



# ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.2, No.3 Jul.-Sep, 2024

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**To cite this article:** Sophia Kidd, "Comparative Relational Aesthetics: Zha Changping's 'World Relational Aesthetics' and Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics'," *Art Frontier* 2, no.3 (September 2024): 34-44, <https://doi.org/10.64212/FGVX7559>.

**DOI:** 10.64212/FGVX7559

**ISSN:** 2835-5490

**EISSN:** 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

**Website:** [www.artfrontier.org](http://www.artfrontier.org)

**Email:** [artfrontier2023@outlook.com](mailto:artfrontier2023@outlook.com)

**Publishing Frequency:** Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



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Sophia Kidd

## Abstract

This is an article I've wanted to write for over a decade now, ever since I began translating texts written by Professor Zha Changping on the theory of world relational aesthetics. These translations from Chinese into English were never easy, despite my acquaintance and later friendship with the author. Texts on world relational aesthetics introduced terminologies, logic, rhetoric, theology, and registers diverging from my academic training in Western philosophy and aesthetics. Indeed, world relational aesthetics constituted a sort of "foreign land" with which I had slowly to get accustomed to, learning to speak its local dialect. As a system, world relational aesthetics are intensely cogent, operating as a self-sustaining ecology of thought, operating independently from Western aesthetic theory. The clearest link I found between Zha's unique system of aesthetic thought and Western relational aesthetics was Professor Zha's use of the term "relational aesthetics", coined by curator, art critic, and historian Nicolas Bourriaud in the latter's book titled *Relational Aesthetics*. In this paper I will first introduce some basics of each paradigm of thought, then comparing and contrasting key points. While I have come to understand Zha's theory of world relational aesthetics on its own terms, I have been waiting for this opportunity to study and write about how Zha's theory of world relational aesthetics compares and contrasts to the movement and genre of art known as "relational aesthetics", as Nicolas Bourriaud wrote about it.

## Key Words

World relational aesthetics, Zha Changping, relational aesthetics, Nicolas Bourriaud, Sinitic and non-Sinitic paradigms, comparative relational aesthetics

## 1. "Relational Aesthetics" in Western Contemporary Art Discourse

Nicolas Bourriaud defines "relational aesthetics" as:

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.<sup>1</sup>

The crux of what amounts to a critical and aesthetic movement has been to deterritorialize the capitalist notion of "art" as something which appears exclusively in a "white cube" art space, such as the gallery or museum, where it is hung on a wall and labelled, packaged thus as an aesthetic commodity to fetishize. This subversion and reversal of the Deleuzian notion of how capitalism "deter-

ritorializes" art objects from their natural social context discusses the social terrain as a "territory". Relational aesthetics, then takes the "reterritorialized" terrain of capitalist models of art markets, and "deterritorializes" it once again, taking the artwork off the wall, and even outside of the gallery or museum onto the streets, disrupting the art market context, allowing the social fabric in which the artist is sewn to inform and reflect the ways in which audiences interact with art.

For example, while a painting by Leonardo da Vinci hanging on the wall in a museum creates a sense of distance, or as Walter Benjamin discussed, an "aura" around the art object; a performance artwork done on the

streets uses an entirely different art material—the human body, and places it out amongst viewers who are then challenged to distinguish the difference between everyday life and art. By removing art from the exclusivity of the museum and gallery, relational aesthetics sought to bring everything in life, and all events and constructions in society to the level of “art,” and vice versa. This “reterritorialized” art created a new territory for art-making and art-viewing, one with no borders, one with no distinctions between art and life. Thus, we see that, according to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics consisted in a “set of art practices” that took “the whole of human relations and their social context” as its playing ground. Independent and private spaces of art, which saw artworks as “mimetic” reproductions of reality, and commodified them in a fetishistic way, as Bourriaud saw it, were part of the old world, part of the old mode of pre-modernism and modernism. The viewing and appreciation of art no longer needed to be mediated by “gate keepers” such as curators, art dealers, critics, and scholars. These old modes of artistic presentation would be cast aside as humanity moved forward into the new world of our future.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari discuss deterritorialized as a mode of capitalism, to dissolve interdependent bonds between humans:

Private property no longer expresses the bond of personal dependence but the independence of a Subject that now constitutes the sole bond. This makes for an important difference in the evolution of private property: private property in itself relates to rights, instead of the law relating it to the land, things or people.<sup>2</sup>

Let us unpack this. Where we read “private property” in Deleuze and Guattari, let us read “art”, to echo what Bourriaud suggests in his book, *Relational Aesthetics*. Capitalism in the art market has taken artworks that were created by individuals or groups who existed in a social and historical context (the original territory of art) and recoded them to read as commodities which relate to a new territory (the art market, art history, etc.). As such, capitalism has deterritorialized art such that it no longer “expresses the bond of personal dependence”, but rather expresses the “independence of a Subject”. This Subject is the viewer of art in a museum, or an art dealer or collector at an art auction, and the bond between the individual viewer, dealer, or collector and art is not the primary bond that the artwork holds with the world as we know it. The original social and historical context of the artwork, even the artists’ relationship with their world, or with the created artwork—all of this is lost as either extraneous, or at best secondary to establishing the value of the artwork.

In his introduction to *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud borrows French writer and theorist Guy Debord’s notion of “separation” in the latter’s *Society of the Spectacle*:

The supreme “separation”, the separation that affects relational channels, represents the final stage in the transformation to the “Society of the Spectacle” as described by Guy Debord. This is a society where human relations are no longer “directly experienced”, but start to become blurred in their “spectacular” representation.<sup>3</sup>

Mapping this notion of “separation” onto the Deleuze/Guattari notion of “deterritorialization” is useful in synthesizing a general sense of what Marx talked about as “alienation”. Where, as a member of society, we constitute a part of the productive force of labor that contributes to the creation of artworks by individual artists, in capitalism (Deleuze) and modernism (Bourriaud), we are alienated from the product of our group labor—made to feel as if our own humanity had nothing whatsoever to do with the artwork. We come to feel as if the artwork, as it appears on the walls of a museum or gallery, is surrounded by a golden halo or “aura” imparted to it by a gift of creativity bestowed by a transcendental power upon the genius artist.

Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics is not as pessimistic as Marx, Deleuze/Guattari, or Debord. Rather, Bourriaud unearths evidence of outlying new growth in art practices as we find them throughout the latter part of the 20th century, stating that “(...) artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns.” The book he writes on relational aesthetics, then, is intended to “outline so many hands-on Utopias”.<sup>4</sup> Let us discuss just an example of a representative artist of the relational aesthetic genre or movement, before shifting our focus away from relational aesthetics as presented by Bourriaud and towards Zha Changping’s theory of world relational aesthetics. Oft cited artists of relational aesthetics include Argentinean-born Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jorge Pardo, Maurizio Cattelan, Philippe Parreno, Carsten Höller, Jerry Saltz, and Tino Sehgal.<sup>5</sup> Let’s look at the first artist on this list, Rirkrit Tiravanija.

Rirkrit Tiravanija’s artwork *Pad Thai*, originally done at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York in 1990, was later recreated as *Untitled (free still)* at the David Zwirner Gallery in 2007. This extremely well known artwork was revolutionary at the time for breaking down barriers between life and art, as well as between artist and audience. As Tiravanija prepared a meal for audiences attending the exhibition (this was the artwork), people experienced a feeling of familiarity, generosity, and community. In more traditional art territory, as we have



Figure 1, 2. Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, Zha Changping's Books.

discussed above, audiences would gain a sense of inspiration, awe, or reverence for an artwork displayed on a wall (if they liked it), or disgust, apathy, or irreverence (if they didn't). While in Deleuzian thought, capitalism deterritorializes the art work, appropriating it within a network of symbols mediated by a profit motive; Bourriaud's relational aesthetic theory sees artists like Tiravanija's performative and interactive artworks as capable of deterritorializing capitalism's new territory, recontextualizing the art experience in one based upon social experience and interdependence. This is the reterritorialization performed by Western relational aesthetics.

## 2. Zha Changping's "Theory of World Relational Aesthetics"

Zha Changping's theory of world relational aesthetics arose in China, specifically in the Southwest of China. Zha is a professor in the Institute of Daoism and Religious Culture Studies at Sichuan University, and teaches New Testament Greek, Old Testament Hebrew, and biblical theology, although most of his writing is on Chinese contemporary art. He is well known in Chengdu's contemporary art community as the one of the most prolific, accomplished, and first art critics in this city of 14 million souls, and famous in the Chinese academic field of Christian study.<sup>6</sup> With over three decades of writing about what he calls "pioneering" art (distinct from "avant-garde" as it is meant in Western art

discourses), his theoretical system of world relational aesthetics is invested with Christian theological insights and is an all-encompassing ontology of art and life. For example, the "Introduction" to Zha Changping's book, *World Relational Aesthetics*, is composed of seven chapters laying out the history of ideas in art as a history of the interaction between humans and language, time, self, nature, society, history, and the divine. Zha is approaching a totality of human existence on earth, seeking to articulate the history of ideas in art, in order to discern:

In a relative period of time, such as the last twenty years of contemporary art, what original art schemas were actually produced? What is their relationship to each other in terms of value? What psychological, social and historical value do they possess for Chinese people today?<sup>7</sup>

Zha writes from within a culturally diverse region where there are a high number of ethnic minorities, and probably the strongest holdout in China of religious practices, in the form of Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Situated far from Beijing (the political center of China), and Shanghai (the commercial center of China), Chengdu could be viewed as the most culturally inclusive city in China (maybe even the cultural center of China in the future). Up until recently, the Southwest of China has been an overlooked area for research on Chinese contemporary art by scholars in other regions of China or elsewhere in the world. Thus, most artistic practices have gone under the radar, allowing art scenes to organically incubate, relatively free from ideological censors as well as the

art market. This is now changing, as Beijing cultivates the Southwest as a pivotal cultural and economic hub for China's international development into Central Asia, Africa, and Europe. Forty years of relatively independent art cathexis saw social networks support grass roots private sector efforts to scaffold arts infrastructure and programming. What has arisen through this process is much like what Bourriaud was seeing come into fruition in his own Western art paradigm, including a high degree of experimental art including performance art and new media, with art happening outside of institutional settings, seeing a high degree of social interaction and intervention. Yet, the government's official ideology was still the dominant note being played, and critics, academics, and other arts professionals stewarding art movements in the Southwest of China were still writing and thinking about art in the context of scientific-materialist and atheist paradigms. As such, there arose a cognitive dissonance between the kind of art being created, and the theoretical and market frameworks set in place to contextualize this art. Zha Changping's work in world relational aesthetics sought to curb this development, by opening up the multiple dimensions of artworks, as well as the abundant world of the individual Subject who both creates and views art. Later on, in the next section of this paper, I will compare and contrast this notion of individual Subjects as developed in Zha's world relational aesthetics and Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. For now, suffice it to say, that they were not talking about the same thing, and that Zha's positing of an interiority, or inner essence, of an artwork, as well as an inner life to individual people as Subjects is highly controversial in China's ideological atmosphere, where the "human soul" is a product of Western "spiritual pollution", and where individuals are merely socially constructed units of being in relationship with family, community, society, and nation.

I spend so much time developing the social cathexis within which Zha Changping writes because this is integral to his writing. His theory of world relational aesthetics is somewhat insular, and does not formally reference Western aesthetic theory, arising rather organically within a Chinese aesthetic discourse, with its own logic. Zha is writing against a background of post-Cultural Revolution and post-Opening Up and Reforms in China. Chinese contemporary art first peaked in the 1985 New Wave movement, having a relatively short history compared with the West. The histories of contemporary art that exist within China are what Zha terms "historiography (*wenxianshi* 文獻史)", rote recitation of the biographies of artists, a list of artworks and major exhibitions, with an emphasis upon the scientific-

material aspects of the artworks. Zha sets up his own systems of "world-picture logic" and "world relational aesthetics" as an *edifice of meaning*, to hold off the tsunami of meaninglessness that he perceives has taken control of the forces of artistic production and exegesis. In Chapter Two of his book *World Relational Aesthetics*, Zha sets up an alternative to what he sees as a barren field of meaninglessness, in that he proposes a systematic study of the "generative logic of idea-events" (*sixiang shijian de shengchan luoji* 思想事件的生產邏輯) as arising in certain time periods. He also does not see these time periods as diachronically connected to one another in succession in a teleological manner, but rather existing synchronically in our contemporary understanding.

The theory of world relational aesthetics comprises an ecological ontology. This ontological account of all that exists is ecological because it is composed of systems of relationships along seven dimensions, namely: the human-linguistic, human-temporal, human-self, human-thing, human-human, human-history, and human-divine dimensions. This holistic, multilayered, interactive "world-picture logic" is holistic, multi-layered, and interactive.<sup>8</sup> As a system, it can be used to interpret the world, and in application, Zha uses it to interpret the rich, diverse, and unique field of contemporary art that has been developing in the Southwest of China.

Rather than give one specific example of an artwork which exemplifies world relational aesthetic theory, I am going to discuss an art phenomenon that Zha Changping



Figure 3. Members of the 719 Artist Studio Alliance Before Chengdu's Ming Dynasty Wall (From left: Liu Chengying, Dai Guangyu, Yin Xiaofeng, Zhou Bin, Zha Changping, Zeng Xun, Zhu Gang, Zhang Hua, Chen Mo), 1998.



Figure 4. Liu Chengying. *Ask Heavens*. Installation, 1997.



Figure 5. Yu Ji. *Playing a Stringed Musical Instrument toward Water*. Performance, 1997.



Figure 6. Zeng Xun. *Magic Frame* series. Performance, 1998.

has felt particularly worthy of coverage in his art writing, one which invariably falls under the theoretical auspices of world relational aesthetics. Zha's theoretical system is particularly suited for writing on ecological art, due to the attention and care that it gives to the interrelations between levels of human and non-human experience (i.e., language, time, things, divinity, history). One example of the value of Zha's coverage is in the attention he gives to local art movements, collectives, and culture. In an age when Chinese society, culture, and art have been absorbing copious influence from the West, Southwest China has remained relatively untouched. Thus, there are individuals and collectives that are stalwart about holding onto their own values, views, and methodologies of art. One such collective is the 719 Artist Studio Alliance, which was active in the 1990s for a period of about ten years. Two of their objectives (not the only two) were to raise awareness of water quality and preserve the cultural heritage of the city of Chengdu as the cityscape developed rapidly. Members of the 719 Artist Studio Alliance were primarily performance artists, and comprise an important part of China's history of performance art. *The Keepers of the*

*Water*, a collaboration between American Betsy Damon and leader of the 719 Alliance, Dai Guangyu, saw a series of social interventions in the form of performance art carried out along the banks of the Jinjiang River (then known as the Funan River) in 1995 (Chengdu) and 1996 (Lhasa). The 719 Artist Studio Alliance also conducted performance art interventions around Chengdu's old Ming dynasty wall being torn by the city. The performance interventions of the 719 Alliance managed to save a segment of the wall, which still stands today amidst towering highrises. Zha wrote about these interventions in his book, *Ecological Art in Humanist Criticism*.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Comparing and Contrasting "Relational Aesthetics"

Let us look at how the two paradigms of Zha Changping's world relational aesthetics and Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics are both reactions to and departures from a status quo which is isolating art from a deeper or more expansive context of meaning. I have already laid the groundwork concerning Zha Changping's theory of world relational aesthetics. Zha's body of writing has



Figure 7. Dai Guangyu. *Breath & Meditation*. Performance, 1999.



Figure 8. Yin Xiaofeng. *99's Showed Head on the Chengdu's Ming Dynasty Wall*. Performance, 1999.



Figure 9. Zha Changping. *Preserved Chengdu's Ming Dynasty Wall for 60 Meters*. Photograph, May 8, 2016.

developed out of an ideological season of scientific-materialism and atheism, to which Zha provides an alternative ontology of the human being. That is, in Zha's system of education and cultural acculturation in China, the human is being defined as a socially constructed unit that exists in relationship to the family, society, and the nation, with only a physical body which perishes upon death. Zha's alternative ontology of the human being includes a soul, a spirit, and a self which relates in powerful and various ways to language, history, self, time, nature, plants, animals, and divinity. Based upon this philosophical-theological ontology,<sup>10</sup> art takes on many connotations to be able to express all of these relationships, either in part or all at once. Zha's exegesis and analysis of art provides a framework for multi-dimensionality of belief, and a greater space within which the human being can attain self-realization or self-humanization through the practice or appreciation of art creation. The history ideas in art, so important in Zha's work, gives voice to the uniquely interior aspects of art, allowing for ideas, emotions, and impulses which are not mainstream, not yet deterritorialized by dominant ideologies (including a nascent and rapidly maturing capitalism from 1980's onward). Thus we see how world relational aesthetics was a reaction to and departure from a status quo which isolated art from a deeper or more expansive context of meaning.

Likewise, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics was a reaction to "art for art's sake" of avant-garde modernism in the West, as well as to post-modern meaninglessness resulting from the decentering of so many signifiers from what they had originally signified. One of the most deeply decentered institution in the West—the church, had by Bourriaud's time given way to an artworld that

eschewed spiritual belief in any form, given over almost completely to the scientific-materialism necessitated by capitalism's development across national and cultural borders. Bourriaud was reacting to the meaningless of art in a capitalist schematic which attributed value to artworks according the logic of late capitalism. Bourriaud writes a scathing critique of what he saw as the two dominant forms of modernity:

There are several versions of modernity, however. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was thus the arena for a struggle between two visions of the world: a modest, rationalism conception, hailing from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and a philosophy of spontaneity and liberation through the irrational (Dada, Surrealism, the Situationists), both of which were opposed to authoritarian and utilitarian forces eager to gauge human relations and subjugate people. Instead of culminating in hoped-for emancipation, the advances of technologies and "Reason" made it that much easier to exploit the South of planet earth, blindly replace human labour by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques, all through a general rationalisation of the production process.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we see how both Zha Changping and Nicolas Bourriaud are reacting to what they see as failed art cathexis, striking out on their own path. Whereas Zha is reacting to a history of art which isolates only the dates, dimensions, and physical statistics concerning artworks and their artists; Bourriaud is reacting to an art history which is no longer able to describe social issues arising today, because it has divorced art from the society from out which art arises.

While both paradigms of world relational aesthetics and relational aesthetics are responding and reacting to an art cathexis which they reject, it is important to note



Figure 10. Zhou Bin. *Ignorant Writing*. Installation, 2000.



Figure 11. Betsy Damon. *Living Water Park*. Landscape, 1998.

that the two are addressing the individual human Subject from a different ontological viewpoint. Firstly, Zha is fully accepting a Christian ontology which Bourriaud is hard-pressed to acknowledge within his own scholarship. The reason that Bourriaud is hard-pressed as such is because he is writing within a dominant Western art discourse which has rejected spiritual belief in the form of mainstream exoteric metaphysics (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.) or alternative new-age esoteric metaphysics (Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Wicca, etc.). Thus, while Zha is fully able to contextualize the individual human Subject within a system of inter-relations with not only society, but also nature, time, language, self, history, and divinity; Bourriaud is confined to reclaiming what had originally been confined within the individual human Subject (constructed by capitalist notions of Subjective agency) and distributing this value, meaning, and agency throughout society as a whole. That is, Bourriaud can reinvest social relations with the value and meaning it once had to art, and vice-versa; while Zha is reclaiming

for the individual human Subject that which Communist ideology had taken from human Subjective agency (seeing it as form of Capitalist spiritual pollution) and giving this back to society as a whole. These are interesting reversals of meaning and value attribution, both as a reaction to scientific-materialism, with both sharing a valence, in one form or another, with Marxist ideology.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have described some of the main tenets of both Zha Changping's world relational aesthetics and Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. We have discovered that while each is responding to and reacting against the art historical methods prevalent in their respective socio-historical milieu, they are responding to diverging cultural cathexes, and thus addressing the individual human Subject from a different ontological viewpoint. These two paradigms of contemporary art both in China

and in the West also assign somewhat varying roles to art in society, with Zha asking art to redeem the human being in its relation to a seven-fold system of relationships within the forming factors of the world, and Bourriaud merely asking art to belong to common people, not just to artists and arts professionals. As each paradigm highly values the systems of relational interactions which constellate art as an existential phenomenon, they are clearly the way forward for humanity in establishing more harmonious relationships with other humans as well as with non-human living and non-living things. Both paradigms are also optimistic about the power of art to heal individual human beings as well as human societies, and as such deserve greater attention in art historical discourse.

Dr. Sophia Kidd is a scholar, research-based curator, art critic, translator, author, and poet. Kidd was born in 1973 and is currently an Associate Research Fellow at Sichuan International Studies University. From 2009 to 2016, Kidd obtained an MA and PhD at Sichuan University (SCU) in Classical Chinese Literature and served as Associate Professor at Sichuan University (2018-2021), as well as Visiting Master Class Lecturer at Ruhr Universität Bochum (2017) and Göttingen University in Germany (2017-Present). Kidd is the founder and CEO of Yan Er Lu Arts International.

Editor: Li Congcong

## ENDNOTES

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## 比較關係美學：查常平的“世界關係美學”和尼古拉·布裡沃的“關係美學”

康書雅

**摘要：**從我翻譯查常平教授關於世界關係美學理論的文本開始，十多年來，我一直想寫這篇文章。後來我與作者認識並成為朋友，但將這些中文翻譯成英文非常不容易。關於世界關係美學的文本涉及術語、邏輯學、修辭學、神學，這與我在西方哲學和美學方面的學術訓練極其不同。確實，世界關係美學構成了一種我慢慢適應的“外域”，我不得不學會說其本土的語言。作為一個體系，世界關係美學非常明晰，作為一種自我維繫的思想生態系統發生影響，獨立於西方美學理論之外。我發現查教授獨特的美學思想體系與西方關係美學之間最清晰的聯繫，是他援引的藝術策展人、藝術評論家和藝術史學家尼古拉·布裡沃在其著作《關係美學》中創造的術語“關係美學”。在本文中，我將首先介紹兩種思想範式的一些基礎知識，然後比較和對比關鍵點。雖然我已經開始理解查教授關於世界關係美學的理論，但我一直在等待機會比較和對比關於它與尼古拉·布裡沃所寫的“關係美學”中的藝術運動和流派。

**關鍵詞：**世界關係美學；查常平；關係美學；尼古拉·布裡沃；漢語和非漢語範式；比較關係美學