

# N I C O L A S B O U R R I A U D A R T T H E O R I S T , C R I T I C A N D C U R A T O R

Interview ROB MEAD

Nicolas Bourriaud is one of the leading theorists and curators in the contemporary art world today. His landmark book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) presented a new theoretical position born from certain art qualities he had noticed in the '90s, highlighting how artworks and objects are experienced communally and collectively by the viewer, and this relationship's value within the work. His following book *Postproduction* (2003) placed these ideas in the context of growing technologies, suggesting artists were increasingly reforming their work's sources in the same way a DJ samples and remixes music. As a curator he has helped conceive renowned biennales and exhibitions that have presented the cutting edge in art and critical thinking.

His current focus as director of the future Contemporary Art Center of Montpellier, due to open in 2019, and as director of the La Panacée art centre, sees him continue his trend in establishing key sites of contemporary art and discourse beyond the recognised arts capital of Paris. This venture marks a shift from this centralised thinking, via a new freeform and flowing networked arts institution.

What he offers is a view of art as resistance to and deviation from prescribed patterns of living, a nomadic model of the artist as non-centred and non-nationalised. Moving beyond the sovereignty of one nation, he advocates a more global system where collisions across diverse networks can provoke new ways of thinking and seeing. Within the current instability of this global world, he reflects on his most recent projects and his perspective on the environment that young contemporary artists are working in today.

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Rob Mead: As a theorist-critic and curator with avant-garde ideas, have you previously found yourself ahead of your time in your country? How would you define your position today?

Nicolas Bourriaud: If words can appear ahead of their times, they only are following what is going on in exhibitions and artists' studios. I don't see myself as a philosopher. More as a curator trying to think *out of* the artworks, exactly the kind of practice-related activity that Jacques Lacan, psychoanalyst, was developing in his own field: philosophy, yes, but from practice.

Rob: How does this impact on how you approach examining the world around you?

Nicolas: Deciphering the times I am living in and reading the evolution of the arts are totally related for me. If you understand the leading lines of society, it helps to understand emerging art. Also, I don't believe that I 'belong' to any country. I know this discourse sounds slightly off tracks these days, but I always tried to act and think beyond borders, walls or flags.

Rob: In this case are there still current key centres of contemporary art: London, Berlin for example?

Nicolas: Are you sure that those centralities still exist? I am not certain that Berlin or London are really more "central" than Paris or Zürich, to talk about Europe. More galleries there, more artists here, but what constitutes a centrality? You have plenty of micro-centres today, not one. Networks, international collaborations, are more important to my eyes, the same way cities are more relevant than nations. Many people focus on this kind of competition, I try not to indulge too much in that, even if I am interested in the local. But rather than being obsessed with city-branding, I prefer to look at all that happens *in between*.

Rob: Through this global network is it still possible for there to be a coordinated cultural policy, as happened in London in the 90s? Is it possible that a new generation of French artists for example with international recognition will emerge like the Young British Artists?

Nicolas: I recently curated an exhibition at this huge former industrial complex run by Galleria Continua, near Paris, which is called Le Nouveau Monde Industriel ['new industrial world', as a tribute to French philosopher Charles Fourier]. It shows 21 emerging artists living in France - so I still am focused on emerging artists, I learn a lot from them. In the 90s, I was not very fond of the YBAs, I rather worked with Liam Gillick, Angela Bulloch or Gillian Wearing, who were much more radical, and certainly... younger, in terms of vision. YBAs were making objects; it was the continuation of the 80s. But in a way, they were the last purely national movement.

Rob: Do national barriers exist for artists today? How do artists respond to their sense of locality?

Nicolas: Now, who can produce interesting forms within those barriers? We are living in a globalised world, and any artist has to problematise the relations between his or her local background and the whole planet. Of course, there will always be some room for "regional" artists, addressing their neighbourhood, but I am not too excited by that. YBAs was a branding, and it contributed to their success. But I don't care about price tags. History matters to me, not the market value.

Rob: What is the role of art collectors in this context?

Nicolas: Well, they all live in London or Brussels, anyway... But people like François Pinault or Arnault and their respective foundations are not specifically working on French artists. Unlike Saatchi, for example, who is much more regional. French collectors don't buy French art, they buy art. I never met one of them who would be focused on French artists, frankly. Not because it is bad, only because it makes no sense. They both have works by Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Camille Henrot and many others, but within an international context.

Rob: In 2015, you were appointed director of the future Contemporary Art Center of Montpellier - what exactly does that involve?

Nicolas: I arrived in Montpellier in March 2016, hired by the Mayor, Philippe Saurel. We launched a new institution, Montpellier Contemporain [MoCo], which will be complete in 2019. It's a multi-site art centre, which will have the shape of the city itself, and will include the local art school.

Rob: And how do you approach your role within the institution?

Nicolas: I use the same method as at Palais de Tokyo: I try to understand what are the needs, the context, and how would it be possible to build a specific, updated institution that would not simply copy existing models. As a prefiguration, I am starting an exhibitions program in La Panacée [the art centre at Montpellier, where he is director], along with a series of lectures, but also a big round of public meetings, to have a feedback from the local population. There will be always three to four exhibitions at the same time, like fragments of an ideal museum.

Rob: What is your vision for Montpellier as a site beyond the capital?

Nicolas: MoCo's main building will open in 2019, and this fragmented art centre, stretched into several buildings, will reflect its cultural territory, and also constitute a possible model for tomorrow: more a hub than one of those "branded buildings". We could have called Frank Gehry again, but for me this kind of strategy is completely outdated. Not another "Bilbao effect" please - I find in Montpellier a very specific energy, there is a real spirit of collaboration between art, theatre and dance, which is already feeding the project. This open working process will be seminal for the future institution.

Rob: Will Montpellier offer you the chance to develop the idea of the Biennale?

Nicolas: I will soon submit the idea of a big international exhibition to the mayor of Montpellier, which will be slightly different than the usual biennial format, following the concept of the institution we are working on: it would be more horizontal too, and more collaborative.

Rob: In this context do you believe the public are educated and familiar with contemporary art or do they need further education?

Nicolas: All exhibitions are free in Montpellier, except the Musée Fabre, and there is quite an important audience, yes. But its strong cultural point is contemporary dance, along with cinema. To my eyes, it is the French LA... Both cities have a similar climate, and they are both fascinated by the sea without being

harbours. Los Angeles was mocked for decades for its lack of culture. And the French have a problem with polarity: Mayor Saurel's ambition is to create a southern cultural capital in a country that does not admit any rivalry with Paris.

Rob: Do you entertain wider ideas of collaborating and creating projects from Montpellier, aiming not only at the educational role, but to open the role of the museum into the city?

Nicolas: We are currently discussing the idea of a new research centre with University Paul Valéry. Montpellier is the second academic city in France, after Paris, and it is important to connect with this energy. MoCo will benefit from it also because it includes the art school. We needed this pedagogical unit in order to transform the role of an art centre, and recreate its territory.