

CONVIVIAL

by

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ABSTRACT

How are artists today influenced by the last 20 years of the art movement of Relational Aesthetics? My research is focused on the Relational Aesthetics method of participant engagement as a form of art practice. Combining traditional craft mediums and cooking I explore the ways social engagement and Relational Aesthetics can create community within the spectrum of contemporary art. I use traditional craft mediums to create tactile and visual familiarity to engage gallery goers as well as community participation.

The continuous flux of today's world and how makers navigate majority opinions are direct effects on how individuals see and feel art. Relational art is regional in the context that it uses community agendas to express and advocate for awareness. Relational artists define their practice on a continuum from contextual material to formalist traditions.

In the early 2002, "Relational Aesthetics" by Nicolas Bourriaud was translated into English and published in America. In his book, Bourriaud described a new art process defined as a post-studio practice that used conviviality as a key element. He discussed the relationships a maker could create with viewers and/or participants within specific arrangements.¹

Bourriaud supported his new theory in his discussion of the 1991 *Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In this piece, Gonzalez-Torres exemplifies the new potential of Relational Art and how this new tactic blurs the ideas of object, the subject, and the participant. He arranged piles of individually wrapped candies against the sterile white corner of the gallery. Then the gallery goers would actively engage by taking pieces of candy for consumption. The piles started at the specific weight of his partner Ross, who Gonzalez-Torres lost to AIDS. Each morning the piles of candy were replenished to the specific weight. The piles were set to engage the participant to contemplate the traditional modes of active viewing.²

¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Art of the 1990's." In *Relational Aesthetics*, 25-28. Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002.

² Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Art of the 1990's." In *Relational Aesthetics*, 18. Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002.

To further support his theories, Bourriaud also uses the works of Rirkrit Tiravanija. Tiravanija repurposed traditional gallery spaces to create opportunities to merge art and the participants. He was best known for transforming galleries into a space for table conversation with cultural culinary entrees. In these cases, the ordinary day to day of sharing a meal became a catalyst for social interaction. Tiravanija believed that the gallery could become a convivial space allowing it to be a space for anything and everything.³

The advantage to these styles of work is the use of participation, nurturing activities, and globalized identity to connect the viewers. Many artists during this time adopted Bourriaud's theory of conviviality and space activation. They converted institutional settings into domestic or commercial spaces for tactile enjoyment.⁴ They bolstered Bourriaud's theory of interactivity with the activation of participants. However, Bourriaud's theories and the work artists completed under his definitions did not address all aspects of the agencies of social art. It failed to address how the work could socially engage all viewers since its reach was limited to gallery goers. Bourriaud also fell short in his articulation of a political stance.

Bourriaud received heavy criticism in the field, most notably from Claire Bishop. Bishop critically labels Bourriaud's theory and examples as the creation of pseudo

³ Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Art of the 1990's." In *Relational Aesthetics*, 38-56. Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002.

⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Art of the 1990's." In *Relational Aesthetics*, 26. Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002.

communities of consumers that reproduces the spectacle of the consumer mainstream.⁵ She describes his lack of ideological awareness in for social art. She further argues that Bourriaud's use of the gaze and spectacle is a form of consuming with no political agenda. In her book *Artificial Hells* (2012), Bishop defines her theories of Relational Aesthetics. The examples of work she discusses focused on how social artists can utilize the institutional arena to voice political agency while still blurring the interaction and the perspective of viewer and participants.

One piece that Bishop highlighted in her book was '250 cm Line Tattoo on Six paid people (1999)' by Santiago Sierra. In this piece, Sierra cheaply pays six Cuban labor workers to have a continuous single line tattooed across their backs. This piece brought the audience and objects to a humanizing truth about currency and global capitalism. The works of Sierra are far from the convivial space sharing of Tiravanija events. In contrast, Bishop applauded the work of Sierra as a call to action through art space and a way to activate institutional reflection on social blight and exploited labor.⁶ Bishop claims that Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetic theories only opened the gates for works that had little political opinions and glorified the artist. The works created within his theories were only concerned with limited social inclusion.

Bishop also describes the works of Thomas Hirschhorn whose ideas were set around the workshop experience for voluntary engagement and the agency of activism

⁵ Bishop, Claire. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents." *Artforum International*, February 1, 2006.

⁶ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. 1st ed. London: Verso, 2012. 222.

through education. In 2009, in *The Bijlmer-Spinoza Festival* Hirschhorn directed and wrote a multi-day educational workshop. In this workshop, local citizens participated in workshops that focused on social interaction. For example, during the philosopher's lectures at the festival, they did not have critical dialogues about theory but rather spoke about co-existing with these theories.⁷ Another workshop held during the festival was the *Child's Play* where schoolgirls narrated and reenacted works by pivotal artist such as Vito Acconci, Mariana Abramovic, Joseph Beuys, and Paul McCarthy in hopes of historical understanding of important artistic practices. Hirschhorn stated, "All real participation is the participation on thinking! Participation is only another word for 'consumption'!"⁸

Using these pieces as examples, Bishop is clear in opposition to Bourriaud's choice of what works were defined as Relational Aesthetics. The piece by Sierra exemplifies how participants can be agents for social justice in current markets that affect the working class. Bishop uses Hirschhorn as an alternative of Bourriaud's theories to demonstrate how an artist can activate environments for seeing, learning and acting upon spectatorship to active engaged learning.

In addition to Bourriaud and Bishop, Nato Thompson joined the critical dialogue. In his book called *Living as Form* (2014) he cataloged Relational works completed from 1993 to 2011. He embraced a wider range of works on topics ranging from social issues

⁷ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. 1st ed. London: Verso, 2012. 264.

⁸ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. 1st ed. London: Verso, 2012. 264.

to community unification. The works selected in this book are an inclusive of all theories and practices of participant-based works, and advocated a culture where humanity could model as well as better social forms for future generations.⁹

To highlight ideas of organized inclusion and awareness, Thompson discussed a piece by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla called *Chalk* (1998-2006). In this piece, passers-by were encouraged to express themselves with decomposing five-foot-long monuments comprised of white chalk. These large pieces of chalk were strategically placed in municipal city squares as public objects for any passer-by to engage with.¹⁰ As chalk is sensitive to environmental conditions these five-foot monuments would break down into smaller pieces for multiple people to use at once. By using chalk on the city streets, the goal of this piece was for the public to express thoughts around the social issues to political leaders. This piece empowered the public and gave social awareness to otherwise silence voices. Thompson's theory of social responsibilities through artistic form demonstrated that works of art could give light to the unheard community. It is both convivial and political.

Thompson also advocated for organizing public community alliances through socially and publicly engaged art. One piece of art that supported this theory was Rick Lowe's *Project Row House* (1993-Present). In this piece, Lowe revitalizes the condemned shot-gun style housing located in Houston's Third Ward. He used these

⁹ Thompson, Nato, ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. 1st ed. New York, New York: Creative Time, 2012. 18-22.

¹⁰ Thompson, Nato, ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. 1st ed. New York, New York: Creative Time, 2012. 100-101.

homes as a space for opportunistic artist programs and for people in need of social services. He created a campus for positive interactions and outcomes.¹¹ Lowe created a non-object based project that built a new reflective point of view for a community previously forgotten by its own members. *Project Row House* has since been a leading model for social change and social opportunity in its use of appropriated forgotten buildings and the way that it facilitates social programs to help people in need of assistance. Is this a social art form that Bishop would authentically call as activism or is this artificial in the ideas of space and context on the grounds of engagement? As holding a role of director and supporter, Lowe could properly be held on both sides of the Relational Aesthetic divide.

Thompson's idea that all works fit into the family of Relational Art is beneficial to any positive cause for change. Thompson describes the act of art as the act of living.¹² Can this model be assumed by the popular or non-art identifying culture? Thompson also explains in *Living as Form* that not all Relational works are successful models for objective outcomes but the existence of work is better than no work at all.¹³

As I have outlined different theories of Relational practices, I'd like to add the seemingly quiet voice of Craftivism to the vernacular of Relational practices. As a recent creative movement, Craftivism is rooted in the first wave of feminism and minority

¹¹ Thompson, Nato, ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. 1st ed. New York, New York: Creative Time, 2012. 256-257.

¹² Thompson, Nato, ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. 1st ed. New York, New York: Creative Time, 2012. 18-22.

¹³ Thompson, Nato, ed. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. 1st ed. New York, New York: Creative Time, 2012. 18-22.

equality in the ways in which it uses subtle queues for activism and resistance to the current state of social differences. Artists and makers have used traditional techniques in utilitarian based craft methods as a way to give voice in what some would call a 'shooting match in protest dialogue'.¹⁴

Craftivism is a term coined by Betsy Greer during a time when America felt helpless in a post 9/11 period. Greer looked back on domesticity and its roots in community nurturing in a world previous to globalization of international commercial commodities.¹⁵ Greer wrote two books, *Knitting for Good* (2008) and *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (2014). In these two books, she outlines concepts of our natural human condition to help each other when in need. It also discusses using traditional forms of crafts, such as knitting, crochet and needle point as ways to contribute to our cultural/social circles.

In 2008, Corrine Bayraktaroglu and Nancy Mellon became known as the *Jafagirls* when they bought international attention to their small rural Ohio town of Yellow Springs. They thought outside of typical gallery conventions and took their skills and passion for knitting to a public arena. They created the *Knit Knot Trunk* by attaching a couple of knitted swatches to a tree trunk as a response to the lack of art awareness. The piece quickly gained an audience and participants, as the knitted swatches seemingly grew overnight. Additions from other anonymous knitters further strengthened the

¹⁴ Greer, Betsy. "Part One: Knitting for Yourself." In *Knitting for Good: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social & Political Change, Stitch by Stitch*, 37. 1st ed. Boston, Massachusetts: Trumpeter, 2008.

¹⁵ Greer, Betsy. *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism*, 7. 1st ed. Vancouver, British Columbia: ARSENAL PULP PRESS, 2014.

message, and a movement called “Yarn Bombing” had begun. As this new form of street graffiti took hold, the *JafaGirls* had brought to light the ways that a simple craft based process had the potency to build community unity. This work collectively voiced community participation through creation and dialogue using a non-elitist medium. Yarn Bombing has since become a call to action in the international scene. A person armed with basic knitting needles and historical techniques can reshape the context of artistic engagement. These yarn-bombing locations act as a stage for people who look to other means of protest or for ways to make statements in their own communities. This medium process lets participants engage as well as send messages to separate groups that social awareness is a part of all communities. While this wooly street art has roots in micro communities, larger communities have also taken this craft based tradition as a method for activities and community organizing. The sheer idea of using such a home making medium within the public sphere completely redefines the previous notions of Relational Art.

In a historical discussion of Craftivism, *The AIDS Memorial Quilt Project* was a cultural awareness project originally conceived by Cleve Jones in the 1980’s to bring light to the disease of HIV/AIDS. The quilt’s awareness about HIV/AIDS sparked community action through quilting, as a means to unify people affected by this disease. L.J. Roberts stated that the craft tradition of quilting evokes the nostalgia of belonging and storytelling gives voice to a degraded population within our community.¹⁶ Works

¹⁶ Greer, Betsy. "Craft as Political Mouthpiece." In *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism*, 125-131. 1st ed. Vancouver, British Columbia: ARSENAL PULP PRESS, 2014.

like this are created as a memory to the domesticity of how one's community can supply nurturing and empathy for one another. The voices of those that have created quilts dedicated to a loved one effected by AIDS resonate with grief, but also action. The biographical component of the quilt triggers a sense of communal grieving.

How do works like this fall within Relational Aesthetics? Does this work speak of the agencies that Bishop conceptualizes as social agency? This form is about people as art. Do the pitfalls of social structures and its advocacy for change have to be the art in order for its validness to be shown? Craftivism has forcefully redefined its own agenda within the contemporary art sphere, a sphere that had seemed to no longer accept craft traditions as essential tools for activating social dialogue. The two examples above have pointed to the power and potency of what was typically classified as old-timey forgotten techniques for the hobbyist, can still serve critical roles in community issues. The position of Craftivism embodies a special nature of the handmade objects, which evoke sentimental memories that can serve as symbols for social political agendas. The stigmatization of craft based mediums is a direct dysfunction of the inclusionary ideas of social/ Relational Art. As seen currently with the rejection of craft within the art institution.

The dialogue between Bishop and Bourriaud is important since it is central to defining what contemporary artists do. This dialogue gives a freedom to make without restrictions. As simple as this may be, the critical eye of specific agenda and/or social politics are on the constant back shoulders of the one's who choose to make the work. One who decides to carry the banner of utilizing the participant or engagement as parts to

compose their work must meander the complexities of the art institution as well as the social and political umbrella of making work aimed at people's current social conditions.

Craftivism's voice has reminded the contemporary art field that art can be influential even with the use of traditional hobbyist methods or a reliance in the object. As Craftivism is based upon the medium of traditional modes of creation, it is not commonly viewed as part of the Relational Aesthetic field. This field does not consider the social context of the craft-based medium. The context of this work is pretty simple in that crafts people make work that is for utility and can be re-contextualized to make a statement. Is this not Relational Aesthetics? Bishop and Bourriaud specify the need for the extremist through the institutional setting to serve as voices for social agency but what about the arena of the handmade object? How could attention to the materiality of artistic practice change the value of the political voice? Does Craftivism need an edgy upper hand in order for academic critics to fully respect the power of craft? Are handmade craft based objects not specific to function? If so is this not a social engagement?

These are the types of questions that I strive to answer in creating my own work. I hold the stance that yes handmade, craft-based objects are specific to function and can be used for social engagement. Craft-based objects therefore can be tools to build community. The current status of Relational Aesthetics is segregated in different silos, each approach taking different stances on what validates the work. The truth of the matter is that if ideas are executed with purpose, no matter what the outcome or change in

policy, then the work will be received. Relational Aesthetics has no restrictive boundaries.

Participant engagement has become a common tool for contemporary makers, but the impact of the functional objects on participant engagement has not fully been considered. The materiality of the ceramic vessels that I create are made with intent that can be received and live beyond the maker's hand. My work is not seen as only utilitarian vessels but also as art objects that embody community. These vessels can challenge perspectives within current social arenas. It bridges the space between food, culture and community. I am interested in making objects that invite the participant's choice to the handmade utilitarian object. The simple gestures of meal creation serve as a catalyst for creating a space between participants for the vessel to bridge.

As a maker, I must consider how the user will engage with the specific sculpture. My studio practice is a continuous personal dialogue between what the object is, how the object is made and what the outcome of its use is and will be. The utilitarian object exists within the gray area of the craft-based object and its role as a larger statement for viewer interaction within the role of art and life.

One artist who is working within the sphere of relational functional objects is ceramic artist and critic Robin Lambert. In his *Service: Dinner for Strangers* 2011, Lambert invited strangers to a pot luck style dinner in a gallery space. He arranged a large dinner table with vessels such as plates, bowls and cups for use. Lambert used these handmade vessels to facilitate the awkward situation. He used the familiar and comforting handmade objects as a common ground to build a comfortable socializing

atmosphere. As an added bonus to the potluck dinner, after the event each participant was gifted the handmade vessel as a token of participation.

Lambert's piece directly influenced a two-week exhibition that I completed at the Exit Gallery (at Montana State University, 2014), titled *Full Contact*. In this exhibition, I created a library of handmade wood-fired drinking vessels where participants could check out the vessels as an interactive loaning exhibition. This library system gave users an opportunity to engage with the intimate object inside and outside of the gallery space, depending on their comfort level with handmade objects. Participants were encouraged to take the vessels home with them and use them throughout their daily activities. However, some participants were not comfortable using art pieces and instead explored the idea by using the vessels in the gallery by having tea with me, as the artist.

During the exhibition, I also moved my studio practice into the gallery. This gave the participants the opportunity to have conversations with me about a wide variety of topics. Conversations ranged from current events to the vessel making processes to their previous interactions and comfortable levels with handmade vessels. These interactions of the maker and the participant broke the barriers of using art as their daily utensil. It connected the user directly to the maker, as well as the user directly with the vessel encouraging, them to use and touch the art. An additional component of the *Full Contact* exhibition social interaction through social media. Participants were encouraged to post images of the loaned vessel in action on a Facebook page dedicated to the use and creation of the objects, *Larry Phan Ceramics*. I encouraged posting to social media as an alternative outlet to engage a larger audience through the internet community.

The social media aspect of Full Contact is synonymous to other social media campaigns. These campaigns further outreach and awareness for the life of the functional ceramic sculpture within the public domain. These campaigns exist on social media sites, Instagram and Facebook, through accounts such as *Pots in Action* or through specific hashtags such as *#mugshotmondays*.

Full Contact was an alternative for the customary white cube gallery space. It blurred the lines between studio practice, post studio practice and cultural craft worker. It also brought the maker and user in direct contact with one another creating opportunity for full engagement and dialogue. However, some questions arose when using the participant interaction for the function of the exhibition. Is necessary for, the maker to coordinate the users for a successful outcome? If so, How? Does this method transform the maker into more of a cultural worker, rather than a conventional artist? To address these types of questions, I began to research food object tools as a way to aid the creation of active convivial environments.

One such tool I researched was the round wood-fired oven. Traditional wood burning ovens are commonly made with refractory brick or local clay mixed with straw and manure. I combined these traditional building methods by using commercial pottery materials such as processed fireclay and perlite soil with wood shavings. Doing this created a high temperature low shrinkage thermal shock resistance clay body with the workability of pottery clay. My goal was for the ovens to be mobile, therefore I used the iconic grocery-shopping cart to mobilize the oven platform. The shopping cart also had storage to include all the necessary provisions such as wood for fuel, handmade pizza

paddles and other utensils. All of this could be transported as one piece by trailer to any space suited for a convivial event.

The mobile wood-fired oven events became a new form of engagement with art outside a gallery space. Participants were not only viewing the handmade tool but now directly interacting with it and dictating the outcome, giving life to the object's function. The mobile oven cart was the introduction of how an object can include and heighten the participant's experience. Participants are interacting with the ovens but also directly with one another thereby building community.

The mobile ovens became a communal space for the creation of miniature (roughly 6 inch) handmade pizzas. The individual pizza varied from each participant, for example crust thickness, topping selection and cooking times. These variables all became a part of the participants' discourse. When these individual pizzas are cut into multiple slices they become bite-size reflections of taste, choice and expression of each individual. Making each slice from each participant, a voice at the table that reflects each single maker and community member. It also is a voice that is shared as participants offer slices from their pizzas to one another.

The act and process of making socially engaging work has cultivated social situations to help better a collective dialogue. As I have researched and explored different methods to socially engage community through the object, I have continued to follow the process of wood-firing the utilitarian ceramic wares I make.

The process of firing large wood kilns is one that must be done with a community of people as it takes multiple days to prepare and fire (over 60 hours of firing time). It is

the labor of many that results in the success for each individual. This process is reliant on trust and active participation. The long process of wood-firing ceramics embodies an unhurried manner of using traditional means to build surface and character on the ceramic wares. It is a group event, resulting in a large variety of distinct art pieces. As the organizer of such firings, I am not directing but facilitating an environment for the community to create and interact with the kiln to produce finished works of art.

My most recent exhibition, *Convivial*, used the traditional gallery space as a catalyst for communal interaction. It transformed the white succession space into a convivial atmosphere centered around food, drink and handmade objects. There were no objects on the walls or on pedestals. Instead, I handmade eight tables that were arranged around the gallery. On top of the tables were the functional ceramic wares containing food or drink for the participants to help themselves to. There was a variety of food and drink: Ice cream, kettle-style popcorn, shell peanuts, nitro cold brew coffee, lemonade, whiskey, gin and seltzer, and woodfire pizza. For the pizza table, I also made a woodfired pizza oven, which was placed, just outside the gallery.

The vessels I created for this exhibition were specific to the food and drinks that I selected to serve. These vessels conversed about the value of food containment through form and function. The wide range of use expressed through form was articulated through the varying sizes and tactile quality that was represented in each piece. The vessels acted of serving and sharing food and drinks allowing the meal to live beyond the direct nurture. This facilitated a potential community around the sharing of food and participation.

To further facilitate the engagement of the participants, I made rough-cut benches that spanned the length of the main gallery wall. The wood used for the benches and the tables came from the same wood source that is used as fuel to fire the wood kiln. The consideration for the wood used was another way to make a direct connection between my studio practice and the participants.

At the beginning of the reception, people curiously navigated the gallery. The environment changed quickly as people began conversing and enjoying the food and drinks. They moved around the gallery exploring the tables and the environment became lively. The pizza table had a line and there was a crowd gathered around the pizza oven outside. The contribution of the participants was signified by each piece of handmade ceramics that was used and by the lively conversations. In turn, the participants individually gave life to the objects they used. This exchange transformed the gallery environment into a convivial atmosphere. This exchange is the driving force for how I can visually communicate and encourage inclusiveness within our community.

By exploring and applying different methods to socially engage the community with the object, I have explored questions about the effects of my work on the many different scopes of community. At this time, the lens of research and reflection has come back to my studio practice as a maker and how that connects to the concepts of using food as a tool to build an inclusive community.

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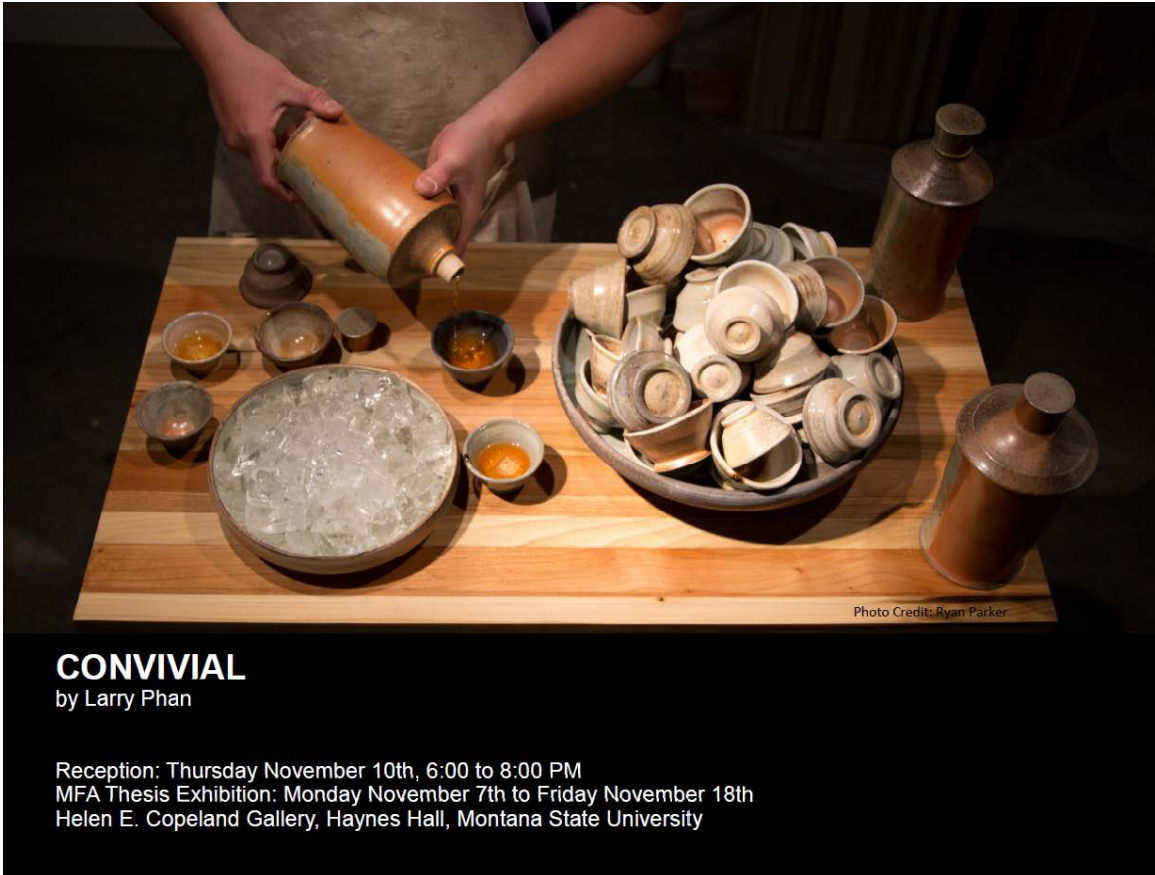


Image 1- *Convivial* Poster



Image 2- Gallery View 1, Before Reception



Image 3- Gallery View 2, Before Reception



Image 4- Gallery View 3, Before Reception



Image 5- Gallery View 4, Before Reception



Image 6- Gallery View 5, Before Reception



Image 7- Gallery View 6, Before Reception



Image 8- Gallery View 7, Before Reception



Image 9- Gallery View 8, Before Reception



Image 10- Pizza Table, Before Reception



Image 11- Ice Cream Table, Before Reception



Image 12- Peanut Table, Before Reception



Image 13- Peanut Table 2, Before Reception



Image 14- Gin & Seltzer Table, Before Reception



Image 15- Gin & Seltzer Table 2, Before Reception



Image 16- Whiskey Table, Before Reception



Image 17- Lemonade Table, Before Reception



Image 18- Popcorn Table, Before Reception



Image 19- Nitro Cold Brew Coffee Table, Before Reception



Image 20- Crates, Before Reception



Image 21- Time Lapse Gallery View 1, During Reception



Image 22- Time Lapse Gallery View 2, During Reception



Image 23- Gallery View 1, During Reception



Image 24- Gallery View 2, During Reception



Image 25- Gallery View 3, During Reception



Image 26- Gallery View 4, During Reception



Image 27- Gallery View 5, During Reception



Image 28- Gallery View 6, During Reception



Image 29- Pizza Oven, During Reception



Image 30- Pizza Table, After Reception



Image 31- Popcorn Table, After Reception



Image 32- Crates, After Reception



Image 33- Gallery View 1, After Reception