinging about gentrification and ruining the purity-of-essence of the region's signature Native and Folk arts. But let's face facts here. This is what (young) artists do. They move into under-utilized areas because they are cheap and then proceed to muddy the waters by mix-n-matching what they find. It's really only the first step in the long conga line of mutations that lead to a Brooklyn or Mission district, which will, of course, eventually back-fire on the artists as well.

But we're not there yet.

Where we are is that an organization of (mainly) Millennials has created a new community (mostly) from scratch and seems to have done it in a way that is (maybe) sustainable.

As the dust settled there were two more thoughtful reviews, addressed to a broader audience, which I found interesting:

[Is This Art Space Backed by "Game of Thrones" Author George R. R. Martin a Force of Good or Evil?](#)

Artnet (online), July 14, 2016

"Like teamLab, the sheer scale of the Meow Wolf effort crosses the line from art collective to art corporation, with the efforts of hundreds of artists melding together into one Gesamtkunstwerk. And like teamLab, the corollary of this upscaling is a self-conscious cultural regression to tactile wonderment...

As an aesthetic, this kind of work is only going to become more and more visible. Because of its lovable DIY roots and genuine success in raking in money for its team, the Meow Wolf model is being proffered, and accepted, as a template for struggling contemporary artists. Almost by nature, art that styles itself as a for-profit entertainment company has to grow, since it is competing in a Game of Thrones-style war of all-against-all for profit and investment and attention."

Meow Wolf: Dawn of a New Art World

Glasstire (online), August 14, 2016

"The House of Eternal Return doesn't feel like recognizable art any more than its visitors feel like recognizable art world people. The people I saw there were tattooed, working class parents out with their kids, teenagers on dates, grandparents peering tentatively into the narrow crawlspaces. The usual black-clad disciples of the high art church? Their hushed reverence is absent..."

These two reviews examine some fundamental issues of Art's purpose and audience. The first hypothesizes a trend to *Big Fun Art* extravaganzas that are sometimes indistinguishable from amusement parks, while questioning the long term efficacy of their focus on financial sustainability: "Is the Amusement Park the future of Art?" This is, in part, an echo of Hal Foster's "[After the White Cube](#)" London Review article which debates the artistic purpose of bespoke destination museums made specifically to house gigantic works by already canonized artists.

The second posits that work like the House is the antidote to this economic subjugation of and/or by the Culture Industry. It also revels in the fact that this self-identified Art Experience is attracting many folks who would seldom-to-never set foot in a traditional art museum, many with their young children in tow, and that they do engage directly with the work.

It may be that these two go hand in hand. By opening its doors to a wider public willing to pay to be entertained, Art may lose its provoking, goading, enlightening, and transcendental function of presenting new and often unpopular ideas to unappreciative audiences. But, like water, Art will find a way. And that way may traverse an entirely different landscape.

In amongst the puff there was one negative review.

To the Meowists: Anything new, pussycat?

Albuquerque Journal, Friday, April 8th, 2016

...the notion that things are not what they seem; that appearances are deceiving; that new realities lurk behind closed doors — even as skillfully conceived and executed as that notion is here — is an old and somewhat faded one.

The writer felt that the giant installation was perfect for a hyper-active nine-year-old — which he was not — though his style suggested that he may have needed a nap anyway. In my humble opinion, although there is something for (nearly) everyone, this is, in the main, true. I came away from my own visit curiously uninspired. None-the-less, it is amazing that over 100 artists — some estimates go as high as 500 — cooperated to create this diverse installation that, in turn, suffers from the fact that over 100 diverse artists each implemented their own vision of an installation.

While the emphasis is on interactivity and play — encouraging visitors to touch and explore the many components that respond in kind, usually with sound — it is fundamentally a charmingly retro-sci-fi-surrealist assemblage of dioramas and wunderkammers in a playground of colored lights and soothing musics. It boils down to being a Rave enabled Disney World, with a similar concentration of underage connoisseurs.

Shortly after the reviewer failed to appreciate things that a young child might, the CEO of the Meow Wolf organization published a list of benefits to the community that had accrued due to their work. It did not mention hyper-active-nine-year-old-art, nor anything else about the installation itself, but the tone of the message indicated that it was, in fact, a response to unspecified criticisms.

[...I have tried to find this post on FaceBook, but FB is a non-replicable medium, so I've failed and will just have to summarize from memory...]

Meow Wolf's benefits to the community

- Creating an organization that employs a large number of people;
- Improving a derelict building in an under-performing area;
- Providing an anchor for other new arts related organizations;
- Drawing customers to nearby businesses.

Given this I can now get to the real point.

In 1998 Nicolas Bourriaud wrote a book in which he hypothesized a new-kind-of-art encompassing:

"...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, Relational Aesthetics, p.113 (definitions)

The form, or medium, of *Relational Aesthetics*, since re-christened *Relational Art*, focuses on the *interactivity* of a piece of art, meaning the interplay between the work and the audience. Of course any old-master painting can be interacted with by simply viewing and responding, but this goes deeper into the relationships created by the artist and the work. On one extreme, say, a community mural painting, the work may not be interactive but the process that produced it is. At another extreme, e.g., Suzzane Lacy's "[The Roof is On Fire](#)", the work is itself the dialog that it fostered. This interactive focus may eliminate many things which are merely reactive, where both sides of the equation remain unchanged. In this respect Relational Art's goals are almost diametrically opposed to that of 'responsive' Big Fun Art, and perhaps Media Art in general.

[Here is my commented and capsulized bibliography for further study.](#)

But what stands out to me is this: While it may not be a completely new-kind-of-art – it has been on the radar since the 1960s and is exemplified by much of feminist performance – it is so out-of-band as to achieve the description: **That's not Art!** which can trace its lineage back through Dada to Leonardo and into antiquity. In this, Relational Art may be exactly what we need to re-form the Dada driven 20th century into something of value to the 21st.

So.

What Meow Wolf has done, and has been doing for a number of years, is create community — were it not for the emphasis on positive cash flow in their presentation, I'd even venture that it could be a step in calming the revolutionaries among us who would tear down the system rather than work within it. They have created an ever broadening community that serves both itself and its accretion of suppliers, food trucks, restaurants, theaters, and performance spaces, that in turn, serves an even larger and more diverse population of here-to-fore less-than-served people.

Thus my point: **It's not the installation, silly. It's the process.** Meow Wolf's real work is in building and maintaining systems and environments through which diverse people are enabled to create, and perhaps even sustain, their own worlds, be they art installations, performances, or food trucks. The odd thing is, I don't know if they realize this themselves. The collective members I have spoken with have focused on various 'cool' aspects of the installation while only mentioning the symbiosis of the group itself, nor has this been emphasized in any of the other press I've seen. So you (may have) heard it here first.

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Michael Schippling is at large in Santa Fe, New Mexico where he builds robots and occasionally helps fight fires. He can no longer describe himself as an *Emerging Artist* as, with each passing year, he is becoming rather more deeply submerged.