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Living and Loving 1 & 2: Aleksandra Mir and Subverted Biography

Abstract

This paper examines Aleksandra Mir's recent publications *Living & Loving: No. 1* and *No. 2*. Presented as a sub-cultural fanzine interview, Mir's biographies assemble a series of complex contexts for the subjects, the audience, and for critical discourse. I profile these contexts—social space, shared knowledge and 'collaborations and contracts'—in order to underscore that Mir's biographies subvert any defence that relationships formed between artist and audience (and in this case the subject is also the audience) create a just social exchange. From this analysis, it is argued that 'collaborations and contracts' between artists and audiences only serve to recreate modernism's hierarchy rather than collapse any ideological, critical or aesthetic distance that modernism established between the artist and the audience.

Born in Poland in 1967, Aleksandra Mir is a citizen of Sweden who now lives permanently in New York. Mir's practice is centred on artist and audience collaborations and individual performance. Her art is described as being 'built on the idea of organized movement, taking the form of collaborative operations that are ultimately as much about the activity of bringing diverse groups together with a common goal as the final result itself'.¹

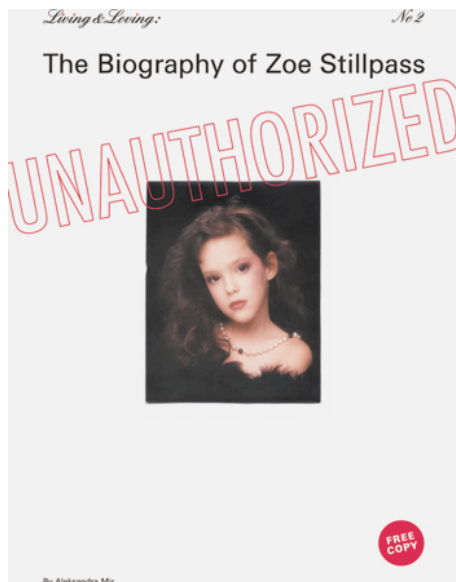


Fig. 1. Aleksandra Mir, *The Biography of Zoe Stillpass (Unauthorized)*, 2004. Image courtesy of the artist.

¹ Bell, 'Aleksandra Mir', 2004, unpaginated.

Here I want to discuss the relational nature of Mir's collaborations focusing on her recent publications *Living and Loving No.1* and *No. 2* (Fig.1), but to begin I will introduce a small selection of Mir's other projects in order to provide a background to my argument—that the sociability, or conviviality, of a relational work can provide a more succinct reading of any socio-political concerns an artwork produces than conventional analogy or an arbitrary linking of art works to socio-political facts and events. For example, when Michael Baxandall proposes that the problem with superficial links being made between 'a pictorial thing and a social thing'², and the prevaricating that is required to make these extraneous links, then the political aspect of the work is thrust upon that work rather than created by it. Terms such as *reflect*, *represent*, or *come out of*,³ as Baxandall suggests, are 'terms of relation that [make] a weak half-claim to some stricter relation—of causality or signification or analogy or participation—which one (artist or critic) [is] not in a position to uphold.'⁴

Bourriaud writes—'Doubt can be cast over the stance of the "critical" artist, when his position consists in judging the world as he were excluded from it by divine grace, and played no part in it...For there is no mental place where the artist might exclude himself from the world he represents.'⁵ Therefore I argue—if relational artists create cynical or parodic interpersonal relations, they subvert our understanding of art as inter-human relations through their participation in an independent and private space.

I have chosen to present the following examples because they best reflect the argument I have proposed.

Antarctica 2005 (Fig. 2): From February to March this year Mir and a group of friends and strangers sailed from Argentina to Marguerite Bay situated below the Antarctic Circle.



Fig. 2. Aleksandra Mir, *Antarctica*, 2005, Image from Mir's website. Image courtesy of the artist.

2 Baxandall, Michael, 1985, p. 39.

3 Baxandall, Michael, 1985, p. 39.

4 Baxandall, Michael, 1985, p. 39.

5 Bourriaud, 1998, p. 110.

Scientific research vessel Tara would be their home. Mir provided daily updates on her web site in the form of short extracts from conversations between those on board. Conversation topics included what they would be eating for breakfast; how the boat handles icebergs; why artists are all just big children; and ocean pollution. In this example the art is the labour itself, not the outcome of labour, as proposed by Bourriaud.⁶

No Smoking, 2004 (Fig. 3): 16 plastic No Smoking signs were installed in the galleries of the Whitney Museum for the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Mir writes—‘I wanted to make something that could breathe the air of the collective tension by negotiating a place with the other pieces there.



Fig. 3. Aleksandra Mir, *No Smoking*, 2004, as installed at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Image courtesy of the artist.

The actual placement of each sign is the result of the other artists’ approval and engagement with it where it appears in relation to their works.⁷

Garlands for people: (Fig. 4). This 1999 series is described by Mir as ‘emerging from hanging around people who don’t normally associate with art’.⁸ The first, *pinecone*

6 Bourriaud describes this condition as ‘critical materialism’ where ‘the world is made up of random encounters (Lucretius, Hobbes, Marx, Althusser). Art, too, is made up of chaotic, chance meetings of signs and forms. Nowadays, it even creates spaces within which the encounters can occur. Present-day art does not present the outcome of labour, it is the labour itself, or the labour-to-be’. Bourriaud, 1998. p.110

7 Aleksandra Mir: www.aleksandramir.info/projects/nosmoking/nosmoking.html

garland, was made for the country home of Mir's longtime friend Maria Stahl. They gathered pinecones in the surrounding forest and tied them onto string in Stahl's backyard. Stahl's brother and husband helped to climb the ladder and hang the garland high in the pine trees where it remained over winter and as far as Mir knows, it is still there. *Flag Garland*, 1999 (Fig. 5) was made with family and old friends in Gothenburg, Sweden. Mir's aunt and niece visiting from Poland collaborated on the flag garland. 'My niece helped paint the flags...I hung the garland all around the kitchen to be seen from the window, so to consciously provoke nosy neighbors with this silly multicultural celebration. But in effect, mostly to the irritation of my father who couldn't access anything in the cupboards and ended up tearing the whole thing down after a week.'⁹



Fig. 4. Aleksandra Mir, *Garlands for people (Flag Garland)*, 1999. Image courtesy of the artist.

Life is sweet in Sweden (Fig. 5). One of her first works, Mir set-up a "tourist office" in the Swedish city of Gothenburg during the world championship athletics. The office was outfitted with clichéd Swedish furniture and was operated by a group of hostesses dressed in uniform (Fig. 6). Anyone who was willing to wear the uniform could perform the services of the hostess, and a wide range of visitors assumed the role; Mir simply provided the structural framework for an otherwise undefined service that was open to personal interpretation.¹⁰

8 Aleksandra Mir: <http://www.aleksandramir.info/projects/garlands/garlands.html>

9 Aleksandra Mir: www.aleksandramir.info/projects/garlandsforpeople/garlandsforpeople.html

10 Whitney Biennial 2004 website. Aleksandra Mir, www.whitney.org/biennial/flash/poplg.php



Fig. 5. (Left) Aleksandra Mir, *Life is sweet in Sweden (Anna)*, 1995. Image courtesy of the artist. Fig. 6. (Right) Aleksandra Mir, *Life is sweet in Sweden (Hostesses)*, 1995. Image courtesy of the artist.

The four examples I have shown fall under the rubric of Bourriaud's collaborations and contracts—where artists propose as artworks (a) moments of sociability and (b) objects producing sociability.¹¹ Though Bourriaud focuses on institutional collaborations—specifically those between an artist and art dealer, or artist and curator—collaborations and contracts is a practical maxim capable of enduring the most rigorous of critiques, such as that by Claire Bishop. Where 'what the viewer is supposed to garner from such an "experience" of creativity, which is essentially institutionalised studio activity, is often unclear'.¹² Without saying as much, Bishop is questioning the artists' and Bourriaud's motive. By pointing out that Bourriaud 'is at pains to distance contemporary work from that of previous generations' Bishop further demonstrates that if a conventional art historical or art critical approach is employed to articulate the faults of, and the general misgivings towards Bourriaud's observation—such as reflecting on previous generations of performance artists—then the possibility of Relational Aesthetics becoming a new direction in which artists can create socio-political art free from the self-conscious activism of post-modernism, will continue to be dismissed as contemporary art fashion, depending on how one wishes to discriminate.

I picked up a copy of Mir's *Living & Loving number two: The(UnAuthorized) biography of Zoe Stillpass* (Fig. 1) at the 2004 Frieze Art Fair in London. Commissioned by curator Polly Staple as part of the Frieze programme, this artwork was distributed, rather inconspicuously, among a plethora of printed material lying about at the fair. This is the second of Mir's ongoing series of biographies, which Mir describes as—'the public dissemination of one ordinary woman's extraordinary life, as told by her parents.'¹³

11 Bourriaud, 1998, p. 33.

12 Bishop, 2004, p. 52.

13 Aleksandra Mir: www.aleksandramir.info/projects/11&12/1&12.html

Living & Loving

Living & Loving number one: The biography of Donald Cappy (Fig. 7), Mir again describes this project as the public dissemination of one ordinary man's extraordinary life. Originally printed in an edition of 5000 copies, it was distributed for free from Cubitt, London, in collaboration with the DCA, Dundee, for the show 'ill Communication', January 2003. Donald's life story was further disseminated across the world through collaborating art spaces that received a surprise gift of 100 copies to give away.

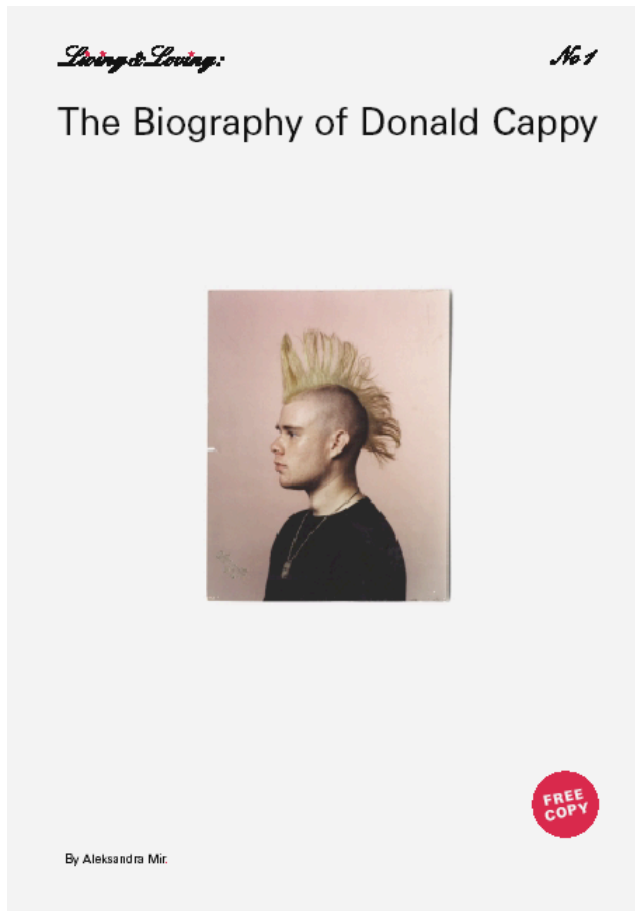


Fig. 7. Aleksandra Mir, *The Biography of Donald Cappy* 2002. Image courtesy of the artist.

Recorded in Oakland, California in January 2002, the biography outlines Cappy's early years growing up in various foster homes. He was a punk in his teens; went into the marines; saw 47 nations; had 50 girlfriends; was married; had a child; and found the love of his life. She dumped him the day he got a divorce from his wife. He went back to college; dropped out; went into security and bouncing; and now works the nightclubs where he meets all the stars and manages security at the university. Donald is 28 years old. The process appears to be intensely personal, with Mir and Cappy

discussing very intimate details of his life. 'He showed me all his meticulously well kept photo albums and broke everything down for me in detail: The reasons why people take in foster kids and what is expected of you in return; the destroy-and-create economy of punk; the torturous aspects of love and friendship; the logic between swinging when you are married, cheating when you are not; the rituals of the marines and the intimacy between men.'¹⁴

"Her name is Zoe Stillpass (Fig. 8) and she is an art collector's daughter. On the outset, being an only child, a popular and attractive honour student, the subject of numerous art commissions, travelling around the world, hers is a life of privilege dramatically different to Donald Cappy's."¹⁵



Fig.8 Zoe Stillpass, Taken from Aleksandra Mir *Living & Loving number two: The biography of Zoe Stillpass (UnAuthorized)* 2004. Image courtesy of the artist.

Zoe is not involved in the creation of her biography—hence the UnAuthorized subtitle. Mir has known the family for quite some time—the family's most recent acquisition being Mir's No Smoking signs installed at the bottom of the family pool (Fig.9).

To return to Bourriaud—"The world is made up of random encounters...Art, too, is made up of chaotic, chance meetings of signs and forms. Nowadays, it even creates spaces within which the encounter can occur. Present-day art does not present the outcome of a labour, it is the labour itself, or the labour-to-be"¹⁶. Mir's biographies are

¹⁴ Aleksandra Mir in a letter to curator Polly Staple. Printed on the back cover of *Living & Loving number two: The biography of Donald Cappy*, 2002.

¹⁵ Aleksandra Mir in a letter to curator Polly Staple. Printed on the back cover of *Living & Loving number two: The biography of Zoe Stillpass (UnAuthorized)* 2004.

¹⁶ Bourriaud, 1998, p. 110.

made up of random encounters, more so than the projects Antarctica and Garland's for people. Donald Cappy's biography grew from a chance meeting when Mir required security assistance when she was working at the university where Cappy is in charge of security. Conversely the biography of Zoe Stillpass subverts the idea of chance meetings because Mir chose to work with a family she knows well. So, the Donald Cappy biography came about from a chance meeting and the Zoe Stillpass biography was a premeditated choice. One transpired from curiosity, the other from an unknown motive.



Fig. 9 Aleksandra Mir, *No Smoking*, 2004. Image courtesy of the artist.

The reason I want to focus on motive is because I feel that Bourriaud's book will one day provide us with a solid understanding of the motives of a specific group of artists working in the 1990s and 2000s, but which for now has been reduced to mere art fashion. This simplification of Bourriaud's theory is borne out of making extraneous links to the history of performance art in place of accepting interpersonal relations as a new political form. To insist that interpersonal relations between artists and audience is a new form will always be reduced by art history's repetitious cry that nothing is new...because in June 1962 blah, blah, blah... It is because of this I suggest if Bourriaud's examination of relational art is to provide an original insight it needs to further scrutinise the motives that inform the organising of interpersonal relations. Or, as Claire Bishop recently asked—if relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?¹⁷ In the case of Mir's biographies, the motive for producing inter-human relations is, possibly, to illustrate that art needs to produce understanding rather than ideology. Which brings me to Marcuse.

Herbert Marcuse proposed that 'all understanding derives from a practice that is ultimately revolutionary, that everything else is ideology, and that consequently all

¹⁷ Bishop, 2004, p. 65.

problems must be comprehended by reference to their bearing on revolution.’¹⁸ When I consider the downbeat polemics employed to describe revolutionary concerns or actions in art today—where unsubtle and self-conscious action is reduced to mere prank-like status—I return to the model prescribed by Marcuse because what he proposes generates accountability in a system that appears unaccountable to revolution whether it be aesthetic or cultural. Relational Art has the appearance of being an art that is accountable to its time and place. It is not a dogmatic practice it is, as Claire Bishop put it “willfully unstable”.¹⁹ I read into this that Bishop is referring to an ideological and formal instability.

The current dialectic between relational art and everything else has created hypocritical motives resulting in a misguided alienation of critique, where interpersonal relations are treated with suspicion, and everything else is considered intelligent if the critique or revolution is subtle. When art is being comprehended via reference to its bearing on revolution—when it addresses culture (not modernism or art history)—is when being obvious can create a confidant discourse capable of reflecting the values of a generation. When art is criticised for being unsubtle, fun, incoherent, or politically self-conscious, is when it is not being comprehended via reference to its bearing on revolution, resulting in crude and misunderstood observations that consider interpersonal relations (or culture) to be a consequence of misguided ideologies.

When a critique of art with social or political concerns describes that art as being self-conscious and unsubtle, and at the same time calls for that art to possess courage and conviction, how can that critique be of any value in articulating the condition of current practice? Of course the answer is that this approach to critique cannot because it is not accountable to culture, it is merely accountable to Art. This is why Claire Bishop derides Relational Art for being in ‘perpetual flux’ because of the ‘difficulty of discerning a work whose identity is wilfully unstable.’²⁰

The examples of Aleksandra Mir’s work that I have presented, show it is possible that Relational Aesthetics is more concerned with an internal network of art politics, such as the *No Smoking* project, than with a didactic approach to art as a platform for Leftist dogma. This is to say that the art of Aleksandra Mir reveals a desire to create socio-political discussion, with the obvious and simple difference being that socio-political discussion is articulated by inter-personal relations and event based artist/audience communication rather than with polemics. The relational artist passes no judgement on the internal politics of art, or the external politics of human relations.

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¹⁸ In Kettler, 1982, p.267.

¹⁹ Bishop, 2004, p. 52.

²⁰ Bishop, 2004, p. 52.

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