Whereas society as a whole incorporates new media at an unprecedented speed, contemporary arts exhibits increasingly shy away from an open confrontation with notions such as networks, interactivity and the virtual. The list of technophobic exhibits is growing. If we exclude the 'neo-realist' video genre for a moment, we witness a growing hesitation amongst curators to confront the technological world we live in. We do not have speak about the absence of 'electronic arts' at Documenta 12. It's obvious. But it also counts for the survey shows like the 2007 Venice Bienale, where Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's work at the Mexican pavilion turned out to be the exception.

We cannot presume that today's leading curators are ignorant and blind. Neither could we say that new media has not yet matured. This is hardly an argument for arts that want to confront the world. Nor is it the case anymore that new media arts merely celebrates emerging technologies in search for a market. Instead we see a general lack of interest amongst corporations, reflecting the wider disinterest from the side of arts institutions. Museums in general show an interest in using interactive elements as part of the effort to increase audience participation. Is it perhaps the booming arts markets that dictates the exclusion of new media? Hardly. Video installations can be perceived as ephemeral as Internet art. True, many works are too formal, pseudo-scientific and cold in their look and feel, but such techno-cultures can easily be altered. These considerations I had in mind when I read the English translation of Nicolas Bourriaud's 1998 Relational Aesthetics pamflet.

In the preface we already find the clue. Bourriaud writes: "we feel meagre and helpless when faced with the electronic media, theme parks, user-friendly spaces, and the spread of compatible forms of sociability, like the laboratory rat doomed to an inexorable itinerary in its cage, littered with chunks of cheese. The ideal subject of the society of extras is thus reduced to the condition of a consumer of time and space." What Bourriaud dreams of is an extra-medial world without representation. Interactive installation, in this line of thought, are associated with the world of commodition and exploitation (of one's data body).

Instead of taking the 'pop culture' route Bourriaud proposes that contemporary arts should take avoid confrontation and instead explore alienation strategies. Bourriaud's relational practice is a game with the viewer's ability to understand and contextualize artworks. From the new

media perspective it is a romantic (and deeply touristic) notion that there can be an "aesthetic of the inter-human" that is non-technological. Contemporary human relations are informed and shaped, if not determined, by the techno assemblages that surround us. The "obsession with interactivity", as Nicolas Bourriaud calls it, cannot be overcome by simply denying the technological factor. By focusing on humanistic concepts such as 'encounter' and 'proximity', Bourriaud, and with him the clustered network of global curators, are running away from the difficult task of deconstructing and reshaping the very foundations of today's network society.

Nonetheless, it is tempting to go along with Bourriaud's call to 'resist social formatting' and to see (new) media as the cause of the trouble. "Learning to inhabit the world in a better way," in my understanding, would mean to reach a level of media literary that understands what today's forms of manipulation are– and when to log off. We do not understand the relativity of perception by not seeing. if art's intention is to model possible universes, we need skills to do this, otherwise we copy unconsciously the dominant model around us. "The role of art," says Bourriaud, "is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist." The problem here is that technology is positioned outside of the 'existing real'. The artist as 'tenant of culture' doesn't have to know the building he or she lives in.

(old unfinshed posting, found in the draft box of this blog with the predictable date of 1970/01/01. /geert)