

How to: What does it take to make a Thing to make a Relationship?¹

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Coming from an architecture background, when I first encountered public art in the 1990s, the problems associated with the practice were relatively new to me. If until then the category ‘public art’ had been traditionally understood to refer to a certain kind of artwork, such as a large sculpture placed in an external site, with the ‘art’ understood as object, and the ‘public’ as site or audience, a new discourse emerged around that time that brought to the fore questions concerning the financing of works and how, even if physically located outside the galleries, public art was still a product of the corporate world, and thus subject to private property, financialization, and the whims of the global art market.

Rather than considering public art as a set of objects located outside a gallery, I understood the genre as an interdisciplinary form of practice, which in seeking to respond to a given site combined a design-based approach to problem-solving with a more art-based attitude that aimed to rethink the problem itself. The practice of moving between solving problems and problematizing solutions expressed a tension between resolution or creative synthesis, on the one hand, and critical analysis or antithesis, on the other. Allowing for a recognition of process rather than outcome, I introduced the term *critical spatial practice*, to place attention on how practices that engaging with publics in the form of sites and audiences combined both critical questioning and creative transformations of the social conditions of the sites into which they intervened, as well as tested the boundaries and procedures of their own disciplines.²

In *Relational Aesthetics* Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the work of artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, produced open-ended conditions that invites the viewer to participate in the construction of the work,³ with the work of art operating as something he calls a partial object, or a vehicle of relation to the other.⁴ In her critique of *Relational Aesthetics*, Claire Bishop takes Bourriaud to task for assuming that—following Althusser’s precept that culture does not reflect society, but produces it—the artwork understood as a ‘social form’ is automatically capable of producing positive relationships. Bishop asked: “If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?”⁵

In the late 1990s, Katherine Clarke, of muf, formulated the elegant problematic of “how to – what does it take to make a relationship to make a thing?”⁶ I have since wondered how to reverse the relation of means and ends such that the making of things takes place in order to make relationships—the formula becoming: “how to – what does it take to make a thing to make a relationship?” It is in light of this question that I would like to discuss the project *New Patrons*, exploring the rules, roles and relations that its protocol for art-making sets forth.

The New Patrons

New Patrons, or *Le Protocole des Nouveaux Commanditaires*, is a project proposed by artist François Hers in 1990,⁷ at a time when the elitism of terms like art, audience, patron and site, were being critiqued through understandings of the material, spatial and political dimensions of private and public space. *New Patrons* challenges conventional forms of art patronage by private individuals, corporations, states, churches by introducing a protocol which aims to democratise the commissioning of art by handing this process over to citizens.⁸

The protocol can itself be considered a work of art in the tradition of the social sculptures initiated and advocated by Joseph Beuys, such as *7000 Oaks*, a project begun in 1982, and completed in 1987, at Documenta 7, in Kassel.⁹ For *7000 Oaks*, ‘everyone’ (or indeed anyone) can become an artist through the planting of a sapling tree paired with a basalt column. Although originally planned only for Kassel, the art work has now spread throughout the world.¹⁰ More recently artists, for example, Tino Sehgal, in his ‘constructed situations’—see *This Objective of that Object* (2005) or *The Situation* (2007)—or curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist, in the instruction-based art project *do it*, have made works where reflecting on the role of instructing as a basis for art-making is core to the practice. In such works the question of *how* an instruction is enacted becomes central. With regards to *New Patrons*, such a perspective shifts the focus from the protocol itself to its performance. Theatre, provides an excellent example for thinking this through. Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), for instance, draws out the distinctions between the characters of a play and the particular actors performing those roles helping us to consider how each artwork commissioned through *New Patrons* is a specific enactment of the protocol and thus a unique performance.

New Patrons includes three primary roles: the patron, the mediator and the artist; and two subsidiary: the supporter and the researcher. The set of relations between them are described a little like a chain reaction: the patron ‘has a concern’, then ‘approaches a mediator’, who then ‘identifies an artist’. These roles and their relationships are governed by three core objectives, which highlight how the art produced will first be the property of a collective rather than an individual; second will prioritise a use rather than a market value; and third will underscore the process of art-making understood as an “equal sharing of responsibilities” and “negotiation [of] the tensions and conflicts inherent in public life within a democracy.”¹¹ The responsibilities of each role defined by the protocol are played out differently each time, as influenced by the particular qualities of a certain site, situation and social context, bringing these generic roles to life according to the qualities distinct to each setting. But while the protocol defines everyone’s role, performance, as an act of shaping, is not a one-way affair: it entails the potential to re-shape the protocol itself. It is through this reconfigured process of commissioning art via the protocol that Hers “invents new ways of relating to the world” where the work of art is no longer an expression of an individual but the result and process of shared creativity,¹² rethinking the relations of art and democracy both by positioning the construction of democracy as art’s aim, and by including a more democratic involvement in art-making.

Commissioning an Artwork: The Patron¹³

Neueauftraggeber—the German branch of *New Patrons*—summarise the role of the patron as follows: “The Protocol proposes to every person who wishes it within civil society, without exception and in any place, either singly or in association with others, the means to assume the responsibility of commissioning an artwork from an artist. As a patron, it is up to the person in question to understand and to state a reason for which art is meant to be and for the investment of the collectivity in the artwork.”¹⁴ The role of the citizen-patron is primary for *New Patrons*, as it is this person or community who notices the need for art and thus puts a commission into motion. The ways in which *New Patrons* re-defines this role is worth investigating. For example, how does a citizen decide that a work of art is needed? And how does this citizen become a patron? What is it that prevents this newly emerged citizen-patron from conforming to the normative role of patron in the capitalism art market as one who, in facilitating the making of art, benefits from the cultural capital attached to this role?

Through the figure of the patron, the protocol of *New Patrons* seeks to intervene into the institutions of art patronage, problematizing the role of the patron and through institutional critique producing something other. Citizens find themselves positioned in the role of patron, when noticing a problem in a day-to-day situation, which might then prompt a recognition that art is needed to ‘solve this problem.’ By taking on the responsibility of patron, citizens discover that they are part of a larger project that challenges the very process of commissioning art, inventing a more democratic version of creativity. As Hers suggests: “The citizen, acting alone or in a group, becomes a patron when he recognizes within himself what lies at the basis of creativity for the contemporary artist: the same desire to express himself freely, the same determination to resist standardization, the same need to imagine himself in a different way and to invent new paths.”¹⁵

From Word to Deed: The Mediator¹⁶

For *New Patrons* the first task of the citizen-patron is to find a mediator. Hers argues that: “The knowledge needed to go from word to deed is supplied by a third party who knows the demands of contemporary creativity.”¹⁷ For *Neueauftraggeber*, “the mediators are scouts and brokers. Rather than having answers ready or arriving with a detailed blueprint, they’re specialists in the art of listening.”¹⁸ But how are these mediators chosen? What exactly are they invited to do? And what experience are they expected to perform in their roles?

I was invited to contribute this essay shortly after the death of my father. At the time, I was searching for a celebrant, someone whose role it would be to celebrate the life of a person who had ceased to be. As I read the biographical statements and CVs of various celebrants, I wondered how a celebrant became qualified to celebrate a life, and on what basis would I choose one to celebrate my own father’s life? I made my choice based on an expression of humanity and the ‘feeling’ that this particular person would be able to recognise and communicate to others why the life of that person I had lost was special and worthy of celebration. This process of selecting a person for a role whose function was unclear to me came to mind when trying to grasp the role of the mediator in *New Patrons*. In both cases the role holder is charged by another with a responsibility for a third, a deceased person in the case of the celebrant, an artist (and ultimately artwork) in the case of the citizen-patron.

Once the mediator has been ‘approached’, their role is to ‘frame’ a commission, ‘identify’ an artist, and then ‘supervise the implementation of an idea.’¹⁹ Such activities describe the practice of an art commissioner and/or curator, but given that *New Patrons* is situated outside the world of the art gallery or museum, and located in the community and sphere of local politics, the role of quite ordinary everyday practices of making relations is vital to the project. This is something that, for example, feminist critic Suzi Gablik pointed out prior to the introduction of ‘relational aesthetics,’ by focusing on the importance of “listener-centred rather than vision-orientated” processes in art.²⁰

In *New Patrons*, the ability of both citizen-patron and mediator to be ‘responsible’ to another, and on this basis to perform a series of acts of ‘recognition’ is of great significance. First, to recognise the need for the making of an art work and the creative processes this involves, next to recognise a mediator, and following that, for the mediator to recognise an artist. In my view, the processes of recognizing which flow through the *New Patrons*’ protocol underpin the responsibilities of the various roles. As psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin writes, the question of ‘how is it possible to recognize an other?’ has been a key concern of feminism,²¹ and as I discussed in *Site-Writing*,²² for Benjamin the central task of psychoanalysis is the ‘double task of recognition: how analyst and patient make known their own subjectivity and recognize the other’s’.²³ In her work Benjamin introduces the importance of recognition and its relation to a third position that “is able to break up [the] reversible complementarities and hold in tension the polarities that underly them.”²⁴

The mediator performs such a third position by playing a key role in setting up and adjusting practices of recognition right across *New Patrons*, from recognising what the making of each artwork might require to recognising what might be at stake and in so doing establishing suitable relational infrastructures. The generality of the protocol, which tends to the universal when it is not being enacted, becomes specific as it unfolds in-situ through the particular configuration of relations—of recognising and mediating—unique to each artwork, as it develops a set of ethical relations through the situated qualities of the practice.²⁵

Creating Forms that respond to the Demands of Society: The Artist

The *New Patrons*' protocol defines the artist's role as one where creativity is a "collective responsibility" which responds to the "demands of society." This social and collective responsibility assigned to the role of the artist can be considered via discussions on art's public role and use value. In *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*²⁶—another core contribution to the debate on public art in the 1990s—Suzanne Lacy challenged the genre as simply the making of objects for the public sphere, and instead provided a range of arguments and examples of public art that focused on process, participation and place, and on social critique and engagement. Reflecting on her own practice, Lacy describes a series of positions a public artist might take as part of continuum which starts with experiencer, and moves to reporter, to analyst, to activist and finally to art-maker.²⁷ Lacy also explores different kinds of audience through a set of concentric circles, with an audience of myth and memory located on the exterior shell, and moving inwards to media audience, to immediate audience, to volunteers and performers, to collaboration and co-development, to origination and responsibility located at the centre.²⁸ Despite Lacy's claim that her circles are "permeable membranes that allow continual movement back and forth," forms that take a concentric nature suggests a sequence of moves, working either from outside in or inside out.

The implications of spatial locations, positions and situations on the making of relations is important, and relevant to the 1990s, as a moment when the spatial theory emerging from cultural geography's critiques of postmodernism were impacting on the art world and reconfiguring how the roles of art production and reception were spatially constituted and understood. There was, at this time, a need for a perspective which could focus on process, attitude and field, and open up possibilities for re-thinking roles and relationships: this was why I proposed , "critical spatial practice," so that the making of art could be considered a form of practice engaging with architecture, design and urbanism, transforming and being transformed by these adjacent fields and disciplines. This also ensured relations between the aesthetic, the social and the ethical could become explicit, so emphasizing critical and theoretical discussions concerning the intersection of public and private aspects of space, and thus the construction of different types of spatial relation between these politicized poles. According to Hers, "The work of art, having become an actor of public life, ceases to be merely the emblematic expression of someone's individuality to become the expression of

autonomous persons who have decided to form a community in order to invent new ways of relating to the world and to give a shared meaning to contemporary creative activity.”²⁹

A Protocol?

If *New Patrons* as a project can be understood as a critical spatial practice that intervenes into the commissioning of art, this is where its value lies, as, according to Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *New Patrons* is a “shared artwork, whose forms are ever to be reinvented,” and through which “a more audacious and more harmonious social contract takes shape in the future.”³⁰ This is precisely why, despite aiming for a more democratic and socially-engaged form of commissioning art, *New Patrons* does not attempt to influence the kind of artworks made as a result of a commission or direct the production of a social or political artistic or curatorial practice in line with the project’s objectives. Instead, the criticality of the artworks made can operate differently depending on situation and audience.

The critical potential of *New Patrons* might even lie outside the project itself, in the possibility of re-functioning the use of such a protocol to address the other crises we face. When encountering the current dilemmas of practice in many disciplines and professions protocols are introduced to encourage self-reflection and ‘ethical’ behaviour.³¹ Protocols can be experienced as restrictive, but in an invitational mode, by adopting and adapting the potential of a code, they can also produce flourishing self-generating systems. For example, what kind of protocol could challenge the education of critics, artists and architects and create universities that are public, socially just and sustainable institutions? What rules, roles and relations would be involved? What would our responsibilities be? Who and what would get recognised? What kind of thing would it take to make a new set of ecologically just and democratic relationships? Could that thing be a protocol?

¹ With thanks to Katherine Clarke of muf. See footnote 6.

² See Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Jane Rendell, “A Place Between Art, Architecture and Critical Theory,” *Proceedings to Place and Location*, (Tallinn: 2003), 221–33. For more recent developments of my work around critical spatial practice, see <https://criticalspatialpractice.co.uk/>; and Jane Rendell, “Critical Spatial Practice as *Parrhesia*,” *MaHKUscript, Journal of Fine Art Research* 1 (December, 2016).

³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47, p. 99.

⁵ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Antagonism” (October, 2004), *City University of New York (CUNY) Academic Works*, pp. 51–79, p. 65.

⁶ Katherine Clarke of muf, “How to: a description of what it takes to make a relationship to make a thing,” in Jane Rendell with Rex Henry (ed.), “A Place Between,” *Public Art Journal* (October, 1999), issue 2, pp. 42–3.

⁷ <http://www.nouveauxcommanditaires.eu/en/home/>

⁸ François Hers’ *Le protocole* was published in multiple languages by Les Presses du Réel in 2002, with a later volume explaining the rationale of the project in 2012 and a letter describing the project to date asking for more involvement from museums in 2016. See François Hers, *Le protocole* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002); François Hers and Xavier Douroux, *L’art sans le capitalisme* or *Art Without Capitalism* (French and English editions, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2012 and 2013); and François Hers, *Lettre à un ami au sujet des Nouveaux commanditaires* or *Letter to a Friend About the New Patrons* (English and French editions, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2016).

⁹ Fernando Groener and Rose-Maria Kandler (eds.) *Joseph Beuys: 7000 Eichen* (Cologne: Walther König, 1987).

¹⁰ Joseph Beuys, “Not Just A Few Are Called, But Everyone,” Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art In Theory, 1900-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 889-92.

¹¹ <https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/the-protocol-of-the-new-patrons/>

¹² <http://www.nouveauxcommanditaires.eu/en/44/protocol>

¹³ <https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/the-protocol-of-the-new-patrons/>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ François Hers, *Le protocole* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 22.

¹⁶ <https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/the-protocol-of-the-new-patrons/>

¹⁷ François Hers, *Le protocole* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 22.

¹⁸ <https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/the-mediators>

¹⁹ <https://neueauftraggeber.de/en/questions>

²⁰ Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 147-150; See also Suzi Gablik, “Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism,” in Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 80; and Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), pp. 96–114.

²¹ Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 80.

²² Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p. 7.

²³ Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. xii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

²⁵ See Jane Rendell, "Sites, Situations, and other kinds of Situatedness," Bryony Roberts (ed.), *Expanded Modes of Practice, Log*, n. 48, 2020; and Jane Rendell, "Hotspots and Touchstones: From Critical to Ethical Spatial Practice," Lorens Holm and Cameron McEwan (eds.), *Architecture and Culture, Architecture and Collective Life*, 2020.

²⁶ Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-185, p. 174.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-185, p. 178.

²⁹ <http://www.nouveauxcommanditaires.eu/en/44/protocol>

³⁰ Laurence Bertrand Dorléac in "François Hers: New Patrons," *Arts & Sociétés*, n. 48. See also <https://www.sciencespo.fr/artsetsocietes/en/archives/1538>

³¹ <https://www.practisingethics.org/protocols>