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# Ecology and the Ethics and Aesthetics of Collaboration: The Case of Nine Mile Run

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## Résumé

Les artistes collaborant avec le public et/ou les professionnels issus de divers domaines, dont l'écologie, rencontrent et reformulent le cas échéant les valeurs fondamentales qui sous-tendent le contexte social et politique de projets tels que la réhabilitation du cours d'eau Nine Mile Run menée à Pittsburgh de 1996 à 1999. Les récents débats critiques suscités par l'art collaboratif ont permis à de nouveaux modèles théoriques de se développer; non seulement pour définir ces projets dans le contexte général de la pratique de l'art, mais aussi pour identifier quels sont les critères éthiques et esthétiques pouvant maximiser leur potentiel. Plusieurs des acteurs clés de ce débat sont partis des concepts d'intersubjectivité mis en avant dans les écrits de Félix Guattari, Jacques Rancière et d'autres en proposant de dépasser les oppositions simplistes entre la subjectivité individuelle et la collectivité afin d'aller vers une « politique du sujet » plus productive, pour reprendre les termes de l'écrivain et conservateur Okwui Enwezor. Le commissaire d'expositions Stephen Wright propose un cadre théorique de réflexion particulièrement efficace pour les projets collaboratifs qui, à l'instar du projet Nine Mile Run Greenway, ne se concrétisent pas sous la forme d'« art » visible. Cet article est suivi d'un texte dans lequel l'artiste Tim Collins discute d'un autre projet plus important qu'il a dirigé à Pittsburgh directement après le projet Nine Mile Run auquel il avait collaboré.

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If there is a single lesson to be learned from the narrative of the Nine Mile Run Greenway Project in Pittsburgh, it is that artists have the potential to make extraordinary contributions through transdisciplinary ecological initiatives. The term “transdisciplinary,” only occasionally applied to visual art, refers to integrated scientific and cultural approaches used to resolve complex, context-specific real-world problems, approaches that have “become aligned with sustainability in a new discourse of problem solving.”<sup>1</sup> Transdisciplinary initiatives require a critical perspective, and often combine theoretical and practical work in a single project. They involve public stakeholders in defining problems as well as in resolving them. This differentiates them from interdisciplinary projects, which do not require the involvement of non-professional stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> In the Nine Mile Run Greenway Project, art was precisely the set of practices within which transdisciplinary strategies could be formulated, and from which they could be carried out, as the following narrative reveals. (Please see [http://artscool.cfa.cmu.edu/~bingham/archive/nmr\\_arch.html](http://artscool.cfa.cmu.edu/~bingham/archive/nmr_arch.html) for images related to this narrative.) This extraordinary project also provides an excellent perspective from which to consider the recent art-world debate among French, English, and North American critics, artists, art historians, and philosophers about artistic practices centred in engagement in the socio-political and in collaboration with non-artist actors. Called collaborative art, community-based art, new genre public art, participatory art, and other names, these practices have become a major phenomenon, and in 2006 the British art historian Claire Bishop declared that “this mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today.”<sup>3</sup> Given the importance of ecologically oriented practices within collaborative work, I explored this critical debate in search of an appropriate aesthetic and theoretical framing for transdisciplinary ecological art that, like the Nine Mile Run project, leads to real change.

Nine Mile Run is a stream in a steeply sloped valley some fifteen minutes by car from downtown Pittsburgh. The stream flows into the Monongahela, one of Pittsburgh's three big rivers. The headwaters of the stream and its tributaries were diverted into culverts in the early twentieth century, at the time when much of the upper watershed was covered over by urban development. The final two miles of Nine Mile Run remained open during this urbanization, and the first of those miles ran through Frick Park, a large forested park. The lower mile had a broad floodplain that remained undeveloped, and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. remarked in 1910 that this floodplain presented a wonderful opportunity for playing fields. The adjoining forested slopes looked to him ideal for “shaded walks and cool resting places.”<sup>4</sup>

But modernity was incessantly unkind to Nine Mile Run. Urban structures and pavement covered more and more of the watershed, so that stormwater gushed more forcefully from the culverts into the open stream with every rainfall, eroding the bed and banks. Since the city's main sanitary sewer system was designed also to overflow into storm sewers, the rush of stormwater carried fecal matter with it as well as street debris, compromising the stream's natural functions even further. And greater trouble lay ahead. A local company saw in the floodplain an ideal dumping site for slag, the by-product of Pittsburgh's giant steel mills. A well-intentioned but unfunded citizens' committee could not stop this company, which hurriedly bought acreage to get ahead of the zoning process,<sup>5</sup> and from 1923 onward, slag arrived relentlessly in vast quantities on slag trains and on barges from the Monongahela. The company only stopped dumping at Nine Mile Run in 1972. By this time, the slag mountains, twenty stories high in some parts, had largely filled the lower floodplain, changing the stream's course, polluting it with alkaline leachate, and turning its valley into something like a canyon.<sup>6</sup>

Then the steel industry left. Pittsburgh became a post-industrial city, reduced to only half the population it had had at mid-century.<sup>7</sup> Like many other post-industrial cities, it began to consider how to redevelop the obsolete industrial sites that were now holes in the city's social and economic fabric. In 1995, the city bought the 238 acres of slag at the mouth of Nine Mile Run and set into motion the preparation of a master plan to transform the slag site into a residential development with a park-like linear space, or greenway.<sup>8</sup> The master plan, completed the following year, recommended grading the slag radically to produce a high pedestal on which 1,200 houses and townhouses could be built. The scraped-away slag would be used below to cover up Nine Mile Run, and on that would be built the greenway and more housing.<sup>9</sup>

But the story took another turn. John Stephen, an environmental attorney and activist who knew of this plan, took three artists for a walk along Nine Mile Run. The three, Bob Bingham, Tim Collins, and Reiko Goto, worked at the nearby Carnegie Mellon University, Bingham as an instructor and the other two as visiting artists. All had access to the university's STUDIO for Creative Inquiry (SCI), which supports artist-generated projects and promotes "creation and exploration in the arts," especially projects that "bring together the arts, sciences, technology, and the humanities, and impact local and global communities."<sup>10</sup> The three artists observed that the city's master plan and the discussion around it focused almost exclusively on the commercial housing development, and that the public had no part in the decision-making process. The artists' view was that "the existing market based design paradigm" was incapable of sustaining the complex multi-party discourse "necessary to produce the best solutions for these complicated problems,"<sup>11</sup> and they concluded that a full consideration of public space was very much needed. Continuing to work with John Stephen, they got a meeting with the assistant director of Pittsburgh City Planning. This meeting clarified for them that, as long as they found their own funding, remained open to compromise, and stayed out of the way of the private housing development, their "input on issues of public space was valuable to the city."<sup>12</sup>

By June 1996, when the city hired a design team to develop the Nine Mile Run site according to its master plan, the artists had begun to take action unofficially, and by that fall they had "assembled a team of principals and consultants from three universities and industry; conducted five public tours of the site as seen from the point of view of five professional disciplines; developed a stakeholder assessment; organized outreach meetings for stakeholder groups; developed an initial site assessment, history, overview, and issues priority list; sustained a dialogue with the City Planners and members of the [Urban Redevelopment Authority] staff about the open space opportunities; presented a "Public Space" response to the city's request for qualifications;

produced a public art exhibit about on-site flora and a related site tour; developed an extensive website...; and presented an exhibit at a Brownfields conference."<sup>13</sup>

Next they proposed to the city an official program called Ample Opportunity: A Community Dialogue, with a purpose to "coordinate a series of educational workshops intended to inform, expand and enable discourse about public space and sustainable development; [to] develop programs, tools and systems which will promote individual expression and ongoing discussion about public space" and to "document the process and disseminate the results."<sup>14</sup> They planned to seek foundation funding for the program. A major element of their proposed strategy was to get local residents, through an intensive program of formal and informal encounters, to rediscover Nine Mile Run as more than a stinking dead place, so that the residents had a basis for taking ownership again. The proposal states: "Our urban population needs help reclaiming the concepts of public space, public access and appreciation of place.... The process [of public consultation] will provide a transferable model to reclaim public space diminished or lost to industrial excess, and concurrently reconnect the community to its native landscape and waters."<sup>15</sup> So, from year one, the artists shared what Claire Bishop in *Participation*, her 2006 anthology on contemporary collaborative art, identifies as a common concern of post-World War II collaborative art: to "create an active subject" who can engage in work toward change.<sup>16</sup>

Tim Collins, Reiko Goto, and Bob Bingham listed themselves in their application to the city as co-directors of Ample Opportunity, together with the environmental attorney John Stephen. Three other Carnegie Mellon instructors agreed to help initially as senior faculty advisors, and the SCI provided its usual project services: office space, administrative support, and some expense money for developing the proposal.<sup>17</sup> The proposal succeeded and received foundation funding, and the artists' team got permission from the city to begin officially their work at Nine Mile Run. Their public workshops took place in the stream valley and at nearby community centres in the warm months of 1997, with background publications, talks, and tours by various experts, and discussions on stream remediation, sustainable open space, and community and ecology. The project emphasized the complexity of the site, the right of the public to determine its future character, and the cutting-edge environmental solutions being used at other sites. The collaborative teamwork also was complex: "Advisory groups, including over 36 artists, scientists, engineers, historians, and planners ... designed the workshop agendas and contributed to the definition of issues on this high visibility effort."<sup>18</sup> The team's three hundred-page report on the community dialogue project<sup>19</sup> reflects extremely high levels of leadership, research, time management, and other professional skills, like all the propos-

als, plans, and reports the artists prepared during this and their remaining two years of work on the Nine Mile Run Greenway Project. As in most cases, the team published and acted as The STUDIO for Creative Inquiry rather than under their individual names. In this respect, and more directly through their continuous work with local citizens, they reflect their commitment to the second of three concerns Claire Bishop finds common to participatory art, the giving over of at least some authorial power to non-artists.<sup>20</sup> The SCI's final report on Ample Opportunity states:

Ample Opportunity has provided a forum for the establishment of an alternative public: a discursive community that doesn't quite fit under the umbrella of citizens that examine and monitor urban development, nor under the umbrella of environmental interests that see our natural world in dualistic terms of wilderness or zoo. Our alternative public is neither strictly professional nor strictly community but an exciting mixture of both.<sup>21</sup>

The artists concluded that their "discursive process" of consultation led to consensus on the public desire for a greenway with a well-functioning stream, a system of trails, and good links to Frick Park above, to the Monongahela River trails below, and to the communities on either side.<sup>22</sup>

Fortunately, at the same time that the artists were leading this public discourse initiative, the city's housing development team was backing away from the master plan directive to cover up the creek. The city had learned it would cost more than \$20 million to move that much slag down to the valley, so that leaving the creek open made much more sense financially, even though it meant reducing the number of houses that could be built.<sup>23</sup> Economics helped the artists' cause, although the developers were still applying pressure to make a conventional manicured park out of Nine Mile Run. In any case, the city modified its master plan to make the stream the centre of a green corridor connecting Frick Park with the Monongahela River. The city then got a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to produce a full conservation plan, and the Department in turn funded the artists' team "to facilitate a partnership of research institutions to contribute to this Nine Mile Run River Conservation Plan's initial assessment phase."<sup>24</sup> The artists' team provided GIS mapping and major participation in the production of the final conservation plan. They also managed the gathering of data on stream pollution, remediation, and plant and insect populations done at two universities and at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and they conducted a public component themselves. The artists worked with the county health department to organize a task force of municipal engineers to identify specific sewage failure sites in the upper watershed. They developed elementary

and middle-school projects about Nine Mile Run in cooperation with the Pittsburgh Children's Museum, gave site tours to visiting state and federal officials, made a half-hour historical video, and maintained a construction trailer at the site as a visitor centre.<sup>25</sup> They worked with the City of Pittsburgh to get a grant from the federal Environmental Protection Agency for the experimental revegetation of the slag slopes, with the objective of producing results that could be used at similar slag sites elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

The artists' team now planned toward a year two of "ecosystem and infrastructure assessment" (1998), followed by a "conceptual planning process" for the greenway in year three (1999).<sup>27</sup> In January 1998, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued an Ecological Restoration Report with the cooperation of the SCI team and other groups. The artists' team helped the Army Corps of Engineers write their initial report—no doubt a first in the history of art. Emphasizing the necessity for reducing the sewage contamination, the report names the artists' team to coordinate the development of a model for "resolving the chronic sewer overflow problems, while simultaneously restoring and revitalizing the region's urban communities and watersheds."<sup>28</sup> Again, an extraordinary task for an artists' group. The City of Pittsburgh agreed to act as the non-federal sponsor for an ecological restoration of Nine Mile Run to be executed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.<sup>29</sup>

To carry out their plan, the artists worked with "a botanist, entomologist, wetlands scientist, stormwater engineer, riverbed engineer, landscape architect and urban historian" in coordinating ecosystem and infrastructure assessments.<sup>30</sup> Throughout this time they held public workshops connecting the scientific and technical work to the goals established in the earlier community dialogue. In these workshops, residents got a chance to speak again on the issues under study.

The *Nine Mile Run Watershed Rivers Conservation Plan*, a major state-sponsored long-term plan, was published jointly in autumn 1998 by the City of Pittsburgh and its planning department, the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, Carnegie Mellon University, and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. The principal authors were a civil engineer, an invertebrate zoologist, a landscape architect, a botanist, and Tim Collins, M.F.A. It is an optimistic plan, treating even the slag as a resource rather than a liability, and emphasizing the value of Nine Mile Run within a larger, nested series of ecosystems. The "Biological Resources" section states that "[w]hile some of the more resilient macroinvertebrates are still found in the stream, a number of sightings of other riparian creatures, such as the Belted Kingfisher near the creek's mouth, suggest that a semblance of ecological integrity still remains within and alongside NMR, despite decades of chemical, biological, and physical assault."<sup>31</sup>

Building on this, Collins writes in another section:

The tendency to value pristine environments over the landscapes that we access in our daily lives undermines the urban and suburban environment.... We must learn to see (and teach) the value of ecosystem function in neighborhood parks, backyards, vacant lots, and daily lives. From the daily practice of attention and care comes the values that will protect and enable a sustainable balance between the built and natural environments.<sup>32</sup>

Through such statements, an official, scientific document was made to reflect the artists' continual insistence on putting "values"—stemming from the rights and the responsibilities of the citizens of a democracy, as well as the need for sustainability—over capitalist interests. The same point about values can be made for an article presenting the Nine Mile Run project as a model for stormwater management, written by Tim Collins with two collaborators and published three times, once in a professional online open-access stormwater magazine with a readership of 20,000. The article proposes ways to even out the extremes of gushing and drought in the stream and to give great benefits to a neighbourhood at the same time, by allowing more water to soak into streets and yards and parks in the upper watershed. In discussing two specific cases, there is emphasis on the social production of space; for instance, the article states, "In the early part of the 20th century, the industrially created land forms served as a baseball field for the Negro League. Some of the best baseball players in the country played as semi-pros at 'Hunter Field.'"<sup>33</sup> This may seem a strange inclusion in an article on stormwater, but that is the point: reflecting the transdisciplinary concept of merging the scientific and the cultural, the comment is a clear marker of the artists' will to make the public conscious of its stake in public spaces.

In 1999, year three, the artists developed, through a series of public workshops, design concepts for the greenway, focusing on five "nodes" of special interest in the stream corridor. In this phase they moved "away from the academic collaborators in the sciences and towards consultants in the areas of integrated ecological restoration" who would help them to market their plan well and ensure the effectiveness of the final recommendations.<sup>34</sup> That summer they filled a non-profit gallery in central Pittsburgh with visual and other material designed to "immerse the viewer in a community discussion,"<sup>35</sup> and this became the site for many of the final meetings with residents and with decision-makers. In July, they gathered residents, city planners, engineers, landscape architects, and environmentalists for a three-day workshop at the gallery to finalize a set of recommendations for the greenway's various sections.<sup>36</sup> The recommendations made clear a consensus on the part of the residents: they opposed the conventional park that the housing develop-

ers were still pushing for. They wanted a restored stream in as "natural" a setting as possible, with trails and very few other recreational elements.

For the artists, it was a major moment. Throughout all the scientific and professional activity, they had served as intermediaries among the project's many participants, taking the jargon out of the disciplinary discourses of scientists, engineers, and other "authorities" and creating a "new public language" in which they altered "the normal client-expert relationship."<sup>37</sup> They took care to provide places for residents even in the workshops at which the professionals finalized their recommendations. They made a public consensus possible and visible, and, ultimately, they made sure it became the basis of the restoration of Nine Mile Run. Very judiciously, while working within the structures of capitalism, they had set their course against a nexus of interests that served private capital, and the outcome was beneficial to everyone concerned. In these various ways, they shared the third of the three concerns of participatory art according to Claire Bishop: a conviction that art helps to reverse the isolation and alienation that capitalism creates among people.<sup>38</sup> In the best sense, then, this is "social sculpture," following Joseph Beuys, whom the artists counted as a critical predecessor.

The team's final report includes a business plan, a design implementation guide, and a review of requirements for the future use, management, and funding of the Nine Mile Run Greenway.<sup>39</sup> The report has the same brisk professional character as all the Nine Mile Run documents, a quality that must have contributed to the artists' ability to get the project through so many contexts and layers of bureaucracy. In the report, they recommend in particular a watershed alliance to unite the five separate municipalities on the watershed in caring for the greenway, extending the goals and work of the Greenway Project in perpetuity. In this way, political boundaries give way to ecological mapping and a common cause. The watershed alliance was to constitute the main extension of the "social sculpture" ideal that had driven the project from the beginning, creating countless occasions for citizens' encounters in public space.

The City of Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania government then signed agreements to stop illegal discharges of sewage into the stream, to fund the completion of the stream restoration, to establish aquatic habitat, and to place the stream on the Pennsylvania Rivers Conservation Registry, making it eligible for more grants. In the spring of 2001, the Nine Mile Run Watershed Association was created. That summer, the Army Corps of Engineers drained the streambed temporarily and began to stabilize the banks and to add bends, curves, riffles, pools, stepping stones, and other impedances to the streambed to slow and aerate the water, and to produce wildlife habitat. The restoration also included the creation of wetlands and the planting of thousands of native trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers.

In summer 2005, a reporter from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* described the transformation: “Previously flat terrain slit by a lifeless watercourse has given way to softly undulating stream banks alive with black-eyed Susans, wild yellow daisies, red clover, delicate sycamore and cedar saplings and gray, weathered spires of standing tree trunks.”<sup>40</sup>

In autumn 2006, the community celebrated the completion of the Nine Mile Run Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration project. That December, a local birder who had done a Christmas bird count in the valley for thirty years reported a remarkable increase in diversity of species. The toads also returned to Nine Mile Run in full force. The water levels in the stream began to fluctuate less exorbitantly. Much work is still needed to improve the stream’s water quality, to even out its flow, and to maintain and improve the valley’s natural and social functions. According to plan, the watershed alliance began to take responsibility for some of this work, and continues to do so. Members conduct walks and in general engage residents continuously in protecting the watershed and stream. The association trains “Ecostewards,” residents who have specific tasks such as removing non-native plants. It distributes rain barrels to houses on the upper watershed so that rainwater will once again be dispersed slowly through the earth, and plants trees along the streets to take up more of the water. Dozens of volunteers gather throughout the seasons to clean away litter in the stream and its valley.

One may argue that such a success as Nine Mile Run was a result of the right artists, the right city, the right university, the right funding connections, the right moment. All true, but at the same time, the project stands as a brilliant example of what collaborative art can do in the face of daunting ecological problems, and as I stated earlier, it provides a clear perspective from which to explore the aesthetic concepts emerging from the contemporary art-world debate on collaborative art, which in turn may help to give ecological projects such as Nine Mile Run a stronger critical position. I discuss a few major writings from that debate now, recognizing of course that the vast amounts of eco-critical writing that have appeared recently provide crucial perspectives also, and that the artists associated with Nine Mile Run, Tim Collins in particular, have themselves done important writing on reclamation art and its precedents. In fact, Collins has been working towards an aesthetics of environmental art ever since Nine Mile Run.<sup>41</sup>

While the precedents go back decades, the spark for the recent debate on collaboration was the brief book *Esthétique relationnelle*<sup>42</sup> (1998) by the French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. (There did exist at the same time a broadly perceived need for a new theoretical and aesthetic framing for collaborative artistic work, as well as a sense on the left that the conservative conversation about “beauty,” of which Dave Hickey’s *The*

*Invisible Dragon* was a centerpiece, needed a response that restored the possibility of political and social engagement to art.) After the publication of Bourriaud’s book in English as *Relational Aesthetics* in 2002, numerous articles appeared in *October*, *Documents*, *Mouvements*, *Art Monthly*, and other French- and English-language journals. *Third Text* devoted an entire issue in 2004 to “Art and Collaboration” and in 2007 published a cluster of three further pieces.<sup>43</sup> While not all of this writing addressed itself directly to Bourriaud’s book or to “relational art,” as it often came to be called, a great deal of it did. Some authors contented themselves with the useful work of arguing that relational aesthetics was not new at all, that the art Bourriaud championed had clear roots in Lettrism, the Situationist International, Fluxus, Dada, or the Constructivists. Some writers developed complex and convincing critiques of Bourriaud but stopped short of proposing alternative aesthetic directions. Only a few offered what I see as deeply considered possibilities for a new aesthetic framing of collaboration within contemporary art, and these are the ones I now turn to.

I begin with Bourriaud himself. Despite the amount of fire he drew, and the fact that he was writing about gallery art rather than “lifeworld” collaborations, he does raise some interesting arguments in *Relational Aesthetics*. Discussing work by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Vanessa Beecroft, Pierre Huyghe, and others, Bourriaud proposes that their work, functioning within the “interstices” of capitalism, had “models of sociability” as its ultimate product: “[T]he role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real,” to offer “microtopias” in the present.<sup>44</sup> The artist creates an “arena of exchange” within an exhibition, and distinct aesthetic criteria may be applied: the “symbolic value” of the created arena, its coherence of form (social relationships in particular are “form,” though physical objects are not excluded), and the “image of human relations reflected by it.”<sup>45</sup>

Bourriaud takes from the psychoanalyst and philosopher Félix Guattari a way of explaining art’s relation to the social and the political. For Guattari, individual subjectivities are not constructed internally, but rather in the cultural and ecological environments, through relations with “human groups, socio-economic machines, informational machines.”<sup>46</sup> By implication, the superego must cede at least some of its (overdeveloped) sense of entitlement to the subject’s relations with the world. Guattari perceives a great need to “seize, enhance and reinvent” subjectivity, to re-appropriate it, in order to prevent its decline into the rigidity so deeply encouraged by capitalist consumerism,<sup>47</sup> and art provides that opportunity: “Art is the thing upon and around which subjectivity can reform itself” and find healthy focus.<sup>48</sup> For Bourriaud then, it is the creation of new forms of intersubjectivity that constitute the new art:

“inter-subjectivity...becomes the quintessence of artistic practice.”<sup>49</sup> The “models of sociability” that art produces can exceed the planned, marketable, and impoverished relations produced by capitalism. This new art “determines not only an ideological and practical arena, but new formal fields as well.... Meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention thus represent, today, aesthetic objects likely to be looked at as such.”<sup>50</sup> They are distinguished from ordinary things by the attention they direct to the processes of their making and to their position in relation to the viewer and the world. This is interesting in relation to the very large element of sociality built into the Nine Mile Run project: the artists saw from the beginning that the creation of community was essential to the project’s success.

The American art historian Grant Kester happened to give a paper the year *Esthétique relationnelle* appeared, a paper published many times since, which elaborates a concept of “dialogical aesthetics.” Kester’s ideas parallel Bourriaud’s in several ways, but he applies dialogical aesthetics to what he calls “Littoral art,” referring to its positioning beyond conventional artworld framings. Littoral art is a process as well as a product, “a process rooted in a discursively mediated encounter,” and Kester claims particular interest in “a discursive aesthetic based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience.”<sup>51</sup> Littoral art may interact with “relevant public policies and debates, corporate ideologies, images and narratives promulgated by the mass media and numerous other sites which structure the political and cultural meaning that a specific work is capable of producing, and which are susceptible to be transformed by the work in turn.” The aesthetic is centred upon “the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself,” an exchange which is capable of transforming subjectivities. While Kester’s work is well known, this interesting and useful paper did not attract anything like the attention that Bourriaud’s book received. However, the central concept of a discursive aesthetic can certainly be applied to the work at Nine Mile Run.

Claire Bishop comments in an *October* article that for Bourriaud a social relationship is not merely reflected in, but is produced by the structure of a work of art (an idea taken from Althusser); however, Bishop points out, “[I]dentifying what the structure of a relational art work is no easy task, precisely because the work claims to be open-ended.”<sup>52</sup> More importantly, for Bishop, democracy requires conflict and vigorous debate and not just “relational” activity,<sup>53</sup> and she thus finds insufficient political grounding in Bourriaud and in some of the “relational” art he praises in his book (and this lack of oppositional politics is in one way or another the central problem for many of Bourriaud’s detractors). Certainly, in her emphasis on con-

structing democracy, Bishop comes close to the Nine Mile Run artists, as their rhetoric constantly called on democratic values. However, their discourse was based in the laborious work of consensus rather than in conflict, and that is an essential difference. Bishop also argues that moral and ethical concerns are necessarily different from aesthetic concerns and must not replace them;<sup>54</sup> to her, it is dangerous to assume, as she believes much critical writing on collaborative art does, that sociability equals good art. In good art, intersubjective relations are not “an end in themselves” but serve “to unfold a more complex knot of concerns” relating to the social. “The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address [the] contradictory pull”<sup>55</sup> between the autonomy of the artist and the possibility of losing this autonomy in social engagement. The aesthetic is constituted within this pull itself (according to Bishop’s interpretation of Jacques Rancière).<sup>56</sup> For Bishop, a work of art has to display a critical edge, or else it takes on too much risk of being subsumed by the state and used to mask systemic evils.<sup>57</sup> In a related argument, George Baker, contributing editor for *October*, proposes a “counter-relational aesthetic” that “foregrounds an absence, a lack at the centre of social space,” which would provide both a critique of capitalism and the affirmation that “it is indeed only around such gaps that social groups and relationality can truly be called into being.”<sup>58</sup> I would argue that to foreground a lack is to take a position that is largely oppositional in character, and this would not serve well the kind of initiative the artists took at Nine Mile Run. While they stated very clearly that the “market-based paradigm” was inadequate for the proper resolution of the problem at hand, they made their point through insistence on democratic and ecological values rather than through oppositional critique. Further, the question of ethics cannot be simply put aside, as Bishop wishes to do.

The Canadian-French curator and theorist Stephen Wright takes a path toward an aesthetics of collaboration that includes the ethical, the political, and the social. In his 2001 article “A Dis-Operative Turn in Contemporary Art,” he discusses recent art that surpasses the “post-object” work of Fluxus, the Conceptualists, and other Cold War avant-gardes whose “documentary traces” took on the aura, and often the exchange value, of the work of art. The very thing that is disappearing in the new art is, finally, the artwork. Echoing contemporary capitalism’s increased production of “laborers of the Immaterial” who (and here Wright quotes the sociologist Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat) “carry their work tools within themselves, because these ‘tools’ are directly related to their intellectuality and their creativity,” Wright considers that the shift toward open-ended processes, which are typically collaborative in some way, requires an aesthetics that stops seeing art through the artwork. The concept of the artwork, which has been stretched in every possible way, now constitutes only one option for artists, he declares, and

Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, while "abounding in intuitions," was obsolete even as it was written because Bourriaud is merely the latest writer to try to salvage the idea of the artwork by treating encounters, etc., as "form."<sup>59</sup> The new aesthetics replaces it with a concept of an art "coterminous with the creative operation." At this point, Wright's argument is not so different from Kester's "dialogical aesthetics," but he elaborates further.

Stephen Wright together with the British writer and curator John Roberts edited the 2004 issue of *Third Text* on "Art and Collaboration," which picks up from a 2003 conference at the Tate Modern and broadens the discussion with contributions from "artists and writers from Western Europe, North America, Australia, Russia, and the Congo."<sup>60</sup> Emphasizing the lack of consensus on a theoretical model of collaboration, the editors affirm that collaboration nevertheless demands greater attention since it "addresses the very basis of art's relationship to democracy, the art world and capitalist modes of production," and since it is "that space of interconnection between art and non-art," it "continually tests the social boundaries of where, how, with what, and with whom art might be made."<sup>61</sup> Wright's own contribution, "The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration," is the most important in the issue. The title honours the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, on whose work this article is based. Wright proposes that "art can now be seen—and is seen, at least implicitly—as a specific set of competencies, skills, aptitudes, and perceptions that over its long history it has had the opportunity to hone to a very sophisticated level.... Rather than recycling the art-related skills and perceptions back into the symbolic economy of art, a growing number of artists are now filtering them into other economies."<sup>62</sup> It is important to get out of the gallery because, he notes, "generally speaking, political gestures made in the art world alone are at best ineffectual in the political sphere, where they go unnoticed, and are oftentimes thoroughly counterproductive exercises in energy absorption."<sup>63</sup> Wright uses the term "competencies," which includes the *manifestation* of competence, to replace "performance," since "modernity has reduced art to its performative dimension alone" and he wants as a theorist to restore its full potential.<sup>64</sup> It is a delicate business, since, in this era of "diffuse creativity," much of what once characterized artists, including "autonomy, flexibility, inventiveness, mobility, creativity, refusal of hierarchy, intrinsic motivation, and so on—have been self-consciously harnessed by managerial rationality."<sup>65</sup> If art "quits the art world" for collaborative work, this must be done with an explicit ethical framework in place to keep it from being appropriated and to avoid co-opting the work of public participants, thereby replicating established power relations.<sup>66</sup> This ethical framework begins to appear when one abandons the notion of the self as "a fixed, given, and isolated quantity. Lone individuals existing outside the relationships and interac-

tions that constitute them are an utter fiction..." and "as Emile Durkheim, Margaret Mead, John Dewey, and others have argued, collaborative association is the very condition of possibility of individuality."<sup>67</sup> Following this line of thought, Wright comes closer than he admits to Bourriaud's interest in intersubjectivity, but he makes a much more highly developed ethical and political argument, asserting that art as a set of competencies can, through collaboration, help liberate a community from the "overarching normative structures" of managerial capitalism, and help reweave the "invisible ties of confidence" (quoting Mauss on mutual gift-giving) that have been suppressed by those structures.<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere, speaking of Argentina's Grupo de Arte Callejero and their work with local activists to generate public actions revealing the institutional mechanisms behind the phenomenon of the "disappeared," Wright argues that the GAC "inject art-specific competence into social processes as a tangible form of energy, at the same time maintaining art as such in a state of objective absence. What they do is not art, yet without art it would not be possible to do it."<sup>69</sup> Wright declares even more firmly in a later article that "if it is sincere about its political engagement, art must sacrifice its co-efficient of artistic visibility altogether, operating under the radar, to gain the value to which it has so long aspired."<sup>70</sup> If art is "not partitioned off as 'art'—that is, as 'just art'—it retains the freedom to deploy all its symbolic force within social processes of all kinds."<sup>71</sup> Wright applies Rancière's concept of the "police" to show what this freedom really means: a dominant power structure makes certain modes of perception appear natural, and in that structure, what Rancière calls the "police" is "an order of the visible and the sayable, which determines that some activities are visible and that some are not, that some speech is heard as discourse while others are heard as noise."<sup>72</sup> "Politics" then is any action that makes visible something previously not allowed to be visible, and empowers speech in those who have not felt they could be heard. Democracies must be produced continually through just this constant intervention. Stephen Wright argues that the art world too is policed, and this is a reason for artists to operate outside its frame: "[I]f it is not visible, art eludes all control, prescription and regulation—in short, all 'police.'"<sup>73</sup> Artists who work in this way will at the most opportune moment affirm their work as art by making themselves visible—presumably taking all possible care to elude the "police"—within the art world, as, for instance, at the XVe Biennale de Paris in 2006. This Biennale, for which Wright was *directeur éditorial*, consisted entirely of such "stealth art." Here, Wright delineated in these theoretical terms a movement that "depuis une dizaine d'années, commence à anticiper un nouveau statut de l'art."<sup>74</sup> It is notable in this regard that when the Nine Mile Run artists held their gallery "exhibition" during year three of their project, they essentially co-opted an art-world space to do exactly the same work

they had been doing in the stream valley, in the meeting rooms of the city, in the schools, and in other public sites. It was a sort of reverse co-optation of an art-world space.

Wright's point about ethics is crucial. As Okwui Enwezor points out, the discussion of ethics has become increasingly urgent in science and law as well as in other spheres, and "artists have been at the forefront of an interdisciplinary response" to this development. However, "the relation between the ethical and the aesthetic, the aesthetic and the political, the poetic and the social has increasingly brought the philosophical value of ethics before us in an unresolved form." For Enwezor, it is a new "politics of the subject" that will bring about progress in this regard.<sup>75</sup> I conclude that a concept of intersubjectivity that does not exclude but rather supports individuality and difference, can be a basis for this "politics of the subject." The aesthetics of Bourriaud, Kester, and Wright depend in their different ways on concepts of intersubjectivity, and this is a change from earlier avant-gardes, in which collectivism was not theorized in relation to the formation of the self. Intersubjectivity represents an unshakable tying of the self to "community" and "the public" without a loss of individuality, these concepts having been refined and made more powerful in the writings of Habermas, Guattari, Nancy, and Rancière, and used in these newer incarnations by the writers summarized here. At Nine Mile Run the formation of an environmentally and politically conscious subject within a discursive community was clearly tied to the work of producing democracy in the terms laid out by Rancière. Such work automatically takes on the sort of critical edge that Claire Bishop and others yearn for, a real-world challenge and alternative to the schemes of dominant power structures. But, it is done without relying on conflict.

Concerning the "visibility" of art as per Stephen Wright's theorizing, I have the sense from having read virtually all the texts from the Nine Mile Run project, and from discussing it with some of the artists and participants, that they made no particular attempt to hide their work as art; further, any reading of their theoretical texts shows their intention to situate it firmly in a history of art that includes Beuys and a host of other "visual" artists. But there was certainly nothing "arty" at Nine Mile Run either. At every step, the artists, in exploiting their "artistic competencies," really did without visible artwork, without visible "auteurs," and without spectators in the conventional art-world sense, and these are the three elements Wright sees as having disappeared from the new art, to its great advantage. I find that especially in this sense, Wright's theorizing is useful in thinking about their work, and might similarly be useful in theorizing other transdisciplinary ecological initiatives involving artists.

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## Notes

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  - 16 Bishop, "Introduction / Viewers as Producers," *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London and Cambridge, Mass, 2006), 12.
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