

Relational antagonism  
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### **Relational antagonism**

By contrast, the 'antagonism' theory of democracy put forward by Laclau and Mouffe is underpinned by an idea of subjectivity as irremediably decentered and *incomplete*. It can be used to illuminate the work of an artist conspicuously ignored by Bourriaud: Santiago Sierra (b. 1966), a Spanish artist who lives and works in Mexico. The work of Sierra, like that of Tiravanija, involves the literal setting-up of relationships between people: himself, the participants of his work, and viewers. But Sierra's 'actions' since the late 1990s have been organised around a manipulation of relationships that are more complex (and more controversial) than those produced by the artists associated with relational aesthetics. Sierra has attracted tabloid attention and belligerent criticism for some of his more extreme actions, such as *160m line tattooed on four people* 2000 and *A person paid for 360 continuous working hours* 2000. These actions and live installations are -- like much performance art of the 1970s -- ephemeral and documented in the form of casual black and white photographs, a short text, or video. Sierra's work nevertheless significantly develops the 1970s performance art tradition in his use of other people as performers, and in his emphasis on their remunerations: everything and everyone has a price. His work can therefore be seen as a sobering meditation on the social and political conditions that permit such disparities in people's 'prices' to emerge.

Unlike the emphasis on dialogue for its own sake (as a representation of communication) in the work of Tiravanija, Sierra's installations often imply that silence can be as forceful as speech. In his exhibition at Kunst-Werke in Berlin 2000, viewers were confronted with a series of makeshift cardboard boxes, each of which concealed a Chechnyan refugee seeking asylum in Germany. The boxes were low budget, Arte Povera take on Tony Smith's celebrated 6 x 6 foot sculpture *Die* 1962, which Micheal Fried famously described as exerting the same effect on the viewer as the 'silent presence of another *person*'. In Sierra's piece, this silent presence was literal: since it is illegal in Germany for immigrants to be paid for work, the refugees' participation could not be announced by the gallery. Their lack of status was highlighted by their literal invisibility beneath the cardboard boxes. In such works, Sierra seems to argue that the embodied perception posited by Minimalism is politicised precisely through the *quality* of its relationship to other people -- or more precisely, its lack of relationship. Presence and perception, then, are shown to be pre-regulated by legal and economic exclusions.

Sierra's work for the Spanish pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale, *Wall Enclosing a Space*, involved sealing off the pavilion's interior with concrete blocks from floor to ceiling. On entering the pavilion, viewers were confronted by a hastily constructed yet impregnable wall that rendered the galleries inaccessible. Visitors carrying a Spanish passport, however, were invited to enter via the back of the building, where two immigration officers inspected their documents. All non-Spanish speaking nationals were denied entry to the gallery, whose interior contained nothing but grey paint peeling from the walls, left over from the previous year's exhibition. Once again,

the type of Minimalism espoused by Sierra charges phenomenological perception with the political: his works seeks to expose how identity (here, national identity) is, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions.

It could be argues that Sierra's installations and actions are nihilistic, simple reiterations of an oppressed status quo. Yet he embeds his work into 'institutions' other than contemporary art (immigrations, the minimum wage, traffic congestions, illegal street commerce, homelessness) in order to highlight the divisions enforced by these contexts. Crucially, though, he does not present these territories as reconciled (unlike Tiravanija's seamless fusion of the museum with the cafe or bar), but as spheres fraught with tension, unstable, yet open to change. Our response to witnessing Sierra's live installations and actions -- whether the participants face the wall, sit under a box, or are tatoored with a line of ink -- is quite different in character in the 'togetherness' of relational aesthetics. The works does not offer an experience of human empathy that smoothes over the awkward situation before u, but a pointed racial/economic *non*-identification: 'this is not me'. The persistence of this friction, its awkwardness and discomfort, alerts us to the relational antagonism of Sierra's work.