

# BOUTIQUING AT THE RAINDANCE CAMPOUT: RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AS FESTIVAL TECHNOLOGY

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses Nicholas Bourriaud's theorizing of "relational aesthetics" to consider the mechanics that facilitate strong subcultural ties amongst participants of small-scale, "boutique" festivals. Relational aesthetics describes art that takes human interaction as its theoretical horizon, where art works are envisioned primarily as social interstices. Using California's Raindance Campout as a case study, I argue that festivals may be viewed as a form of relational art, where organizers create environments that prompt meaningful human performance. Building on critiques of the revolutionary energy Bourriaud invests in his concept, I propose that we might productively understand relational aesthetics as an indeterminate technology always adaptable to particular political ideologies. I use art present at Raindance to illuminate some of the event's unspoken political prerogatives; despite attempting to disassociate from the ethos of a perceived US mainstream, I argue that Raindance still coincides with logics of modern liberalism including consumerism and cultural appropriation.

KEYWORDS: relational aesthetics, performance, festival, subculture, ideology

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## INTRODUCTION

In operation since 2005, the Raindance Campout departs from mega-music festival models by building an aesthetically customized, social and spiritual experience. With a maximum capacity of just one thousand people, and no indication that admission limits will soon be significantly raised, Raindance exemplifies what some festivalgoers call a “boutique” festival, a small-scale event that caters to a specific subculture in its music and aesthetics. Usually run for profit, boutique festivals emphasize style, personality and community over big-name attractions and spectacle firepower, drawing tight-knit circles (“tribes”, as they sometimes call themselves) instead of disparate crowds. For Raindance, this means including intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic components to distinguish itself from the myriad other events in the California festival ecosystem. In addition to DJs spinning day and night on amplified sound stages built in lush, natural settings, the gathering hosts a range of organized rituals, psychedelic art displays and workshops on subjects like Chakra Yoga and “Aquaponics with Applied Permaculture”. Raindance combines electronic dance music, artisanal vending, intricately constructed outdoor spaces that house performances and lectures, and a spiritual component linked to the “New Paradigm” (a contemporary redeployment of New Age) that integrates—and, it might be argued, appropriates—cultural practices from East Asia, South Asia, South America and, especially, pre-colonial America.

The brainchild of DJ John Edmonds (commonly known as Little John), Raindance is a product of the Santa Cruz underground rave scene with related events spanning back to 1995. Although Raindance now takes place far from Santa Cruz (at least a 4- to 6-hour drive, generally), it maintains a connection to the local scene, with DJs and much of the crowd hailing from that area and returning to the festival year after year. Though open to the general public, the ticketing link for Raindance 2013 referred to participants as a “private group” and sold “membership passes for our annual private gathering”, suggesting an attempt to retain a social dynamic that does not extend far from its original constituency (Raindance Presents 2013a). As one first-time attendee put it: “Raindance is a family affair—everyone knows each other and has been a part of the [Northern California] underground tribe for a long time. Refined, evolved lifers, industry players, baller growers, local hicks, old-school scenesters, down-to-earth artists and misfit freaks made up the crowd, which felt experienced, passionate and highly stylized” (KnowFun 2014). For this Raindancer, the feeling of a tight-knit community is attractive. His valorization of experience and stylization speak to how boutique festivals create unique, appealing subcultural articulations—sociality distinctive enough to be considered part of the festival’s attractions, but manifested through the improvised activities of the participants themselves, rather than prepared stagings by organizers. By perceiving members of the crowd as “experienced”, “refined”, “evolved”, the reviewer enunciates participants’ ability to hold space in unique ways as a kind of artistic skill, one that can be developed through practice.

In this article I wish to use the Raindance Campout as a case study to think through how social practice can take on aesthetic qualities. The event typifies trends in global festival culture that emphasize organizing principles based on generating interpersonal connection

and dialogue to create an artistic synergy within temporary constructed spaces, trends that have now started to be adopted by large-scale, highly corporate events as well. Yet small-scale, boutique festivals should not be looked at as large festivals in-waiting. That is, they should not be characterized by what they lack, be it large crowds, high-profile musical acts, or spectacle firepower; instead, boutique festivals should be considered sites for personal and subcultural identity-making based on playful, improvised, personal encounters with other participants, and it is towards this activity that their art, music, workshops, architecture and even vending are oriented. As opposed to the unifying mass spectacles of large events—crystalized in, say, the throngs of people cramming together to view a headliner at Coachella, or the collective cheers of Burning Man participants watching the event’s titular effigy go up in flames—Raindance thrives by generating affective ties between participants through momentary encounters that occur not only on the main dance floors, but also in interstitial, participant-created performance sites: renegade sound stages, altars and installations, drum circles, theme camps.

In what follows, I first investigate the creative potency of Raindance by considering it through the lens of what art curator and critic Nicholas Bourriaud calls “relational aesthetics”, work that creates social situations (rather than objects for contemplation) and takes as its theoretical horizon the field of human interaction. Bourriaud’s theory provides a critical apparatus that allows us to consider the festival space as one co-created by participants and organizers, where the event’s music, dance, sculpture, workshops and ritual practices become social interstices that facilitate micropractices of intersubjectivity; these induce a sense of alterity vis-à-vis quotidian forms of political economy. Within the space of a boutique festival, I argue, relational aesthetics solidify subcultural ties by creating a feeling of communality, a bond that helps instill a value system determined by the event’s framing dramaturgies. While such practices are present at large-scale events as well, the relative intimacy of boutique festivals—which affords the sense of a personalized, exclusive experience—creates a rarified air that makes subcultural identification more acute. To members of relevant circles, attending boutique festivals confers what cultural sociologist Sarah Thornton (following Pierre Bourdieu) calls “subcultural capital”, the *bona fides* that allow entry into a niche community and distinguish oneself from the mainstream (1995: 27). In the context of leave-no-trace boutique festivals like Raindance, which lack sizable archives or media visibility, using relational aesthetics as an analytical lens helps us understand the mechanics and political economy of subcultural identity-making.

Relying on observations noted while attending the 2013 and 2014 Raindance Campouts as a participant-observer (both times working as a volunteer), I begin by discussing how Raindance might be viewed as an example of relational art. While, for Bourriaud, relational aesthetics carry an inherently progressive and democratizing energy, following prominent critiques of the theory I suggest that their political implications are more murky—potent yet indeterminate. To help unpack the larger implications of this small festival, then, I conclude by discussing Raindance as an example of an emerging category of similar events known as “transformational festivals”; this serves to illuminate the dramaturgy that guides participants and organizers towards specific ethical imperatives, as well as to highlight some of the political prerogatives that attend such practices.

## RAINDANCE AS RELATIONAL ART

Discussing his fifteen-year career throwing parties and festivals, Little John describes his motivation in terms of building scenarios that allow for improvised and combinative artistic expression: “I personally like to provide space for creative people to be able to express themselves through music, dance, painting, stilt walking—whatever your creative passion is, bring it, do it, throw it in the mix” (Limbach 2010). Little John’s impetus for creating events like Raindance characterize the festival’s power as deriving not so much from the spectacle technologies and sensorial stimulation that amount to “putting on a show”—massive sound systems, choreographed light shows, pyrotechnics, etc.—but from its ability to summon artistic display enacted by the participants themselves. Many, perhaps even a majority of Raindance participants identify as artists in some respect, and the festival brings together their creative energy in order to build a unique synergy. Staging a festival involves developing aesthetically heightened zones that attract social interaction, and logistically enabling participants to do the same. Much like Katherine Chen’s characterization of the organizing strategies of Burning Man (considered by many to be the progenitor of contemporary alternative festival culture), orchestrating an event like Raindance is a matter of attracting talented individuals to the event, motivating them to contribute, and creating an infrastructure that allows the free flow of artistic energy (2009).

The characterization of artistic practice as a process of instigating (rather than enacting) creative expression coincides with Nicholas Bourriaud’s theorizing on relational art in his book *Relational Aesthetics*. Bourriaud defines relational art as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space” (2002: 5). He contrasts relational art to object-oriented modes of art making characteristic of modernity, wherein a completed piece gets *consumed* by a patron, who is excluded from the act of creation and presumed to be passive when interfacing with the artwork. Relational aesthetics, instead, present an art form “where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the ‘*encounter*’ between beholder and picture, and the *collective elaboration of meaning*” (2002: 5–6, emphasis added). In other words, the artwork is not a materialized manifestation of the artist’s private imagination, but the performative interplay that results from people coming into contact with the piece itself, and with each other in the spatio-temporal frame presented by the piece.

Little John seems to echo this sentiment: “To me it’s like, if you’re a painter, you have your canvas, you have your paints, you have an idea of what you want to paint, and that’s your thing. For me, it’s like a three dimensional, living, breathing painting that I set up, and create this whole interactive art space of music, sound, artists” (Limbach 2010). His artistic product is not a sculpture, painting or concert; it is not even the architecture of the festival space itself, with its sound stages, installations and tentscape. It is, rather, the participant-generated performances that *activate* these sites in real time. While Bourriaud developed relational aesthetics as a way of explaining 1990s interactive gallery art, his theory helps us

understand the labor necessary to create the decorated dance floors, altars, sculptures and lighting displays scattered throughout the festival; they are not intended to be the festival's foci, but their *loci*, gathering points that prompt meaningful human performance.

The performances that take place at Raindance are infinitely variable and may or may not correspond to recognized artistic genres. The festival brings different forms of art-making together within a single space, allowing them to intersect with one another. There is, of course, music: Santa Cruz "family DJ's", acts from the greater California area and usually a couple international artists.<sup>1</sup> There is dancing: scrums bouncing in front of the sound stages, flow artists spinning glowing *poi*, staves or hula hoops, tweaked-out loners on the periphery bizarrely bouncing with the beat. There is painting: artists with canvases just to the side of the dance floor creating vibrant, visceral, visionary art; they color with techniques so nuanced that the images seem to subtly bend and warp, injected with a kind of kineticism. There are poetry readings, water sculptures, electro-kinematic installations and much more. What makes the space so exciting, though, is the saturation of talented individuals in close proximity, enabling them to scaffold their creative energies by riffing off one another: a visual artist's brush strokes become guided by the music (see fig. 1); a dancer creates an elaborate choreography using a bedazzled scepter she borrows from a metal sculptor; painters design crazy body art that circulates the grounds through ambulation. Even staged rituals are made all the more potent through musical accompaniment and by taking place near beautifully-designed altars that incorporate spiritual icons from around the world.

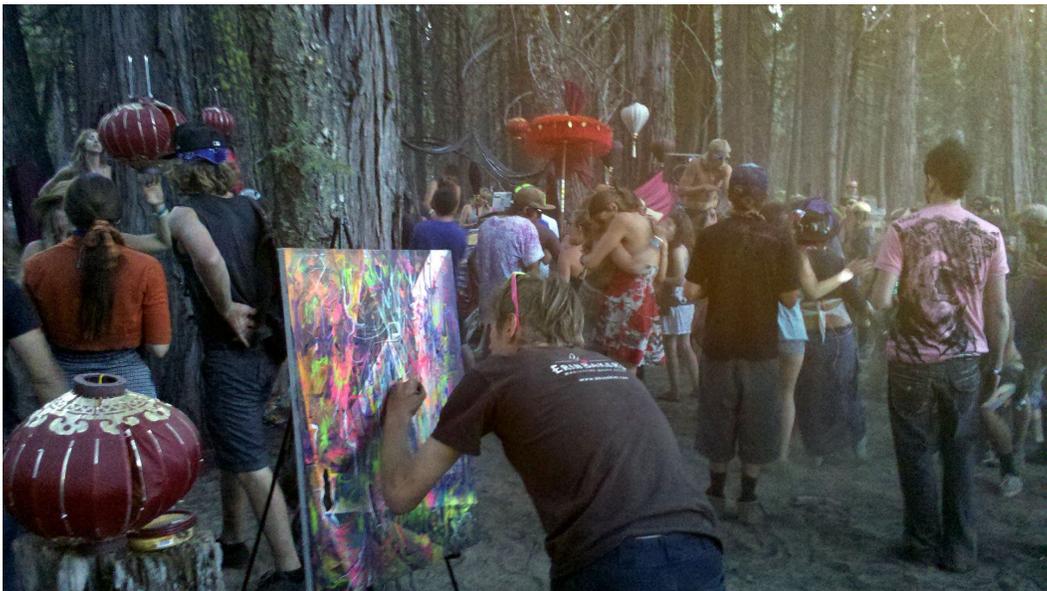


FIGURE 1. A PAINTER CREATES VISIONARY ART NEAR THE DANCE FLOOR OF A RAINDANCE SOUND STAGE.

PHOTO CREDIT: AUTHOR (2013).

Art emerges in unexpected places: walking from the main dance floor back to your campsite, for instance, you might encounter a well-made stone stack, a light installation hanging from the trees, a theme camp with carpets and pillows decorated with East Asian spiritual symbols to encourage impromptu meditation. Sometimes enhanced by participants' use of hallucinogens, these eye-catching areas become assembly points for meaningful interaction. One evening, as I strolled through a wooded area in the quieter part of the festival grounds, I stumbled upon a van that had been converted into a mini-sound stage, complete with turntables, amps and small, rotating LEDs; as amateur DJs spun their jams, passers-by gathered around to listen, dance and converse. Someone started spinning poi, which prompted me to join him; a woman began to wildly dance, going airborne with each base drop, stinging the ground with her foot and kicking up dirt into the eyes of those standing around; someone else came by and offered to rub fine-scented oils on anyone who cared for it. The entire event was aesthetically heightened, too, by participants' costumes, face paint, and trendy festivalwear (many components of which could be purchased in the festival's vending tents): tunics, boots, utility belts, corsets, glowing boas, bangles, feathers, jewelry of all kinds, snazzy fedoras with ostentatious feathers sticking out, a woman with a fur tail, a guy in a child's tiger suit.

The saturation and simultaneity of these myriad creative activities in the space of the festival blurs disciplinary boundaries, breaks down the barrier between quotidian life and aesthetic encounter, collapses the binary between performer and spectator and troubles the notion of a stable, structural artistic frame—where and when, precisely, does quotidian life end and the aesthetic experience begin? Cultivating a participatory ethic, the festival itself becomes an example of what performance scholar Wendy Clupper Meier calls a “heightened theatrical zone”, where self-performing, role-playing and collective collaboration become operative modes of being, and which opens up space for the remaking of identity (2007: 170). Likewise, Graham St John describes similar visionary art festivals as hyperliminal spaces that “expose participants to disparate modes of self-dissolution and reflexivity” (2014: 64).

The potential for unexpected and aesthetically rich performance activity to crop up at any moment invigorates the Raindance space and binds its populace together. Discussing the performance event, theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte uses the concept of the “autopoietic feedback loop” to describe the invisible, self-generating energies that connect participants to one another; by creating an oscillating sense of the self as performer and the self as spectator, subject and object, participants are plunged into a state of liminality<sup>2</sup> (2008: 12). In doing so, the performance event scrambles notions of the self and primes participants for communal transformation (50). Considering Raindance through the lens of relational aesthetics allows for the notion that, within the container of the event space, art is everywhere and always a performance event; it can arise unexpectedly, co-generated, free-form, disciplinarily intersectional, subject to momentary contingencies. Fischer-Lichte's theorizing might be seen to operate in

conjunction with Bourriaud's, which characterizes artistic practice as an experimental production of new social bonds; together, they point to a way of understanding how the density of creative activity at Raindance might lead to powerful forms of subcultural identification. Its boutique size and ability to summon the tight-knit Santa Cruz EDM community create circumstances wherein familiarity and repeated encounter give rise to a sense of intimacy and intersubjectivity.

### THE LIMITS OF RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

While intersubjective connections may be intensely meaningful to festival participants, it is crucial to question their durability and political directionality rather than assume their inherent value. Scholars have rightly critiqued Bourriaud's sanguine approach to the development of relational aesthetics on a number of different grounds, especially the liberatory rhetoric that accompanies it. For Bourriaud, relational art is without a doubt a positive innovation, one that "permit[s] the development of new political and cultural designs" through dialogic interaction; it is capable of generating new economic possibilities by allowing for micropolitical disengagements from the dominant system of capitalist exchange:

Over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, the work of art represents a social *interstice*. This *interstice* term was used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising, autarkic types of production, etc. The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within the system (2002: 6).

Bourriaud recognizes that relational art still operates as a commodity, but, as Stewart Martin notes, he sees it as having "an essentially critical relation to capitalist culture, defined by its resistance to exchange-value and, at least implicitly, its struggle with subjection to the value form" (2007: 376).

Bourriaud's belief in the positive potential of these temporary rearticulations of capitalism (rather than the sustained engagement of more classical leftist projects) aligns with festival communities' faith in the creation of transitory sites that enable alternative social practices as a foil to corporate consumerist culture. This is especially apparent in the cultivation of alternative economic practices at festivals, such as the artisanal and gift economies present at boutique events like Raindance. The artisanal economy consists of artists, jewelers, metallurgists, clothing designers and food sellers who attempt to counter the apparatus of mass production by vending goods that they themselves have produced. Such an economy operates through personal encounter, attempting to reframe the exchange event as a site for interpersonal connection between buyer and seller instead of the alienation normalized in industrial capitalism. The profit motive is still operative, but it is not the end of the story;

vendors in an artisanal economy sacrifice the possibility of a potentially more profitable scale of production in order to create objects that retain the aura of their creator's labor, and which circulate among participants assumed to share similar values.

In a gift economy, made famous through events like Burning Man, participants appear to abandon the profit motive altogether; they donate to the community goods, services, art objects, performances and lectures—labor for which one typically receives compensation in the quotidian world. The presence of these free items and activities are part of the draw of events like Raindance, and those who offer them appear to allow the event to capitalize on their labor power for no or minimal compensation (at most the waiving of the admission fee, and this only for those whose labor would be valued much higher in the outside marketplace). Yet, to view such donations as complete disavowals of the profit motive occludes the (sub)cultural capital generated by this seemingly free labor. Whether conscious of it or not, what participants sacrifice by declining to sell their work they gain in reputation within the community, a status that is sometimes parlayed into gigs or commissions for larger, more financially lucrative venues and ventures. Such a system creates the veneer of eschewing capitalist exchange, but does not necessarily escape its perquisites.

Martin pushes back against the notion that temporary rearticulations of capitalism, particularly in the context of an artistic event, actually lead to realistic models for the future. Quite to the contrary, he believes that they are “helplessly reversible into an aestheticization of novel forms of capitalist exchange”, further abstracting the logics of capital even as they attempt to transcend them (2007: 371). Even though alternative economic practices occur at festivals like Raindance, attending the event itself is a form of exchange, one more in line with what economists Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore term the “experience economy”, than with typical goods and service exchange (1999). Bourriaud's theory fails to account for the cultural capital generated by participating in relational aesthetics, which ultimately reasserts the value form presumed to be bracketed off when in the social interstice. The claim to an “authentic” community that exists outside the mainstream market is itself laden with cultural capital; yet, as with events like Burning Man, claiming alterity vis-à-vis the quotidian does not release participants from the market's sign game or social logics (Kozinets 2002: 36). Rather, the required intersection with mainstream capitalism to generate the technology and materials necessary to produce Raindance's relational art gets abstracted through the social interaction that occurs around it. The affective ties boutique festivals generate create memorable, moving, even transformational experiences, but they also create loyal customers. Keeping this in mind is crucial to understanding how, despite creating liminoid spaces that house alternative economic structures, boutique festivals still plug into normative macroeconomic paradigms.

Claire Bishop has also argued vehemently against assuming, as Bourriaud does, the *a priori* politicality of relational art. She notes that because “he regards the open-ended participatory work of art as more ethical and political in implication than the autonomous, finite object”, the interactive premise of relational art is seen as inherently superior to

optical contemplation, which is deemed passive and disengaged; yet, “underlying [this] argument about relational aesthetics is the presumption that dialogue is in and of itself democratic”—far from a foregone conclusion (2005: 118–9). For Bishop, the fundamental flaw in Bourriaud’s argument is that the conversations created around relational art tend to be between people who already have much in common: gallery goers with similar dispositions towards art consumption, or, in the case of boutique festivals, subcultural groupings with pre-established aesthetic interests, agreed upon rules for social conduct and similar political postures. Instead of more agonistic models of democracy that embrace concepts like subject-group difference (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) or dissensus (Rancière 2010), Bourriaud’s discussion of relational art points towards a liberal-democratic utopia in which frictions and antagonisms between disparate subjects simply disappear.

This critique certainly holds weight in the context of Raindance, a space in which participants are already bound together through common location, artistic tastes and lifestyle choices, as well as important identity-positional attributes like class and race (the festival’s population, like most in the California scene, is by a vast majority white and middle or upper-middle class). Indeed, events like Raindance tend to be judged on criteria like “good vibes”, an unspoken copasetic quality that values minimal conflict and the feeling of social cohesion. This is not to say that conflicts don’t occur, but they tend to manifest on a personal level rather than through political positioning, and organizers attempt to police it when it becomes outwardly visible and threatens the harmony of the space.

I acknowledge these powerful critiques of relational aesthetics to make clear that I see the theory as offering a way of understanding the formal qualities of Raindance’s artistic practice, the intentionality integral to creating festival spaces and the efficacy such work has in solidifying subcultural ties—but *not* as an apparatus to assert the revolutionary qualities of boutique festivals. In fact, the critiques leveled at relational aesthetics are useful for understanding contradictions that arise in the politics of festival culture, wherein too often the creative ethos and transformational project get positioned as inherently critical and progressive. The reality, I suggest, is far murkier.

But questioning Bourriaud’s assumptions regarding the *a priori* progressivism of relational art should not amount to ignoring its potency. We should instead think about what might be achieved by viewing relational aesthetics as a *technology*, a way of reifying or disseminating ideology via the immanence of participation. Relational aesthetics act as a kind of spectacle, but one that operates differently than Guy Debord’s famous Society of the Spectacle (which Bourriaud sought to counter in writing *Relational Aesthetics*). They present, instead, an encoding power that, as performance scholar Margaret Werry writes, is not “hegemonically totalizing, [but instead] a transversal, constellated and coincidental, mobile and multiple cultural formation, open to the intransigence, desire, and momentum of the subjects it produces” (2005: 381). Festivals constitute diffuse ideological apparatuses that utilize the creative energy of participants to consecrate a particular ethico-political position—one that is often implicit, but which can be gleaned from sustained attention to participants’ activities and event dramaturgies. Self-identifying through their disidentification with

an imagined mainstream (e.g., the “misfit freaks”<sup>3</sup> described by the Raindance attendee in this article’s introduction), boutique festivals and their participants use the language and poetics of subculture to declare independence from certain normative paradigms (industrial capitalism, mass consumer culture, etc.). But in distancing themselves from this position, they abstract the way other mainstream values get reified—as I will soon discuss in greater detail. Their participatory nature a catalyst for subcultural identity formation, relational aesthetics help naturalize the idea that a community’s values are self-generated, primal aspects of the individual or subculture itself—rather than the ideological residue of an opposing social structure.

Viewing relational aesthetics as a technology forces us to question the purposes towards which that technology gets deployed, directing us to consider the discourse that frames events like Raindance. To do so, in the following section I discuss how Raindance operates within an emerging category of events called “transformational festivals”, whose ethical system has lately begun to be codified and disseminated. Communicated through Raindance’s website, advertisements and framing rituals, as well as through popular online hubs frequented by festival regulars, this ethical system constitutes the major dramaturgy that bounds the performance event prompted by relational art. My goal here is not to produce a comprehensive and definitive accounting of Raindance’s politics, but to consider a couple of axes on which the concept of “transformation” is built in order to reveal what it abstracts.

## WHAT TRANSFORMATION?

A[n] experience as unbelievable as Raindance 2014 is few and far between. My soul and body is fiercely cleansed of all pain and stress involved in my life. I literally cried harder than I ever have because of laughing soooo hard. The thing that makes me smile about it now is knowing that I was [consciously unconscious] the whole time. For my life to change for the better in that state of mind [I] feel unbelievably blessed. So from here...with a clean canvas I am super excited to learn and grow with my family and have my heart beat again (Briscoe 2014).

[Raindance web advertisement:] The term ‘transformational festival’ was not even a buzz word when we started. We just knew we were on to something special. We knew it deserved to be nurtured and cultivated, and yet had no idea that ten years later there would be so many amazing festivals, and that the West Coast would become a trendsetter for conscious gathering evolution (Andy 2014).

I want to frame this section by discussing a participant-created water sculpture and altar given prominent placement on the festival grounds in both 2013 and 2014 (fig. 2). An example of relational art, it encapsulates the political axes I wish to explore in Raindance as a whole.

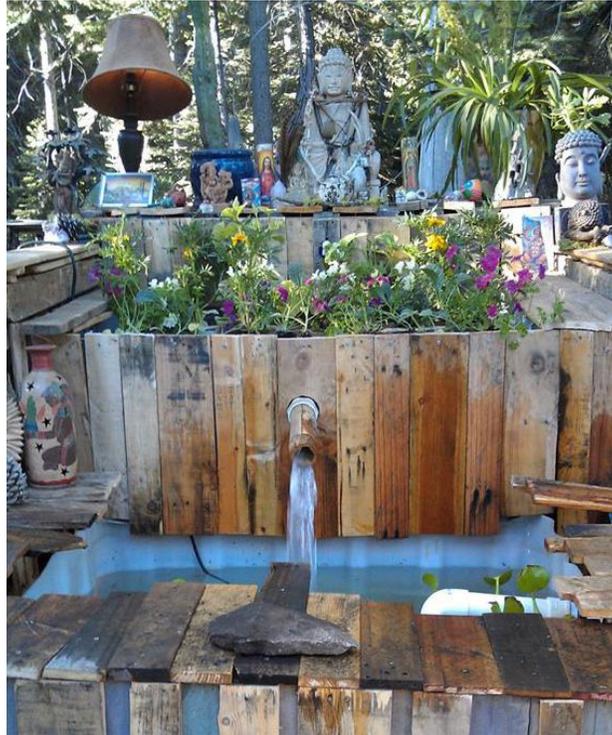


FIGURE 2. WATER SCULPTURE WITH PERMACULTURE SYSTEM CREATED BY GERASIMOS CHRISTOPHORATOS.  
PHOTO CREDIT: GERASIMOS CHRISTOPHORATOS (2013).

The piece consisted of two pools stacked on top of one another, lined with dozens of wooden slats like a giant crate; water flowed through a spout from the top pool to the lower one, and a solar-powered pump cycled it back up again, creating a continuous loop so that the tranquil sound of running water continued for the festival's duration. A variety of cultural-geographical images and artifacts lined the structure: a figurine of Krishna holding a flute, two Buddha heads, candles depicting Jesus Christ and the Virgin of Guadalupe, a picture of the Painted Desert, a San Pedro cactus, a clay vase featuring a brown-skinned figure with a headdress holding a potted plant (seemingly a Central American derivation), a wood-carved Native American face wearing a plumed headdress. The artist, Gerasimos Christoforatos, who produced the piece as a gift to the Raindance community, deployed these symbols as an attempt to “incorporate all the different religions of the world, to represent the unification of what we might all consider to be spirituality.”<sup>4</sup>

Christoforatos' sculpture also served a functional purpose, working as an operational hydroponic and permaculture system. Troughs growing small herbs lined the top pool, while the bottom one contained fish; waste from the fish pumped back up to the top tank to help fertilize the plants, and in turn, the runoff from the plants helped feed the fish—both could be harvested for human consumption.

The piece constitutes a particularly visible example of relational art at Raindance, presumably seen by everyone and built with the intention of encouraging people to “hold space” with one another by presenting an aesthetically- and spiritually-charged environment.

As Christoforatos expresses, the piece was incomplete upon its arrival; it *grew* to completion via the acts of communal co-creation that it prompted:

People would bring certain kinds of stones or crystals and different candles and incense, different types of artistic metal objects; they may bring things to hang around the Buddha's neck—medicine pouches, little pendants of eagles. And things build up over time as people leave objects behind. So we reach this climax where people are giving what they have to offer to the piece, and just as the event is over and the climax is over, things get taken apart; and just as it's built up it's also built down.<sup>5</sup>

Through the community's donations, Christoforatos sees the sculpture taking on a lifespan coincident with the duration of the festival, generating a kind of community aura. This, he proposes, extends beyond objects placed upon the sculpture to performance practices, rituals and social encounters that occurred around it: a man who set up a desk nearby and wrote poetry, a juggler who attracted onlookers as he practiced, even some confused partiers who used the sculpture to fill their drinking bottles. In 2013, the piece demarcated one of Raindance's workshop spaces, hosting intellectual and embodied classes: "Making a wild-crafted hydrosol", "Herbal medicine for the home", "Spirits in a bottle",<sup>6</sup> "Weaving a dreamcatcher", "Finding your inner Jedi", "Anchors with Wings".<sup>7</sup> For Christoforatos, all of this was absorbed into the sculpture itself, endowing it with an energy that reflected the ethos of the festival community.

Through thinking about this sculpture, we can see a number of tropes associated with Raindance as a whole: 1) an emphasis on ecology and sustainability, and a particular fascination with water;<sup>8</sup> 2) a non-specific spirituality that mixes elements from different world religions and indigenous cultural practices; 3) an emphasis on identity-making and the unleashing of personal potential through spiritual practice—in a word: transformation. Over the past ten-to-fifteen years, a number of similar EDM events sharing these values have cropped up primarily in California and British Columbia, coming to be known as transformational festivals. Raindance does not explicitly label itself a transformational festival on its logo or website, but as the advertisement that begins this section indicates, administrators are aware of the term's growing cachet and embrace being categorized as such.

The term "transformational festival" is relatively new, having only emerged in the last five years or so, and largely due to the efforts of Jeet-Kei Leung, an avid participant in the West Coast festival scene and documentarian of EDM culture. Leung's TEDx Vancouver talk in 2010, entitled "Transformational Festivals and the New Evolutionary Culture", codified the term around a series of event models, principles, and aesthetics, and helped disseminate it widely amongst festival participants and organizers. Leung parlayed his talk into a Kickstarter campaign that led to the creation of a four-part documentary of Transformational Festivals called the Bloom Series, and an accompanying web portal that helped solidify their ethics and poetics.<sup>9</sup>

According to Leung, transformational festivals are powered by the co-creation of an immersive, participant-driven reality (what I'm here associating with relational aesthetics).

They are distinguished from other festival genres by the following qualities: an ecstatic core ritual provided through electronic dance music; visionary art, performance, art installations, and live art; a workshop curriculum covering a spectrum of New Paradigm subjects; the creation and honoring of sacred space; ceremony and ritual; a social economy of artisans and vendors (or, alternative gift economy); a natural, outdoor setting to honor the Earth; and a multiple (typically 3–7) day duration (The Bloom Series 2014).

Leung frames transformational festivals as “a cultural renaissance in progress”, an “evolution” and a conduit for “building a better world” (The Bloom Series 2014). Like Bourriaud, his language creates a teleological narrative of positive development, a dramaturgy that frames the Raindance experience as a participatory critical project. Yet, when we consider that transformational festivals arise within the context of North American liberalism, a number of axes emerge on which we might consider their distinctive political positionality: economic structure, spiritual inflection, sexual, gender<sup>10</sup> and racial politics, etc. Certainly, as these events gain momentum and spread beyond the West Coast scene, efforts should be made to more comprehensively account for these various aspects. However, seeking to avoid straying from my subject thus far, here I wish only to briefly discuss two major areas made visible through Christophoratos’ previously discussed artwork: 1) the ecological ethos cultivated within the festival space, and; 2) a form of spirituality that grafts contemporary technology to practices of indigenous culture, what Leung refers to as “Ancient future culture” (TEDxTalks 2011).

### ECOLOGICAL ETHOS

Christophoratos gifted his water sculpture to the Raindance community in order to “educate people about sustainability so that we can spread this kind of technology to make a difference here and abroad”. While technically not 100% self-sustaining (the system can be run on solar power, but requires modest nutritional supplementation) the altar itself *performs* homeostasis by displaying a self-perpetuating life cycle between plant and animal, bioprocesses at perfect equilibrium. The cultural symbols that surround it depict humans as the stewards of this equilibrium, rather than antagonists. The sculpture’s cyclical permaculture functionality, beauty and relational aesthetics crystalize how transformational festivals generate an environmentally-oriented politics amongst its populace. Acting as both inspiration and, through workshops dedicated to teaching sustainable living techniques, training grounds, they seek to spread ecological consciousness beyond the festival frame.

All transformational festivals are leave-no-trace events, where organizers guarantee that, post-festival, the land will be left in as pristine shape as before participants arrived. The leave-no-trace ethos is central to generating feelings of subcultural belonging vis-à-vis other, presumably more hedonistic events. When I attended Raindance, I remember discussing with some people camping near me how they could no longer bring themselves to attend festivals without the leave-no-trace label because of their discomfort with the trash politics that accompany them—not only the beer bottles, wrappers and cigarette butts unthinkingly

strewn across the event grounds, but the way that a culture of ecological carelessness intersected with human relationality to make for a colder, more impersonal environment. In contrast, practices of trash consciousness—picking up one’s cigarette butts and placing them in a snazzy pouch, or converting beer cans into recycled sculptures—reverberate throughout transformational festival spaces, constituting ecological microperformances that reify communal solidarity through a sense of shared ethics.

Of course, leave-no-trace events can never hope to literally leave no trace. Cigarette butts get picked up, string and twine tangled in trees get taken down, but even if visible markers of the event disappear, traces can be found at the molecular level: soap used for making giant bubbles (a playful relational art activity I saw both years I attended *Raindance*) that sinks into the soil, or a feather from someone’s festive boa that gets trampled into the ground. While I do not suggest that participants are ignorant of this contradiction, I want to point out that since leave-no-trace eschews unseen remnants of festival activity, it normalizes a perceptual frame that can only account for concrete, visible forms of environmental impact.

Furthermore, leave-no-trace is in-part achieved through the labor of volunteers who patrol the grounds picking up trash in exchange for a free ticket to the festival after three four-hour shifts. In 2014, the festival added a \$25 “impact fee” for all participants, including volunteers, to offset the labor and logistical costs of making the event carbon-neutral. While these aspects no doubt illustrate the legitimate attention organizers pay to environmental concerns and weave an ecological ethos into the event’s dramaturgy, they also authorize consumption patterns wherein the labor that sustains them gets abstracted. Transformational festivals necessarily impact the environment through the gasoline burnt to generate the wattage required to run sound stages and lighting displays, and to travel into remote spaces. But participants and organizers view this as a strategy, where the training and consciousness-raising that takes place within the space outweighs the heightened consumption patterns perceived to generate this momentum. Seen thus, events like *Raindance* constitute what Slavoj Žižek calls a “chocolate laxative”, a calling card of contemporary liberal society wherein “the very thing which causes damage should already be the medicine” (2004); the impact fee, combined with the leave-no-trace policy (encouraged through community self-regulation but only guaranteed through organizers’ post-festival management), potentially reifies unsustainable consumption patterns that accompany the event’s Saturnalian atmosphere.

### *ANCIENT FUTURE CULTURE*

It is unclear precisely how the *Raindance* name came about—some say that it arose to reference an unusually dry summer at the time of the company’s founding, while the poster for the group’s first event (a “Tribal Dance Party”) suggests an homage to ritual practices in Ancient Egypt and Africa (*Raindance Presents* 2014). Regardless of the derivation, suffice it to say the event’s name characterizes it as a fusion of contemporary recreational practice (camping) with indigenous ritual, and this carries through to the spiritual inflection of the festival’s contemporary iteration.



FIGURE 3. A PIECE OF VISIONARY ART PRESENT AT RAINDANCE 2013 (ARTIST UNKNOWN).  
NOTE HOW THE HEADDRESS (SUGGESTING INDIGENEITY) AND SKIN COLOR ARE COMBINED WITH  
NEON COLORING AND DECONSTRUCTIVE GEOMETRICAL PATTERNS. PHOTO CREDIT: AUTHOR (2013).

The transformational festival movement encourages signifiers of indigenous culture to get deployed alongside contemporary technologies that create a heightened state of aesthetic richness (light shows, synthesizers, hallucinogens, etc.) in order to induce a return to what are presumed to be more sustainable environmental practices and more respectful human interactions. Placed throughout Raindance, for instance, were dreamcatchers, a totem pole, a teepee; altars (like the one described above) included figurines and symbols reflecting indigenous cultures from around the globe; paintings depicted indigenous bodies fused with cybernetic technologies (see fig. 3); participants wore headdresses, moccasins, beaded vests, and other clothing inspired by representations of Native Americans; they integrated objects like Maōri *poi* into their dance practices and instruments like the didgeridoo into cut-and-paste water rites or dance floor rituals. Transformational festivals, as described by Leung, are built on a premise of fostering a new mode of spirituality discovered through combining the reperformance or redeployment of “ancient” ritual elements alongside the spectacle firepower provided by contemporary visual, aural and chemical technologies; this leads, potentially, to what he calls “reindigenization”, an attempt to simultaneously “reconnect with the earth...with our own indigenous nature”, and to explore “a re-encounter [with] representatives of indigenous communities” (Festival Fire 2014).

Leung’s concept of reindigenization proposes a fundamental mutability in terms of the positionality of the predominantly white, middle class population that attends transformational festivals. It aligns with what Arun Saldanha has discussed as the white ethico-political project of psychedelics aimed at transcending the geohistorical body (2007: 15). Seen thus, transformation here posits an evacuation of one’s hegemonic identity to enter a primal, fluid state of being; participants then reconstitute their identities, picking

and choosing from a range of cultural practices that may or may not align with their former positionality. Participants come together at transformational festivals to form temporary (white) enclaves dedicated, at least in part, to rearticulating the self as malleable, adaptable, and performative, able to perceive and indeed *become* that which is perceived as the antithesis and casualty of global modernity: the indigenous Other.

Despite what I take to be the genuinely respectful intentions of festivalgoers,<sup>11</sup> the dangers of such a project should be immediately apparent. The relative absence of indigenous bodies at events like Raindance speaks particularly loudly, coinciding with contemporary controversies that display the lack of control indigenous groups have over their own representation (e.g., the naming of the US football team the Washington Redskins). The ability to view indigeneity as a mutable category that can be tried on, played with, cast aside or altered if desired undoubtedly speaks to the privileged position many festivalgoers occupy within the US cultural hierarchy. It both displays and refortifies white supremacy by characterizing whiteness as neutral, unmarked, a blank slate. Furthermore, the appropriation of religious and cultural practices for the purposes of reinvigorating the identities of festivalgoers threatens to drain these practices of their specificity, historical significance, and symbolic power. It redeploys them as forms of identity capital in a neoliberal marketplace that does not privilege those from whom the practices were mined, but rather, *Homo economicus*, the rational figure of political modernity that can detach from the web of cultural associations that sustain community and resistance (Werry 2011: 185).

There is reason to suggest that some of these issues are also familiar to patrons and organizers of transformational festivals themselves: one such event, Lightning in a Bottle, banned headdresses and other explicit Native American mimicry in 2014; others are following suit, triggering widespread debate within the community about issues of cultural appropriation. Discussing “reindigenization”, Leung himself acknowledges the danger of reifying exploitive behaviors, and explores how to bridge the gap between indigenous and contemporary neo-tribal communities “in a good way, in [a] right relationship[, in] a way that is not replaying the dynamics of colonialism, but is attempting to heal those dynamics” (Festival Fire 2014). He thus outlines at least a personal consciousness of the ease with which projects that emphasize such cultural remixing (particularly as enacted by relatively privileged persons within the hegemonic order) can slip into a reiteration of neo-colonial marginalization practices even if, outwardly at least, it is precisely the racial/gender/class politics of white colonial modernity from which transformational festival participants attempt to disassociate.

## CONCLUSION

Bourriaud wrote *Relational Aesthetics* primarily to understand shifts in the 1990s European gallery art scene, and it is worth questioning the need to reach into such a different space to theorize an event like Raindance. Despite festival culture becoming a major artistic trendsetter for society at large, it often gets dismissively framed as a hedonistic party scene rather than a critical space for creative identity-making or ethico-political development. As

just one small example, a 2015 *New York Times* article discusses how the Wassaic Project, a New York-based artist residency, developed an accompanying festival event that aimed to mimic the “spirit” of music festival culture; in the article, organizer Bowie Zunino described a desire to build an event with a sense of generosity and sociality, but “where the art wasn’t hippy stuff but serious contemporary art” (Green). While Zunino values the affective ties that arise within music festivals, he effortlessly dismisses the artistic practice that, as I have argued, helps generate this communal cohesion. Discussing Raindance as relational art, I hope, does work to counter similar characterizations of festival culture as lowbrow and unserious, a frou-frou hobby that contrasts with thoughtful contemporary art practice. Perspectives like Zunino’s occlude the creativity, collaboration and discipline that enable events like Raindance—from organizers and participants alike. The lens of relational aesthetics opens up festival culture to modes of analysis that take seriously its affective power and ethical imperatives. It reveals the technologies by which boutique events generate a sense of belonging and inspiration without access to the resources of larger festivals. While I have sought to refute the teleological, liberatory trope seen in Bourriaud’s writing and the discourse surrounding transformational festivals, placing the two in conversation makes visible the participatory technologies that operate at events like Raindance and potentially propagate liberal values.

Relational art in the context of the Raindance Campout does indeed produce real transformations that bind participants together and encourage alternative social practice, but transformation is never neutral. It occurs within the discursive frame that circumscribes it and travels along multiple axes, rather than a single, positivist continuum. The progressive energy participants, organizers and spokespeople invest in the concept of “transformation” naturalizes such a continuum and abstracts contradictory critical axes: the presence of the material culture, rituals and representational practices of diverse peoples substitutes for actual multicultural diversity; the impact fee’s assurance of sustainability and proper stewardship of the land obscure the unsustainable consumption patterns that participants engage in while at the festival; alternative economic practices amongst a tiny population supplant systemic critique. This is not to call out the Raindance Campout for “bad politics”, but merely to indicate that it *has* politics, politics that cannot be uncritically contrasted to an imagined normative “mainstream”. Neither relational aesthetics, nor a boutique size, nor an ethical model assures progressivism. The point is not to moralize but to advocate for reflexivity amongst participants, organizers and scholars in determining where transformational festival culture’s ethical imperatives lie. The dizzying array of rituals, artistic practices, costumes, dancing bodies, finely constructed spaces—all simultaneously present in the spellbinding crucible of a natural setting—should not prevent us from questioning what happens when the amps are finally turned off and the temporary community dispersed. Intensity of experience, the novelty of creative invention and the richness of sociality should prod us to ask the crucial question: “What exactly have I signed up for here?”

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## NOTES

- 1 Santa Cruz family DJs include Brother, Digital Honey, Stridah, The Pirate, Mozaic, Dax, Rob Monroy and Little John himself. Festival headliners in the last two years have included Vibesquad, Pumpkin, Random Rab, Bluetech, Shpongle, Om Unit, Thugfucker, Eprom, Marty Party and Russ Liquid.
- 2 Fischer-Lichte elaborates on this form of liminality as a feeling of existing “between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives” (2008: 12).
- 3 The “freak”, as discussed by Arun Saldanha, performs oppositionality via the dominant social structure that governs her/him. His chapter “Goa Freaks” provides an excellent conversation on the conceptual history of the freak and how it relates festival/rave culture—especially in regards to the culture’s ethical and racial dynamics (2007).
- 4 Gerasimos Christoforatos, phone interview with the author, 5 November 2014.
- 5 Gerasimos Christoforatos, phone interview with the author, 5 November 2014.
- 6 A workshop on aromatics, essential oils, and plant spirits.
- 7 “A playful exploration of core essence using transformational life coaching techniques and creative inquiry exercises” (Raindance Presents 2013b).
- 8 The presence of water has always been an important element of the Raindance Campout. In the early years, the event was held in a Scout camp near Santa Cruz that had a swimming pool; in recent years, the festival occurred on the Yuba River (2013) and Feather River (2014). The river provided a refreshing place for participants to cool off during hot California afternoons (a nearby sound stage helping to build the party), as well as a site for daily water blessings and yoga practice that took place in the morning and evening.
- 9 Leung is also writing a book with the working title: “Dancing Together into the Great Shift: Transformational Festivals & the New Evolutionary Culture”.
- 10 In Leung’s TEDx Vancouver talk, he discusses “gender alchemy” (a challenge to the Manichean male/female divide) and “models of compatible diversity” as formative components of the Transformational Festival movement (TEDxTalks 2011).
- 11 Graham St John suggests that although many deployments of Native American imagery in festival settings falls into the camp of solipsistic neoprimitivism, “some exemplify genuine efforts to advance change in the wake of the recognition of crises of self and globe, or contextualize respectful exchanges involving collaborative intercultural performances” (2013: 191).

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