§ 1: Overview

In the eighty-eight pages that comprise Postproduction, Nicolas Bourriaud sketches a tentative map through art at the turn of the twenty-first century. It is a continuation of his book Relational Aesthetics, which became an art world hit in 1998 and continues to gather a following with its English translation published in 2002. According to the author, both books take their point of departure in the changing mental space that has been opened by the Internet, but while Relational Aesthetics focused on artists who produced various modes of sociality (such as seminars, games and neighbourly encounters) in order to situate themselves in this abstract space, Postproduction reframes these artistic practices in terms of the questions they raise for artistic patrimony. What postproduction artists have in common are the secondary working processes akin to the audiovisual industry, such as cutting, dubbing, editing and remixing. The heraldic figures of postproduction are the DJ, the programmer and the hacker, replacing the flâneur and the nomad in current art lingo.

Forty-year old Nicolas Bourriaud brings to his investigation of contemporary art extensive experience as an art critic and curator. Until 2000 he was the director of the magazine Documents sur l’art, which he founded in 1992; Postproduction was published as an extension of its editorial activity. In 1999, together with Jérôme Sans, he became the director of the new Palais de Tokyo, the only space in Paris devoted exclusively to contemporary art. It opened in 2002 with a group exhibition of contemporary artists, some of whom are mentioned in Postproduction. Indeed Bourriaud has risen to fame in the “age of the curator,” combing the globe for young artists and presenting them at various stops on the international circuit. It is for
this audience that is already visually familiar with recent trends in art – with the rooms filled with miscellaneous stuff, the loops of reshuffled video footage, and the kiosks offering various services – that Bourriaud is writing *Postproduction*. A certain number of air-miles are required to conjure up the images that are missing from the pages, an absence that is not compensated for by description or analysis.

But description and analysis are not his objective. Despite his recurrent use of the words “invention” and “creation,” individual artworks are not the subject of *Postproduction*. No one’s particular contribution to art history is being put forward here. Rather, this book is based on the premise that one can no longer analyze production as such because “postproduction artists do not make a distinction between their work and that of others” (41). Thus instead of the particularities necessitated by rigorous research, Bourriaud presents the impressions carved into his thought by the repetitions evinced in contemporary visual art. His intent is to demonstrate that this repetitiveness is indicative of a shared underlying concern.

Postproduction artists take as their point of departure a digitalized and globalized cultural landscape in which the “principles of selection are very difficult to identify” (83). Their concern for maintaining individual agency in an increasingly confused and abstract environment is what Bourriaud exposes in *Postproduction*, not the cultural conditions which spawned it, nor its implications.

Nicolas Bourriaud does not set himself any limits other than to look at the most recent art. He organizes his exposition into four chapters: “the use of objects,” “the use of forms,” “the use of the world,” and “how to inhabit global culture.” This suggests the type of work in which he takes interest: each example uses or inhabits pre-existing “forms,” whether they be objects, art forms or social forms, transforming any original significance they may have held. Furthermore, Bourriaud’s chapter headings suggest his typographical approach. His method is grouping like with like based on a formal similarity and then subsequently making a comparison with technological processes. As such, it is a book based on metaphor: he is not talking about artists
who use technology in their work or comment on it (though they might); he is talking about artists who use “preexisting works or formal structures, as if the world of cultural products and artworks constituted an autonomous strata” free for their taking (8). The subtle turn of phrase “as if” is the key to understanding Bourriaud’s position in *Postproduction*.

Bourriaud’s writing style is as sweeping as his subtitle: *Culture as Screenplay: How Art Re-programs the World*. It is light and fast paced. His toned is assured: prescriptive statements are frequent: “To rewrite modernity is the historical task of this early twenty-first century: not to start at zero or find oneself encumbered by the storehouse of history, but to inventory and select, to use and download” (87). And questions are rhetorical: “Why not use art to look at the world, rather than stare sullenly at the forms it presents?” (48). This book is a case in which an author’s prose corresponds to his subject: Bourriaud inventories contemporary artists in various typographical lists; he uses history idiosyncratically and offers only selective references and no bibliography; and he looks at the patterns of thought that he has downloaded from “global culture” rather than their specific carriers. What makes this book distinct is the fine line it treads between complicity and critique in both content and form, leaving equal amounts of hope and doubt as to the agency of the avant-garde in the 2002.

§ 2: Analysis

Taking a close look at the propositions put forward by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Postproduction* is also somewhat like editing and remixing: looking for what the author is trying to say underneath what his said and bringing it to the forefront. This necessitates a certain degree of violence for the meandering style of his text is deliberate. But analysis is necessary for to speak back to impressions is to shoot at straw dogs. A chapter by chapter breakdown will maintain partial fidelity to the organization of the text and facilitate comprehension of the main lines of argumentation.
The thesis of *Postproduction* is not clearly stated but Bourriaud centers his discussion on an underlying assumption. He expresses this assumption most directly three-quarters of the way into the book:

To denounce or “critique” the world? One can denounce nothing from the outside; one must first inhabit the form of what one wants to criticize. *Imitation* is subversive, much more so than discourses of frontal opposition that only make formal gestures of subversion. (68)

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, what this means is that artists need to find evermore creative ways to fulfill their “critical duties” and avoid giving in to the “eclecticism of consumption” (86). They must look for new strategies and maneuver like hackers do. Only by inhabiting the systems and forms in which they live and identifying with them thoroughly can artists gain control over them and pull them from their “inertia” (67).

Bourriaud mentions this theme of “inhabiting” or “imitating” in his short “Introduction” without spelling it out as such; indeed the word “imitation” falls from the pages of *Postproduction* entirely. He introduces the DJ and the programmer as the forerunners of postproduction due to their “recourse to already produced forms” (10). This has implications for the discourse of originality and the cult of the original but Bourriaud is quick to state that postproduction is more than a “fairly mannered posture” or a lament that everything has already been done (11). According to Bourriaud, what postproduction artists produce are “original pathways through signs” (12). He calls them “semionauts” who produce new “cartographies” (12). They invent “protocols of use for all existing modes of representation” and invite viewers to learn how to “makes them one’s own” (12). The clincher comes at the end of the introduction: “In generating behaviours and potential reuses, art challenges passive culture, composed of merchandise and consumers. It makes the forms and cultural objects of our daily lives *function*” (14). It is this emphasis on assigning new functions that links postproduction artists to Bourriaud’s idea of subversion: they embed themselves in a network of signs and “program” or “remix” them to serve new ends.
Turning the page to the first chapter, “The Use of Objects,” Bourriaud temporarily abandons high-tech metaphors. With passing references to Karl Marx, Marcel Duchamp and Michel de Certeau, he establishes the equivalence between consumption and production. Although this is implicit in the idea of postproduction he offers in the introduction (seeing as the material being postproduced is a product that is being consumed in an untraditional manner), Bourriaud reframes consumption itself in terms of “use:” “To use an object is necessarily to interpret it... use is an act of micropirating that constitutes postproduction” (18). In this sense consumption is not passive but active and “each day we benefit from more ways in which to organize this production: remote controls, VCRs, computer, MP3s, tools that allow us to select, reconstruct and edit” (19). According to Bourriaud, postproduction artists are “agents” of this evolution, “specialized workers of cultural reappropriation” (19). This evolution is consequent to technological innovation but the governing metaphor of this chapter is the flea market, which is decidedly low-tech. Bourriaud offers a sketch of European New Realism, American Pop and Simulationism in order to assert that “new artists have gone shopping, too, but in unsuitable shops” (22). These artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jason Rhoades and Thomas Hirschhorn, reorganize past production and give old objects new ideas. The significance of this for Bourriaud is that, by using the market as a “formal matrix,” these artists “make commercial relations concrete once again, relations that the postmodern economy tends to make immaterial” (26). The low-tech form that this art takes thus “restores the world to us as an experience to be lived” (26). In this chapter, postproduction is not so much subversive as remedial.

The following chapter, “The Use of Forms,” is Bourriaud’s most extensive. The title suggests that it is distinguished from the first chapter by the material employed by the artists, “forms” instead of “objects.” Bourriaud asks, “Why do so many artists strive to remake, recopy, dismantle and reconstruct the components of our visual universe?” (59). Relative to “neutral” everyday objects found at a flea market, “forms” have been previously informed by artists or designers for ideological purposes. Bourriaud cites Guy Debord’s “Methods of Détournement”
and asserts that, similar to the Situationists, contemporary artists use preexisting artworks. The difference is that these artworks “are no longer perceived as obstacles but as building materials”: postproduction is “a neutral, zero-sum process” (31), not a politically motivated devalorization. According to Bourriaud, deejaying and contemporary art share this revised idea of 
détournement and have “similar configurations” (33): “the producer is only a transmitter for the following producer, and each artist from now on evolves in a network of contiguous forms that dovetail endlessly” (34). Originals may be hard to locate but originality is maintained: “the quality of a work depends on the trajectory it describes in the cultural landscape” (34), and this trajectory is personal: the “consumer customizes... to his or her personality or needs” (33).

The second part of this chapter is the heart of Postproduction. In addition to inventing new uses for works like a DJ, postproduction artists also “reedit historical narratives, inserting the elements that compose them into alternative scenarios” (39). It is in this idea that Bourriaud’s desire for subversion is met: “art brings collective scenarios to consciousness and offers us other pathways through reality, with the help of forms themselves, which make these imposed narratives material” (40). Postproduction art subordinates to itself the conditions from which it stems and, in so doing, contributes to “the birth of a culture of activity” (39) – to the “use of the world” as opposed to “passive contemplation” of it (40). The key example Bourriaud provides is Pierre Huyghe’s work, which “aims to bring to light these implicit scenarios and to invent others that would make us freer” (44). With reference to Michel Foucault, Bourriaud insists that we must “stop playing walk-on parts in a script written by power. We must become its actors or co-writers” (46). We must “inhabit” them. Similar to the proposition put forward in the first chapter, by using “culture as screenplay” postproduction artists suggest “new ways of apprehending the real” (60).

In the third chapter, titled “The Use of the World,” Bourriaud takes the idea of “playing the world” and “reprogramming social forms” (63) literally. In this chapter his attention is not on artists who use preexisting art forms but rather on artists who intervene in
“the socius” at large, in “all the channels that distribute information and products” (65).
According to Bourriaud, this is “the true exhibition site for artists of the current generation” (65). Here in “the functional universe” (67) as opposed to “art world,” the postproduction artist “deprograms in order to reprogram, suggesting that there are other possible uses for the techniques and tools at our disposal” (66). The “tools” to which he is referring are not ready at hand: they are “the invisible structures of the ideological apparatus” (64), which are made visible through the artists’ gestures. Bourriaud asserts that “interpreting the world does not suffice; it must be transformed” (66). Borrowing terms from Freud, Lacan and Althusser, Bourriaud suggests that the postproduction artist “exposes the unconscious of human production” (70). He ends this chapter by rephrasing his thesis: “instead of engaging in critical commentary, we have to experiment, as Gilles Deleuze asked of psychoanalysis: to stop interpreting symptoms and try more suitable arrangements” (76). Postproduction is above all an art of rearrangement, not criticizing or moralizing but participating in the “apparatus.”

Bourriaud’s last chapter, “How to Inhabit Global Culture,” reverts to technological metaphors for artistic production. It is subtitled “aesthetics after the MP3” and starts with a brief account of precedent art movements that involve “data storage,” namely Minimalism, Pop Art and Conceptual Art. Bourriaud then offers a brief discussion on the “author” and suggests that, instead of designating the “cult of the artist/demiurge/salvager” (85), a name now designates “a mode of appearance or production, a line, a fiction,” as it does in the logic of multinationals (81). He also discusses the concept of an “open work,” which is no longer a matter of reacting to or completing a given proposal: in today’s techno-cultural environment, the line between transmission and reception has become erased and the status of the “work” is profoundly destabilized (82-3). After collecting these loose ends, Bourriaud makes a salient point that adds weight to his thesis. In response to the “banalizing and consuming eclecticism that preaches cynical indifference toward history” Bourriaud calls for the emergence of a “civic consumption” (86):
The key to this dilemma is in establishing processes and practices that allow us to pass from a consumer culture to a culture of activity, from a passiveness toward available signs to practices of accountability. Every individual, and particularly every artist, since he or she evolves among signs, must take responsibility for forms and their social functioning. (86)

Bourriaud is calling for an “ethics” concerning “the reprocessing of forms” (29). Here the utopian chant of art as a “collective sport” (14) and the Romantic vision of the artist as the inventor of trajectories that will lead to freedom is drowned out and overshadowed by the challenges posed by globalization and “techno-market power” (88). Bourriaud ends *Postproduction* with a call for an artistic “counter-power” (87) – for a raising of arms – in this case the same arms that are wielded by power itself.

§ 3: Evaluation

At his most sinister, Bourriaud is his most convincing. The claims he makes in *Postproduction* are large and lucrative – who wouldn’t want change the world? As an example of the shape the avant-garde has taken in contemporary art, *Postproduction* is indispensable. The chapter by chapter content analysis ties up Bourriaud mass of sprawling ideas, disjointed references and loose examples into a neat marketable package, but are these claims are more than sound-bytes on the mixing board? Supporting evidence is scant and his theoretical framework is flimsy at best, too flimsy to withstand the internal contradictions of his writing style, and too flimsy to withstand the external questions of cultural identity in a globalized world.

What Bourriaud values most in the art that he exposes is that it “places tools at the public’s disposal” (63) that enable it to participate in the construction of social forms and thus be “freer” (44). However, Bourriaud does not extend this courtesy to his readers: he keeps the tools for himself. He offers many lists of artists’ names and cryptic descriptions of their work, and supplements these lists with references to particular theoreticians, but does not provide enough information for the reader to be able to assess Bourriaud’s ideas. The outcome of this
negligence is that it is impossible to evaluate Bourriaud’s “facts” and decide for oneself whether to buy them or not. Acceptance is expected, which is a passive gesture in comparison to the active engagement he calls for. The irony is bitter. Bourriaud states, “in the political sphere, submission to form has a name: dictatorship. A democracy, on the other hand, calls for constant role play, endless discussion, and negotiation” (57). Both discussion and negotiation are foreclosed by Bourriaud’s lack of care for historical accuracy because no common ground is established. The only role the reader can play is submission.

There are other ways in which Bourriaud’s writing style is congruent with the artwork that he is discussing and the effects are equally dire for his thesis. Take for example his unease with the idea that artists use “the history of art is like a giant trash can of hollow forms” (85); yet all throughout Postproduction he participates in emptying them. Rather than giving credit where credit is due and using history as a building block, he writes as if a high-modernist formalist discourse was the sum total of art before postproduction. What about Raymond Hains, for example, who Bourriaud identifies as “a splendid practitioner of la dérive and instigator of an infinite network of interconnected signs” (31)? Bourriaud states that he “emerges as a precursor here” (31) and leaves it at that; he is important. But what network did he instigate, when, where, why and how? All that Bourriaud gives is the form of the work, emptying it of content. This effectively erases the political implications of the avant-garde, as he begrudges of contemporary artists (86). This lack of art historical contextualization also undermines his credibility. Consider Hal Foster’s question: “when has art, at least since the Renaissance, not involved discursivity and sociability? …might this emphasis be redundant?” Bourriaud’s evaluation of past art is not comprehensive and is often misleading, casting doubt on his evaluation of contemporary art, as well.

1 In an interview by Stretcher conducted in 2002, Bourriaud states: “I think the most important thing is you don’t have to be intimidated by knowledge and by history. Most people’s relation to history can be summed up by this image of somebody trying to walk into a room with a lot of porcelain and fragile things and not wanting to break any of them. It’s super precious and it has to be kept exactly like it is. I think all these artists do exactly the opposite. Which is, they don’t care about any historical object; they just use it and try to understand what’s in it. And these are two different ways of seeing history: first as a commodified history, doing nothing to change it – or revisiting it all the time and feeling totally free.” www.stretcher.org/archives/i1_a/2003_02_25_i1_archive.php

Another way in which Bourriaud’s form matches his content but discredits his argument is in the lack of shape that he gives to his text: it is as “chaotic” (22) as the art that he cites. Mimicking the flea market of which he writes in his first chapter, his ideas are placed in roughly sorted piles that are only loosely connected by the figure of the “merchant.” There is no center and there is no end. This may be interesting in art but it is not so interesting in art criticism. His chapters trail off without conclusion and the next one starts for no clear reason. Segues are missing in Postproduction despite Bourriaud’s emphasis on relations. His typography is slippery and references to particular artists recur in every chapter without ever being distinguished or elaborated upon. Bourriaud’s rhetoric of “rematerializing” economic and ideological abstractions is contradicted by generalizing excessively: his language lifts up off of his topic and slips into nonsense leaving the “real” that he wishes to apprehend far behind.

How can “activity” be spurred when there is nothing concrete, when the “form” he wishes to “subvert” is as undefined as a “global mechanism” (65)? Bourriaud identifies the formal mechanics of an artwork but does not break it down to see how it works in the larger socíus which it “inhabits” – to see how artwork works. The distinction is important for to say it works is not to measure the implications of its working. The book addresses the problem of “how to find one’s bearings in the cultural chaos” (8) and uses the example of Pierre Huyghe to discuss how the imperatives of globalized communication force the singularity of speech to be eradicated, a loss which Huyghe (metaphorically) “restores” (45). But Bourriaud is contributing to the eradication of this singularity and the resulting disorientation: none of the artists he mentions are identified by more than their name; their age, gender, ethnicity and nationality – their culture – is overlooked: it is “just baggage that we carry around” (43).

According to Bourriaud, “art can be a form of using the world, an endless negotiation between points of view” (88) but “points of view” need to be located in the here and now in order to have political effect. “The use of the world” is no cyber debate: it is real and real lives are at stake. Bourriaud addresses global culture only in terms of technology, which is just one
aspect of a larger picture, which includes real things like economic exploitation, hunger and the bonds of tradition, all of which fall outside his purview. He states: “All cultural and social structures represent nothing more than articles of clothing that can be slipped on, objects to be experienced and tested” (66). At many points throughout his essay, Bourriaud forgets to add the two little words “as if,” for indeed he must know that only the most fortunate inhabitants of this “global culture” could ever discuss their lot in life as if it were a day at the tailor’s. Interpretation is needed to reveal such biases and inequalities: the world may not change through criticism alone but certainly it will not change without it either.

Despite its internal contradictions, painful abstractions and denigration of interpretation, the questions Bourriaud raises in Postproduction are crucial: how can we open a civic space in a consumerist space managed by private enterprise? How can we maintain activity in the face of mass production and avoid being silenced by the spectacle? “How can we prevent this telescoping of cultures and styles from ending up in a kitsch eclecticism, a cool Hellenism excluding all critical judgment?” (83). As an art critic and curator Bourriaud is on the front line, trying to systematically gather and classify divergent art practices under a single title. Postproduction provides a reference point for an emerging trend, throwing an anchor into an abyss in search of the ground: a commendable feat. But just as Bourriaud says of contemporary art, this book “does not position itself as the termination point of the ‘creative process’...but as a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities” (13). Its meaning will be determined by its use, not his intentions. And the question of how to use such an ambiguous tool, other than for writing snazzy press releases, remains hanging.