

Emotional Labor and Interpersonal Connection in the Creation of Contemporary Relational Art

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Abstract: This article looks closely at the emotional labor artists put into contemporary relational art. Since *relational aesthetics* emerged, art has stopped being just something people view — it's become a space for people to meet and connect. Yet few discussions address the emotional toll artists take on to make this happen. This article uses the concept of emotional labor proposed by Hochschild to analyze four representative practices: Rirkrit Tiravanija's gallery cooking project, Hu Jinping's town weaving collaboration with local women, Koki Tanaka's stranger collaboration experiments, and Song Dong's family memory presentations. Drawing on Olive Network's research on social practice artists and close readings of individual works, we map what emotional labor does in relational art. Emotional labor is both the backbone of relational art and a heavy, often unsustainable practical burden for creators. Artists are no longer just producing objects, but also investing a lot of energy to maintain connections between people. This creative approach breaks the boundary between art and life, and provides an aesthetic answer to how to rebuild trust between people in today's society.

Keywords: Relational Aesthetics; Emotional Labor; Interpersonal Connections; Participatory Art; Social Practice Art.

1. Introduction

Nicolas Bourriaud proposed in his 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics* that the true value of contemporary art lies not in the objects that can be collected, but in whether it can create spaces for people to truly meet and communicate with each other. Now, all the studies on art are not about the works themselves. Now we will look at the relationships among people formed through their work experience. Therefore, emotional labour has become a relatively unknown subject in recent years and is gradually being acknowledged. The history of art has always dealt with form and style, etc. The work of the artists includes communicating with the public, arranging the materials, and attending to the emotions of others. It hardly ever reaches this stage. [1]. The difference in relational art lies here, as it turns this invisible labor into the core component of the work.

Arlie Hochschild proposed emotional labor in 1983, which was originally used to analyze the emotional management of service industry workers. This theory is surprisingly applicable to art. Artists who engage in relationship art share similarities with those in the service industry - they must constantly adjust their own state, have patience, empathize, and make everyone present feel comfortable and respected. According to a study published by Olive Network last year, based on a survey conducted by University College London and the Social Arts Network in 2022, artists who engage in long-term social projects almost all experience varying degrees of emotional exhaustion. Their work has long gone beyond the scope of traditional artistic practice, and there are significant ethical issues hidden here, but few people have explained them.

Nowadays, people in the art circle are already under a lot of pressure, and various surveys show that those who do creative work are more likely to burn out than those in the general industry. It is even more difficult for artists to engage in social practice, as they need to constantly invest their emotions and interact with people, which naturally consumes more energy. We look at these four practices to break down

what emotional labor looks like in relational art, and what this creative path offers to our current society.

2. The Shift of Emotional Labor in the Context of Relational Aesthetics

Relational Aesthetics has transformed the paradigm of artistic production. The focus of creation has shifted from the production of objects to the construction of relationships, and the way artists work has also undergone fundamental changes [2]. Labour input in traditional visual art mainly refers to the time cost of material production, whereas relational art is more focused on non-material emotional elements. *Relational aesthetics* has begun to undermine the idea of autonomy in modernism; therefore, artworks are no longer solely for aesthetic enjoyment in museums but are now used as practical means to trigger social interaction in daily life. The role of artists has undergone a fundamental change, shifting from traditional creators of works to organizers and maintainers of interactive situations, and the labor form of artistic creation has thus undergone a substantial change [3].

For artists running participatory projects, this means constantly drawing on empathy, communication skills, and patience to build trust across diverse groups of participants. As the aforementioned 2025 Olive Network study (based on 2022 survey data from University College London and the Social Arts Network) points out, a large proportion of social practice artists' working time is not spent on traditional studio creation, but invested in interpersonal work including communication with participants, conflict mediation, and emotional support, with a much higher proportion than studio creation. The boundary between artistic production and social reproduction gradually disappears as a result.

Emotional labor has two levels of significance in relational art. It first constitutes the core medium of artistic creation - artists create an interactive atmosphere that makes every participant feel safe and respected through sincere emotional investment. This atmosphere itself is the core of the aesthetic quality of the work. When audiences experience such works,

their perception of the sincerity of creation often takes precedence over their judgment of formal innovation. This same labor comes with a hidden cost, too. Long-term high-intensity emotional investment can easily lead to professional burnout among artists, and in projects involving vulnerable groups, the responsibilities borne by artists often exceed the scope of traditional art creation.

Art evaluation standards need to shift to match this change. Traditional formal analysis methods are difficult to fully explain the value of relational art, as the meaning of a work is not fixed in a certain material form, but dynamically generated through continuous interpersonal interaction. The focus of art criticism needs to be adjusted from formal language to the quality of social relationships constructed by the work. The subjectivity of participants and the depth of dialogue between different groups have become new dimensions of evaluation.

3. Rirkrit Tiravanija and the Interpersonal Theater of Daily Eating Together

Rirkrit Tiravanija created his well-known relational work at 303 Gallery in New York in 1992. He turned the gallery office into a kitchen and cooked Thai curry for all the visitors. There were no suspended pictures or statues at the site. The cooking and dining process make up the whole of the work. Nicolas Bourriaud believes this work is the start of *relational aesthetics* and thus no longer needs to be about "viewing" but rather about "being observed".

All kinds of emotional labour are required in cooking, such as buying food and ingredients, preparing food and ingredients, handling fires, controlling flavour, etc. according to different diets. Continuously observe and react to the needs of others at every stage [4]. This daily labour, when it reaches the gallery, will also be treated as a ceremony. Artists have gone from making art to providing food for people; at the same time, audiences have changed from being observers to participants in communal dining. Strangers sit together, and there is a faint odour of curry. The white box attribute of the gallery is weakened, and it becomes a temporary community.

Duchamp's Readymades took daily life objects and transformed them into works of art; Tiravanija used ordinary behaviour as art. As the artist put it, it is to take Duchamp's urinal off its stand and put it on the wall again so that it can be used in real life. The two differ in that one focuses on objects and the other on actions; one has made one look, the other has made one participate. Food is not to be considered a symbol or metaphor here. It is a natural edible material that has extended the division between art and life by catering to the basic physiological needs of the people.

The full title of this work is *Untitled (Free/Still) 1992/1995/2007/2011*. At the Carnegie International Exhibition in 1995, the work was reproduced several times; in 2007, it appeared at David Zwirner Gallery, and by 2011, MoMA had displayed it. They have all been modified according to the specific place and conditions. The MoMA collection notes that this artwork can be displayed in two ways: as a legacy from previous exhibitions, or as an interactive state of on-site cooking [5]. The significance of repeated performances lies not in the fixed form, but in presenting the specificity and uniqueness of each interpersonal encounter.

Tiravanija's practice clearly presents the operational logic

of emotional labor. Through specific service-oriented labor, he created a space for participants to relax and communicate. This kind of labor does not produce collectible items, but generates even more precious social capital - trust, connection, and a temporary sense of community.

4. Reconstruction of Labor Value in Hu Jinping's Xiaofang Project

Where Tiravanija's work shows how emotional labor can build temporary community among strangers, Hu Jinping's decade-long *Xiaofang* project shows how this labor can grow into long-term empowerment [6]. The *Xiaofang* project has been ongoing for ten years since its launch in 2015, and is Hu Jinping's social art practice. When she returned to her hometown in Luzhou, Sichuan, she witnessed the woolen hats woven by her mother and the women in the town being purchased by intermediaries for only two yuan each. She entrusted a friend to use the pseudonym *Hu Xiaofang* and created a fictional identity as a buyer for a French brand to purchase these works at a much higher price than the market rate. This well-intentioned design gradually developed into a creative community of over a hundred people, and the form of the works also expanded from woolen hats to various weaving creations.

The core contribution of this practice lies in the dual reconstruction of labor value [7]. At the economic level, through the intervention of artistic mechanisms in market pricing, rural women's manual labor has received reasonable compensation. More importantly, the women themselves have begun to feel a sense of self-worth; after being neglected for a long time, they have come to know their own creative abilities. Through the fictional identity of *Xiaofang*, Hu Jinping repeatedly puts forward open-ended creative prompts for the participants, such as how to imagine forms of resistance and how to design currencies for different countries. These problems have stimulated their sense of self, and now weaving is not merely mechanical repetition but a form of self-expression.

The operation of the project is based on the high-intensity emotional labour of artists. To maintain the fictional identity of *Xiaofang*, all-day work is required; regular communication, gift distribution, gathering organization, mediation of differences among participants, coordination of the pace of creation, and balancing the logic of art funding with the actual needs of participants must be achieved. Hu Jinping once said that in order to prevent the exposure of lies, she had blocked hundreds of hometown contacts on her social accounts and reviewed the past chat records of each contact before making a call. This emotional investment of the past ten years is the main support for the project.

The solo exhibition "You can start anytime" at UCCA Dune Art Museum in 2025 showcases the decade-long creative journey of this community. The colorful woven works in the exhibition hall are each accompanied by a specific personal narrative. What the audience sees is not just handmade items, but also the growth and transformation of over a hundred women over the past decade. The exhibition title is exactly what artists often say to participants, meaning that there are no limits to creativity and everyone's imagination deserves to be taken seriously.

The *Xiaofang* project showcases the potential for emotional labor to be transformed into an empowering force in relational art. Artists do not adopt a condescending attitude, but instead

engage in equal emotional interaction to help participants discover their self-worth in their creations. The ultimate achievement of this practice is not a static work, but a continuously growing community, and the dignity and growth gained by each participant.

5. Koki Tanaka's Temporary Community Collaboration Experiment

Koki Tanaka takes this work in a different direction, focusing on how collaboration works in uncertain, unstable contexts. After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (March 11 disaster), there was a significant shift in the creative direction of Koki Tanaka. The disaster made him realize that in fragile social contexts, temporary connections between people are more vital than permanent systems [8]. The solo exhibition "Temporary Community" at UCCA in Beijing from September 27, 2025 to January 4, 2026, showcases his over 20 years of exploration of interpersonal collaboration. The exhibition title points to the core paradox of *relational aesthetics*: the community should be stable and enduring, but the word "temporary" reveals the flow and uncertainty of contemporary social relationships.

Koki Tanaka's creative method is "setting the situation and retreating to observe". Artists do not preset the form of their works, only build open frameworks, and meaning is generated through interaction. In representative series works, participants from different backgrounds transform individual behaviors such as playing the piano, pottery making, and poetry writing into collective practices of multiple people working together simultaneously. The process is full of discomfort, laughter, and improvisation, and participants experience the feeling of social distance being broken through coordination. Artists are situational triggers rather than creators, and emotional labor is reflected in the observation and guidance of the interactive process [9].

The core of a temporary community is to embrace uncertainty. Koki Tanaka cited Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "coming community" and believed that a true community should not be based on fixed identities, but should be formed through the encounter of those who do not belong. This idea is particularly evident in creative works during the pandemic. The universal isolation brought by COVID-19 highlights the interdependence of human destiny. The video works by artists in this period document the people's attempts to rebuild connections and raise questions about the feasibility of co-existence.

Based on the experience of the audience, UCCA exhibitions of academic texts show that such collaborative works can lead participants through a psychological process of "comfort zone breakthrough", and most people are later aware of the positive impact of this experience. Thus, relational art can reduce the distance between ordinary people by deliberately producing some mild social friction. This kind of creation needs to balance control and freedom; the participants are given freedom, but it must also be good art.

Koki Tanaka's practice reveals another dimension of emotional labor: creating spaces for difference to coexist. Temporary communities do not seek consensus, but embrace contradictions and disagreements; they do not pursue permanent bonds, but cherish each encounter. Emotional labor does not aim at predetermined outcomes, but maintains an open interactive field where each participant can find their

own place.

6. Emotional Connection Practice in Song Dong's Family Narrative

Song Dong's practice brought the field of emotional labor back from public spaces to the most private family relationships. His artistic creation revolves around family relationships and daily emotions, transforming emotional labor in the private domain into the core issue of public art [10]. The artist explicitly states that the core of his creation is "love", which forms a unique path in relational art — different from Western artists' direct involvement in social and political issues, Song Dong explores the universal significance of emotional connection from individual family experiences.

The creation of *Making the Best Use of Things* was completed in 2005 through a collaboration between Song Dong and his mother Zhao Xiangyuan. The artist moved over 10,000 everyday items that his mother had kept for decades - old clothes, bottles, discarded packaging, etc. — into an art museum. These objects, which are considered waste, each carry specific memories and emotions. After his father's sudden death, his mother dealt with the trauma by hoarding items. Song Dong did not intervene, but instead transformed it into art. The implementation of the work involves a lot of emotional labor: the artist records the mother's narrative of each item, understands the survival experience of the era of scarcity, and provides a display space for private memories in public spaces. This work was collected by MoMA in New York in 2009 and is the museum's first large-scale contemporary Chinese installation.

Touching Father took fourteen years to document the process of emotional reconciliation between Song Dong and his father. In 1997, the artist projected his hand onto his father's body through projection, completing a virtual touch; on the day of his father's passing in 2002, Song Dong touched his body during the farewell ceremony; in 2011, the artist projected his father's image onto the water and touched the reflection in the water. This series presents the expressive dilemma of father-son emotions in Chinese families, as well as the outlet provided by art for indescribable emotions. In creation, the artist waits for his father's psychological defenses to gradually soften, which itself constitutes emotional labor.

The *Chopstick Path* series, a collaboration between Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, expands family emotions to interpersonal connections. *Chopstick Path is a homophonic pun that refers to the logic of collaborative creation*. Two artists create separately and ultimately combine like chopsticks, corresponding to the relationship of independence and symbiosis in intimate relationships. At the "One Moment, Entry and Exit" exhibition in 2024 at the Xinyi Art Museum, Song Dong used a golden iron chain to construct a Guardrail with golden locks donated by the public, and Yin Xiuzhen created a link between private and public emotions using red threads woven from old clothes. The audience also participated in this link.

Song Dong's works have shown that emotionally engaging stories about people's lives can also appeal to the public. Artists provide references for viewers through their own family trauma and memories. Therefore, there is no need for a sermon; feelings of empathy will emerge spontaneously out of demonstration. [11].

7. Conclusion

At present, relational art has begun to focus more on the issues of emotions than previously focused on. A cross-comparison of the four artists' practices reveals that the breakthrough of *relational aesthetics* lies not in formal innovation, but in shifting the focus of artistic production from objects to human relationships. Emotional labor is no longer an optional accessory in the creative process, but has become the core mechanism and source of value for the generation of meaning in works.

This way of creating carries a clear tension at its core. The practice of the four artists jointly confirms the social potential of relational art - whether it is the communal theater in the gallery space, the creative community that has grown up in the town for ten years, or the temporary collaborative scene and emotional reconciliation within the family, all provide the possibility of sincere encounter for atomized modern individuals. Art is no longer an object for people to observe, but an aesthetic medium for rebuilding social connections. However, this mode of production also has an unavoidable cost. Artists have borne a considerable emotional burden for a long time without receiving official recognition or support, and as a result, job burnout among them is increasing. Ethics in the art world are to be uncovered.

The change has also been received differently by various groups. The traditional system of art criticism evaluation focused on formal analysis and is no longer suitable for assessing the worth of relational art. Future research should build a new evaluation system that adds factors such as labour ethics, quality of relationships and the subjectiveness of participants to the scope of assessment; art history narratives for art history needs to break away from materialism and incorporate social changes and interpersonal dynamics that have occurred over time into historical writing. People's daily

lives have gradually moved online in recent years; thus, this form of art that values face-to-face interaction and emotion is now facing an unfamiliar living model.

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