

## Politics of Display

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# Curating: politics of display, politics of site and politics of transfer and translation

## Editorial by Dorothee Richter and Nkule Mabaso

This issue of OnCurating consists of a variety of texts and interviews, which were developed out of interviews from participants connected to the Postgraduate programme in Curating ([www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org)). Many of the authors and interviewees gave lectures and participated in the programme over the last four years, adding to the dialogue in the postgraduate programme, as well as other curators in the field.

In the spirit of slowing down, in sometimes rather a hastily discourse, we would like to present them to a broad public, which engages with our main topics: politics of display, politics of site and politics of transfer and translation, topics which refer clearly to the research institution where the Postgraduate Programme in Curating is situated: the Institute Cultural Studies in the Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts. We see the curatorial discourse not primarily as a philosophical discourse with some practical outcomes. We are always interested in the power relations and politics, which structure the field. As curators and as researchers we have chosen the attitude that practice and theory are intertwined profoundly, and both materialisations have the ability “to do things” with art and with words, to intervene, to highlight.

**Elena Filipovic's** *Global White Cube*, first published in 2005, traces the genealogy of exhibition formats through the development and success of the white cube, its putative neutrality, and its ubiquitous architectural use in commercial galleries and art fairs. Filipovic discusses the global hegemonic shifts brought on by the white cube's impact on contemporary art, curating, and art institutions.

**Paul O'Neill** writes about the ‘group exhibition’ and how it has opened up a range of curatorial approaches to demystify the role of mediation, and as such has also enabled divergent artistic practices to be exhibited together under a single rubric. He does this by examining curatorial statement across a period of time show how each group show, was the result of divergent, complex, and dialectical relations between the curator and the artist as co-producers, during a process of co-production, which has the possibility to lead to the construction of co-operative and co-authored group exhibition-formations.

**Dorothee Richter** describes the relationship of terms commonly used within the activity of “exhibiting”, and the promise they hold of disclosing otherwise concealed knowledge. Richter considers various historic exhibitions that came

into existence, from a close reading of Mary Anne Staniszewski's study, *The Power of Display* (1998) in order to thereafter discuss contemporary exhibitions. Staniszewski concludes that there are three normative kinds of exhibition developed over time, the propagandist, the ennobling, and the pedagogic exhibition. Richter makes the addition of a fourth category, which she refers to as the "self-critical" exhibition.

**Marco Scotini** in his text *The World belongs to us*, runs through seminal moments of the last 10 years that reveal the self exploitation and lack of control that art workers have in the art system which is poised against them in favour of big institutions and money. Scotini includes several examples that show there is no longer an outside; all institutions have been subsumed into the fold of the hypervisible art organisations, which he points to as being more hypothetical than real.

**Monan Slome and Joshua Simon**, write about the *Aesthetics of Terror* workshop, which took at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) in 2008, and generated a set of questions, leading to the development of the exhibition originally planned to be shown at the Chelsea Art Museum, New York. The show encountered many difficulties and received asylum in another institution. The exhibition and text take the events of 9/11 as a starting point and the precipitating events that followed are contemplated from a specific formal perspective and analysis is of the pictorial strategies of terrorism through certain visual characteristics of the spectacle of terror and its echoes in contemporary art.

This issue also includes a number of interviews from contemporary curators in the field:

**René Block** discusses his career spanning decades from 1964, at the age of twenty-two, when he founded his first gallery in Berlin, and touches on the risk and challenges that have followed. The interview is divided along the range of Blocks activities including curating, art promotion and financing and collecting. Block gives insight on the development of art in the early 1970s and the advent of the Independent curator made prominent by Harald Szeemann.

**Rainer Ganahl**, talks about the nature of his production and his objective replication of the 'often obscene and hideous' language of economics and politics in his *Credit Crunch Meals* series, which deals with the obscene economic injustice revealed by the credit crisis that hit the international markets in 2008. He further expands on the notion of defining a practice, the role of the curator, the dynamic power-relation in the exhibition making process, and speaks on the relation to autonomy and commodification of objects and other aspects as explicated in his 2007 text, *When attitudes becomes curating* (2007).

**Saša Nabergoj** expands on her presentation at the Kunstverein Zürich (Wäscherei) in September 2011. In this interview she explicates what is missing if there is no time for laziness, what she is trying to get out of a discourse about laziness and gives insight on the artistic scene in Ljubljana, the economic situation artists of artists in Slovenia and the curator roles in 'collaborating' with artists.

**Paul O'Neill** touches on artists run centres that have eventually become institutions and the instrumentalisation for art for social engineering purposes and draws out the paradigmatic problems posed by setting *New Institutionalism* as a short lived shift happening in the last fifteen years, with its major proponents initially all in relatively small institutions, which they have all left for larger institutions.

He explains further the position of the individual curators who coined the term, is a by-product of the internalization of the modus operandi of the institution.

**Mirjam Varadinis** discusses the site-specific exhibition, *Shifting Identities* (2008), which had as one of its venues the Zurich Airport; and reflected on themes such as globalization, borders, and migration. Mirjam speaks about the complexities of working in the third space, like an airport with this exhibition, in which 67 artists participated and confronted changes in the concept of identity on multiple levels.

In this almost candid interview with Nkule Mabaso, **Anton Vidokle** writes about his early influences and the development of his creative interests while growing up in Moscow. Vidokle finds the subjective nature of curating especially problematic and discusses the objective, systematic, almost scientific, practice which most of the time it is not.

# Revisiting Display: Display and Backstage

## Dorothee Richter

In what follows, I use the terms “display” and “backstage” to somewhat loosely describe a particular relationship within the activity commonly referred to as “exhibiting,” which is said to hold the promise of disclosing knowledge hitherto concealed. This relationship, which affects all cultural and visual offerings, contains a voyeuristic perspective that foreshadows and discloses, conceals and detracts, thus keeping alive a yearning for images.

The term “display” is fairly recent in the context of exhibitions, first emerging about a decade ago. Its range of meaning encompasses presentation display; display and packaging, advertising and computer display, and refer to new economies and new conceptions of (re)presentation oriented towards a specific “surface,” specifically a “user interface.” In English, “display” refers literally to a screen and to the visual presentation of factual matter. Its horizon of meaning indicates the primacy of the surface over a complicated, difficult, and incomprehensible background.<sup>1</sup> The term “backstage” thus attempts to grasp those parts of an exhibition apparatus that satisfy – within a specific display – our desire to see and know more within a short space of time. Which part of an exhibition is sold as the hitherto unseen? For that matter, which part of the exhibition apparatus remains hidden from view? The term “backstage” thus by all means implies that exhibitions are part of the culture industry, where it also operates as a metaphor of desire; only access to the backstage dissolves the distance to the imagined star. What are the effects of these backstage moments, especially when they address viewers-as-subjects? Which movement or impetus initiates such moments? Since I am especially interested in the relationship between display and backstage (that is, the relationship between the displayed and the allegedly hitherto never displayed, the effectively concealed) in contemporary art exhibitions, I will first situate my reflections within history.

Mary Anne Staniszewski is considered one of the principal precursors of a critical inquiry into exhibition display. Based on a discussion of exhibitions held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), her study *The Power of Display* reveals a series of paradigmatic exhibition designs and their transformations over time.<sup>2</sup> Staniszewski concludes that in the first decades of the period investigated (1929 to 1970), there was a remarkable cross-section of different exhibition displays, which subsequently became more or less indistinguishable, conventional forms of exhibition.

I will first consider the various kinds of exhibitions that came into existence, in order to thereafter discuss contemporary exhibitions on the basis of the insights gained. My reading of Staniszewski leads me to conclude that three normative kinds of exhibition developed over time: first, the propagandist, emotional exhibition; secondly, the ennobling, elevating art exhibition; and thirdly, or put briefly, the pedagogic, animating design exhibition. For the moment, I refer to the fourth category, futile as a mass media exhibition, as a “self-critical” exhibition.

Staniszewski attributes the normative development of exhibitions to the circumstance that the conventions of museum presentation only arose together with the development of MoMA. While institutional practices stabilised, curators, designers and architects began to develop their professional parameters. From 1953, a permanent exhibition was mounted at MoMA, and exhibition standards thus became determined for a longer period of time. This, however, was not the only factor that led to standardisation. Experimental designs, such as Herbert Bayer's Bauhaus exhibition, were heavily criticised for their inaccessible and disturbing visual language. Bayer's unusual instances of staging exhibits contravened viewing habits and the demand for easily digestible representation.



He subsequently revised his hypotheses on exhibition making, and mounted *Road to Victory* (1942), a show of American propaganda photographs, along the lines of the new criteria. Comparable to the later *The Family of Man*, it marked a new form of the propagandist exhibition (type 1). *The Family of Man* propagated a patriarchal concept of the nuclear family as a universal model. Using a simple language, the exhibition played on the emotional register and established a connection with visitors, who could see themselves as part of a large family (of the patriarchal male?). Thus, the exhibition displayed a global family, without, however, touching upon prevailing economic or political conditions. It suggested that human affinity arises from experiencing similar emotions, utterly irrespective of economic circumstances. *The Family of Man* travelled the world for years, with the implicit remit to convey democratic values, a Western conception of freedom, equality and fraternity as constitutional principles, and of the nuclear family as the cell of society. It situated the audience as a single, unified international audience, whose implicit structure was the nuclear family.

Exhibitions are meant to be readable and acceptable. MoMA's exhibition policy thus appealed increasingly to a certain kind of visitor, that is to say, in the manner of addressing and creating such a visitor. It was paradigmatic for "successful" MoMA exhibitions to create spaces that enhanced the sense of the viewer's autonomy, especially in art and design exhibitions, as Staniszewski argues (type 2). It is important to realise that among all imaginable kinds of possible presentation modes precisely those emerged as ritualised forms that made one forget their ideological character, thus preventing viewers from recognising their own voyeuristic perspective. Staniszewski observes that this mode of presentation enhances the



autonomy of the object and the viewer's notion of autonomy through their one-to-one confrontation and through situations providing a general overview.<sup>3</sup>

While design exhibitions (type 3) take up the ennobling gestures of art exhibitions, their modes of presentation relate to viewers' everyday environment. Good design was readily displayed in stylish living rooms or in spaces intimating sales situations, thereby subtly implying the pedagogy of consumption and gender roles. Besides these three well-known kinds of exhibition (which obviously also exist in blended or hybrid forms), early experimental exhibition concepts (type 4) and exhibition designs to this day present new formats and ideas, which are currently the subject of inquiry and reappraisal also in art installations. The reason for this might be that it is precisely those kinds of exhibition and designs that have not enjoyed mainstream success that today provide us with material to reconsider presentation modes and thus to discuss the conception of display not only in terms of surface but also as a visual proposal. Seen thus, exhibitions proving more difficult to read, and moreover dealing explicitly with viewer positions, represent a fourth category; they include, among others, Kiesler and Barr's experimental exhibition designs, where the viewer's position taken into account in a visually recognisable manner.



### Types of Exhibitions in Contemporary Art

Recently, artists have once again begun to present extremely emotional scenes, thus referring back to the first kind of exhibition. In 2008, such exhibitions included Christoph Schlingensiefel's at the Zürich Migros Museum<sup>4</sup> and Kai Althoff's at the Kunsthalle Zürich.<sup>5</sup> Both exhibitions consist of a multi-layered, multiply connoted conglomerate of artefacts, materials, and media. Especially Althoff works with references to images disseminated by the media. The press release for Althoff's exhibition determines a specific way of reading the exhibition: "Narrative elements shape his work and make a personal, direct and inescapable demand on the viewer's involvement. The artist's place of presentation for his works is never a white cube, but always an all-encompassing locality that Kai Althoff has transformed into an area for a 'private' experience of his works composed of everyday materials: carpeting, wall hangings, draperies, partitions, atmospheric colouring, smells and intimacies. It is as if we were suddenly granted access to the long locked chamber of an individual obsession."

Althoff's installation is situated as the turning inside out of one or several pathologised subjects. Nightmarish scenes, sexual "perversions," childlike assertions find visual expression in an exuberant overall design that envelops the visitor, namely the hell of private life. Thus, a central mechanism of contemporary culture is translated into art, specifically the displaying of intimate relations and a kind of intense exhibitionism, as well as the viewer's vampiric greed for the details and

images of celebrity life. The hidden and intimate part of a personality reveals itself to us, and the display seeks to make public a person's "backstage." The exhibition backstage, that is to say, the doors, offices, rear stairs, storage rooms, and political dependencies and subtexts are, however, denied all the more persistently, for everything must be subjected to the staging of an overwhelming machinery of impressions from which the visitor cannot escape. The exhibition thus becomes a total-environment experience space, and this "matrix" both encompasses and appropriates visitors. The press release for the Althoff exhibition makes it clear that these scenarios, and their visual and scenic opulence, are nevertheless concerned with political constellations: "Kai Althoff's works revolve around fantastical, mythological and dream-like scenarios on the forms that friendship and sex relations take, the integration into dubious social groups such as religions, 'Burschenschaften' (fraternities), political radicalism, the bourgeoisie or subcultures."

In a press conference, Schlingensiefel also made a political reference when he observed that he considered his art to be a reaction to his family's entanglement with the Nazi regime. But are we as viewers thus not drawn into political reflections situated only within the personal sphere? And does this not lead us into an impasse, which excludes political action? Which spheres of action are thus opened up?



### Visitor Appeal – Exposing the Desire of Viewers?

Such theatrical staging's seldom reach that level of appeal that plays on an emotional register, only to then to mock it. Christoph Büchel's London show *Simply Botiful* managed to do this.<sup>6</sup> The well-to-do audience had to ask for directions through a maze-like section of run-down streets in London's East End to find the utterly inconspicuous entrance to the exhibition. Once inside, visitors stepped into a house that had adopted the look of a hastily abandoned refugee camp or of a derelict hotel. This way through (their itinerary) ended on a balcony overlooking a huge warehouse filled with pieces of scrap, haphazardly stacked old refrigerators,

piled up containers, and street noises in the background. This setting was only loosely closed off from the shabby East End streets outside. Visitors paused for a moment; unsure whether this belonged to the production or to the surrounding flea market stalls selling precisely the same kind of discarded objects as those displayed. The hall, however, could be entered and “explored,” and the word spread among visitors that secret passageways and subterranean caves could be discovered. In groups of three, visitors clambered through claustrophobic burrows and excavations to discover a giant earthen mound with a protruding tusk. So far so good. Diedrich Diederichsen’s dictum, “participation is the new spectacle” comes to mind.<sup>7</sup> On stepping back out in the shabby East End streets, reality shifted all at once: visitors suddenly saw themselves as intruders in the nightmare of these parallel worlds, of fragmented everyday lives on the edge, through entering an impoverished part of London amid a heart rendering flea market. This induced a breakdown of categories: what was staged and what was real? Which of these worlds was real, and who was taking notice of these laughably styled visitors in these surroundings? The reality of the art audience was both rebuffed and made relative, through an outing into a theatrical world on the one hand, and a real yet alien life world on the other. The juxtaposition challenged the notion of reality as such.



### Rereading Art as a Frame of Reference

A particular display, however, can also serve to radically question the frame of reference – not only beyond but also within the art system: the Lentos Museum in Linz, for instance, mounted a spectacular inaugural exhibition when Stella Rollig took office as its new director. The British artist Darren Almond laid out a large-scale itinerary through a sequence of video projections featuring excerpts from the deserted interiors of Linz prison.<sup>8</sup> To enter the exhibition, visitors had to cross a threshold comprising an overdimensional digital clock with a precise indication of the local time. Thus, the prison space became mapped onto the exhibition space, in which the uncomfortable sensation arose that otherwise strictly separate social spheres could be related. Both sanctioned social behaviour, and the contingency of one upon the other abruptly imposed itself – both localities now seemed to be sites serving a (political) function. The passage of time, made evident by the digital indication of local time, involved museum visitors in the sense of the simultaneous elapsing of both their own real time – and lifetime – and that of the prison inmates. Not only this unsettled and “arrested” visitors, however, but also the knowledge

that one of the projections was not a canned video but a streaming video broadcast along with ambient noise straight from Linz prison. Which paradigms of viewing did this fluster? In terms of fundamental viewing habits and experience, the projections initially seemed to recall television formats and to superficially resemble “boring” documentary images.

The French film and media theorist Christian Metz claims that cinematographic projection amounts to a paradigmatic instance of cultural production in our society: “It has very often, and quite rightly, been said that the cinema is a technique of the imaginary. On the other hand, this technique is characteristic of a historical period (that of capitalism) and of a particular state of society, so-called industrial civilisation.”<sup>9</sup> For Metz, the foremost quality of the cinema is the construction of a fictional narrative, drawing on the primary imaginary of photography and phonography. The viewer, however, is involved into (intricately imbricated with) the fictional nature of this projection. For Metz, moreover, the cinematic imaginary is complexly intertwined with the imaginary in a Lacanian sense, as an intrapersonal psychic institution. For Lacan, while the imaginary and symbolic are opposed, they are nevertheless constantly embroiled; the imaginary arises as a secondary narcissism in the mirror stage. The mirror stage denotes the fundamental deception of the self in the constitution of the subject, and represents the durable mark of the mirror. The subject therefrom infers the deception of a self-contained person, lying outside itself as it were, which alienates human beings in their own reflection. In long term makes them, as Metz observes, “the double of [their] double,”<sup>10</sup> through their involvement in the process of projecting an imaginary personality onto a “screen.” What this process also involves is the subliminal adherence to the exclusive relation to the mother, (which affirms the mirror image), and thus to desire as a pure effect of lack. All this, Metz further observes, is “undoubtedly reactivated by the play of that *other* mirror, the cinema screen.”<sup>11</sup> Ordinary film scenes affirm in this manner the imaginary components existing in the viewer’s psychic topography. Cinema narratives are at the same time pervaded by social and cultural codes, thus establishing manifold relations between the “cinematographic apparatus” and the symbolic.

Visitors walking through the Linz exhibition were not confronted with a particularly cinema-specific narrative totality, driven by a storyline and characters. On the contrary, Darren Almond’s show presented a fragmented narrative, consisting mostly of long and one-dimensional shots, and an extremely slow sequence of cuts. Such a scheme in itself breaks customary viewing habits, since the film-specific imaginary unity is questioned from the outset. As visitors, we wander through the installation in search of the familiarly patterned cinematographic apparatus, since this holds in store multiple affirmations and pacifications. While we begin by looking for familiar characters to grant us a comfortable sense of recognition, instead we behold empty spaces, and only excerpt thereof, and hear unspecific sounds (is that perhaps a door banging?). Owing to the scopic drive, a voyeuristic perspective is part of all cultural and visual offerings. And yet the cinematic situation involves a particular viewing technique. For Metz, the cinema additionally involves the hidden spectator, who experiences the projection as a double distancing, since a film is produced at other sites, the shooting locations and the editing table, in addition to the already removed site of projection. Unlike the theatre, the cinema reaffirms the viewing subject’s voyeuristic stance. While cinema spectators assume the actors’ implicit agreement, they are also certain that the lack and distancing will be maintained, which in turns motivates and spurs on their desire. “For the voyeurism of the spectator,” Metz asserts, “there is no need for him to be seen (it is dark in the cinema, and the visible is limited entirely to the screen). One

doesn't need a knowing object, or rather, no object that wants to know, no object-subject that shares the activity of the partial instinct with the spectators. It is enough, and it must be like this – and this is just as much a specific path of gratification – that the actor should behave as though he were not seen (and therefore as though that he did not see his voyeur); it must have be that he goes about his ordinary activities and continues to exist, just as the story of the film intends him to continue his antics in a closed space, while he is particularly keen to ignore the glass rectangle fitted into one of the walls and that he lives in a kind of aquarium, which simply saves a bit more on its 'windows' than real aquariums (precisely this restraint has its share in the scopic game.)<sup>12</sup>



Darren Almond's installation questions all these mechanisms: the narrative is split, the actor's object-subject relation is absent, and the actors' consent is denied. Since one of the screens contains streaming video, the assurance provided by a canned image is also absent; on the contrary, live projection foregrounds the viewer's vampiric voyeurism. What unsettles viewers even more is that they have no knowledge which of the projections is the live stream. The awareness that one of the projections is broadcast live from the prison at once reveals the inappropriateness of the "secret" observation – the projection looks back at the viewers as it were. Viewers see themselves "from outside," moreover in a strange situation, namely as observers of other people's misery, whose lives are contained in a state institution, just as the art museum also functions as a state institution. The installation was powerful enough to induce viewers to reflect on their own positioning in a social construction. Not all visitors appreciated this, however, and the reactions of the local press and politics made perfectly clear that the message had indeed been understood.

The Linz exhibition offered a view of the backstage, locating the invisible part of an art exhibition not in personal history but in a social narrative, of which we are a part. It thus situated us not as vampires of other people's emotions, but thrust us into the scenario. Almond's exhibition made it clear that we are not only observers but also participants, thus reordering the relationship between display and backstage. As the very different exhibition projects *Simply Botiful* and *Live Sentence* show, exhibition displays are currently being actively employed to reverse the line of view. The backstage, poverty-stricken Londoners, and the Linz prison

inmates are all looking backwards in that the exhibition visitors recognise themselves as specks in the staged tableau. Bourgeois exhibition goers become visible as part of a social staging. As visitors and viewers they experience a phase of uncertainty, which can, however, afford them new insights, beyond a voyeuristic dispositive.

### Captions

- 1 Bayer, *Bauhaus 1919-1938*, Ausstellung im MoMA, a photography of Herbert Mayer looking through a hole, Type 4
- 2 Image from *The Power of Display*, pp. 212 and 213
- 3 Christoph Büchel *Simply Botiful*, 2006 Installation View, Hauser [ø] Wirth Coppermill, London Courtesy the Artist and Hauser [ø] Wirth Zürich London-Hotel corridor
- 4 Christoph Büchel *Simply Botiful*, 2006 Installation View Hauser [ø] Wirth Coppermill, London Courtesy the Hauser [ø] Wirth Zürich London
- 5 Darren Almond *Live Sentence* 14. Mai bis 27. September 2004, Lentos Museum Linz

### Notes

- 1 See Michael Barchet, Donat Koch-Haag, et. al. (eds.): *Ausstellen. Der Raum der Oberfläche* (Weimar 2003).
- 2 Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition – Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, (London-Cambridge 1998)
- 3 Mary Anne Staniszewski: *The Power of Display. A history of Exhibition – Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, London, Cambridge 1998, pp. 292/293
- 4 Christoph Schlingesief, *Querverstümmelung*, 3rd November – 3rd February 2008; migros museum Zürich
- 5 Kai Althoff, *Ich meine es auf jeden Fall schlecht mit Ihnen*, 10th November 2007 – 13th January 2008, Kunsthalle Zürich
- 6 Christoph Büchel, *Simply Botiful*, 11 October 2006 – 18 March 2007, Hauser [ø] Wirth Coppermill, London.
- 7 Diedrich Diederichsen, *Partizipation ist das neue Spektakel*, unpublished lecture delivered at the MAS Curating, Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), 2008.
- 8 Darren Almond, *Live Sentence*. 14th May to 27th September 2004, Lentos Museum, Linz.
- 9 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Translated by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), pp. 3-4.
- 10 Ibid. p.14
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 76/77 and 96.

**Dorothee Richter** is head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and co-founder, with Susanne Clausen, of the “Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Cultural Studies, Practice-Based Doctoral Programme” a cooperation of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and the Department of Fine Arts, University of Reading. From 1999 to the end of 2003, Richter was artistic director of the Künstlerhaus Bremen where she curated a discursive programme based on feminist issues, urban situations, power relation issues, institutional critique. In 2005 she initiated, in collaboration with Barnaby Drabble the Postgraduate Studies Programme in Curating. Symposia: “Re-Visions of the Display”, coop. Jennifer Johns, Sigrid Schade, Migros Museum in Zurich.

2010 *"Institution as Medium. Curating as Institutional Critique?"* coop. with Rein Wolfs, in 2013 the symposium *"Who is afraid of the public?"* at the ICA London, coop. with Elke Krasny, Silvia Simoncelli and the University of Reading. Her most recent publication is *"Fluxus. Kunst gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft"* and the new Internet platform [www.on-curating.org](http://www.on-curating.org) which presents current approaches to critical curatorial practice. In 2013 she published a film together with Ronald Kolb: *"Flux Us Now! Fluxus explored with a camera."*

# Interview with Rein Wolfs

## Garance Massart-Blum and Amber Hickey

### Garance Massart-Blum and Amber Hickey:

As director of an influential institution – the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel<sup>1</sup> – what do you think the role of the curator is, in the context of the art world today?

### Rein Wolf:

There are different possible roles. First of all, this depends on the difference between institutional curating and independent curating. An institutional curator is working with, and for, a specific community and, in my opinion, is trying to strengthen this community. An independent curator is delivering a specific input for a specific situation; he/she does not have to think in terms of the mid-term or long-term continuity, but is delivering specific content for a specific situation. There might be situations where it is, for instance, necessary to curate a show to be as global as possible, but there might also be situations where it is needed to curate on a more Western or even national or regional level. It might be necessary to confine yourself strictly to visual art, but it might also be necessary to broaden the scope of an exhibition in terms of cross-over and multiple-disciplinary dimensions. It is important that a curator knows his or her own strength and boundaries and the situation that he or she is part of. We do not always need the extremely 'creative' or the 'shamanistic' curator. A curator should also be a good craftsman, somebody who knows the job, and somebody who knows how to create the necessary conditions.

**GMB&AH:** As you've been working in an institutional context for many years, what are the challenges you find most interesting in this context?

**RW:** I like the possibility of profiling an institution over a certain period. I very much like to develop a certain 'style' and 'attitude' with an institution by programming in a more or less coherent way over a number of years. Furthermore, I like to influence questions relating to mediation and communication in a continuous way. These are all very impor-

tant and decisive instruments in implementing this 'style' and 'attitude'.

**GMB&AH:** You were the founding director of the Migros Museum in Zurich, back in 1996. What were the main issues at stake in starting an arts institution?

**RW:** We wanted to find a way of linking the patronage of Migros with the idea of running an institution. Essentially, I was looking for some kind of integral fostering of arts: commissioning, exhibiting, collecting and mediating (also in terms of opening for a market). For me it was important to work on a high international level, but also to translate this for a local context and using the polarity between a retailer and a museum, as an almost playful starting ground for communication.

**GMB&AH:** In 2008 you became director of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel. What were your goals upon arrival in Kassel, and how have they changed since then?

**RW:** I wanted to define the difference with the other player in our house, Documenta, by focusing very strongly on solo exhibitions with an intense and gestural type of approach. I wanted to show the quality of the building with its extreme tension between classical outside and almost industrial inside. I also wanted to renew the relations with the people from Kassel and with the students from the Kunsthochschule. I wanted to create a community in and around the Fridericianum again.

**GMB&AH:** You have worked in various European cities such as Zurich, Rotterdam and Kassel. What challenges did each of these institutions present?

**RW:** Not only are Zurich, Rotterdam and Kassel very different cities, but also the Migros Museum, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, and





Kunsthalle Fridericianum are very different institutions. Zurich was commercially very strong; Rotterdam was changing very rapidly from a very left-wing society into a populist society. Kassel is the absolute paradox between certain marginality and a huge global competence in terms of contemporary art. I liked to work in all three environments because I could find ways to get along with the very different kind of communities. It is a continuing challenge to try to find a relationship with the existing communities and turn them into something new, in and around the art institution.

**GMB&AH:** In your first text for the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, you wrote, “the Art at the Fridericianum was to be human and humane.” Can you elaborate on what it means for art to be human and humane?

**RW:** I felt like making a statement against a program, which would be oriented towards the formal aspects of art too much, against a program, which would reduce contemporary art to a pitch for formal and immanent questions. I felt like going for universal questions in terms of content. It might sound like a bit of a cliché, but I think it is working.

**GMB&AH:** Were you able to achieve this aim?

**RW:** I think we are on our way. I think we were able to turn the Kunsthalle Fridericianum into a very specific kind of institution in which the visitors feel and experience that art does want to mean something in our world, that art does care and that art is not only something in its own right.

**GMB&AH:** In the same text, you also wrote, “The future in the Kunsthalle Fridericianum was to not be completely free of risks, was to be as courageous as possible, and was to now and then be provocative as well.” Do courage and provocation come hand in hand?

**RW:** Courage does not always provoke, but provocation has to do with being courageous. I like an institution to present itself as a coming together of strong attitudes, strong gestures. I believe that it is necessary to use provocation every now and then, to make clear on a broader societal level that art still exists and still cares for society. I don't believe that art is capable of changing the world completely, but I do believe that we need art, which is tackling our own, very human questions about life and death, about engagement, commitment, about history and about context.



### Captions

1 Christoph Büchel, *Deutsche Grammatik*, 2008. Installation view Kunsthalle Fridericianum (detail)

2 Teresa Margolles, *Muro Ciudad Juarez*, 2010. Courtesy FRAC Nord Pas de Calais, Dunkerque. Installation view Kunsthalle Fridericianum. Photo: Nils Klinger

3 Rikrit Tiravanija, *A Retrospective (Tomorrow is Another Fine Day)*, 2004. Installation view Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (detail). Photo Nils Klinge

### Notes

1 Rein Wolfs is now director of the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, Germany.

**Rein Wolfs** was appointed in 2013 as director of the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn. Since January 2008 Rein Wolfs has been the Artistic Director of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum. From 2002 until 2007 he was the Director of Exhibitions of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In 2003 he curated the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Biennial. From 1996 until 2001 he was the first director of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich.

# Interview with Anton Vidokle

## Nkule Mabaso

**Nkule Mabaso:** What has had the most influence on your career as an artist?

**Anton Vidokle:** My art education started really early. What happened was that I dropped out of piano school when I was around 10 years old, and my parents got really worried about my future; so my mother decided to enrol me in a private drawing class, together with a daughter of a friend of hers. This was in Moscow in the late 70s and the lessons took place in a basement studio of a kind of a semi-official artist: A member of the artists' union, but one with modernistic tendencies, which were officially discouraged. The moment I entered this space, I knew that this is exactly where I wanted to be. I suspect it was more about a certain life style than art, because the studio was something so different than the mundane, late soviet reality: I felt like Alice falling into a rabbit hole and ending up in some fascinating, parallel realm.



Once I was in this realm I had a very clear idea about what needed to be done: All I needed to do to make a mark on art history was to make a painting of

a plaster bust of Julius Caesar wrapped in red drapery. I was very surprised that this has not been already done before, because I sincerely thought that this would be the world's greatest artwork. All I needed to do was to learn to draw and paint.

**NM:** How did this early experience shape your current projects and practise?

**AV:** Well, it was both ridiculously academic and simultaneously had to do with exposure to a certain counter-cultural lifestyle, within a rigid, ideologically organized society. Eventually I discarded the formal thing, but the interest in setting up alternative situations persists to this day.

**NM:** Is there a particular exhibition or project that you can single out as being the most successful of how you want your work to be understood?

**AV:** I think success is something best determined by others, posthumously. I suspect e-flux is probably something that had the most effect on others, then e-flux journal. But its really hard to say how all this will be perceived in the future. Maybe 50 years from now people will think that an entirely different work of mine – a video, or an experimental school, or time bank, or something I wrote – are much more significant. It's really hard to say.

**NM:** Your artistic practice lends itself to being read as curatorial, could you elaborate on why you insist on the difference between the artist and curator; couldn't you see both practices as a form of meaning production by a cultural producer, instead of a binary opposition?

**AV:** First of all, I am not sure meaning can be produced. It seems to me that meaning is a consequence of understanding, which something that arises in a subject. I think one can also make significant art without any intention to produce meaning or culture, and in fact I suspect that this is almost always the case with particularly good works of art. I think these terms are very pompous, imprecise and are used now as catch phrases that may be more

appropriate for funding applications than to try to describe what art does. It would be good to try to be more humble.

I do see curators as people who work significantly differently than most artists. It's a much more extravert activity that has more to do with aggregation than with the kind of work with the self that is implicit in much of artistic practice, even when it looks superficial on the surface. There is also a lot more distance between curators and their production than between artists and what they make. So I don't really feel it's helpful to conflate these things: it only confuses curators, and it seems to me that they are already a bit confused. Firstly because a lot of them actually have problems understanding art, and even beyond this, because there is a kind of an interesting vacuum at the centre of curatorial work. This is because the reasons for inclusion of this or that work in an exhibition, are primarily subjective, while so much effort goes into trying to present or account for this as something objective, systematic, almost scientific, which most of the time it is not.



**NM:** What projects are in the works for you over the next year, and what future opportunities do you envision for growth of e-flux? Have there been any new developments on the .art domain?

**AV:** Next year I will continue running an experimental art school in Beirut, together with the Lebanese theorist Jalal Toufic. At the same time I am

working on a feature-length film I shot in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union last summer. I am also working on a number of books: A book on the work of Mladen Stiljinovic, a book of recipes by artists, and a book on e-flux projects over the past 10 year, among other things.

There hasn't been much activity with the art domain so far. ICANN is dealing with this at glacial pace. Basically almost nothing happened in the process of evaluating domain applications in the past year and a half.

**NM:** What artist, group of artists, or art movement do you think exemplify the current or next exciting move in contemporary art?

**AV:** There seems to be renewed interest in art on the Internet, various online projects, games, etc. A lot of young artists are looking in that direction right now and I think it's a very interesting area.

**NM:** Your work takes on a curatorial quality and in that is not only highly collaborative but also takes the form of an archive, for example in the Martha Rosler Library (2005-), you collect information and you archive it however: the Martha Rosler Library project is attributed to you in collaboration with Martha Rosler herself, but on the website its cited as an e-flux project, how are we meant to understand the difference between an e-flux project and a project by Anton Vidokle?

**AV:** The library was a collaboration with Martha, but she also thinks of it as her own work: I saw that she listed this project in her bio as a solo exhibition. I very much like the fact that its so confusing. Its funny and very productive.



**NM** You characterize the *e-flux* as an artwork. Would you say that it is because all the other aspects of your individual practice are being subsumed under the corporate identity of *e-flux* that it now requires you to claim the company as being more than just a profit making endeavour, that must be recognised as a work of art? Is this in part a reaction to not being recognised as an individual artist, but co-opting everything under a ‘corporate umbrella’?

**AV:** Well that’s not really accurate I think. There are films and videos, which are also collaborations, but not necessarily *e-flux* projects, as well as other things, like *unitednationsplaza* or *nightschool*, or this current school in Beirut with Jalal. So I would not say that the totality of my activity is subsumed under the name *e-flux*. I think there is something in the way this question is posed that sets up a false dichotomy.

*e-flux* started as a kind of an art project, then over a span of 15 years it developed in a number of directions some of which are editorial, other curatorial, revenue generating, organizational, artistic, etc. It’s a very complex structure and I don’t pretend to fully understand what it actually is – this is also why it stays interesting for me. Furthermore, it continues developing and I can’t really envision any type of a final form or definition of what it will be in the future: we basically simply follow our evolving interests in many different activities. A scientist I know recently suggested that this sounds like a kind of an institute, maybe he is correct. Can institute be an artwork? Why not.

**NM:** You do not claim individual creative authorship to *e-flux* and it is a collaboratively curated platform so why claim it as an artwork at all? And how is this model of artwork positioned in relation to other practices?

**AV:** I don’t think *e-flux* is a “collaboratively curated platform.” I mean maybe some curators see it as that, but I think they are just projecting. Yes its probably significantly different from some artistic practices, while it is similar to some others, but I think that maybe this is something for people to figure out rather than just expect me to explain everything.

**NM:** With *e-flux* you have developed a robust ecosystem that grants your team and collaborators the opportunity to engage selectively. Looking at your ecosystem as an extension of curation within increas-

ing professionalisation of artistic practices in the overall cultural and creative industries, would you say a platform like *e-flux* heralds the working model for what could be future institutions by curators?

**AV:** I hope not. People should try to develop new models themselves rather than just replicating what already exists. The important thing is that the “ecosystem” you are referring to came about not as an extension of curation, but in ways similar to various artists initiatives of the past hundred years or more. To understand the difference, you need to look carefully at the history of artists’ self-organization, the kind of institutions they created, etc., and compare it with the kind of curatorial initiatives we’ve been seeing in the past 20 years or so. This would be a very productive exercise in the context of a curatorial studies program.



**NM:** Late last year and with reactions earlier on in this year, the American art journal *Triple Canopy* published the Article ‘*International Art English*’ (2011), an article about the kind of language found in art and especially exhibition releases which “has enforced a hermeticism of contemporary’. Considering their research was collated through thousands of exhibition announcements published since 1999 by *e-flux*, what was your reaction to this criticism?

**AV:** I find it very awkward when privileged Americans or Brits accuse foreigners of contaminating English language or not speaking it correctly, etc., because purity of language argument almost always has racist undertones. Hito Steyerl and Martha Rosler wrote in-depth responses to this article and I fully agree with the problems they point out.

**NM:** As *e-flux* continues to mutate beyond its core press-release distribution service, what do you think will be the lasting legacy and impact of *e-flux*?

**AV:** I wish I knew. Hopefully it will have something to do with preserving a certain kind of an independent voice.

**NM:** The art world is proliferated with lists, one example being ArtReviews Power 100 which is in its 11th year now, how seriously do you consider your position on this concerned with “ambition and the realization of that ambition”?

**AV:** Oh we don’t take this seriously at all. Its more of an inside art world joke. One should never take lists seriously.

### Captions

1 Anton Vidokle, 2012. Photo: Krzysztof Zielinski.

2 *Time/Bank*, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2011. Photo: Helena Schlichting. Courtesy Portikus

3 Martha Rosler *Library at United Nations Plaza*, Berlin, 2007

4 *Agency of Unrealized Projects*, 2012, installation view. Courtesy Berliner Künstler programm/DAAD and AUP, Photo: Krzysztof Zielinski.

**Anton Vidokle** is an artist, born in Moscow and living in New York and Berlin. His work has been exhibited internationally at Documenta 13, Venice Biennale, Lyon Biennial, Dakar Biennale, and at Tate Modern among others. As a founder of e-flux he has produced *Do it*, *Utopia Station* poster project, and organized *An Image Bank for Everyday Revolutionary Life*, and *Martha Rosler Library*. Other works include *e-flux* video rental and *Time/Bank*, co-organized with Julieta Aranda; and *Unitednationsplaza*—a twelve-month experimental school in Berlin initiated in response to the unrealized *Manifesta 6*. Vidokle is co-editor of *e-flux* journal along with Julieta Aranda and Brian Kuan Wood. Currently Vidokle is a Resident Professor at *Home Workspace Program*, an educational program organized by Ashkal Alwan in Beirut.

# Le monde est à nous

## Marco Scotini

One of the most intense moments in the 24-hour long *dérive* (journey) of the three inhabitants of the Paris banlieue in the masterpiece movie *La Haine* (Hate) by Mathieu Kassovitz is when Saïd, the Moroccan guy, comes out of the group and - filmed from behind, at night - intervenes on an advertising billboard. The image on the original poster represents Earth against a black background—the same one on which a Molotov bomb explodes in the opening sequence, a sort of leitmotiv in the whole film. By deleting and replacing a single letter with his spray paint on the billboard text, Saïd enacts a radical *détournement*, turning the sentence “*Le monde est à vous*” (The world is yours) into “*Le monde est à nous*” (The world is ours). *La Haine* is from 1995, ten years earlier than the riots that shook the Paris *banlieues* in 2005.

Now, some years later and in the midst of a global financial crisis, the French tycoon of art and finance launches again, in Venice, a populist challenge: this time the buzzword is “*Le monde vous appartient*” (The world belongs to you). It is hardly a coincidence that this takes place in Italy, but it’s a sign of a more global attitude. The title has been chosen to identify a blockbuster show held in Francois Pinault’s Canal Grande headquarter, Palazzo Grassi, devoted to artists from emerging countries: the *banlieues* of the globalized world. But in a wider sense this slogan also applies to the art audience, to the public of tourism and communication: a new workforce that - while it produces value, economies, and consensus - has to be controlled in order to, on the one hand, discourage it from enacting a social reallocation of commons, and on the other hand encourage a new, restricted and competitive channelling towards the business and wealth of the upper classes. What is “*Le monde vous appartient*” if not a “governance of the public” brought to its paradoxical consequence? In this paradox, the promise of redistribution - as stressed by the title - is turned into the form of ownership of a single collector: Francois Pinault. We are faced with the evidence of a typical situation of capitalist valorisation, in which one is allowed to participate in forms of expression and creation only as long as she or he accepts to be barred from their ownership.

Creative industries spur the ideological and political nature of the subjects to capitalise on their desires, over-determine their social roles and functions, and ultimately restore disciplinary *dispositifs* (devices) and hierarchies. “*Le monde vous appartient*” is an outright ideological mystification of the new subordination between the governing and the governed, so as to make the latter’s exploitation unrecognizable. The aim of current creative industries is to obtain the unquestionable identification of their employees, in a way that was unthinkable within the previous frame, in which the mere existence of a contract acknowledged the separateness of the two parties. But today, in cognitive capitalism, a statement such as “the business belongs to you” can be all but indifferent to current knowledge-workers.

Back in Venice, once again, on the occasion of the 2011 edition of the Venice Biennale, the Swiss curator Bice Curiger not only chose the title *ILLUMINATIONS* for an exhibition whose main sponsor is a multinational energy corporation such as ENEL, but awarded a Golden Lion to Christian Marclay’s work *The Clock*, in order to

comply with the marketing needs of the Swiss brand, Swatch. The previous year, one of the most recognized art dealers in New York became the first gallery owner to be appointed director of one of the major contemporary art museums in the US. After receiving a 30 million dollar gift from millionaire Ely Broad for its 30th anniversary, the Los Angeles MOCA, by now vulnerable to the irreversible financial crisis, defined its leadership model as an unprecedented union of marketing and art, contradicting the conventional appointment protocols. Meanwhile, the Guggenheim Museum in New York celebrated the retrospective and last exhibition of 51-year-old Italian artist, Maurizio Cattelan. About the show, the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, printed an article titled, "Maurizio Cattelan, Patron Saint of the Subversives"<sup>1</sup>. But it is important to ask: Subversive of what? Since we know very well - as the same newspaper article makes clear - that Maurizio Cattelan is supported by such collectors as Francois Pinault in France, Eli Broad in the USA, Dakis Joannou in Greece, who are the real patrons behind the financialization of the contemporary art system. So it seems that there are many things unsaid, yet very well known.

Where does this gap between those who own the art and its system, and those who are only allowed to look at it, originate from? And how is the art public reacting? Does it keep its role of passive spectator? It seems that the real art public has become the one captured in the glamorous photos published in the Art Forum online column, "Scene and Herd," according to which Claudia Schiffer visiting the VIP opening of the Frieze Art Fair or Dasha Zhukova's magazine, *Garage*, are not just a parody of the whole art system, but the core of it. The global redistribution of wealth has caused the coming to the fore of two other phenomena; underscoring both the growing discrepancy between rich and poor, and the fact that a segment of society is trying to make its wealth seem perfectly natural. In this situation, contemporary art becomes a sort of a privilege, one that gives to those who own it a feeling of acquired right, something that no one would dare to put into question. In February 2012, on the occasion of the opening of the Whitney Biennale the group Arts and Labor posted a claim on their website, asking to close the Whitney Biennial in 2014, on the occasion of its first 100 years of history. It is important to know that the main sponsor of this Biennale is the famous auction house Sotheby's, which had recently locked-out 50 unionized art handlers in New York, at the same moment when it sold a work by Clifford Still for more than 70 million dollars. Arts and Labor members wrote:

"We object to the biennial in its current form because it upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers. The biennial perpetuates the myth that art functions like other professional careers and that selection and participation in the exhibition, for which artists themselves are not compensated, will secure a sustainable vocation. This fallacy encourages many young artists to incur debt from which they will never be free and supports a culture industry and financial and cultural institutions that profit from their labors and financial servitude.

The Whitney Museum, with its system of wealthy trustees and ties to the real estate industry perpetuates a model in which culture enhances the city and benefits the 1% of our society while driving others into financial distress. This is embodied both in the biennial's sponsorship - represented most egregiously in its sponsorship by Sotheby's, which has locked out its unionized art handlers - and the museum's imminent move to the Meat Packing District, a neighborhood where artists once lived and worked, which is now a gentrified tourist destination that serves the interests of the real estate industry.



We therefore call upon the Whitney in its centennial year to end the biennial and to support the interests of art workers over the capital interests of its trustees and corporate sponsors."<sup>2</sup>

Right inside the frame of the 2012 edition of the Whitney Biennial, artist Andrea Fraser, one of the major voices of Institutional Critique, decided to use the invitation to participate, not to exhibit her work, but to occupy a space on the Biennial's website<sup>3</sup>. In the text that she produced on this occasion she writes:

"It is widely known, that a private equity, managers and other financial industry executives emerged as major collectors of contemporary art early in the last decade and now make up a large percentage of the top collectors worldwide. They also emerged as a major presence on museum boards. Many of these collectors and trustees from the financial world were directly involved in the subprime mortgage crisis - a few are now under federal investigation.

More broadly, it is clear that contemporary art world has been a direct beneficiary of the inequality of which the outsized rewards of the Wall Street are only the most visible example. A quick look at the GINI Index which tracks inequality worldwide reveals that the locations of the biggest art booms of the last decade have also seen the steepest rise in inequality: the United States, Britain, China and, most recently, India. Recent economic research has linked the steep increase in art prices over the past decades directly to this growing inequality."<sup>4 5</sup>

The text by Andrea Fraser is captured into a self-evident contradiction though, because it can be downloaded from the Whitney Biennial website, but with a copyright symbol of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The conclusion of Andrea Fraser is that it is necessary to abandon the rhetoric of the classical approach to art, because:

"It now seems that the primary site of the barriers between 'art' and 'life', between aesthetic and epistemic forms that constitute art's symbolic systems and the practical economic relations that constitute its social conditions, are not the physical spaces of art objects (as critics of a museum have often suggested), but discursive spaces of art history and criticism, artists' statements and curatorial texts. Formal, procedural and iconographic investigation and performative experimentation are elaborated as figures of radical social and even economic critique, while the social and economic conditions of the works themselves and of their production and their reception are completely ignored or recognized only in the most euphemized ways."<sup>6</sup>

So what do all of these events have in common? It is easy to understand how all of these symptoms share a single matrix, that is post-Fordist capitalism, in which financialization is just the other face – 'adapted and perverse' – of the contemporary transformation of labour and its value. Such labour now coincides with productive strategies in which the workforce's knowledge and cognitive competencies, and ultimately everyone's very life, assume the role formerly played by machines in the Fordist era. Here, in the socially diffused factories of cognitive capitalism/exploitation, it is less and less visible: it reaches so far beyond the boundaries of contractual working hours that it economically colonizes life itself, subjugating and controlling the space of 'free' productive action.

It's not enough to have the courage to publicly denounce this phenomenon, as many artists in the tradition of Institutional Critique, such as Andrea Fraser or

Peter Watkins, have already done. This is no longer a moral issue only. The current task of artistic and cultural professionals is to go beyond the legacy of Institutional Critique in favour of a socio-labourist point of view capable of equating art with any other form of labour in the social production machine. They need to go beyond the boundaries of capitalistic organization. There is an increasingly pressing need to unmask the hyper-visibility of organizations that are more hypothetical than real: Recognizing the true nature of curators as 'shepherds' of a new unilateral proselytism (neo-liberal propaganda), and revealing the hidden networks and procedures behind art world brands and corporate identities. But it is also more and more necessary to demand social rights to backup both the current transformation of the nature of cultural consumption and production, as well as the increasing imposition of quantitative and measuring criteria to knowledge as a whole. Defending cognitive labour, and demanding for a social recognition of human capital, are hence not only a duty of every subjectivity involved in such labour: they are an essential right. It is about becoming aware of the new time-space geographies of global knowledge production, as well as of the figures of the workers involved today in this process. And this reflection needs to start from the radical acknowledgment that these figures are still politically unarmed, and yet incapable of social recomposition. The invention of new forms of action and coalition seems to be crucial, especially now, at a time when the crisis is being followed by a reaffirmation of ever more oppressive neo-regimes and behaviours. Finally, this awareness needs to avoid the cynicism of the post-Fordist enterprise's innovative vision, as well as the wage-earner's nostalgic cynicism and the classical trinitarian formula of wage-profit-revenue. If the only possible option for art is to work on its own working conditions, it is just as necessary to consider the cultural industry as a new ground for political struggle.

As Walter Benjamin wrote, back in 1934, the difference between the author as a producer and the 'artist' (or the professional) will never lie in the mere production of works (and/or exhibitions) so much as their work will be based on those means of production themselves.<sup>7</sup> Feeding the production system with an innovative critical spirit is useless if this does not entail its transformation. "Art and culture professionals, in the belief they master an apparatus which actually masters them, defend an apparatus they can no longer control," because, as Bertolt Brecht maintains, such structure no longer is "a tool for producers, as the latter still believe, but something which is used against them."<sup>8</sup> If it is true that a sociological 'outside' can no longer be found in this new regime, that is no longer a given, then it must be built.

Back to Saïd, Hubert and Vinz in the nightly Paris *banlieue* - we shall be able to profane the semiotic *dispositifs* (devices) of our own exploitation and control. We shall write, once again, "*Le monde est à nous.*"

### Notes

- 1 Philippe Dagen, "Maurizio Cattelan, saint patron des subversifs," *Le Monde*, December 2, 2011.
- 2 <http://artsandlabor.org/end-the-whitney-biennial-2014/>
- 3 <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2012Biennial/AndreaFraser>
- 4 Andrea Fraser, There's No Place Like Home, [http://whitney.org/file\\_columns/0002/9847/andreafraser\\_theresnoplacelikehome\\_2012whitneybiennial.pdf](http://whitney.org/file_columns/0002/9847/andreafraser_theresnoplacelikehome_2012whitneybiennial.pdf)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1978. Rpt. Schocken, 1986, pp. 220-238.
- 8 Bertolt Brecht, cited in *ibid.*

**Marco Scotini** is an independent curator and art critic based in Milan. He is Director of the department of Visual Arts and Director of the MA of Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies at NABA in Milan. He is Editor-in-Chief of the magazine *No Order. Art in a Post-Fordist Society* (Archive Books, Berlin) and Director of the Gianni Colombo Archive (Milan). He is one of the founding members of Isola Art and Community Center in Milan. His writings can be found in periodicals such as *Moscow Art Magazine*, *Springer*, *Domus*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Brumaria*, *Chto Delat? / What is to be done?*, and *Alfabeta2*. Recent exhibitions include the ongoing project *Disobedience Archive* (Berlin, Mexico DF, Nottingham, Bucharest, Atlanta, Boston, Umea, Copenhagen, Turin 2005-2013), *A History of Irritated Material* (Raven Row, London 2010) co-curated with Lars Bang Larsen and Gianni Colombo (Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 2009), co-curated with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. He has curated solo shows and retrospective exhibitions of Santiago Sierra, Deimantas Narkevicius, Jaan Toomik, Ion Grigorescu, Regina José Galindo, Gianni Motti, Anibal Lopez, Said Atabekov, Vangelis Vlahos, Maria Papadimitriou, Armando Lulaj, Bert Theis and many others. His most recent exhibition was *Disobedience Archive (The Republic)* for the Castello di Rivoli (Turin, 2013) and *The Empty Pedestal*, an exhibition project dedicated to the art from Eastern Europe at Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna, 2014.

# Mirjam Varadinis

## interviewed by Garance Massart-Blum and Milena Brendle-John

**Garance Massart-Blum and Milena Brendle-John:** The exhibition, *Shifting Identities* (2008), had several venues outside the museum walls. One of these venues was the Zurich airport. The site-specificity of the airport seems perfect for the subject matter of "*Shifting Identities*." However the airport is quite a distance to Zurich. Why did you choose the airport? Were there existing exhibitions in airport environments that inspired you?

**Mirjam Varadinis:** *The exhibition Shifting Identities—(Swiss) Art Now* (2002) dealt with changing values and shifting identities in the course of globalization. Altogether 67 artists took part and confronted changes in the concept of identity on multiple levels: from concerns for the economic consequences of globalization, to aspects of migration and on-going cultural and religious conflicts, to investigations into the dissolution of traditional ideologies and models of belonging.

Since the exhibition was reflecting upon themes like globalization, borders and migration, it was important for me that it would expand also beyond the borders of the institution to make a shift of identity also evident on the institutional level.

I decided to occupy places of decisive significance to the identity of our contemporary society, such as Paradeplatz and Bahnhofstrasse, twin venues of Zurich's global financial power. Zurich Airport became a satellite of the exhibition, as a symbol of transit, and a site of concentrated meditation on the issues of migration and identity. It was important for me to have artistic interventions before and after passport control – that is, both within Switzerland, and beyond it.

I didn't want to make a classical exhibition in the airport - as there are many. On the contrary: I wanted to use the airport as a context and interfere there with artistic projects that were questioning mechanisms of control and surveillance and that

would create a moment of pause and reflection in the regular flow of the passengers. It was very important for me to break with strategies of using art to promote airports that are very common nowadays. Therefore the interventions were also mainly temporary.



**GMB&MBJ:** The exhibition took place in 3 locations, of which one was a private institution, one within the public space in the city of Zurich and the Zurich airport. The airport is a privately owned space but perceived by many as being public. From your curatorial perspective, does exhibition making in the airport fall under the public or private sphere notion?

**MV:** Airports are some of the most commercialized environments. Every little inch or cm is sold for a lot of money. So in this sense an airport is like an extreme example for what is a general tendency of the public space. Also in cities, public space is being less and less real public space, it's owned or occupied by private companies. If you remember for example how FIFA really occupied the whole city for the European football championship in 2008 - that was really crazy. Certain zones that were actually public suddenly became inaccessible for people, unless they would wear certain T-Shirts or only drink a certain kind of beer etc. So one of the important questions nowadays is: Who owns the public space? And in this sense it wasn't a big differ-

ence to curate something in the airport or in the city centre.

**GMB&MBJ:** *Shifting Identities* is a political discussion about breaking borders and deals with themes such as migration, inclusion/exclusion and the nomadic system. How did you go about in your choice of artists?

**MV:** The idea for the show came up because I realised that artists I had worked with in the last few years were dealing a lot with this issue. So it was not that I imposed a theme on the art, on the contrary, it was growing out of the art; as it was apparent in the work of many artists.

It was important to me that the exhibition would cover different approaches to the theme: From works that were touching upon political issues like migration, cultural and religious conflicts, the limits of tolerance and the idea of a multicultural society, to those works who affronted the issue on a more personal level - exemplified by the sculptures of fragmented bodies- as well as by the figure of the so often appearing doppelgänger. And the third large chapter or group was dealing with the dissolution of traditional ideologies, and models of belonging, and the parallel appearance of alternative social forms and utopias. These groups or chapters refer back to the exhibition in the museum. For the interventions in the city centre or the airport, I invited artists that were working with themes present in these specific sites: be it economic issues (for Paradeplatz) or issues of border, security and control for the airport.

**GMB&MBJ:** How did you approach the airport officials and how did you convince them to exhibit art - especially art with a critical political content?

**MV:** When the idea came up to use the airport as a site I contacted the airport and luckily got in touch with somebody who was very interested in art in general. He was the head of communication then. We met and he very much liked the idea to show art in another context, outside the museum walls. I told him very honestly about my plans and I mentioned also the idea that I intended to do things that would be critical towards certain mechanisms in the airport, and that they would also question the idea of "Swissness" which is being promoted so heartily in the Zurich airport; so to break with the image of cows, mountains and Heidi. He was very open and

willing to support the project. I was really lucky because without this man the whole project wouldn't have happened. He was also the key to enter many other doors in the airport.

Regarding the critical content of some of the works, I had some very surprising encounters: For example for the performance of Gianni Motti, *Pre-Emptive Act* (2008), we needed to work with security guards working at the airport, willing to collaborate and to do some Yoga sessions in full uniform several times a day. First I thought the head of the security company would not like this kind of critical approach towards the whole issue of "security". But again, Gianni Motti and I encountered a man who saw in this performance a possibility to react on prejudices people had in their minds when talking about security. So he supported us to find some of his employees to do the performance.

**GMB&MBJ:** During the process of the exhibition making did you encounter obstacles concerning political issues?

**MV:** No, surprisingly I didn't. I actually expected to do so, but the person from the airport I was working with was completely open. His deep conviction was that art shouldn't be censored. He said that I should have complete carte blanche, and that he wouldn't interfere in the programming. He just wanted to be informed about the planned interventions, also to be prepared if some reactions would come up due to the critical potential of some works. This guy was really amazing! He opened the doors for the project and me, to the very highest level of airport administration. Unfortunately he decided to leave Zurich airport for another job in the middle of the preparations for the show. This was really hard, because I somehow had to start again with his successor. And this person was not an art person at all. But luckily all the permissions were already organized before, and the new person in charge couldn't really skip or change something substantially. In the meantime I had also built up good connections with many other people working at the airport - on all different levels. And this helped as well as they supported me very strongly too. For example to find the security guards for Gianni Motti's *Pre-Emptive Act*, or just to bring sandwiches while inflating Aleksandra Mir's *Plane Landing* (2008) early in the morning. So in the end all of the planned works were actually also shown - which I somehow still think is a miracle, if you think of the critical potential the works had.



**GMB&MBJ:** Which security, administrative and political problems did you encounter while installing Aleksandra Mir's inflatable plane or with Nedko Solakov's work *A Pass-Control Story*?

**MV:** The two projects were both very complicated to organise – but in different ways. For Aleksandra Mir's *Plane Landing* (2008), the most difficult part was to erase all the completely irrational fears that were linked to that project. The idea to inflate a balloon in the shape of a landing airplane on the tarmac of a real airport created all kinds of dramatic imaginations in people's mind. The worst case scenario was that the balloon would explode and cause a chain reaction of explosions that would destroy the whole airport in the end. Another recurrent fear was that the inflated plane could explode, and that the remaining parts of the fabric would then stick to a cockpit of a real plane and blocks the view of the pilots and lead to an accident. So all these stories came up, although none of them were possible to happen – as Aleksandra Mir's plane is filled with Helium and this is an inert gas – it can't explode. The whole balloon is technically very sophisticated, and has been designed by the same people who had constructed Bertrand Piccard's balloon that travelled around the globe. It was a factory in England who was the most specialised place to create these kinds of balloons. So, to convince the authorities of the airport in Zurich, we arranged a meeting with the engineer of the balloon and the head of the tarmac security. The engineer explained the main technical facts and mentioned by the way that he had also worked on Piccard's balloon – of course this was a very convincing argument. After that meeting all the fears were gone and the head of security became completely enthusiastic about the project. He gave us several options where to inflate the work and we chose two locations: first, one day just outside the airport on a green field, below the real planes landing. And then on another day the plane was inflated

on the tarmac, in between real airplanes. For Aleksandra this was really a dream come true, as she had been dreaming of showing the work in a real airport for years, but never thought she would get the permit. That's the good thing of Switzerland; It's a very democratic country and if you find the right person who supports the idea it's possible to do things – without necessarily following all the hierarchical and administrative steps. That's really great! I think that's also why a project like, *Shifting Identities* was possible in Switzerland. In other countries where people follow more strictly the imposed hierarchy it would have been much more difficult.

With Nedko Solakov's work, there were other obstacles to overcome. He had the idea to use the booth of border police for his intervention – so really on the border between inside and outside Switzerland. Because once you pass the passport control you leave the country you are in, and you enter a kind of in-between zone. I liked the idea very much as it was touching very directly on the issue of borders, but I doubted that we would ever get the permission to do this. Of course I was ready to try and thus arranged a meeting with the artist and the head of airport police. We showed the head of police earlier works and interventions by Nedko Solakov and explained the concept of the show. Surprisingly he really liked the idea and in the end we got the permission to use the booth for Nedko's doodles – both Nedko and I couldn't believe it.

The doodles needed to be done when no passengers would need to pass the control. So one night we went to the airport, protected by a security guard, and Nedko drew some small doodles on every booth where people would either leave or enter Switzerland. They were funny little drawings, or sentences that should make the moment of control less severe. Nedko Solakov comes from Bulgaria, and had experienced many controls at boarders where he had felt not at ease, therefore the idea of the doodles. To be sure that the cleaning teams would not erase the drawings by mistake, we left also in every booth a note saying that this was an artistic intervention, and not vandalism. Next day we went back to check if everything was still ok and took some pictures. It all looked great and we were both super happy that it had worked out fine.

But one day later, on the day of the opening, I suddenly got a phone call from the Kantonspolizei. It was the head of press and communication, and he told me that the doodles would be removed because they would mock the police, and leave a bad impres-

sion on people visiting the country. Of course I tried to stop this cleaning action because it meant that they would destroy the artwork. But a few hours later everything was gone. Nedko Solakov was of course furious, especially because it was shortly before the opening of the exhibition, and journalists were about to visit the airport to see all the artistic interventions. So we had to come up with a new plan, and decided last minute that we will make a new work out of this failed intervention and call it *A Pass-Controlled Story* (2008), to reflect on the double control on one hand of the regular pass check, but also on the control of the authority over art. So the work consisted- in the end- of the documentation of the doodles at the airport, and a handwritten wall text in the museum explaining the behavior of the authoritative. It was a very nice work in the end which fits very well into Nedko Solakov's artistic practice, as he is often starting from mistakes or things not working properly.

But the most scary thing about the whole story was the reason behind the censorship of the police. It was all linked to the European championship of soccer taking place in Switzerland. Of course this wasn't declared officially, but many other art projects had been cancelled then as well, because they didn't fit the image that the city should have in that particular moment. An artistic intervention at Message Salon (an off space in Zurich) at Langstrasse in Kreis 4, was also censored and even followed by a juridical process. The disturbing thing about all that was that behind this image campaign stood FIFA – a private organisation, that at this moment occupied the whole city and decided what would happen in the public space and who was allowed to enter it.

**GMB&MBJ:** Which audience did you want to address with the installation *Inflatable plane*?

**MV:** Aleksandra Mir's work is intended to travel around the world and to be inflated in front of different landmarks or monuments to open up a new perspective and reading of the place. It deals with issues of tourism, traveling but also identities of specific places.

As I mentioned earlier we showed *Plane Landing* twice, and with the two locations also two different kinds of audiences were addressed. The first time we showed the plane on a green field just below the real planes landing. This is a place open to everybody, with no restrictions of access. It's also a

spot where airplane lovers, and spotters, gather together to look at the planes landing in Zurich. They know the schedule by heart and can tell what airline and which type of plane would land next. It's a very particular community, and we thought this would be an interesting context to show *Plane Landing*. Since the green field was next to a street, also cars would stop spontaneously to come and see what was going on. It was a mix of people and also some - although very few - art people were around. They had been informed through the website and our blog. Most people were just people from the neighborhood, which was really nice.

The second time we inflated the plane it was on the tarmac. So it was inside the airport, after passport control, and people needed to register before coming as special security measures needed to be taken. So we had again a mix of people, from curators, collectors, photographers who had registered themselves before, joined by the airport team. The nice thing was that all the people who were somehow involved in the project from the airport came and really liked it. It was an experience that left some deep traces in people's minds there, and also in their way of looking at the world. In January 2011, so 3 years later, I received an email from one of the persons who had helped organizing the project. She wrote me that she would still think of that project every day, and that it had completely changed her perspective - not only of the airport, but also on the world in general. And this is a great, great compliment!

We started to inflate the plane very early in the morning, because of the wind situation. Once daylight arrived the airport started to become alive again, also the passengers from the large central hall in the airport could see the *Plane Landing*. So it was one of the works that could be seen only by travelers that would either change their flight here in Zurich, or were about to fly off somewhere. This was one of the ideas behind the decision to show works before and after passport control: To have some works that are only accessible for people who are traveling or using the airport of Zurich as a transit site, reflecting again upon the fact that never in the history of mankind, as many people as now, have been traveling, and also in the art world people are constantly flying to all different places in the world. I heard that artists are traveling as much as managers nowadays, and curators too. I thought it's interesting to have some works only accessible for the travelers – as a kind of extra audience to the regular museum visitors.

**GMB&MBJ:** During the exhibition you opened a blog. Did you get any reactions from visitors/passengers to the art exhibits and performances?

**MV:** The idea to install a blog was important to me, as I wanted to open up the exhibition to people from outside Zurich. I wanted to use the Internet to make the show accessible from around the world – reflecting again on the idea of globalization. So all the works in the exhibition were filmed and put online so that people could “visit” the exhibition, even when physically being far away. Some works were even only present on the Internet, like Cao Fei’s *RMB City*.

We also used the Internet and blog to announce all the events happening during the whole exhibition – which was working well. But initially I thought that it would be great if people from all different places in the world could comment and exchange on the exhibition, and issues related to it via the blog we installed. But somehow this didn’t work out. Swiss people are not very active bloggers – at least back at the time of the exhibition. The idea that a Chinese blogger would react on the website, and exchange ideas or discuss specific things with other bloggers from Switzerland who had seen the show, unfortunately wasn’t working. Maybe if we had somebody really taking care of the blog by activating a discussion, it could have worked – but we didn’t have the time to do so as there were so many other things going on that needed to be organized. So the blog didn’t really work. Nevertheless I had some echoes from far away through the website. I received emails from Australia, Canada and other far remote countries referring back to the exhibition that people had seen on the Internet. Somebody from Canada even wrote her thesis on the exhibition, although she had visited the exhibition, only via the Internet.

**GMB&MBJ:** Now almost three years later, how would you reflect on this experience curating in an airport? Would you do it again? And if so how differently?

**MV:** The exhibition was a very important experience for me. I tried out several things with that show and learned a lot – on all different levels. I still think it was great and very important to extend the show to the airport when touching upon issues like shifting identities. As I mentioned earlier, the

airport is one of the central places for contemporary society and the globalized world we live in.

Looking back at the interventions in the airport, the main problem was the one of visibility. Airports are so extremely charged with visual information, that it’s not easy to compete with – especially if you don’t want to come up with monumental sculptural works. Since some of the works were only ephemeral appearances, and on view only on certain days, it must have been frustrating for some of the visitors who specially went to the airport and maybe couldn’t see the works.

But, the central idea for all the works was to interfere in a subtle way and to question the mechanisms of the airport. As I mentioned earlier, the art works should create a certain moment of break and reflection, in the usual flow of the passengers. This worked very well. Even if some of the works were maybe not visible at first sight, they left traces in a second moment - like Aleksandra Mir’s *Plane Landing*. And that’s what I intended to do.

Another good example for this is the newspaper, *Journal of Disorientation*, by Christian Vetter. It was distributed in the waiting areas at the gates, where people wait before boarding the plane. In these areas you find bookshelves where people can get magazines for free. So I wanted to place there an artwork that looked like a newspaper, but wasn’t. I liked the idea that people would take the newspaper with them to the plane, the art work, and through it the exhibition was traveling to other places in the world. I heard from some friends, who didn’t know about Christian Vetter’s work, that they did as I described: They were waiting and bored, so they looked at the magazines to find something to read, took the newspaper, started to look at it and were confused a bit first – then they realized that it was an art work and took a whole bunch with them to distribute to their friends in the country where they were flying to.

So to sum all this up: I’m very happy with the overall experience of that show, and I would definitely use the airport again when doing an exhibition dealing with issues that are related, or present in the airport. But it needs to have this background. Otherwise I wouldn’t be interested in just doing an exhibition in the airport that wouldn’t have a conceptual link with the site itself.



### Captions

1 Aleksandra Mir, *Plane Landing*, 6th July  
10-18hrs Installed in: Berlet Visitor Parking, Zurich  
International Airport.

2 Nedko Solakov, *A pass controlled Story*, 2008,  
4-5 June (erased June 5th) Installed in: Pass control  
Check-in 1, Zurich International Airport

**Mirjam Varadinis** is an art historian and a curator at Kunsthau Zürich since September 2002. There she oversees contemporary art and has organized various exhibitions, among others the group show *Shifting Identities – (Swiss) Art Now* (2008), and solo exhibitions with Haris Epaminonda, Rosa Barba, Roman Ondák, Adrian Paci, Mircea Cantor, Runa Islam, Tino Sehgal, Erik van Lieshout, Aleksandra Mir, Nedko Solakov, Urs Fischer, David Shrigley a.o.. She has published numerous catalogues and artist books.

Mirjam Varadinis was also curator of the special project *O Perormance – The Fragile Beauty of Crisis* for the 5th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. In 2012 she co-curated *TRACK*, a large-scale, city-wide international group exhibition in Ghent. In 2006 Mirjam Varadinis was the curator of “*Printemps de Septembre*”, an annual festival of contemporary arts in Toulouse (France). Additionally Mirjam Varadinis is part of various international juries, a.o. the Skoda Art Prize in New Delhi 2013

**Garance Massart-Blum** is one of the two founding members of massart brendle art curating and advising. Garance was born into the art world as the daughter of a renowned auctioneer and impressionist and modern art expert. She has gathered experiences in large museums and galleries for contemporary and classical modern art. Throughout her life, she has fostered excellent relations with the most important galleries, foundations, and art collectors worldwide, while developing collections for clients. Before establishing massart brendle art curating and advising, she worked for nearly a decade as an art consultant and independent curator in Europe and in the Middle East. Garance has a double Bachelor’s Degree of arts in: History of Art and International Relations from Tufts University, Medford MA, USA where she received a distinction for her dissertation. She also holds a Postgraduate Master of Advanced Studies Degree (MAS) in Art Curating from Zurich University of the Arts (ZHDK).

**Milena Brendle-John** is one of the two founding members of massart brendle art curating & advising. Over the past years she has been in charge of a major private Swiss art collection and has worked as an independent art consultant and curator in Europe. Her career began in an international gallery with a focus on Classical Modern Art. Later she worked for several years as an art evaluator/consultant for a major art insurance company. There she advised clients in the private, institutional, and commercial sector regarding questions of: insurance coverage, evaluation, inventory, collection support, conservation, and transport. Milena has a Master’s Degree in History of Art and Psychology from Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich, Germany, and a Postgraduate Master of Advanced Studies Degree (MAS) in Art Curating from Zurich University of the Arts (ZHDK).

# Co-productive Exhibition-Making and Three Principal Categories of Organisation: the Background, the Middle-ground and the Foreground

## Paul O'Neill

### The Group Exhibition-form as a Continually Evolving Structure

Since the 1960s, the group exhibition has opened up a range of curatorial approaches to demystify the role of mediation, and as such, has also enabled divergent artistic practices to be exhibited together under a single rubric.<sup>1</sup> The term 'demystification' became a recurring trope within art, and curatorial discourse for how the changing conditions of exhibition production were made manifest in the final exhibition-form. Curators, artists and critics were acknowledging the influential mediating component within an exhibition's formation, production and dissemination.<sup>2</sup> Demystification was a necessary process in revealing and evaluating the more hidden curatorial components of an exhibition, making evident that the actions of curators had an impact on which artworks were exhibited and how they were produced, mediated and distributed for the viewer.

The group exhibition has become the primary site for curatorial experimentation and, as such, represents a new discursive space around artistic practice. The following text describes how a cumulative, and expanding exhibition-form, can constitute an investigation into how the curatorial role is made manifest, through collaborative and collective exhibition-making structures applied through close involvement with artists during all stages of the exhibition production.

In order to focus on the spatial context of the exhibitions, any implementation of thematic displays of related works is resisted, whereby selected artworks would have been forced to collectively adhere to a single theme. The artists were not there to illustrate any overarching subject, nor were the works arranged so as to demonstrate a coherent inter-textual relationship between one another. Instead, the gallery is a setting for the staging of spatial relations between works, and between viewers, with curating put forward as the activity that structures such experiences for the viewer and for the work.

### 'Coalesce': Three Principle Categories of Organisation

'Coalesce' is an evolving curatorial project established as a means of reflecting upon how the re-configuration of curatorial praxis in recent years can be made apparent within the final exhibition-form beyond the curatorial as master-planning scenario. Since 2003, it has marked a shift in my own curatorial practice towards a

more collective curatorial methodology, achieved by working directly with artists on every aspect of the exhibitions' production. 'Coalesce' is an accumulative exhibition that gathers its form across a series of distinct exhibition-moments. To date, the project has taken the form of five distinct exhibitions at London Print Studio Gallery, UK (2003); Galeria Palma XII, Villa Franca, Spain (2004); The Model and Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland (2005) and Redux, London, UK (2005).<sup>3</sup> 'Coalesce: Happenstance' at SMART Project Space, (2009) was the most recent instalment in an evolutionary project.<sup>4</sup>

The project began with "'Coalesce: Mingle Mangle' physically 'becoming' the gallery space, with each work accessing all of the available space and melting with other works. Jaime Gili, with his explosive silk-screens, covered part of the wall space, developing his research on repetition and the installation of painting. Intertwined with this Kathrin Böhm's work 'Millions and Millions', an ongoing project of printed posters, continued a strategy of penetration and mutation of the space. This ensemble of works, like an expanded, complex wallpaper, adapted and occupied the walls and ceiling of the gallery, while the work of Eduardo Padilha, in the shape of sleeping bags made with beautifully printed or embroidered fabrics found on discarded mattresses around London, was open for the viewers to sit, lie, relax and enjoy the created environment of the exhibition as a whole."

In each instalment, each exhibition-moment has subsequently grown with the most recent incarnation involving seventy artists. Each 'Coalesce' has consistently taken the exhibition-form of a mutating environment of overlapping artworks whilst advancing it across a series of related exhibition platforms. Each new exhibition also gathers new artists and curators each time. Some invitees are called upon to activate the exhibition site by considering it as a possible pedagogical-tool within an on-going collaborative process. This also results in a staging of discursive events that respond critically to the concept, structure and form of the exhibition. The multiple outcomes of 'Coalesce,' across locations and times, form part of a continuum, with the project being considered as an unending exhibition with artists being added for each new outing. Each time the title has been retained whereas a new subtitle is introduced in order to distinguish each outing from the other. For each exhibition, artists work collectively in a semi-autonomous way on an installation, with their work(s) literally merging into each other, resulting in an overall group exhibition form rather than an accumulation of discernible, autonomous, individual artworks. The overall exhibition grows over time, at different speeds and with varying modes of display and foregrounds mediating strategies by emphasising exhibition design, structure and layout, all of which are intended to be as dominant as the individual works of art.

Throughout the series of exhibitions, there is an intentional balance inherent to each curatorial methodology articulated – through the exhibition form and the space of production for art made specifically for the exhibition – in which each participant within the exhibition becomes part of a dialogical structure, mediated from the outset by the curator. These series of exhibitions have no grand narrative, no single or unified way of reading the exhibition as a work, or of clearly separating out the curatorial and artistic work therein. In each project, artists responded to a curatorial proposition, strategy or imposed structure which resulted in artworks that would not have emerged without such orchestration. At the same time, each curatorial structure was responsive to each artist's practice, which always remained the starting point for the propositions.<sup>5</sup>

To focus on the spatial context of the exhibition-form, the gallery is a setting for the staging of spatial relations between works, and between viewers, with curating as the activity that structures such experiences for the viewer and for the work. 'Coalesce' provides three potential planes of interaction, with the exhibition considered to be an organised built environment which:

- 1) surrounds the viewer who moves through it
- 2) the viewer interacts with only partly
- 3) contains the viewer in its space of display

By applying Susan Stewart's understanding of landscape (and the gigantic) as a 'container' of objects and mobile viewing subjects<sup>6</sup> to our experience of the exhibition, one can deduce a rejection of the notion of the autonomous objects of art as the primary medium through which the ritualised and ritualising experience of art takes place. This perception is then replaced by a desire for an understanding of these rituals at the level of the space of exhibition(s), where 'our most fundamental relation to the gigantic is articulated in our relation to landscape, our immediate and lived relation to nature as it "surrounds" us.'<sup>7</sup> As a question of scale, landscape is that which encloses us visually and spatially, 'expressed most often through an abstract projection of the body' upon the world.<sup>8</sup> The metaphor of the exhibition-as-landscape also acknowledges the spatial world as a display space.

For Carol Duncan, the experience of the exhibition space is organised for the viewer through the 'arrangement of objects, its lighting and architectural details [that] provide both the stage set and the script' for gallery visitors to perform their experience of culture in a prescribed manner, with the exhibition site operating as the framework of this experience that has been passed down over time and understood by its users as a space of performed reception.<sup>9</sup> All exhibitions structure ritualised practices for audiences within 'those sites in which politically organised and socially institutionalised power most avidly seeks to realise its desire to appear as beautiful, natural, and legitimate.'<sup>10</sup> Such an ameliorated reception of art and objects of cultural value disguises the ideological forces behind such 'cultural experience[s] that claims for its [exhibited] truths the status of objective knowledge.'<sup>11</sup> 'Coalesce' considers in practice, how the ritual site of exhibition is structured for the viewer at each stage of the curator's involvement in the organisation of an exhibition's contents, display and spatial arrangement.

'Coalesce' applies the metaphor of the exhibition as a landscape as a means of establishing a formal structuring device, responsive to three planes of interaction available to the viewer. Structured around three spatial categories – the background, the middle-ground and the foreground – these terms of classification were used as three prescribed terms of reference for thinking about how exhibitions are constructed. These spatial co-ordinates are then utilised as organisational strategies, through which the exhibition can consider the proximity of the viewer to each of the artworks as well as to the exhibition display, with respect to exhibition production as a form of co-authorship. Each artist or artwork is then selected to respond to one of the three organisational parameters.

1. The background is considered to be the architecture of the exhibition space, the primary layer of the exhibition under discussion. The white walls of each gallery are at least partly painted, covered, or pasted over and converted from a blank space into a dominant aesthetic experience.



2. The middle-ground becomes an area with which audiences are intended to interact. It could be described as the manner in which the exhibition design and the layout of the exhibition space is organised – prior to the placement of artists and their works – and the way in which such elements function within the overall organisational framework of a group exhibition. Display structures, gallery furniture, seating, and overall exhibition design are considered prior to the exhibition installation, which the middle-ground utilises as a means of conditioning and mobilising the exhibition viewer in prescribed ways.

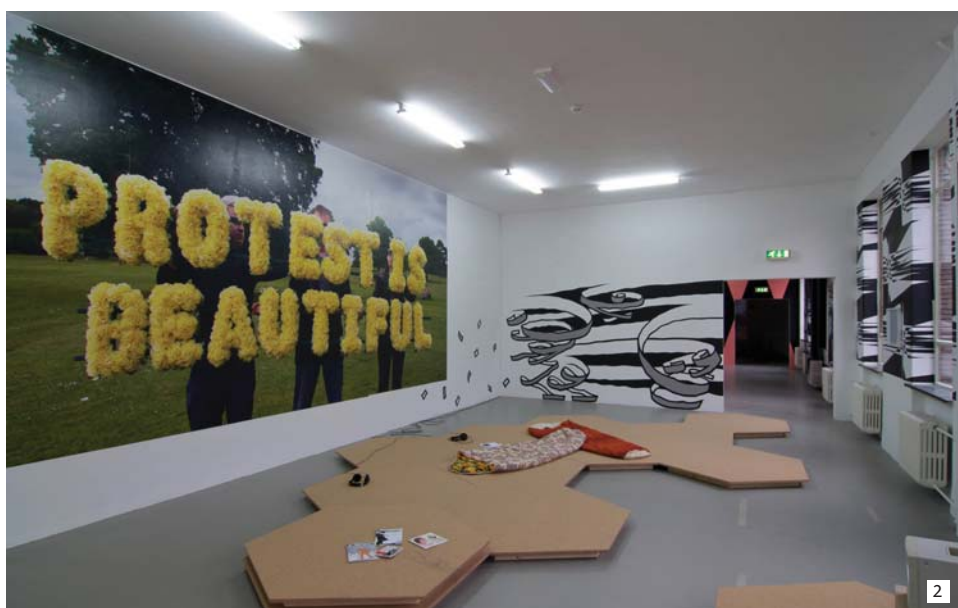
3. The foreground represents a space of containment, in which the viewer is requested to take part in a subject-to-object relationship with those artefacts, images and works of art that could be categorised as autonomous objects for study in their own right. Such works arrive in their complete form and are left intact after the event of the exhibition. These works can not be adapted or changed by curatorial intervention, each of which requiring certain inherent conditions of display.

The three organisational categories described above are not only employed to facilitate the selection of works for each exhibition but also intermingle into the final exhibition form. The intention of 'Coalesce' is to accommodate a cross-fertilisation of different artistic and curatorial positions within a single unifying curatorial project over an extended period.

While all five exhibition-forms were responsive to the unique gallery contexts for which they were commissioned, there were intentional connections, structural attributes and curatorial overlaps between them. As important as it was to maintain a consistent curatorial methodology across the five exhibition platforms, it was also crucial to extend the potentiality of this vocabulary while testing its limitations. Each of the five components of the exhibition project were used as a research tool in exploring the potential of the group exhibition as a space of collective co-production, in which curatorial and artistic work could operate in unison, with equal parts to play in the resulting exhibition. As research tools with practical outcomes, these projects were used to question the different ways in which the language of an exhibition is arrived at through a co-production process, working closely with artists within an open, yet predetermined, curatorial structure. Each exhibition attempted something unique, while adhering to an overarching curato-

rial framework set out beforehand. Each 'Coalesce' can be read as a separate and discrete outcome, or as part of a more cohesive investigation into the group exhibition as a space of experimentation that informs how exhibition-viewing is organised and structured.

The *foreground, middle-ground, and background* are set out as three principal categories of organisation for the viewer and for the works. The production of an exhibition is structured for the viewer around three separate, but interdependent, stages in which the group exhibition as a medium could be divided into three categories of organisation regardless of what was contained therein. My intention was not to inaugurate or consolidate the curating of group exhibitions as a discipline; instead it was to define a curatorial strategy from the outset, across a period of time, as a means of demonstrating how such a methodology could be usefully applied to the production of group exhibitions. This strategy demonstrated how curating can bring about a certain order to the exhibition material through the configuration of the architectural setting, the exhibition design, form, style and artistic content. By focusing on an overarching organisational structure it was my intention to show how each individual curatorial statement, made manifest in these exhibitions, was the result of divergent, complex, and dialectical relations between the curator and the artist as co-producers. By making these inter-relations apparent from the outset, 'the difference between collaborative and authorial structures'<sup>12</sup> converge during a process of co-production, leading to the construction of co-operative and co-authored group exhibition-formations.



### Captions

- 1 *Coalesce: Happenstance Smart Project Space* (Amsterdam) January/Feb. 2009
- 2 *Coalesce: Happenstance Smart Project Space* (Amsterdam) January/Feb. 2009

### Notes

1 The thematic group exhibition emerged as a formative model for defining ways of engaging with such disparate interests as exoticism, feminism, identity, multiculturalism, otherness, and queerness. As I argued in a previous paper, the ubiquity of the biennial model since the 1990s – and the consistency of such

exhibitions in being centred on an overarching trans-cultural, cross-national and inclusive thematic structure – has helped to define the modes of art's engagement with a variety of socio-political and global cultural topics. Through their diversity of outcomes, group exhibitions have also offered an alternative to more traditional Western museum exhibition paradigms, such as the monographic or genre exhibition, or the permanent collection.

2 Much of the discussion around curators from the '60's, such as Seth Siegelau's curatorial projects, benefit from considerable hindsight for, even during the 1960s, the term 'curator' was never used by Siegelau in relation to what he was doing at the time. It is only in the context of other people's subsequent texts about his practice of the 1960s and as part of curatorial debates in the 1980s and 1990s, that Siegelau has been called a curator. In my interview with him, he stated: I probably wouldn't have used the word 'curator' at the time, although I have recently done so in retrospect because there is a whole body of curatorial practice that has quantitatively evolved since then...While I can look back now and say that curating is probably what I was doing, it is not a term that I would have used when I was active for one simple reason: the dominant idea of the curator at the time was basically someone who worked for a museum. Since then, the definition of the term curator has changed. This is just another facet which reflects how the art world has changed since the 1960s/early 1970s; the art world has become much bigger, richer, more omnipresent; there are many more museums, galleries, artists, art bars, art schools, art lovers, etc. It has also become more central and more attached to the dominant values of capitalist society...It is clear that, in the last thirty years or so, art has become a more acceptable profession, even a type of business, a more acceptable thing to do, both as a practitioner, as well as an art collector. One can think of becoming an artist as a possible 'career choice' now, which just didn't exist back then. One just didn't have this opportunity. The question of the curator, in this context, is also related to another modern phenomenon today: the need for freelance curatorial energy to invigorate museums that no longer have this kind of energy.

Seth Siegelau, Interview with the author. For a comprehensive examination of Siegelau's practice between 1965 and 1972, see Alberro, Alexander. *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2003).

3 Documentation from all four manifestations to date are viewable on the website [www.coalescent.org.uk](http://www.coalescent.org.uk) which shows documentation of each exhibition and represents the development of the project since 2003.

4 The final exhibition at SMART involved the following artists: Dave Beech [✉] Mark Hutchinson, David Blandy, Het Blauwe Huis with M2M radio, Kathrin Böhm, Nina Canell, Oriana Fox, Freee, General Idea, Jaime Gili, Clare Goodwin, Lothar Götz, Tod Hanson, Toby Huddleston, Tellervo Kalleinen [✉] Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, Cyril Lepeti, Ronan McCrea, Jonathan Mosley [✉] Sophie Warren with Can Altay, Jem Noble, Isabel Nolan, Harold Offeh, Mark Orange, Eduardo Padilha, Garrett Phelan, Sarah Pierce, Manuel Saiz, Savage, temporarycontemporary, Richard Venlet, Robin Watkins, Lawrence Weiner, Matt White, Mick Wilson. Coalesce film programme involved: Ursula Biemann [✉] Angela Sanders, Jakup Ferri, Esra Ersen, Adla Isanovic, Helmut [✉] Johanna Kandl, Tadej Pogacar and the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E Museum of Contemporary Art, Marko Raat selected by B + B. Special opening event: musical performance by Irish music research group TradFutures@W2.0, organized by Mick Wilson. TradFutures@W2.0 consist of Nollaig Ó Fiongháile, Brian Ó hUiginn, Patrick Daly and Bill Wright.

5 See O'Neill, Paul interviewed by Fletcher, Annie. 'Introduction', *Curating Subjects*, Ed. Paul O'Neill (Amsterdam and London, De Appel and Open Editions, 2007), p. 18.

6 Stewart, Susan. 'The Gigantic.' *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993), p. 71.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. p. 71.

9 Duncan, Carol. *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), pp. 12-13.

10 Duncan, Carol. *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), p. 6.

11 Ibid. p. 8.

12 In his keynote address for the Banff 2000 International Curatorial Summit at the Banff Centre, 24 August, 2000, Bruce Ferguson highlighted three recurring issues in contemporary curating, the third of which was 'the difference between collaborative and authorial structures.' See Townsend, Melanie. 'The Troubles With Curating', *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, Ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff, Canada, Banff Centre Press, 2003), p. xv.

**Paul O'Neill** is an artist, curator, educator and writer based in Bristol and New York. He is the new Director of the Graduate Program at Bard Centre for Curatorial Studies, New York. Paul has co-curated more than fifty exhibition projects across the world including: *The Curatorial Timeshare*, Enclave, London (since 2012); *Last Day*, Cartel Gallery, London (2012); *Our Day Will Come, Part of Iteration: Again*, Hobart, Tasmania (2011); *We are Grammar*, Pratt Institute, Manhattan Gallery, New York (2011); *Coalesce: happenstance*, SMART, Amsterdam (2009); *Making Do*, The Lab, Dublin (2007); *General Idea: Selected Retrospective*, Project, Dublin (2006); *Tonight*, Studio Voltaire, London, (2004); *Are We There Yet? Glassbox*, Paris (2000) and *Passports*, Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art, Warsaw (1998). He has held lecturing positions on the MFA Curating, Goldsmiths College, London and Visual Culture at Middlesex University amongst others. He currently international research fellow with the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin, and international tutor on the de Appel Curatorial Programme.

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# Paul O'Neill

## interviewed by Lindsey Sharman

**Lindsey Sharman:** We would like to talk about *New Institutionalism*, a term borrowed from economics and sociology, that became popular during the last decade to classify a certain type of curatorial practice, institutional reform and critical debate concerned with challenging the art institutions. It was a response to artistic practices that have questioned the institutional, programming and staffing structures; its distribution mechanism and marketing strategies and even the need of the institutions existence to be a mediator for the visual arts. With that in mind, what kind of curatorial projects' have you seen lately, that you consider interesting examples of this idea of *New Institutionalism*?

**Paul O'Neill:** Well, the problem with the *New Institutionalism* as a paradigm, if you are setting up that there is a paradigm shift in the last, say, 10, 15 years, with people like Maria Lind, Charles Esche, Katrin David, in relatively small institutions, is that they all have left. So as a paradigm it only existed for a very, very short period of time in relation to the specific individual curators who were responsible for coming up with that term, but also rethinking what the institution could look like. So, for Charles Esche, in Rooseum in Malmo, thinking about the institution as a laboratory, as much as an educational institution, as much as an exhibiting space. Maria Lind - at the Kunstverein in Munich - was thinking about the kind of everyday nature of the institution, so it became continually activated with the presence of different and divergent publics, and making the archive more overtly public, in the entrance of the museum for example. And then, someone like Katrin David, that only lasted a year in Witte de With, where she was curating primarily a contemporary Arab artists' program.

I think the notion of the institutional critique, from the position of the curator, is a by product of that internalization of the modus operandi of the institutional critique; self-reflectivity, self-critique, and becoming part of the way in which the institution in itself promotes itself externally. And I see that drive towards *New Institutionalism*, from the curatorial perspective, as being because of that, or contin-

gent on it certainly. In terms of thinking about recent curatorial projects that might be rethinking what that could be, I would say a number of artists' projects such as Jeanne van Heeswijk's, the *Blue House* in Ijburg<sup>1</sup>, which is a kind of a micro-institution where by she took over a villa in Ijburg, as part of a city extension of Amsterdam, and turned it into what she called *The Housing Association of the Mind*. And *The Housing Association of the Mind* was made up of a number of members of which I think they are maybe 60, or plus, who ultimately contributed to what the *Blue House* could become, but without any expectations as to what that would be. So the idea of, "Let's spend four years together and see what happens", is an interesting institutional model, also as an interesting counter institutional model. Within the context of perhaps the most restrictive conditions under which an artist is invited to work; a regeneration project, in which new communities are arriving to live in new parts of Amsterdam. As part of that, an institution is set up, which ultimately exists alongside the development of that new community as they arrive is a really interesting kind a shift of thinking. There is a kind of parallel development between *Blue House*, and also a parallel development with Ijburg as a community, which ends of forming itself over a four-year period. Artists, critics, sociologists, anthropologists, filmmakers, documentary and political theorists contribute to what that might become. All of the people who moved through it, or come through it, or realize projects under its rubric, ultimately disperse and translate those activities beyond the location of Ijburg and also beyond the temporality of the four years. So, I think as a counter institutional model, it is really perhaps one of the most interesting *New Institutional*, or thinking/rethinking what a *New Institution* could look like.

*New Institutionalism* is a very short-lived moment, but also its short lived nature does have a correspondence with historical precedents even very recent historical precedents, which is the practice of Ute Meta Bauer and Nikolaus Schaffhausen. Perhaps this is why it is disintegrated as a subject area, or why it's become less interesting to many writers, and critics, and curators; because it was built around a

number of individuals and those individuals moved on to larger institutions. Even art fairs are institutions which have become very smart, so therefore in order to encapsulate some of the self-reflexivity, art fairs commission new projects, hold talks, commission critical publications, do something site responsive or location responsive. I think that permeates all larger institutions now as well.



**LS:** Where do you see this failing or succeeding?

**PO:** They have succeeded I would say in generating many publications, generating a certain critical discourse around what constitutes the institution; what are its parameters, boundaries and power structures? In terms of its affects in terms of transformative change, I would say is particularly limited. Maybe that's also in a sense a bi-product of the 1990's as well, because many curators who are currently working in large institutions now, emerged during that moment in the 90s. Since their emergence, the independent, critical thinking, creative curators have also moved into larger institutions. There are more restrictive conditions under which you would work in the Van Abbemuseum, you are working with a collection, you have to rethink the collection, it is a very particular type of public, it is also an historical institution, and its very much about cultural heritage. It's a Dutch institution, which ultimately comes with that historical paradigm of thinking about the legacies, thinking about nationalism, thinking about cultural identity. But in many ways the advocates of *New Institutionalism* ultimately moved away from those institutions where it was possible to have some sort of transformative change, into larger institutions where they could have less of an impact.

**LS:** What are your thoughts on artists run centers that have eventually become institutions themselves? As we have now been talking about how

these curators have now moved into large institutions. How do you react to this flow toward the institution or toward bureaucracies?

**PO:** I think any self-organization is also a self-institution, so I think that the possibility of being outside. Somehow you know the Dadaists really didn't exist outside, they thought they were existing outside and that they ultimately could break down the walls of the institution, the museum without walls for example. But they never really existed outside, because, in order to exist and to acquire, gather and facilitate political agency, they have to rely on certain figures within the art world that would be managed within the more dominant cultural institution of the time – critics and writers. Anyway that doesn't really answer your question, and to go back to what I was saying any self organization is in itself, a self institution but it is about how it institutes itself, and how it constitutes itself at a particular moment without becoming completely bogged down in the administrative mechanisms that enable it to sustain itself and continue etc.

There was a moment, again fairly recently I'd say within the last 10 years, where the notion of the self organization as a kind of counter organization, or a counter institution, was quite popular, and you know even looking at many publications such as the *SUPERFLEX* publication on self organization<sup>2</sup> or Maria Lind's book *Taking the Matter Into Common Hands*<sup>3</sup>. There is a certain ubiquity of certain collectives that are represented by a particular discursive shift, such as Raqs Media Collective or 16 Beaver (Studio) in New York or the Copenhagen Free University. Some self organizations I believe employ the idea of self organization as an alternative conduit to a particular art market, and you could call it the "curatorial art market" for example, or the "biennial art market", or the "discursive art market." Meaning that they are facilitated and accommodated within an art discourse, if not within art markets, where exchange value is based on capital or how a piece of art may be sold. That is one of the most paradigmatic shifts for me in the 1990; is that to acquire value within the art world, is not necessarily to acquire monetary value, but to acquire cultural representation, representational economies. I think that self organizations were certainly apart of that. I mean how many cultural discourses were created in the 1990's? It was endless, and this is certainly along side the proliferation of biennials, and the proliferation of smaller biennials, the proliferation of smaller institutions, the emergence of larger institutions; I mean *Tate Modern* only

opened in 2000 which is only 10 years ago, yet it seems like its been there forever. Other institutions, which have had difficulty in accommodating that shift, that discursive shift, the shift from practice to discourse. Many institutions have been left behind, such as MOMA, the Guggenheim; they look lazy, boring, kind of like dead institutions.

**LS:** In reference to your exhibition, *Coalesce* (2005), London. How did the decision of creating 3 years: foreground, underground and background have an impact on or changed the demographics of the public who visited the exhibition? Did this make it more accessible?



**PO:** I think that they are all very different projects, they all came with their own concrete publics and their own abstract publics. There were certain people who attended the gallery program at *Redux*, (London) or attended the gallery program at *Smart Project Space* (in Amsterdam), or the gallery program at Sligo (*The Model Project Space* in Sligo, Ireland) so that's kind of a concrete public. Then there is an abstract public, which is the idea of publicity that you're trying to produce, enable or sustain, within the exhibition form; and maybe speculating on what that could look like. So for me there are these two tracks, there would be a fast track and slow track, it's important to think about, "is it possible to have a populist exhibition?" But a populist exhibition that's not actually curtailed by its own popularity. For example, *Coalesce* at *Smart* was a really popular show, it was full of kids all the time, and had all that kind of vibrancy to it. But, at the same time there were very serious moments within it, in terms of discussions we had, performances that we had, and also some work was very serious. It plays off that, because of its dichotomies, in a sense. I would be very resistant to the desire to really think through the generation of new audiences, and to evaluate who they might be. I've been very resistant to the "social

engineering drive" within the cultural sector, particularly within the private and public section in the UK.

### Captions

**1** Paul O'Neill lecturing for the Postgraduate Program in Curating, Institute Cultural Studies in the Arts, Zurich Hochschule der Kunste at White Space: Office for Curating, Zurich, Switzerland, November 5, 2010.

**2** Paul O'Neil describing *Coalesce* to students of the Postgraduate Program in Curating during his November 2010 talk at White Space: Office for Curating

### Notes

**1** *The Blue House*: A project by Jeanne van Heeswijk [Ø] Hervé Paraponaris. <http://www.blauwehuis.org/blauwehuisv2/>

**2** Bradley, W. Hannula, M. Superflex. *Self-Organization: Counter-Economic Strategies*. Sternberg Press. 2006.

**3** ed. Billing, J. Lind, M. Nilsson, L. *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*. Black Dog Publishing. 2007.

**Paul O'Neill** is an artist, curator, educator and writer based in Bristol and New York. He is the new Director of the Graduate Program at Bard Centre for Curatorial Studies, New York. Paul has co-curated more than fifty exhibition projects across the world including: *The Curatorial Timeshare*, *Enclave*, London (since 2012); *Last Day*, *Cartel Gallery*, London (2012); *Our Day Will Come, Part of Iteration: Again*, *Hobart, Tasmania* (2011); *We are Grammar*, *Pratt Institute, Manhattan Gallery*, New York (2011); *Coalesce: happenstance*, *SMART*, Amsterdam (2009); *Making Do*, *The Lab*, Dublin (2007); *General Idea: Selected Retrospective, Project*, Dublin (2006); *Tonight*, *Studio Voltaire*, London, (2004); *Are We There Yet? Glassbox*, Paris (2000) and *Passports*, *Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art*, Warsaw (1998). He has held lecturing positions on the MFA Curating, Goldsmiths College, London and Visual Culture at Middlesex University amongst others. He currently international research fellow with the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin, and international tutor on the de Appel Curatorial Programme. His practice is interested in addressing the systems of interpretation that are involved in making sense of the world around us and the compulsions that lead to interpretation and meaning itself. His work explores the experience, of traversing territory, of moving across things rather than patrolling

boundaries. This exploration may take a number of media, approaches and forms, from curatorial projects and art-making, to discursive events, writing or lecture presentations. Paul explores notions of exhibition-making as a form of collaborative artistic practice with multiple actors and agencies at work together.

**Marina Lopes Coelho** was born in São Paulo. She lives, studies and works in Zurich. Trained as a graphic designer at the Faculdade de Belas Artes de São Paulo, she has worked several years in design studios and publishers. Focusing later in photography, Marina has developed her career showing her work in some exhibitions in Brazil and has published the book *Atrevida* with DBA-Dorea Books and Art. Her interest in art goes beyond her photographic production, having staged in Venice Peggy Guggenheim Collection and worked as a producer of exhibitions at Galeria Leme, in São Paulo. She has graduated with a Master of Advanced Studies in Curating. Currently she is director of the Kunsthalle Sao Paolo.

**Lindsey V. Sharman** was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (CA). Sharman has studied art history and curating in Canada, England, Austria and Switzerland (ZHdK, [www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org)). Most recently, Sharman was appointed to a research position with the University of Calgary as curator of art for The Founders Gallery at The Military Museums where she explores contemporary issues surrounding art and conflict.

**Corinne Isabelle Rinaldis** grew up in Italy and the Italian part of Switzerland. She has studied sculpture, acting and interior design and is now living in Zürich, she graduated in Master of Advanced Studies in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK and is currently working at Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

# The Global White Cube

## Elena Filipovic

*The history still to be made will take into consideration the place (the architecture) in which a work comes to rest (develops) as an integral part of the work in question and all the consequences such a link implies. It is not a question of ornamenting (disfiguring or embellishing) the place (the architecture) in which the work is installed, but of indicating as precisely as possible the way the work belongs in the place and vice versa, as soon as the latter is shown. – Daniel Buren, "Function of Architecture"*

### First, the Museum

New York, 1929. A sparse, singular row of artworks lined the palest of walls in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, a display strategy that Alfred Barr Jr. imagined after a visit to the Folkwang Museum in Essen two years earlier.<sup>1</sup> The walls became somewhat lighter upon arriving on American shores and even whiter over the years, moving from beige-colored monk's cloth to stark white paint by the time the MoMA moved into its new permanent home on West 53rd Street.<sup>2</sup> But the essence of the museum's aesthetic project was there from the start. With it, other details followed: Windows were banished so that the semblance of an outside world—daily life, the passage of time, in short, *context*—disappeared; overhead lights were recessed and emitted a uniform, any-given-moment-in-the-middle-of-the-day glow; noise and clutter were suppressed; a general sobriety reigned. A bit like its cinematic black-box pendant, the museum's galleries unequivocally aimed to extract the viewer from "the world." For this and other reasons, the minimal frame of white was thought to be "neutral" and "pure," an ideal support for the presentation of an art unencumbered by architectural, decorative, or other distractions. The underlying fiction of this whitewashed space is not only that ideology is held at bay, but also that the autonomous works of art inside convey their meaning in uniquely aesthetic terms.<sup>3</sup> The form for this fiction quickly became a standard, a universal signifier of modernity, and eventually was designated the "white cube."<sup>4</sup>

No *tabula rasa*, the white cube is an indelibly inscribed container. Far more than a physical, tectonic space (monochromatic walls delimiting a certain geometrical shape), the art world's white cube circumscribes an attitude toward art, a mode of presentation, and an aura that confers a halo of inevitability, of fate, on whatever is displayed inside it. The legibility of the artwork as work is contingent upon the structuring of that legibility by its surroundings—Marcel Duchamp taught us that. From the MoMA's whitewash forward, the white cube became a cipher for institutional officiousness, fortifying the ultimate tautology: An artwork belongs there because it is there. (The fact that the artwork is bracketed off from the world also undermines the impression that it might be related to, or the same as, the stuff of everyday life.) In that space of encounter, the ideal viewer (white, middle-class) is also constructed—well behaved, solemn, disembodied, and able to focus on the singularity of the work of art with an uninterrupted gaze.<sup>5</sup> Particular to the white cube is that it operates under the pretense that its seeming invisibility allows the artwork best to speak; it seems blank, innocent, unspecific, insignificant. Ultimately, what makes a white cube a white cube is that, in our experience of it, ideology and form meet, and all without our noticing it.<sup>6</sup> Years after Barr invoked the white cube as the hallmark of the MoMA's exhibition spaces, Hitler approved of its use for the

interior of the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 1937, the Nazis' first architectural project after coming to power. That monumental new building with its interior of vast well-lit gallery spaces, all white and windowless, opened with the exhibition *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition). The white container and sober display served to make the painted idyllic landscapes and bronze Aryan bodies on view seem natural and innocuous, despite the belligerent motives that underlay their selection and presentation. Driving home the point, the demonstration was doubly staged; *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* was the "acceptable," positive pendant to the somber, densely cluttered, and apparently disorganized show *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) that opened in a nearby archeological institute the following day.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to such a contrast, the artworks in the former seemed all the more righteous and those in the latter all the more abhorrent. There is no denying the coincidence: When the aestheticization of politics reached terrifying proportions, the white cube was called in. New York and Munich, 1929 and 1937. The larger architectural frames for these white cubes are not comparable, and their respective regimes, it goes without saying, were worlds apart. Conflating them is not my purpose. Rather, I wish to highlight the usefulness, efficacy, and versatility of an exhibition format that has become a standard. If the white cube managed to be both the ideal display format for the MoMA's and the Third Reich's respective visions of modern art, despite their extremely different ideological and aesthetic positions, it is because the display conceit embodied qualities that were meaningful to both, including neutrality, order, rationalism, progress, extraction from a larger context, and, not least of all, universality and (Western) modernity.<sup>8</sup> Their examples are relevant today not only because they laid the foundations for how the white cube came to signify over time, but also because the subtle and not so subtle political ambitions of their exhibitions remind us of the degree to which pristine architectonics, immaculate backdrops, general sparseness, and the strict organization of artworks on the walls *matter*. The subjugation of artistic production to a frame at once "universal," neutral, ordered, rational, and ultimately problematic for what that so-called universality implies and hides, points to a predicament with which artists and curators have grappled ever since: Exhibitions, by their forms, entangle the viewer in a space at once physical and intellectual, but also ideological.

### Now, Biennials and Other Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions

Fast forward, virtually everywhere, sometime here and now. Like modernity, the white cube is a tremendously successful Western export. Its putative neutrality makes it a ubiquitous architectural surround (an "architectural inevitability," Rem Koolhaas would say) for artworks in museums, but also for galleries and art fairs that transform commercial environs into what look more and more like mini museal spaces. Given that galleries and art fairs have a financial interest in making goods for sale appear as if they have already been legitimized by museum-like spaces, not to mention their frequent desire to keep the poetry or violence of everyday life out of the realm of becalmed shopping, this is hardly surprising. It makes less sense, however, within the context of the recurrent, large-scale international exhibitions that have proliferated around the world. Sometimes referred to in shorthand as "mega exhibitions" or "biennials" (even those that do not, strictly speaking, occur biannually), these various large-scale international exhibitions distinguish themselves from typical group shows staged in museums, art centers, or *Kunsthallen* in large part through their lineage to the Venice Biennial, the first perennial international salon of contemporary art inaugurated in 1895. This parentage implies a temporality and spectacularity that is their own: These punctual manifestations recurring every two or three or even every five years, as is the case with Documenta, lack real visibility beyond the duration of their exhibitions; they have an explicit ambition both to represent their region, host city, or nation and to dis-

play a decidedly international panorama of contemporary production, an ambition that influences the scale and general circumstance attached to the event; and they often are dispersed over multiple public spaces and institutional sites. If these relatively basic features unite large-scale international exhibitions and biennials, an ocean of differences can separate their tenants and histories. A number of them find their origins in contexts of profound political and cultural transition, for example, the globally disparate Documenta and German post-war reconstruction, the Gwangju Biennial and the democratization of South Korea, the short-lived Johannesburg Biennial and the end of apartheid, or Manifesta, European Biennial of Contemporary Art and the fall of the Berlin Wall. These and others have used the particularity of their historic, cultural, and geographic situation to define an institutional focus, a striking example being the Havana Biennial's ongoing engagement to offer a platform for artists from the "Third World." Whatever their individual histories, however, the ambition to be a counter model to the museum and its traditional exhibitions is a significant defining feature of such events.

Most biennials and large-scale international exhibitions in fact were founded in reaction to nonexistent or weak local art institutions unwilling or unable to support the most experimental contemporary cultural production. These perennial exhibitions, therefore, perceive themselves as temporally punctual infrastructures that remain forever contemporary and unburdened by collecting and preserving what the vagaries of time render simply modern. The aim to be the paradigmatic alternative to the museum cuts both ways, however, with positive and negative distinctions. The proliferation of biennials in the 1990s rendered them new privileged sites for cultural tourism and introduced a category of art, the bombastic proportions and hollow premises of which earned it the name "biennial art," a situation that knotted the increasingly spectacular events to market interests. That mega exhibitions can be compromised is a frequent lament, but in their best moments, they offer a counterproposal to the regular programming of the museum as well as occasions for artists to trespass institutional walls and defy the neat perimeter to which the traditional institution often strictly adheres when it organizes exhibitions (although museums, it must be said, are increasingly challenging their own once-staid protocols). Moreover, mega exhibitions have also been platforms for challenging and heterogeneous artistic forms from around the world, often addressing some of the most politically charged issues of the period. Just as importantly, they have been known to elicit some of the most intense questioning of artistic practices through the expanded idea of where such an event's borders lie. Interdisciplinary discussions, conferences, and lectures that take place on or near the premises of exhibitions or, as was the case with Documenta 11, in several locations around the world are increasingly integral to these events. This striking expansion goes in tandem with curatorial discourses that increasingly distinguish the biennial or mega exhibition as larger than the mere presentation of artworks; they are understood as vehicles for the production of knowledge and intellectual debate. As Carlos Basualdo suggests, "the configuration of interests at the core of institutions like biennials clearly differs from that which gave rise to the institutional circuit traditionally linked to modernity (museums, art criticism, and galleries)."<sup>9</sup> In many ways, he is correct. If, however, "museums are, first and foremost, Western institutions," then biennials, as Basualdo reasons, avoid being so almost by definition because "the global expansion of large-scale exhibitions performs an insistent de-centering of both the canon and artistic modernity," rendering the two qualitatively different.<sup>10</sup> While such an optimistic position champions the positive effects of the increasing number of biennials worldwide, it tends to overlook some of the ways they perpetuate the museum's most questionable paradigms.<sup>11</sup> Despite the numerous reasons to extol mega exhibitions, it is necessary to examine the

curious discrepancy between their accompanying discourses as well as the extraordinary promises they seem to offer and the conventions through which they frame the artworks on view.

### Globally Replicated

*Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched?*  
– Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

No one seems to want to speak about it, but no matter how fervently biennials and large-scale exhibitions insist on their radical distinction from the idea of the museum, they overwhelmingly show artworks in specially constructed settings that replicate the rigid geometries, white partitions, and windowless spaces of the museum's classical exhibitions, that is, when biennials are not simply bringing artworks into existing museums without altering their white cubes. Timeless, hermetic, and always the same despite its location or context, this globally replicated white cube has become almost categorically fixed, a private "non-place" for the world of contemporary art biennials, one of those uncannily familiar sites, like the department stores, airports, and freeways of our period of supermodernity described by anthropologist Marc Augé.<sup>12</sup> One of the crucial particularities of biennials and large-scale exhibitions, however, is that they are meant to represent *some place*. Their specificity is precisely their potential to be specific–site-specific, if you will, and time-specific as well. The fact that the main exhibition format used in a recent biennial in Dakar looked like that used in Taipei a short time ago or like that used in Venice twenty years ago seems to contradict such an idea. Forays beyond the box and into the city or its environs are part of what visitors expect from biennials, but such "special projects" held outside museal spaces often make up a relatively small percentage of the whole event and, in some cases, don't figure at all. Instead, the requisite mixing of "local" and "global" artists, recurrent themes generalizing the contemporary condition (their titles say it all: *Everyday, Looking for a Place, Art Together with Life*), and a singular, age-old display strategy diminish the distinctions between geographically distant events. The paradox, of course, is that the neoliberal model of globalization against which many of these biennials position themselves thrives on and itself produces just such homogenization.

There are exceptions to this rule. Biennials such as those in Havana, Istanbul, Johannesburg (while it lasted), and Tirana, all of which happen to represent the so-called margins of the art world, historically have often reflected the particular economic, political, and geographic conditions of their localities through their inventive and often hesitant exhibition forms. Rare editions of other biennials, like Paulo Herkenhoff's edition of São Paulo in 1998 or Francesco Bonami's edition of Venice in 2003, stand out for the ways in which they revised typical biennial norms and forms. Still, the list of cities that have hosted large-scale exhibitions in the last decade using and reusing white cubes to display large portions of the artworks selected for inclusion is seemingly endless: Berlin, Dakar, Pittsburgh, Luxemburg City, New Delhi, Taipei, São Paulo, Sharjah, Frankfurt, New York City, Kassel, Sydney, Prague, Seville, etc. Their reliance on traditional museum exhibition formats is questionable for numerous reasons, including, as Catherine David suggests, the fact that many contemporary aesthetic practices no longer correspond to the conditions for which the white cube was built.<sup>13</sup> Just as troubling is the presumption that the profound diversity of histories and cultures that these biennials aim to represent should be equally legible in such a space. Determined to present themselves as an alternative to the museum, these large-scale exhibitions attempt to give voice to cultures, histories, and politics underrepresented within that institu-



tion. The fact that the most seemingly progressive biennials and their curators, vaunting the most heterogeneous of art forms, so often adopt a unique and now ossified exhibition format suggests that some of the most pernicious tenants of the museum and the history of modernism it embodies remain fundamental to their functioning. As Brian O'Doherty, one of the white cube's most perceptive theorists, notes, "the history of modernism is intimately framed by that space; or rather the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and how we see it." More than "any single picture," he further states, "that white ideal space...may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art; it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains."<sup>14</sup> The white cube, therefore, often supports the modern museum's other historiographic devices, including a linear, evolutionary history of art (think Alfred Barr's famous "torpedo" of modern art) with its decidedly Western perspective, limited temporal schemas, and unidirectional notions of influence. Given this, one wonders why this most dutiful spatial accomplice has continued to proliferate almost without question when we have become more conscious in recent decades that "modernity" is a construct that has suppressed, obscured, or transformed whole cultural histories and their producers. If globalization, as is so often maintained, problematizes the binary opposition of the national and the international, defying national borders and unhinging dominant cultural paradigms to allow the entry of histories, temporalities, and conditions of production from beyond the West, then why do so many conventional structures remain at exactly those sites that seek to undermine the epistemological and institutional bases of these structures? The white cube is, to cite O'Doherty again, "one of modernism's triumphs," a Western conceit constructed to uphold some of its most cherished values, including what Igor Zabel called the common presumption that "Western modern art is...modern art, that modernization (in the visual arts as well as in other areas of cultural and social life) is Westernization."<sup>15</sup> While it may not be surprising that the museum has been slow to dismantle these paradigms, why have biennials not done so? To question Basualdo's notion of decentering: Can a true decentering of traditional notions of modernity be fully accomplished so long as the Western museum's frame is exported as the unquestioned context by which to legitimize an apparently expanding canon? To Lefebvre's queries about whether space can be innocent and whether hegemonies might leave space untouched, the answer—as he knew well—is "no."<sup>16</sup> And so it is for the space of the exhibition. There are diverse ways an exhibition can resist, asserting its social and political relevance in our contemporaneity. To focus on select aspects, therefore, is admittedly to hold in suspense a reading of the others. Still, the "ideology of an exhibition," as theorist Miš contends, is not "an aggregate of oriented and entirely rationalized intentions of its organizers," nor is it the "messages that the authors of an exhibition are projecting and proclaiming in their introductory or accompanying texts."<sup>17</sup> Instead, he concludes, it lies "between the intended and the unintended." Or, to put it slightly differently, the ideology of an exhibition lies between the discursive statements of purpose and the aesthetic-spatial result that manage more or less effectively to translate the intentions of its makers. An examination of several editions of Manifesta, Documenta, and the Gwangju Biennial thus will focus on the discursive and structural armatures supporting these exemplary recent projects and, inevitably, on the ways in which the white cube still continues to haunt them.

It is about time that someone persuasively showed that the strategies and tactics of exhibiting art in large-scale international exhibitions (whether it be Manifesta, Documenta, the Gwangju Biennial, or other similar events) are no less neutral or innocent than the modernist museum or gallery. In short, the biennial's white cube is not a transhistorical, transgeographical, or apolitical

construct. Its aesthetic ideal is a specific macro- and micro-political construction that operates in relation to an art that is involved in the social machines of identification, exchange, consumption, pleasure, critical expression, and undeniably the construction of social subjectivities and objectivities. Strategies and tactics of exhibiting are devices of explicit cultural politics employed to reflect social reality in relation to the structuring of aesthetic, discursive, and political identities (both individual and collective). Thus the curator is not just a technician who arranges more or less temporary or permanent manifestations, but instead a kind of "political activist" acting in a cultural superstructure that today increasingly resembles a fastpaced and spectacular system that shows signs of what Foucault called the "biotechnological" and Marx called "class struggle." Pushing these arguments in another direction, I would say that contemporary large-scale exhibitions no longer present finished masterpieces. Instead, they display the visible relationships between the curator-as-author, the exhibiting institution, and the artist-as-performer in the world of media and cultural traces. The artwork is thus removed from the exhibition, as Yves Michaud suggests in his book *L'Art à l'état gazeux*. Specific kinds of productive relations within society, which have historically determined every paradigm of the large-scale exhibition as well as the art world in general, cause this to occur. A high modernist fetishization of the art object determined the white cube. From the beginning, the Venice Biennial was founded on models of identity endemic to a nationalistic bourgeois society as well as the synthesis of representative "national" arts. Conversely, a system of rapid changes in the artistic and cultural fashions of late capitalism shaped Documenta from its outset. Manifesta emerged to problematize notions of the local and global in the aftermath of the cold war. Today, we could point to media spectacles, in which the so-called exhibition becomes a media and cultural net of totalizing artistic, cultural, and political events, presenting an atmosphere of art, culture, and society instead of artworks.

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### **Manifesta**

Manifesta, European Biennial of Contemporary Art was inaugurated in 1996 as a platform for cultural exchange between newly unified, post-Wall Europe. The paucity of dialogue between artists, institutions, and curators across Europe (despite the dramatic historic changes), the phenomenal multiplication of biennials, and their increasing concretization and inflexibility are all factors that profoundly influenced the project. As a result, the new biennial was imagined not only as an alternative to the museum, but as an alternative to the typical biennial as well. Thus Manifesta's most unique feature was conceived—each edition was to be held in a different peripheral European city. Rejecting some of the inherent nationalism of geographically fixed events and eschewing art-world capitals in favor of locations with less established or visible infrastructures for art, Manifesta seemed to want to use its shifting locations and explicit focus on emerging European artists to rethink the form and specificity of large-scale international exhibitions.

For each edition, the selected curatorial team mounted its exhibition across a number of local institutional sites. The main venue was typically a contemporary art museum or *Kunsthalle*—the Museum Boijmans Van Beunigen for Manifesta 1, the Casino Luxembourg for Manifesta 2, the Moderna galerija Ljubljana for Manifesta 3, and the Frankfurter Kunstverein for Manifesta 4. (Manifesta 5 was an exception to this rule, with only a small portion of the show displayed in a local contemporary art space, the Koldo Mixtelena.) Exhibiting in such established ven-

ues was no doubt a pragmatic gesture: Given Manifesta's itinerant existence, it would be difficult to start from scratch each time. Moreover, the designation of local museums, contemporary art centers, and other cultural sites as exhibition spaces was a vital element, it was reasoned, in the collaboration between Manifesta and its host cities. However, in this process, the white cube seemingly had been accepted as a kind of "international-style" exhibition frame, an internationally recognized container that was deemed appropriate almost no matter where the project moved or the nature of the artwork being displayed.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the incredible promise of such a project lay in the possibility of producing fundamental shifts in successive editions as they traversed Europe, Manifesta's exhibitions have remained relatively true to known biennial formats and standard museal display aesthetics. Although no edition of Manifesta to date has abandoned the white cube, a remarkable fragility, informality, and tentativeness did characterize several editions, distinguishing them in the face of the otherwise visual sophistication and high-gloss spectacle of most perennial events. However, the modesty and ad hoc character of the display in Manifesta's first edition in 1996 had already begun to fade somewhat with the second edition two years later and seemed to have been lost altogether by the fourth edition of 2002. The reasons for this are hardly simple and the attachment to traditional museum spaces and their formats is perhaps the symptom of the resistance that biennials like Manifesta encounter when they consider departing from established expectations for such events. An anecdote about the city of Stockholm's decision not to host the second edition of Manifesta after having seen the first in Rotterdam is telling: The dozen venues across which were dispersed predominantly subtle and small-scale or otherwise unspectacular artworks and performances hardly seemed to cater to the ambitions of a city looking to place itself on the cultural (tourist) map. For city officials shopping for a biennial, there was little that seemed likely to draw the same crowds or press as more established mega exhibitions. This story suggests that there was pressure on Manifesta to conform to the idea of what a biennial should look like—which meant not only grand artworks displayed in visible concentration, but the appropriately conventional "museum hang" and white partitioned spaces to properly enframe them.

Another theoretical problem with abandoning the white cube remained, one perhaps even more fundamentally troubling to such exhibitions: how to display works of art by as yet unknown artists, often with an aesthetic sensibility that is as yet unrecognized by most viewers, or artworks that are not easily recognizable as *art* in spaces that do not announce themselves as bastions for art? Might not the artwork be mistaken for mere "stuff"? And wasn't it desirable that artists new to the international art world avoid this confusion at the moment of their *entrée* into that world? (Not to mention that the emerging curators relatively new to the international art world might have felt they were expected to demonstrate that they too could organize a biennial that looked the part.) To imagine that the art that Manifesta showed or that the survival of such a new institution indeed *depended* on the white cube, however, would be to accept the dominance of Western modernity's structures as the ground against which everything else must be read in order to be considered legitimate at all, a highly problematic assumption and one contingent on precisely the kind of normalization that Manifesta claimed to want to question. Efforts to highlight the specificity of a Manifesta exhibition in a particular place as well as its specificity as a biennial could instead be seen in the themes that both the displaced exhibitions and the artworks on view addressed, including homelessness, hospitality, diasporas, borders, and immigration. Perhaps more than any other biennial, Manifesta's various editions can be said to have consistently probed topics crucial to intellectual, cultural, and political debates of the 1990s. The third edition in Ljubljana in 2000 underlined these debates in a programmatic way. Its large

number of politically engaged works, rejection of slick display strategies, active discussion program initiated by local thinkers, and collaboration with the RTV Slovenia to use local television broadcasts as a fifth venue were uniquely appropriate given the region's war-torn history. Relatively little was done, however, to engage in more than a thematic way the show's concerns with what it called Europe's "borderline syndrome." Thus, in the end, the significant distinctions between the exhibition formats of the editions themselves arguably were hard to discern. Manifesta 5, held in Donostia–San Sebastián in the politically troubled Basque region of northern Spain, might be seen as an exception since it took urbanism as a theme at the same time it incorporated actual urban rehabilitation into the exhibition as a constitutive element. In collaboration with the Rotterdam-based Berlage Institute, the curators instigated theoretical reflection on the revitalization of one of the region's poorest districts, the Pasaia Bay area, and had two of the area's disaffected factories, Casa Ciriza and Ondartxo, restored with the intention that they would serve the community after the run of the show. The largest portion of the exhibition, shown in the Casa Ciriza and thus framed by the defunct fish warehouse's post-industrial ruin and larger impoverished context, avoided the physical accouterments of the white cube, as did the portion held in the sixteenth-century former monastery Museo San Telmo; yet, what was staged in these venues and those others that did resort to white cubes amounted to a rather conventional show. While the urban renewal project was an important step towards asserting that biennials could be the motors for lasting local change, in the eyes of a number of critics, the exhibition missed an opportunity to render the historic, political, and cultural specificity of the location more integral to its form or to the artworks selected. As one reviewer concluded, it "could have been mounted almost anywhere."<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, Manifesta's past exhibitions as well as its symposia, discussion forums, and parallel events have attempted to encourage curators and institutions to think about the limits, transformations, and particularities of Europe as an idea as much as a physical place but never productively incited the connection between this thinking and the reinvention of the project's structural form. After all, given Manifesta's concerns, why demand that it take the form or occupy the space of a conventional museum exhibition? Why not imagine truly experimental exhibition forms that emerge from both the specific sites in which Manifesta finds itself and the issues that make holding a biennial there and then relevant or even urgent? And why not imagine that even those cities less able to replicate Western European museum standards and lacking the same level of financial commitment might actually host a Manifesta edition, inventing new idiosyncratic forms for the event. As experimental platforms that define new models for exhibiting, the peripatetic editions could thus better reflect Manifesta's stated ambitions. If questions such as these have beset the project from the start, the sixth edition seems to have used them as a point of departure. The curators of Manifesta 6, still in the planning stages, have announced that this upcoming edition in Nicosia, a geographically isolated, culturally and politically divided site with only minimal resources for the production and presentation of art, not to mention a historically fraught relationship to Europe, will exchange Manifesta's punctual, traditional exhibition in favor of the extended duration and pedagogical process of an art school. It appears that the biennial's newly envisaged form and temporality emanate from an attempt to respond to Cyprus' multiple historic overdeterminations, including its locus between Europe and the Middle East (a first foray outside of Europe for Manifesta) and its role as paradigm of the conditions and consequences of globalization today. For what sense could another mega exhibition have in such a location today? If goods can traverse its international borders with relative ease, people still cannot,

caught as they are in the political instrumentalization of ethnic and national identities. In place of a biennial as showcase for contemporary cultural goods, the sixth edition purports to use the increased facility of movement across borders made possible by student visas to construct a bi-communal, international forum for process, experimentation, and exchange built from the artists' extended presence at the site in order to respond to the realities of its ethnically divided host city. What the visiting spectator will be able to experience, how such things as process and cultural translation can be rendered visible in an exhibition-as-school, and whether some of the complexity of what has for so long been the "Cypriot problem" will be adequately addressed in the result remain to be seen, but this shift for Manifesta suggests that the specificities of its site have come to serve as the foundation for imagining a new formal model for this biennial.

### Documenta

Documenta began in 1955 in the hope of rehabilitating the image of postwar Germany, transforming the bombed-out town of Kassel and its most iconic extant structure, the neoclassical Museum Fridericianum, into the center of the art world every five years. The one-hundred-day quintennial quickly came to be considered the most serious and among the most prestigious mega exhibition of its kind. One can hardly say that for the tenth edition of Documenta in 1997 artistic director Catherine David devised radical, new display strategies to recast the physical appearance of the white cube. While the artworks on display were largely political in content, their presentation in the Museum Fridericianum bore little evidence that the traditional museum format or the Western avant-garde canon were under attack. The highly problematic role of the white cube was, however, an essential tension underlying Documenta 10. A reflection on what David called its "spatial and temporal but also ideological limits" was central to the conception of her project.<sup>20</sup> The seeming inability of the museum's "universalist model" to accommodate some of the most experimental and exemplary contemporary cultural production determined her objective to conceive an exhibition that included the program 100 Days–100 Guests, a mammoth series of daily public lectures, theater performances, film screenings, poetry readings, discussions, and other events in Kassel.

Conceptually, 100 Days–100 Guests began with the premise that presenting a panorama of recent visual art was not a priori the best means of representing contemporaneity. As David suggested in the short guide to the exhibition, "the object for which the white cube was constructed is now in many cases no more than one of the aspects or moments of the work, or better yet, merely the support and the vector of highly diverse artistic activities."<sup>21</sup> Nor was the *exhibitible object* the most representative of every culture. She further explained:

For reasons which have partially to do with interrupted or violently destroyed traditions, as well as the diversity of the cultural formations that have sprung from colonization and decolonization and the indirect and unequal access these formation have been given to the forms of Western modernity, it seems that in many cases the pertinence, excellence, and radicality of contemporary non-Western expressions finds its privileged avenues in music, oral and written language (literature, theatre), and cinema forms which have traditionally contributed to strategies of emancipation.<sup>22</sup>

All cultures, she thus contended, are not equally served by the white cube. David's resulting project, with predominantly Western figures featured in the show's historical "retro-perspectives," more recent but still largely American and European artwork on view in the exhibition spaces, and the work of non-Westerners overwhelmingly relegated to the lecture and events program, admittedly

offered a Eurocentric perspective of *visual* art. But, instead of imagining yet another "Museum of 100 Days," as Documenta had been nicknamed at its founding, she aimed to present more heterogeneous works – and through more heterogeneous means – during 100 Days–100 Guests. Both conceptually and physically central to the exhibition (its stage stood in the middle of the Documenta-Halle), the events program could also be experienced live on the radio and via the Internet, or consulted as recordings in the exhibition, constituting a growing archive both in and, potentially, beyond Kassel.<sup>23</sup> David thus effectively transformed Documenta from a spectacular visual arts exhibition to a hybrid site for the representation of diverse cultural production. The result opened Documenta to the kind of political engagement and diversity of mediums and cultures that no other such exhibition in the West had seen—what many critics in turn lamented as an overly political, theory-driven, and aesthetically impoverished show. In fact, David's move to counter the mega exhibition's usual spectacle was consistent with the audacious assertion that it is impossible to continue to innocently perpetuate the museal exhibition format as the legitimate frame for all works of art from all places. The exhibition and events program thus staged the very limitations of the white cube. And in critically reflecting on the way hegemonic forms operate, Documenta 10 used the conceptual and discursive structure of the last edition of the millennium to encourage others to do so as well, a role that was, as David suggested, no less political than aesthetic. For the eleventh edition of Documenta in 2002, artistic director Okwui Enwezor and his co-curators aimed to transform the geographic, conceptual, and temporal constitution of the event, conceiving a series of five "platforms," the first four of which were themed conferences (in one case including a workshop and film screenings) held in Lagos, Saint Lucia, New Delhi, Vienna, and Berlin over the course of eighteen months.<sup>24</sup> The discussions deliberated such issues as the recent impact of globalization on the world or the violent legacy of colonialism. Although far from a literal rehearsal of the exhibition, they also mapped out the concerns at the heart of the fifth exhibition platform.

Reiterating the terms of the larger project's postcolonial critique, the stridently political artworks and accompanying curatorial statements rendered explicit the need to question Western imperialism, including its perpetuation through such notions as modernity, the avant-garde, universality, and democracy.<sup>25</sup> The first four platforms were, by most accounts, thought provoking if academic affairs, at once dislocating the singular site of Documenta and situating critical research and theoretical reflection at its heart. Despite the fact that, relatively few visitors and participants actually attended the conferences, these proceedings were integral to the form of Documenta 11, which expanded the boundaries of this art event traditionally held in a provincial European town and transformed it into a transnational, interdisciplinary, multilayered manifestation. While these events overturned the strictures of Documenta's hallmark one-hundred-day exhibition in Kassel, the fifth platform appeared to be a decided *return to order*. Impeccable arrangements of white cubes and black boxes recurred throughout most all of the show's multiple sites. Even though the exhibition largely occupied the stately Museum Fridericianum, keeping with Documenta's typical practice, here as well as in the massive, newly inaugurated Binding Braueri and the Kulturbahnhof one encountered a display even more museal, conservative, and rarefied than in previous editions.<sup>26</sup> Exceptionally, a few of the exhibition projects extended outside the museum, seeming all the more to confine that platform to neatly delineated display spaces.<sup>27</sup> It was as if, in creating four other platforms out there in the world, the curators decided that the fifth in Kassel would replicate even more closely a museum space cut off from that world. The exhibition brought, as one critic noted, "issues of genocide, poverty, political incarceration, industrial pollution, earthquake wreck-

age, strip-mine devastation, and news of fresh disasters *into the inviolable white cube*.<sup>28</sup> This is not to suggest that the means through which display strategies structure perception and art history were simply overlooked. As one of the curators attests in his catalogue essay:

Art exhibitions also frequently adopt linear models to represent historical flux and the relationship between past art and recent production. To be sure, there is a correspondence between the linearity of these narratives and their tacit—or implicit—totalizing will....The ideological effects of these types of exhibition strategies are well known: the consolidation of an artistic canon, and therefore the staging of a series of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that assures its permanency.<sup>29</sup>

He and the other curators of Documenta 11, therefore, tried to imagine a “structure that would allow the works to co-exist in a heterogeneous and nonlinear temporality.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, as such an effort suggests, an exhibition’s politics are inevitably a politics of (identity) representation, articulated in the selection of works and in the ways their strategic display rethink certain established ideals. Once the works were selected, however, Documenta 11, being largely composed of recent art, did not seem to fully question the ideological legerdemain of traditional museum shows, except insofar as it dispersed historical works from the 1970s throughout the exhibition. If Documenta 11’s notable breadth of representation (with significantly more visual artists from non-Western nations than any previous edition) and the displacement of the four platforms sought to challenge occidental paradigms and champion instead “those circuits of knowledge produced outside the predetermined institutional domain of Westernism,” then corseting the exhibition portion in exactly that predetermined institutional paradigm most intimately connected with the development and historicization of occidental modernism effectively undermined many of the very objectives of the project.<sup>31</sup> Examining the fifth platform in this way inevitably simplifies the breadth and theoretical complexity of a much larger project, but it also underlines the silence which allows the white cube to function, even in those projects most consciously and explicitly positioned against the hegemony of modern Western forms. Why, one might ask, expand Documenta into different parts of the world through the four discussion platforms only to encase most of the over four hundred works from five continents in Kassel within the West’s least questioned framing devices? A hasty response might be that bringing works of art from vastly different cultures requires using a uniformly prestigious or valid frame through which they can be experienced—the necessary fiction sustaining this being that the white cube is that neutral, legitimate frame. The issue is undeniably complex, but it was rehearsed, one might say, in one of the essential queries of *Democracy Unrealized*, the first platform of Documenta 11: Can democracy, a fundamentally Western concept and hegemonic political form, serve as a legitimate benchmark for the constitution of society in the postwar period, even in nations with vastly distinct histories and cultures? One could also ask the same of the white cube in relation to large-scale exhibitions. Of course, the underlying stakes of these two questions might seem, on the surface, wildly different, but both suggest that there is an imperative need to problematize (Western) models that quietly perpetuate themselves as unquestioned universals.

If the proliferation of biennials can be said to mark a break in the global cultural politics of modernity and modern art, it is because they affect art history writing and contemporary art’s relationships to the specificity of location, which ultimately hinge on the revision of the aesthetics so dominant in the art of the 20th century. However, a biennial’s role in fashioning

alternative art histories and aesthetics needs to take in account of their other concerns as well. As periodic events, they also aspire to showcase the new and the very contemporary as a response to and echo of local and global transformations in economy, politics, and culture. This limits their ability to incorporate historical depth but it contributes to their contest with the museum, which tends to be less sensitive to what is most contemporary. This conflict in the functioning of biennials has to be examined carefully, particularly in non-western countries where “contemporary art” only arrived in the 1980s (at the same moment that biennials began to proliferate) and still needs time to develop significant histories. Thus, instead of taking aim at how biennials attempt to write histories, we should talk about the “effects” of biennials on art history writing. On the aesthetic level, it is hard to measure how far biennials can depart from the traditional white cube.

Every biennial tackles this issue differently, and each edition also provides different approaches, articulated in more or less conscious ways. But, in general, it would not be fair to say that as long as biennials present themselves in museums, they will not be able to depart from the white cube or a linear art history based on Western modern art. On the one hand, museums all over the world are revising their relationship to the traditional white cube. On the other, the museum, with the protection and the flexibility of framing it can offer for art works, will still be an important venue for biennials, at times for reasons that are context-sensitive: A biennial can be created because of the lack of a museum, or because existing museums do not feature contemporary art, or because the contemporary art featured by the museum is outdated.

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### **The Gwangju Biennial**

The Gwangju Biennial, East Asia’s first large-scale contemporary art event, was founded in 1995 at a high point in the biennial boom. With memories of nearly two decades of political oppression still present, including the 1980 massacres that accompanied a citizen uprising for democracy, the new biennial was imagined as a bandage for old wounds and a means by which to provide the city a positive, forward-looking profile. Critics decried the overly Western focus of the first two editions as well as their seeming inability to draw attention to the specificity of the emerging Asian art scene or, for that matter, those of other cultures less well-represented in Asia. As a result, the biennial’s third edition in 2000 was revamped, initiating a strong Asian focus accompanied by a declaration of commitment to becoming a forum for artistic practices outside the West. Broadcasting that the biennial would “pursue globalization rather than westernization, diversity instead of uniformity,” officials marked their seriousness and new focus by building a multistory, convention center–like exhibition complex, which was inaugurated with the 2000 edition.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, at precisely the moment that Gwangju and its biennial hoped to demonstrate their entry into a globalized art world, this new permanent exhibition structure incorporated generic Western display tropes in the form of a series of flexible but neatly arranged white cubes. For biennial officials, to be globally relevant meant replicating the “universal” exhibition backdrop. The fourth edition in 2002 opposed this strategy. Entitled P.A.U.S.E. and directed by Wan-kyung Sung, the biennial was composed of four curated exhibitions or “projects” that in different ways engaged the vestiges of Gwangju’s uneasy past and contemporary condition, including a series of site-specific installations in a former military prison, a project to reconstruct the area around the city’s abandoned railroad tracks, and an exhibition concentrating on the Korean diaspora. Project 1: Pause, curated by Hou



Hanru and Charles Esche and held in the biennial hall, was the largest part of the biennial, and the curators conceived it as a “context specific event” rather than a panorama of recent art. Asia’s transformed urban reality provided the context for questioning art’s “global-local negotiation” and imagining possible alternatives to the homogenization and acceleration of late capitalism.<sup>33</sup> The conditions of art production in contemporary Asia and beyond the Western world more generally, where structures to support experimental artistic practice are rare or nonexistent, determined the curators’ decision to show dynamic recent cultural production by artists who had self-organized outside the occidental art world’s capitals.<sup>34</sup> As a result, they conceived an exhibition that included some twenty-five independent collectives and artist-run organizations from around the globe, mostly from Asia and Europe but also from the Americas and India. These groups were invited essentially to self-curate their participation in the biennial, retaining incredible autonomy and shifting the role of the biennial curator. The result was less a presentation of discrete artworks than a biennial as the workshop for artistic experimentation, since bringing together artist collectives from around the world was meant to empower and mobilize, acting as “a first step towards a global network of independent, self-organizational, and resistant structures for creation.”<sup>35</sup> By highlighting the possibilities of collective self-organization in the face of institutional inertia, the biennial engaged in a real dialogue with its local context, offering artists multiple models of self-sustainable cultural production. “Hou and Esche seemed to want to subvert both Eurocentrism—with its fellow traveler, a certain patronizing exoticism—and ‘the museum’ as an institution,” one critic noted, adding that “in much of Asia, these two issues are deeply intertwined.”<sup>36</sup> Project 1: Pause translated its conceptual ambitions into an equally remarkable form: In collaboration with architects, the artist groups were asked to conceive display pavilions or reconstruct the actual spaces in which they typically worked and exhibited. A sprawling frame of steel and plywood delimited these pavilions, the ensemble redressing the biennial hall’s exhibition spaces with evocations of a frenzied global metropolis. The resulting makeshift structures connecting the different parts of the exhibition rendered tangible the physical qualities of various international art spaces and conceptualized something about the practices seen within them. The pavilions and reconstructed independent art spaces varied wildly, from a Bedouin tent printed with images of Western cities overlaid with Muslim iconography (AES Group from Moscow) and a carpet-lined photocopying facility for Xeroxing reduced-priced copies of the catalogue during the exhibition (Kurimanzutto from Mexico City) to reconstructions of an apartment interior (IT Park from Taipei) or a meeting room (Project 304 from Bangkok). They also implied, as did the urban evocations of the larger exhibition frame, that the particularities of artistic practices were connected to and imbricated in the actual structures that allowed for their experimentation. Suggesting that colonialism insinuates itself through the appropriation of the Other’s monuments, demonstrating how capitalism’s means could be used against itself, or illustrating that the most apparently quotidian gathering spot could be the site of intense cultural exchange, these structures within the larger exhibition refused the white-cube form but also demonstrated that the aesthetics of a display space are not separable from the ethics of an art practice.

### The End(s) of the White Cube

To have begun to question the use of the white cube in recent large-scale perennial exhibitions by addressing the foundation of the modern museum and the historical and political implications of certain exhibition spaces, extreme as those examples may be, was not merely for rhetorical effect. By so doing, I intended to underscore that the framing of art, no less than the selection of artworks, is fundamental to the ideological dramaturgy that we call an exhibition. A curious silence

regarding this phenomenon remains in discussions of biennials and related large-scale exhibitions. Yet, one could say that the “crisis of biennials” that so many critics have decried lies not so much in the proliferation of these events as in the proliferation of a *form*, which, more often than not, remains the same over time and across space despite the vast differences in the issues such exhibitions are meant to illustrate, their relationships to their individual local contexts, the works they present, the institutions that sponsor them, and the institutional and other histories they interrogate along the way. At a moment when art remains one of the few modes of critically resisting hegemonic global transformations and when the engagement and experimentation of many artists remains a source of incredible promise for the future, exhibition forms need all the more urgently to be intelligent, sensitive, and appropriate means for rendering art public. To insist here on the ways in which some of the politics of an exhibition inheres in its form is not, however, to advocate the promotion of a cult of the curator or the conflation of his or her role with that of the artist. Nor does it mean to suggest that curators, institutions, or their exhibition spaces generate the meanings of contemporary artistic production. Artworks, however much they are elements in the construction of the meaning of an exhibition and, dialectically, also subjected to its staging, in fact also articulate aesthetic and intellectual positions and define modes of experience that resist the thematic or structural frames they are put in.<sup>37</sup> Yet, as any number of examples can amply testify, an exhibition is no mere sequence of artworks, good or bad, thematically unified or formally disparate. Nor is an exhibition’s worth and meaning the sum (if one could measure them in this way) of the combined worth and meaning of the various works of art on display. Instead, the manner by which a selection of artworks, a tectonic context, and thematic or other discursive accompaniments coalesce into a particular form is at the heart of *how an exhibition exhibits*. This, after all, is what distinguishes an exhibition from, say, an illustrated essay: The articulation of a particular physical space through which relations between viewers and objects, between one object and others, and between objects, viewers, and their specific exhibition context are staged. What then is the role of biennials and large-scale exhibitions today? How might they be more self-reflective about how meaning is expressed in the very structures they provide visitors for thinking, acting, and viewing a show? How can the postcolonial project of cultural translation prevent itself from being betrayed by the frame through which art is shown in order to allow these large-scale exhibitions to live up to their potential as sites from which to question the consequences of global modernity? How too might they register some of the hesitancy and instability that their discourse would have us believe is integral to their projects? There are perhaps no easy answers to these questions nor is the issue without its own contradictions. But a change lies above all in the recognition that the aesthetic and intellectual premises on which an exhibition is based—the issues its curators and artists wish to defend, the positions they seek to express—need to be more fully articulated in the forms exhibitions take.

How is an exhibition articulated? What new grammar of space should we invent for international shows, which claim to represent a globalizing art production, in order to transcend the Eurocentric confinements of the white cube? These are relevant questions, but let’s push them one step further. What sort of new spatial language are we looking for? Is it a language that universalizes its meanings through the subsequent inclusion of new forms, contents, audiences, producers, processes? Does it consist of more and more different spaces combined together? This erosion of the white cube’s boundaries works both ways. We are faced with an increasingly rapid demand for new raw materials of art production: social contexts, local specificities, cultural differences, even new models of resistance. The white cube is only

partly dismantled in the search for new stages and forums for art. This is because its mechanisms are also extended into the new areas it aims to include. We have seen the most curious examples of this dynamic: Due to instrumental policies of multiculturalism, reluctant marginal groups are dragged into museums about which they couldn't care less. The call for another form of exhibiting remains, nevertheless, urgent. But what if an exhibition is not a means to an end? What if it is not meant to transmit, to communicate, to translate, or even to reform, but to bewilder, alienate, dazzle, or suspend the instrumentality of meanings? Isn't the consequence of the call for a politics of form to liberate form from the instrumentality of the relationship of means and ends? The ends of the white cube thus consist precisely of getting rid of ends that mistake policies for politics because a politics of form knows no ends, just means, and it knows no end either, just endless contestation.

*Hito Steyerl, Berlin-based artist and filmmaker*

Of course, it is not evident what forms might be appropriate to the vast cultural and formal heterogeneity of contemporary artistic production—supple enough to accommodate diverse practices, respectful enough to reveal the inherent, individual logic of artworks, and quiet enough to allow an intimate relationship between artwork and viewer. The answer is surely not singular. The now global white cube certainly should not be supplanted by another model that will become *the* biennial standard. Merely inserting works in crumbling industrial buildings or any number of other “exotic” locales is not the solution anymore than any single other form. Instead, the future of biennials is to be found in a sensitivity to how the coincidence of works of art and other conditions (temporal, geographic, historic, discursive, and institutional) *locate* a project and how that “location” can be used to articulate a project that is respectful of its artworks and speaks to its viewers. This requires the willingness of curators and institutions to think through more complex relationships to sites, artworks, audiences, and the theoretical propositions of an exhibition—a prospect that may require more time for exhibition research and preparation as well as greater collaboration between artists, curators, and institutions, but also the courage to risk a result perhaps more vulnerable and hesitant as it departs from an authoritative format. In the end, none of this will guarantee consistently memorable shows, but thinking through an exhibition's form will facilitate the development of more engaged and dialectical relationships between artworks and their presentation frames as well as projects and viewers more aware of the ideological entanglements of the structures and strategies they experience everyday.<sup>38</sup> Only then will biennials and mega exhibitions emerge that assert themselves fully as the “models of resistance” that they promise to be: not necessarily the end of the white cube in all cases and for all places so much as a critical relationship to its ends.<sup>39</sup>

**Remark of the editors:** the text by Elena Filipovic was published before the cancellation of Manifesta 6, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifesta#Manifesta\\_6.2C\\_Nicosia.2C\\_Cyprus.2C\\_2006](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifesta#Manifesta_6.2C_Nicosia.2C_Cyprus.2C_2006)

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**Elena Filipovic** has just been announced as director of the Kunsthalle Basel. She is Senior curator at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. She co-curated the 5th Berlin Biennial (2008) with Adam Szymczyk, and co-edited *The Biennial Reader: Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (2010), with Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø. She has curated a number of traveling retrospectives, including *Marcel Duchamp: A Work that is not a Work "of Art"* (2008–2009), *Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Specific Objects without Specific Form* (2010–2011), and *Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955–1972*, co-curated with Joanna Mytkowska (2011–2012), in addition to organizing solo exhibitions with artists such as Petrit Halilaj, Leigh Ledare, Klara Lidén, Lorna Macintyre, Melvin Moti, Tomo Savic-Gecan, and Tris Vonna-Michell. She was guest curator of the 14th Prix Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris (2012) and the Satellite Program at the Jeu de Paume, Paris (2010) and has, since 2007, been tutor of theory/exhibition history at De Appel postgraduate curatorial training program and advisor at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. Her writings have appeared in numerous artists' catalogues as well as in *Afterall*, *Artforum*, *frieze*, *Kaleidoscope*, and *Mousse*.

### Notes

1 For a discussion of Barr's strategic adaptation of the white cube based on European exhibition models, see Christoph Grunberg, "The Politics of Presentation: The Museum of Modern Art, New York," in *Art Apart: Art Institutions and Ideology Across England and North America*, ed. Marcia Pointon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 192–210.

2 See also Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

3 As Grunberg ("The Politics of Presentation," 206) argues of Barr's whitewash of the MoMA: "The white, neutral and ideology-free gallery space constitutes the physical materialization of MoMA's selective amnesia. More than anything else, the 'white cube' epitomized the attempt to escape from the realities of the external world, belying modernism's original claim for the integration of art and life...The physical confinement and limitations imposed by the installation reveal MoMA's selective appropriation of modernism."

4 Artist and critic Brian O'Doherty, the white cube's earliest commentator, probably first coined the term in the mid-1970s. His series of three articles entitled "Inside the White Cube," originally published in *Artforum* in 1976, remain the most thorough and engaging study of the phenomenon. They have been collected and reprinted with later articles on the subject in his *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

5 Over the last decade, various studies have begun to make evident the manner by which the

museum, from its origins, has been both an ideologically laden and disciplining site crucial to the formation of subjectivity. The white cube is in many ways the culmination of its Enlightenment project. See, in particular, Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Donald Preziosi, *The Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

6 Indeed, the white cube is no more a *tabula rasa* than the white surface in architecture more generally. The seminal work on this subject is Mark Wigley's *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). Whitewashed spaces, Wigley argues, were far from accidental, blank, or silent, and although his study concentrates on the beginnings of the use of white in modernist architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, the whiteness of museums, galleries, and biennial exhibitions in the decades since similarly speak volumes.

7 Numerous studies have thoroughly discussed these two exhibitions, including "Degenerate Art": *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, ed. Stephanie Barron (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991); Neil Levi, "'Judge for Yourself!'—The Degenerate Art Exhibition as Political Spectacle," *October* 85 (1998): 41–64; and Berthold Hinz, "'Degenerate' and 'Authentic': Aspects of Art and Power in the Third Reich," in *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators, 1930–1940*, ed. Dawn Ades et al. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 330–34.

8 A discussion of the Third Reich's paradoxical conceptions of modernity and diverse exhibition strategies is not possible here. While the above cited

studies have brilliantly treated many of these issues, what interests me is the ways in which the white cube was indoctrinated early in the twentieth century as a vehicle for the projection of diverse, even contradictory, ideals. There is, as I have pointed out, some shared significations of the display conceit, including legitimacy, neutrality, and—albeit differently for Barr and Hitler—a modernity that is resolutely Western. This last point may sound contradictory, since what counted as “Western” was also very different for both men and their respective institutions. Moreover, one could argue that the art shown in the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* was like Albert Speer’s monumental neoclassical structure, hopelessly caught between past and present, more backward looking than “modern,” in the way we have come to think of the term. However, for Hitler, the presentation of newly made works of art at the Haus der Kunst (the only ones that could legitimately represent their time) contrasted with those of the avant-garde and everything gathered in the *Entartete Kunst* show, which were dismissible as degenerate and essentially non-Western or at times degenerate because non-Western (the discourse that accompanied the show was explicit, while the primitive “African” lettering of the posters for the *Entartete Kunst* show attempted to underscore the point).

9 Carlos Basualdo, “The Unstable Institution,” *MJ – Manifesta Journal* 2 (winter 2003–spring 2004): 57.

10 Ibid., 60. For a discussion of the degree to which museums have historically been Western institutions founded on colonial imperialist principals, see Preziosi, *The Brain of the Earth’s Body*, 116–36.

11 Across various texts, from his curatorial statement for his exhibition *The Structure of Survival* at the fiftieth Venice Biennial in 2003 to his essay for the Documenta 11 catalogue, Basualdo has interestingly engaged the discursive and display strategies in large-scale international exhibitions. If I point here to what has been overlooked in his most explicit treatment of the question in “The Unstable Institution,” I do so in part because that essay is a rare example of serious consideration of the biennial phenomenon, and it is remarkable that it does not acknowledge how the endless replication of the white cube in biennials relates to the Western museum model he discusses.

12 Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992).

13 That argument is a central premise of Documenta 10 and is discussed at length in David’s introduction in *Documenta X: Short Guide* (Ostfildern-

Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1997) as well as in Robert Storr, “Kassel Rock: Interview with Curator Catherine David,” *Artforum* 35, no. 9 (May 1997): 77.

14 O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 14. Igor Zabel astutely discusses the ambivalent possible readings of the use of the white cube in recent exhibitions (“The Return of the White Cube,” *MJ – Manifesta Journal* 1 [spring–summer 2003]: 12–21) and I agree that meanings of the display conceit are hardly univocal over time. However, I would argue that this format that “returned” may be more historically overdetermined than most admit, and its proliferation as an ideal standard in biennials and other mega exhibitions merits questioning.

15 Ibid., 79; and Igor Zabel, “We and the Others,” *Moscow Art Magazine* 22 (1998): 29.

16 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 11.

17 Mišćić, “On the Ideologies of Manifesta,” *Platforma-CCA*, no. 3 (January 2002), 11, available online at <http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma3/suvakovi-cengp.htm>.

18 Robert Fleck (“Art after Communism?” *Manifesta 2, European Biennial of Contemporary Art* [Luxembourg City: Casino Luxembourg–Forum d’art contemporain, 1998], 195), one of the show’s curators, employed this term in the catalogue for *Manifesta 2*. He provocatively argued that after the Wall fell and equal access to such things as video games and Coca-Cola was established, essential differences between artistic production in the former East and West disappeared to be replaced by what he called an “international style.”

19 Jordan Kantor, “Manifesta 5,” *Artforum* 43, no. 1 (September 2004): 259. See also Susan Snodgrass, “Manifesta 5: Turning Outward,” *Art in America* 92, no. 12 (December 2004): 68–73. The show almost completely, and perhaps understandably, avoided directly addressing the deep political tensions in the region, the site’s most striking particularity. Instead, the curators opted to construct unspoken analogies to the local situation by displaying a number of artworks that pointed to such things as identity construction, geopolitical strife, and territorial borders elsewhere in the world. However, the inability of the exhibition to more actively or inventively engage with the complex specificity of its location, especially given that this “nomadic” biennial had chosen a Basque city for ostensibly those reasons, left many viewers feeling that the analogies were too few, too distant, or too abstract to resonate with the local reality.

20 David, *Documenta X*, 11.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 11–12.

23 The massive publication that accompanied Documenta 10, *Documenta X: The Book* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1997), a collaborative project between David and Jean-François Chevrier, conceptually carried through this premise, but it in no way attempted to reproduce on the page the exhibition or events or otherwise represent the diverse artworks. Instead, it served as a parallel intellectual, political, historical, and cultural anthology of Europe across several key historical moments.

24 The four conference platforms—Democracy Unrealized (held in Vienna and Berlin), Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation (held in New Delhi), Créolité and Creolization (organized as a workshop that was closed to the public and held in Saint Lucia), and Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos (held in Lagos)—are more widely known through the publication of the proceedings in four eponymous volumes by Hatje Cantz in 2002 and 2003.

25 See Okwui Enwezor, “The Black Box,” in *Documenta 11, Platform 5: Exhibition* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 42–55. For a thorough and cogent discussion of the various platforms, see Stewart Martin, “A New World Art? Documenting Documenta 11,” *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* 122 (November–December 2003): 7–19.

26 Critics repeatedly noted that the spaces were exceptionally “elegantly proportioned” and “restrained,” what Peter Schjeldahl (“The Global Salon: European Extravaganzas,” *The New Yorker* 78, no. 17 [1 July 2002]: 94) described as a “global salon.” Another critic (Jens Hoffmann, “Reentering Art, Reentering Politics,” *Flash Art* 34, no. 231 [July–September 2002]: 106) praised it as “almost perfect, at least in terms of what a traditional art exhibition can be.” In one of the few reviews that addressed the contradictions inherent in the aesthetic of the display strategies of Documenta 11 in relation to the content of the artworks, Massimiliano Gioni (“Finding the Center,” *Flash Art* 34, no. 231 [July–September 2002]: 106–07) proclaimed: “Everything is presented in an almost clinical manner, verging on seamless slickness. Disorder is at the core of the exhibition, but the show itself speaks in a very clear, at times didactic tone....The trouble with this edition of Documenta also lies in this attitude, for it renovates themes, artists, and languages, but it does not readdress the format of the exhibition or truly question our role as

spectators.” It perhaps bears underscoring that my critical position in relation to the near-uniform format of many mega exhibitions, exemplified in Documenta 11’s ultrarefined version, does not suggest that the alternative is necessarily a chaotic, disorderly, overwhelming, or fetishized presentation, but instead, one that is uniquely appropriate to and in dialogue with the works, themes, location, moment in history, etc. of an exhibition.

27 Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Bataille Monument* created for Documenta 11 was one such project and a perfect example of the way in which subversive content and architectonic/display form meet. Its insistent engagement with its displaced location on the outskirts of Kassel (through its use of vernacular materials, a local Turkish workforce to install and maintain the monument, and explicit dedication to the local immigrant community) enacted its own commentary on the relationship of margin to center and political injustice advanced by the exhibition.

28 Kim Levin “The CNN Documenta: Art in an International State of Emergency,” *Village Voice*, 3–9 July 2002, 57, emphasis added. Also available online at <http://www.villagevoice.com/art/0227,levin,36174,13.html>.

29 Basualdo, “The Encyclopedia of Babel,” in *Documenta 11, Platform 5: Exhibition*, 60. See also Derek Conrad Murray, “Okwui Enwezor in Conversation with Derek Conrad Murray,” *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 18 (spring–summer 2003): 40–47.

30 Ibid.

31 Enwezor, “The Black Box,” 54.

32 Cited in Charlotte Bydler’s exceptional recent study, *The Global Artworld Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2004), 131.

33 Hou Hanru, “Event City and Pandora’s Box: Curatorial Notes on the 2002 Gwangju Biennale,” *Yishu* 1, no. 2 (July 2002): 91.

34 See Hou Hanru, “Initiatives, Alternatives: Notes in a Temporary and Raw State,” in *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age*, ed. Philippe Vergne, Vasif Kortun, and Hou Hanru (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 36–39. The Gwangju Biennial demonstrated what Charles Esche (“Debate: Biennials,” *Frieze*, no. 92 [June–July–August 2005]: 105) has argued is the most pressing issue for such events: “the biennial needs above all to ask what kind of global culture it underwrites and how that support is made manifest.”

35 Hanru, “Event City and Pandora’s Box,” 91–93.

36 Jonathan Napack "Alternative Visions," *Art in America* 90, no. 11 (November 2002): 94.

37 Silly me, I actually believe in the agency of the artist as author, singular one at that. This does not preclude the exhibition from providing a context for *reading* the artwork (otherwise, I have written in vain) but it does not, to my mind, fundamentally *change* the artwork nor does it annihilate the dialectic relationship between artwork and exhibition and the potential sense constructed by their encounter.

38 Such a turn would be a positive shift for the museum as well, which has arguably also been rethinking its own exhibitions' forms, in many cases in response to and under pressure from its biennial counterpart. The museum haunts this essay even as its particularities—but also its important social contributions—remain insufficiently discussed. (This section's title nods to the brilliant 1996 exhibition and conference series, *The End(s) of the Museum*.) Museums unquestionably serve a vital role and one that will always be distinct from that of mega exhibitions. Still, neither institution is monolithic despite the need to refer here to the values of each in schematic terms; space limitations have kept me from being able to treat the issue in a more nuanced way, but one should not go away with the impression that museums/Kunsthallen (and their directors and curators) have not historically struggled with the ideological signification of the white cube, nor that these institutions have not at times been the sites for truly engaged and innovative projects. The relationship between the large-scale international exhibition and the museum—one of exchange and articulation of difference that has been important for both sides—is a subject awaiting thorough study.

39 The term is Okwui Enwezor's and is mentioned in his "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antimonies of a Transnational Global Form," *MJ – Manifesta Journal* 2 (winter 2003–spring 2004): 31.

# Saša Nabergoj

## in conversation with Jill Keiser

*Saša Nabergoj is working in the field of contemporary art as a curator, writer, editor and lecturer. In her presentation at the Kunstverein Zürich (Wäscherei) 30st September 2011, she pointed out among other things, the importance of laziness, which would lead into a productive laziness as she is convinced. In this interview she explains more explicitly what is missing if there is no time for laziness. What she is trying to get out of a discourse about laziness and Saša Nabergoj is giving an insight in the artistic scene of Ljubljana, the economic situation artists are living in Slovenia and what role she believes the curator has in the collaboration with artists.*

**Jill Keiser:** Your presentation was about laziness. How important is the topic to you?

**Saša Nabergoj:** Ever since I started my professional career in the world of art I have been faced with a demand for multiproduction. In midst 90's I came across Mladen Stilinović text *The Praise of Laziness*, and since then I have slowly and lazily worked on the subject of laziness, idleness in historical, political, ideological contexts and backgrounds that contributed to the bad connotation the word has in today's society. My research intensified last year (2010), so my presentation here aimed at giving you a short introduction to alternative; counter-discourse on laziness as opposed to prevailing discourse based on work. I strongly believe such issues are, especially today, very relevant for artistic and curatorial practices. When you are just rushing to produce things you don't have the time to think.

Ivan Minatti, Slovenian poet from XX. Century, once explained his creative process: "I can spend the whole day laying on the sofa and in the evening I might get an idea for a poem or I might not." He didn't publish much, but what he did was brilliant. I myself am usually getting the best ideas when I'm walking in the forest or just doing nothing.

So what I want to say is, that we need time to let go and be open to ideas. When you are involved in creative work, you can't rush from one point to the other, what unfortunately we sometimes are forced to do.

**JK:** Would you call yourself a lazy person in that sense?

**SN:** The problem with laziness is, that in a society based on value of work it acquired bad reputation. As for myself I am aware that I'm contradictory. When you're talking about laziness you're active. It's this contradiction that makes it interesting - this productive un-production.

I reflect a lot about working, how I do things. And I create for myself hubs of productive laziness – how I call it. For instance taking enough time to talk to artists, or people in general, for hours.

**JK:** Do you think it is important that an artist lives the laziness?

**SN:** Yes, but not just the artist – the curator too. There was an American analysis on working conditions of artists in the 90's, that showed that an average artist uses up to 80% of his time on managing the career: Going to the openings, networking, arranging documentation, portfolios, the CV, etcetera. So actually there is only 20% time left to work as an artist. So, yes it is very important that you have this time that allows you to create, not just to produce or manage.

**JK:** How you bring laziness and organized life work balance together?

**SN:** I'm not sure if I manage it always well. I organize time to be lazy, which is very contradictory. But now, I think, is the busiest time in my life. I have two small kids that I want to see growing up, an interesting but demanding career and there are also my husband, friends, fiction, sports,...



Curatorial residences can be a really nice organized way to practice laziness. On the respective visit of Zurich, as well, I deliberately stayed for a few extra days to allow me time to research the scene a little bit. Which is actually organized time for discussions with artists, curators and as I planned it carefully, not to rush from one venue to another. I had a lot of time in-between, time for unplanned long talks (if they would happen) with artists. That's what I call organized laziness. But there is of course the other less encouraging perspective. In Ljubljana there is this tendency to do more and more work, for less and less money. So you can't really escape this overproduction, as you cannot operate outside of general working conditions. But I always try to balance my life.

**JK:** For you what is the essence of the discourse about laziness?

**SN:** It's the reflection of the *modus operandi*. It is also the question how and why society is governed by the work ethic. Bertrand Russell, a philosopher in the beginning of the 20th century argued that laziness is really a relic from our past: Before the industrial revolution people had to work all the time to survive. After the industrial revolution there was no economical reason for long working hours. Because, technically speaking, modern technology has finally made it possible for the whole community to practise laziness. The idea of leisure for the poor, has been always strange for the rich. Average working hours in England in the 19th. century were 15 for men, and 12 for children; it was a wide spread belief that work kept adults from drinking, and children from mischief.

**JK:** What do you live on?

**SN:** I'm the assistant director of the SCCA, Center for Contemporary Arts-Ljubljana. I'm actually paid for the work I like, modestly, but I can live on this.

**JK:** Is it possible to separate "work" artist work and private life?

**SN:** No. We are not in a profession you put down your pen and leave when it's five o'clock. Of course I try not to work all the time but I always generate ideas. What I do is, I don't open e-mails, I don't answer the mobile phone (if not just before the opening or many other occasions when one just can't afford the luxury of free weekend).

But for example this year we took a revolutionary two months off, and went on a family travel to Turkey. It was wonderful and private, but at the same time I have developed many ideas while talking with interesting people we met or knew, and they were of course from the world of art.

**JK:** It is not really a job in which you can separate private from working life.

**SN:** The circumstances for an artist are in Slovenia tougher than for example in Switzerland so we presume that the circle of artists in Ljubljana is rather small?

The scene in Slovenia is not small at all. Let me put it this way, I spent a few days in Zurich but I had the chance to talk to very different, mostly very interesting people, and through the conversations I got to know a little bit the scene in Zurich; I got the impression it is quite similar to Ljubljana, not only concerning artists, but also concerning NGOs. In Slovenia we have an abundance of NGO institutions who doing really interesting things. I'm worrying a little if it will remain so, as the fuel is mainly enthusiasm and logically this enthusiasm is slowly wearing off, because the working conditions are really precarious in Slovenia.

But I must say the art scene in all levels is incredibly diverse and rich, for such a small city. Sometimes it is even difficult to find time to see everything you want to see, which is really surprising for a city the size of Zurich, and with a very small cultural budget, but there is a lot of good energy and many interesting things happening.

**JK:** So there are different venues for visual art in Ljubljana, even when there is almost no budget?

**SN:** The only problem of Slovenia..., well not the only problem (laughing) only one of the problems in Slovenia, at least in visual art is, that there has been very little new venues in the last decades. People can't afford the rent and costs for running a space. As an individual curator or artist, you can actually get some money for a project, but it doesn't pay the rent of a venue.

Rent is very high, and private owners prefer spaces empty to lowering the rate or perhaps even thinking about using it to contribute to the (art) community.

**JK:** Why not? Does it have to do with the change of System from Yugoslavia to Slovenia?

**SN:** A lot of spaces have been nationalized in the times of Yugoslavia and then returned to families of original owners in beginning the 90ies. Newly established owners are mainly interested in generating money quickly, so we don't have situations of temporary use (and affordable rent). This I have encountered quite often in Vienna, where one for example buys a house, and while organizing its transformation in posh apartments lets off- spaces to use it.

Our space owners prefer to leave a house empty, as they simply don't understand the concept of temporarily usage. So it is almost impossible to get a space.

I used to think differently – when we didn't have a space I thought it was good because we were forced to collaborate with others, which is true; we still collaborate with others, we only don't have to go through all the organisational fuss of finding a space for each event we organised. Furthermore I think permanent space is very important for generating public in long term period, for cultivating your public..

**JK:** The venue is important to generate public you say, and to generate a good exhibition there is a good curator needed. Do you think a curator is also an artist?

**SN:** No. Of course not (laughing)

**JK:** Of course not, why of course?

**SN:** (Thinking) I do believe the curator is somebody who must work with artists and who must actually curate contexts for reading artworks. And I do believe a good curator disappears when the exhibition is shown. The curator's fingerprint shouldn't be that visible.

**JK:** So the artist should be up front not the curator?

**SN:** The Artwork! One must be very precise especially in a situation today when curators also took over art critics role in writing art history. And art history must be written with artworks! Not with artists and not with curators. But of course nowadays there are many different curators and it is really a

controversial topic and if you open any "Vademecum" on curatorial interviews you would find diverse possible curatorial roles ranging from mediator to translator, to organizer to creator. I think curatorial practise is creative, but you shouldn't interfere with artistic practice, and you should be very careful how you work with it, and how to work with artists. In that sense I advocate for a little bit less spectacular curatorial role I think.

**JK:** What is the curatorial part in the work of the artist, especially in long-term collaborations?

**SN:** It's a discursive part. You are there to actually to discuss the project, to place it in wider context, to elaborate on possible interpretations of the work, but not to co-create it.

Our role should also be giving feedback to the artist, because we are the "connoisseurs", we are the professionals, we are the ones who know, supposed to know, also art history and understand shifts in artistic, theoretical, curatorial practises, which I think is important, That's also why I showed the video in the end of my presentation "Everything has been done", a video by Polish art group Azorro, because everything has been done it is just a matter of the contexts. I am really annoyed by this omnipresent demand for new and new, because there is nothing new and statements like that just show ignorance towards the past and tendencies towards "spectacularisation".

And I do believe the artists need somebody to talk to and I also believe that curator should work in close connection with the artists. I think it is really important to follow the process of an artistic production, to be close and give feedback.

But of course one has to be careful, especially when artist are young and the curator very charismatic then the artist can get too influenced by the curator. So a curator has to be very careful and precise about his role. As today I think the role of a curator is really very important and a curator is therefore very powerful. And when you are in such a powerful position you have to reflect on what you do and how you do it constantly.

**JK:** So the curator is walking on a very thin line

**SN:** Yes!

**JK:** Who is then the author of an exhibition, the artist or the curator?

**SN:** The author is of course the curator. Actually I would prefer the word author to curator. I think we have to reform a little bit the concept of curator. But the exhibition is the (one of the) media the curator is using.

**JK:** Do you think in an exhibition something like a clear defined authorship is missing?

**SN:** When you are very precise about different positions, and its relations then authorship can be quite clear. And if you say that an author of an exhibition is a curator, but an exhibition is about artworks, which are placed in a certain contexts to be read as curator saw it; I don't see a problem in that. I don't see the role of an artist is diminished through that, as long as a curator is working with knowledge, respect and awareness of her responsibilities with the artists and with artworks.

**JK:** But it can put the curator in another position when he looks at himself as an author of the exhibition.

**SN:** The curator is the one who is actually conceptualizing the exhibition, but it has to be done in collaboration with the artist and with good knowledge of artworks.

**JK:** And if an artist like Claire Kenny curates own artwork together with artwork from other artists...?

**SN:** That I find a bit problematic, of course she is not the only one, far from that. Such practise can very often lead to an attempt to contextualize your practise in a frame you want it to be read; i.e. using other works just to provide you with a context you want.

The artist is completely differently attached to its own work than a curator. The curatorial role is supposed to be analyzing, and understanding artistic practices in a wider context. I'm almost sure that an artist can't do it, even though she can be careful and precise about different positions she operates within. As an artist you surely see your work differently than works of other artists, which is completely fine as long as you don't curate them.

So I think it's not really possible to curate your

own work, as it is too close and it is a completely different perspective. You can't detach yourself from your artwork.

### Authorship of artwork, private collections and exhibition fee for artwork

Authorship of artwork and the problems with private collections:

When an artist sells her artwork, she no longer can influence the way the artwork is shown, for example in an exhibition. But the way it is shown can contribute to changes in reading of the work. Therefore Saša Nabergoj is sceptical towards the private collections that come from financially well off institutions, when they prefer not to finance existing structures in the world of art but rather create their own collections. That seems in a way privatizing the cultural heritage. Because if an artist sells her work to the museum of modern art for example, the museum of modern art is obliged to follow certain rules from museological, art historical field and has to follow principles that contribute to general public benefit. While private collection do not answer to any public "laws," and can therefore—if I exaggerate a little—burn the whole collection down if owners decide so.

Exhibition fee for artist of visual art—worldwide:

Saša Nabergoj is a strong advocate of such an exhibition fee, as she doesn't understand the divisions between different disciplines in culture. When one invites a theatre group, one pays all the costs, if one invites a music group one negotiates a little, but everybody involved in the production is paid. When one invites visual artists or curators, they are supposed to work for free and be happy for the opportunity... She thinks one of the good practises in socialistic times in Yugoslavia was, that every author, every artist got a certain amount of money for an exhibition. It was systematically arranged and of course based on a worker salary, but everybody got an exhibition fee.. Therefore Saša Nabergoj appreciates the act of rebellion like it happened in Vienna on the Gender Check exhibition in MUMOK, organized and financed by ERSTE Foundation. It was a huge research and exhibition about a gender issue in the works of art from the countries from ex-Eastern Block, and ex Soviet Union, with a lot of accompanying program and a comprehensive catalogue. And they didn't pay any artist's fee. One Slovenian artist demanded a fee for his work to be exhibited, was denied and then rejected to participate the exhibition. A very brave act especially for an

independent artist in relation to big power culture structures, but Saša Nabergoj supported this artist.

Exhibition fee a subject at the WORLD OF ART, School for curators and critics of contemporary art:

Saša Nabergoj explains that they are paying a fee to every artist who is collaborating with the school, but what is also important, exhibition fees are presented and argued as case of good practise to the World of Art students, future curators and critics that will be running the world of art of tomorrow. They established and follow a practice that should be normal. She thinks the Suisse and Slovenian phenomenon when most of small NGO are paying fees for artists, while big public institutions (on much bigger budget) are not, is very problematic.

Saša Nabergoj believes that the system can change if many individuals (in and out institutions) would think and act the same way as the WORLD OF ART.

### **Saša (Glavan) Nabergoj (1971)**

Art historian, curator and critic. Assistant director at SCCA–Ljubljana, Center for Contemporary Arts (Slovenia). A member of AICA (International Association of Art Critics) and IKT (International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam). Writer, editor, curator and lecturer on contemporary art, focusing on curatorial and critical practices.

She curated many exhibition, among them *Line Stroke the Letter* (Matchpoint Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 5. 9.–13. 10. 2013); with Barbara Borcic, Dušan Dovc, Ida Hiršenfelder, *Studio 6 Presents: Liminale* (Project Room SCCA, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 20. 6.–22. 7. 2013, exhibition was part of 7th Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia); with Simona Žvanut, *That's Doodles* (City Gallery Nova Gorica, Slovenia, 15. 3.–5. 4. 2013), *Doodles* (Simulaker Gallery, Novo mesto, Slovenia, 26. 10.–21. 11. 2012), *Studio 6 Presents: CAC Bukovje (SLO) and Studio Golo Brdo (CRO)* (Matchpoint Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, November 2011), *Tomislav Brajnovic: Ekspedition\_ego* (Alkatraz Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, November 2010); both with Sonja Zavrtnik, *Around the world of art in 4.380 days. World of Art 1997–2009* (Alkatraz Gallery, November 2009), *Ola Pehrson. Retrospective*. Ljubljana. Beograd. Stockholm (Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 19. 12. 2007–20. 1. 2008); *Salon of Museum of Contemporary Art Beograd, Serbia, February, March 2008* and *Färgfabriken, Sweden, October 2009*); with Joa Ljungberg. She has lectured extensively, recently: *Legends and Stories of the Parallel Reality* on symposia *Archive as a Strategy: Conversations on self-historisation on the*

*Case of East Art Map* organised by Calvert 22 and University College of London (May 2012), *Curatorial Intervention on a conference Applied Exhibiting, ECM, Post-graduate educating, curating and managing studies at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna* (May 2012) and *A Praise of Lazyness at TEDx in Maribor, Slovenia* (January 2011).

She edited several publications, recently: *Open Systems, Quaterly for Contemporary Art and Theory* (August 2013), *Anthology Dilemmas of Curatorial Practices* (2012); with Barbara Borcic.

Since November 2011, she is working on a research of visual art scene at Autonomous Cultural Center (ACC) Metelkova City (Ljubljana, Slovenia) in collaboration with Alkatraz Gallery and Simona Žvanut. Within this working process they prepared exhibition and research projects: *The Closing Stop*, various locations in ACC Metelkova City, 10. 9.–9. 10. 2013 (co-curated Metelkova Revived!, documentary exhibition at the 20th Anniversary of ACC Metelkova City, Alkatraz Gallery, Slovenia, 10. 9.–9. 10. 2013; with Ana Grobler, Sebastian Krawczyk, Jadranka Plut, Simona Žvanut) and *A Mid-Stop*, various locations in ACC Metelkova, 6.–25. 9. 2012 (co-curated M'Art, Alkatraz Gallery, Slovenia, 6.–24. 9.; with Jadranka Plut).

Since February 2013 she is a guest lecturer on the Department of Art History (Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana) at Seminar for Modern Art I (Assist. Prof. Rebeka Vidrih).

At SCCA–Ljubljana she is a head of World of Art, School for Curators and Critics of Contemporary Art (since 1998) and Studio 6 (since 2004). Currently she is preparing the third Port Izmir (Turkey), triennial of contemporary art (November 2013–June 2014).

**Jill Keiser** is a journalist, a producer and curator, currently working at the Swiss radio and television. She graduated as a Master of Advanced Studies in Curating and also opened up a space for Audio work XLR in Zürich.

# Anke Hoffmann and Yvonne Volkart

## interviewed by Melanie Büchel and Jeannine Herrmann

**Melanie Buech & Jeannine Herrmann:** How has your curatorial practice developed, what is your background?

**Yvonne Volkart:** While studying I was part of the founding advisory board at the Kunsthalle St. Gallen. At this time, they did not have directors but worked with guest curators, and so I was asked to curate an exhibition. While spending one year in Vienna, I worked at the Grita Insam Gallery. This is where I started learning how to curate and work in the art scene. Aged 24 I curated my first group show with six Vienna based artists. Among them were Martin Walde and Ingeborg Strobl.

**Anke Hoffmann:** I have always been interested in art and culture, as well as in being a cultural producer. While doing Cultural Studies at University in Berlin and London, I started my own video work and also did collaborations in this field. With this experience, I began to collaborate with artistic projects. At this time there was no professional idea behind it. At the end of my studies I started working as assistant curator for the video and new media art festival Trans-Medial in Berlin, as I had this video practice. I did not particularly want to work in the art scene, but somehow got into it, as I was very interested in video and film. While working for this festival for two years, I began curating projects, and afterwards went to work in the exhibition department of the ZKM, a museum for contemporary media art in Karlsruhe.

**MB&JH:** What is your definition of curating?

**AH:** Curating is a mixture of reflecting your social and political environment, and the particular interest in artistic forms. Curating is asking about artistic and aesthetic languages speaking about the how, why and with whom, and bringing them

together under a certain perspective. Curating is reflecting visions, ideas and questions about how we want to live.

**YV:** I would say that curating is assembling people, projects, ideas and discourses. Curating is gathering these discourses, sharing and talking about them. The space is very important in curating. Curating is not the same as making a book, although the ideas can be very similar – sharing ideas and assembling them.

**MB&JH:** Is there a particular project you have been involved in that represents your position and definition of curating?

**AH:** Every project I do fits this definition. At the beginning of a project there is always a concept, which is based on a reflection or observation of the social environment. This results in bringing together artistic practices, whether it is a film program, a performance or an exhibition. It does not particularly have to be an exhibition; I also have a strong interest in special artistic practices, which may establish a present collective and shared experience. This can be a way of reflecting my interests, as well as a special artist for whose practice I would like to offer a platform. Curating is about providing a platform for exchange and discourse, for visibility and reflection.

**YV:** For me too, every project has been very important. I find it important to be part of what I curate. I define myself as a cultural producer, and do not completely understand the curator as the 'other part'. For me, the most important projects have been those in which there was a very good atmosphere with the artists, and in which new works have been produced for the exhibition. The exhibition needs to be the context, and this context should be elaborated

through extensive talks to the artists. This was especially important at the end of the 90s when I worked in the context of Cyber Feminism and digital art. During this time I was very active in this field.

**MB&JH:** Shedhalle is located right next to the RoteFabrik, a historically important institution regarding the development of the cultural scene in Zurich. Does this place, this surrounding affect your work?



**AH:** Yes, sure it does affect our work because we know the area and also the mental environment we work in. Artists, students and many other people have fought for this place in the 80s. It is a product of a very special time, of a time when people fought for political interest, and for a place where they could freely experiment with art and culture. This is part of our legacy at Shedhalle, to prevent and to work with these interests. These interests have shifted in the last 30 years but we reflect them in the way we curate, through the people we invite, and with the projects we display. We do not feature Rote Fabrik in a special way, but we do collaborate from time to time. Both institutions have their independent and autonomous projects but share the same cultural and political background.

**MB&JH:** Can you give an example for such a collaboration?

**AH:** We collaborated for the 30 years anniversary at Rote Fabrik in September 2010, and co-curated a site-specific interventionist art work by Michael Meier and Christoph Franz, with collaborative performers. The overall notion of this “anniversary” work was to celebrate the end of Rote Fabrik, as the premises had been sold to an investor and so the whole venue was turned into a building-site and therefore was hard to enter. For an earlier project we collaborated with the Fabriktheater for the Com-

plaints Choir, the first one at all in Zurich, a community project for which we collected complaints and performed these as a song at several places in the city. These were the bigger projects with the cultural producers from Rote Fabrik. Shedhalle is an autonomous association though, we are not part of the programming of Rote Fabrik.

**YV:** It is good that there are always people around we can ask. This enables us to think of art in a much broader sense than probably any other Kunsthalle or Kunstverein. Shedhalle has been originated against the dominant idea of culture. What is culture and what do we need to do in order to be engaged? I find it important to be politically engaged, not in a narrow but in a broader sense of reflecting the function of dominant as well as alternative culture in our society.

**MB&JH:** Looking at the museum landscape of Zurich, where would you position the Shedhalle?

**YV:** Shedhalle positions itself in the more experimental field. We try to be an open institution, which does not have any obligations.

**AH:** When you look at museum institutions in Zurich, they often have their own collections and work with a rather representational style, while displaying often singular positions. Beside that there are smaller project rooms we call off-space. Shedhalle once was an off-space, but has been institutionalized as we receive regular funding from the city of Zurich. Our interest is to work with artistic practices that consider themselves as part of a social or political discourse. Within our curatorial practice at Shedhalle we organize group exhibitions with a specific topic, with a statement, which we evolve. Through this social, political or philosophical bound statement we gather different artistic practices and bring them into a dialogue. I think this is quite special within Zurich based institutions. There are many interesting institutions, but many present solo exhibitions that show the latest works of an artist, that are close to the art market or to international publicity events. Shedhalle follows a working aspect: working with art and mediation, and getting into a dialogue with the audience.

**MB&JH:** Does your programme at Shedhalle differ from the programme of a Kunstverein?

**YV:** We focus on discursive group shows. There are only few Kunstvereine in Germany that also have group shows. In general Kunstvereine, or



Kunsthallen as they are called in Switzerland, usually do solo shows. This is not the cause of the Shedhalle. We do not show single positions; it is the question that is more important. But there is also a lot of intersection or overlapping between a Kunstverein and Shedhalle. The most important impulse to use is this focus on showing engaged art, on being critical.

**MB&JH:** Does your process of working follow similar structures, or is it totally different with every upcoming exhibition?

**AH:** We find our initial statement either through reflection or observation. This means that we read materials and research, visit other shows etc.. It is a mixture of societal and political issues, the points of discussion in the art world and something very personal issues working inside me or Yvonne. This first step can sometimes bubble inside for quite a long time. Sometimes it only need three months to verbalise it. Seeing artworks, either by researching, visiting artists, or by going to shows and festivals is very motivating and brings me to new ideas. Giving commission and discussing our issue with the artist is another thing. We invite them to propose an idea, which is then being discussed and finally produced. The next practical steps are very similar with every exhibition.

**MB&JH:** It is not often that an institution is run by a team. What are the advantages and difficulties?

**YV:** We are very open and we have chosen to work together. That means that we do all exhibitions together. In the past there was a team, but every curator made their own exhibitions. We find it very good to have discussions together, to be mirrored and to be questioned by the strong interventions of the others. We often have a lot of strong discussions – what we like. But often it is not so efficient. And

we also have the idea that at any moment we could overtake the work of the other. So we have complete transparency.

**AH:** The communicational part of the work is very high. You have to share, you have to discuss and come to conclusions. If you decide it by yourself, you do not have to report to somebody all the time. But it has also another aspect. A team is always much more critical, as when you work for yourself, because you put all your ideas to kind of a test with somebody else; I think this is the way is to be critical with your own ideas and ways. I think it fits very well to Shedhalle to work in this way. It is a kind of transparent pre-critical conceptualizing.

**YV:** The exhibitions we have at Shedhalle are quite big, compared with the resources we have. We do have strong concepts. The discussions bring us there. If we wouldn't discuss so much together, we would do it maybe with people from outside. That would be the other possibility, and that is also how the Shedhalle people have been working before. Discussing and sharing ideas, is a very strong idea of the Shedhalle, this is probably also one of the big differences to other Kunstvereine.

**MB&JH:** Together with Andrea Thal from *les Complices\** you have written a statement to *Kulturbotschaft 2012-2015* from the Federal Office of Culture responding to the reduction of diversity and a possible funding cut for contemporary art in the near future. How is political engagement related to your institutional work?

**AH:** We thought it is our responsibility to react to that publication of “cutting fundings” in several artistic institutions – as somebody who is working in that field and who has to take the interest of other art spaces, non-profit and also of the artist. So in a way we feel that this is a part of our responsibility, and also responsibility for the Shedhalle as well because it is an institution that comes out of this kind of off-scene, cultural scene and it is institutionalized now for many years. And results – So that your audience reflects that you take action — also if it is very little — in writing this supportive, rather critical letter.

**MB&JH:** Do you think there is an expectation that artists address political issues these days?

**YV:** I don't think so. I think the cultural sphere changed because we have a lot of these bien-

nials and festivals. And the last years politically engaged people, and people of cultural minorities, have been invited to be curators of these very important biennials and festivals and therefore much more politically engaged art has come into sight. I think people do not expect it in general. We had a market explosion over the last years. Everybody was talking about money and there are these crises of money. Lots of people feel sated with political art – they say: “oh no, not again!” – e.g. during the documentaVI.

**AH:** Shedhalle is not the only place that deals with political art, but there is always the question how you deal with it – before and afterwards. Showing something is one thing, but what kinds of dialogue do you approach/motivate to discuss about the topic. I think that is maybe what the Shedhalle faces in the future: Where is the place of Shedhalle? How does Shedhalle need to define itself? With what kind of practices? And I think how we kind of answer these questions for us, it works out.

**Captions:**

- 1 'Dumped Dreams' Gluklya: UUU N4 (Zurich), 2011
- 2 Dump Time. Für eine Praxis des Horizontalen, Shedhalle 2011

**Yvonne Volkart** is a freelance author and curator, and an instructor for art theory, cultural theory, and media theory at the Academy of Art and Design, Basel (HGK FHNW). In 2006 her dissertation *Fluid Bodies* was published at [transcript]. 2009-12 she was curator at Shedhalle Zurich. Publication: *Subverting Diasambiguities*, Nürnberg 2012, ed. by Anke Hoffmann [et] Yvonne Volkart for the association Shedalle.

**Anke Hoffmann** is a cultural scientist and works as freelance curator and author for contemporary art and is living currently in Zurich. Since 2013 she is researching on actual conditions of time and labour in contemporary society, and its implications and reflections in actual arts practice. As such she conceived a symposia on “Doing No(thing) in the Arts” at the Art School Berne, HKB. From 2009 - 2012 she was the artistic co-director and curator at Shedhalle Zurich in a team with Yvonne Volkart. They both developed an institutional program of thematic exhibitions, and discursive events, on the horizon of individualism and autonomy, community and resistance, ecology and history. In 2012 she curated the exhibition “F-Word” as an inquiry about feminism today. Between 2004 - 2009 she was a member of a collective of artists and curators called RealismusStudio at the nGbK in Berlin and conceived and curated exhibition projects such as “Tainment” (2004), “Resolution 1-3” (2006) and “The blind spot” (2008). In 2006 she was also co-curating the 7. Werkleitz Biennale Halle under the title “Happy Believers” in a team with three curator colleagues. From 2001 - 2004 she worked as assistant curator and research associate in the exhibition department of the ZKM in Karlsruhe, working on exhibitions projects like “Iconoclasm”, “Future Cinema” or “CtrlSpace” e.g. In 1999 and 2000 she worked as assistant curator and project manager, mainly on video and film art, within the art festival transmediale Berlin. Anke Hoffmann studied cultural studies, sociology and political science at Humboldt University Berlin and Goldsmith College London. Since her studies she is engaged in art, cultural and media projects.

**Melanie Büchel** has graduated in Master of Advanced Studie in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK. She is currently Head of marketing and communication at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz.

**Jeannine Herrmann** is a graphic designer and curator. She has graduated in Master of Advanced Studies in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK and is currently working as a lecturer in the Design Department of ZHdK and as the publisher of a curatorial project called Prisma Publications.



# René Block

## interviewed by Sylvia Ruttimann and Karin Seinsoth

### I. Gallery and Fair / Art and Capital

**Sylvia Ruttimann & Karin Seinsoth:** In 1964, at the age of twenty-two, you founded your own gallery in Berlin and went down in the history of the art world for doing so. What inspired you to take that risk?

**René Block:** Well, to begin with, it wasn't a risk at all but simply a necessity. From the time I was seventeen, when I was a student at the *Werkkunstschule* (school of applied arts) Krefeld, I had the opportunity to experience close up how the museum director Paul Wember realized a unique avant-garde exhibition programme at the *Museum Hans Lange*, and also how he purchased works from those exhibitions for his museum. In Berlin – probably because of the insular situation there – such confrontations and explorations of the immediate artistic present were missing. The exhibitions were conservative and often clung to an academic Expressionist tradition. What they did not do – however much they liked to claim that they did – was pick up the thread of the brief Dadaist period. I felt an urge to pop that bubble, and to do so myself; I needed a platform and that was the gallery. So it wasn't based on commercial considerations at all, but on artistic ones.

**SR&KS:** How did you finance the gallery?

**RB:** With other jobs. Jobs that had nothing to do with art; washing dishes and waiting tables in restaurants, selling honey at weekly markets. And in the end, hasn't the experiences I made with selling honey been quite helpful at the installation of *Honigpumpe am Arbeitsplatz* by Josef Beuys at the documenta 6 in Kassel, 1977?

**SR&KS:** Who did you exhibit; what were your criteria for choosing the artists?

**RS:** I exhibited my generation – the artists were hardly older than me. Gerhard Richter, Konrad

Lueg and KH Hödicke had just left the academy; KP Brehmer and Sigmar Polke were still students, as were Palermo, Knoebel and Ruthenbeck. All of them started in the mid-sixties from point zero, like myself. We started together and we grew up together. Wolf Vostell and, naturally, Joseph Beuys represented the older generation, but hardly anyone was taking notice of their work back then. This made them equal to the artists of the young generation from the point of commerce. Even though artistically they have been more experienced. That was the "German programme". At the same time, I was also interested in the boundary-transcending activities of the international Fluxus movement. Nam June Paik, George Brecht, Arthur Kōpcke, Dick Higgins, Allison Knowles, Emmet Williams, Dieter Roth, Robert Filliou, Tomas Schmit, etc. In the early years, Fluxus, or "Neo-Dada" as some people called it, manifested in the framework programmes accompanying the exhibitions, the so-called soirees, which introduced the individual artists in Berlin. Larger scale festivals only came about later on. The Fluxus artists represented the "international programme".



**SR&KS:** In art there is unfortunately an ever-present dichotomy between art and commerce, which also comes to bear in the work of curating. Lise Nellemann, for example, sees her curatorial projects as social artistic work; she doesn't sell anything and she doesn't earn anything. Art, curating and life are one.

That was also an aspect of the seventies. Was that your attitude towards art back then; was that the reason you exhibited Beuys? Or did you simply want to mark him?

**RS:** In 1964 there was no market for these artists; people only started taking an interest in them about ten years later. That interest was encouraged, however, by the founding of the Cologne Art Fair in 1967. It wasn't until 1969 that I started being able to finance the gallery and my own livelihood through the sale of a few works. More specifically, Beuys participated in the first years with actions like *Der Chef*, *Eurasia*, *Ich versuche dich freizulassen (machen)* or *Ausfeigen*, to name a few. The first and only [Beuys] exhibition in Berlin took place in 1979, when I closed the gallery. On the other hand, in 1969 I succeeded in selling the major work *The Pack*, the VW Bus with the sleds, and the *Sled* edition at Cologne Art Fair. But the money I earned was immediately used to publish the book on Kapitalist Realism and other multiples.

**SR&KS:** In your own words, you gave up the gallery when the "art fair boom took hold". But you were also involved in the founding of the Cologne Art Fair. Is that a contradiction? Did the commercial aspect bother you?

**RS:** In the sense that the Cologne Art Fair initially pursued ideal objectives, it's not a contradiction. The first two or three fairs have been cultural events and not yet commercial events. The fact that it eventually developed into a primarily commercial enterprise that many cities copied could not have been foreseen. By 1979, however, when I closed the gallery, most of the artists I had worked with were established. They no longer needed the platform a small gallery could offer them. The art fair boom got underway just a few years later.

**SR&KS:** How did the city of Berlin respond to the provocative actions, performances, and exhibitions you presented in your gallery in the first few years?

**RS:** An abstraction such as a city does not respond. It's always just individuals, or groups at best. In the case of Gallery Block, there was just a tiny circle of people who were interested in our concept and work. The echo in the media; however was often substantial. But we were just another bunch of crazies they enjoyed making fun of. We rarely got any serious reviews. We didn't turn up in the arts section

as much as we did on the human-interest pages. It amuses me when nowadays people consider this gallery significant.

**SR&KS:** To what extent does the market influence art?

**RS:** That question has never interested me.

## II. Art Promotion



**SR&KS:** You also worked for institutions dedicated to the promotion of art, the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the IFA (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations). What are the criteria for support from such institutions? Were there also conflicts, for instance situations where you thought the institution should do something a certain way but it refused? What effect did the conflicts have on your work?

**RS:** I don't remember any content-related conflicts in the DAAD Berlin artists' programme. Within the framework of my work with the visual artists and composers who had been invited I had every liberty to fulfil the artist's wishes and also my own. That's why I stayed in that position for ten years. At the IFA I took those liberties, and opened up the programme designed for the support of German artists living abroad to foreign artists living in Germany. After three years that led to conflicts with the administration. So I left. To my great joy, my successor is successfully pursuing the same strategy.

**SR&KS:** In Switzerland there have recently been demands that art be integrated more strongly in national marketing efforts. In other words, art is being made an instrument of the state; it's like a reversion to the nineteenth century. But it's the only way to convince people who don't care about art that

art is necessary. How can people be convinced that art is necessary?

**RS:** The sculptor Olaf Metzel recently said that there are people who go to football stadiums and people who go to museums. And there are people who do both. That means that there are people who know that culture and sports are important for a meaningful life, for the shaping of the present, and thus for the future. Those people should be encouraged. Culture is a public service in most of the European countries. It would be a good thing, however, if countries like Switzerland would campaign that.

**SR&KS:** Who should finance art? The state?

**RS:** One of the most important and most superb tasks of the national community should be to make culture possible, to finance cultural institutions – particularly as regards the collection of art, as an enhancement and counterbalance to private collecting interests.

### III. Curating

**SR&KS:** In addition to your activities as a gallery owner, you have also curated rather conventional exhibitions with classically art-historical-sounding titles, for example on the history of the multiple, or on graphic arts techniques. What inspired you to do that? Did you study art history? What was your interest there? Did those activities differ strongly from the activities related to your gallery?

**RS:** There were no art-historical motives. In the seventies there was just something interesting about putting artists like Hamilton, Brehmer, Roth or Warhol – whose silkscreen and offset-printing works were not acknowledged as “artistic graphics” (and incidentally, for the purposes of taxation and customs that still applies today) – about showing precisely those works alongside the classics, Dürer, Rembrandt, Goya, Klinger, or Munch. My concern was actually more with correcting the assessment by the art historians. This exhibition demonstrated the continuous development of printing techniques, from woodcut by hand to mass production. In all times, artists always used the most advanced technologies. A full chapter of the exhibition was devoted to the revolutionary print making concept of the artist KP Brehmer.

**SR&KS:** Do you also work as a free curator like Harald Szeemann? What is your stand on that phenomenon, which was actually his invention?

**RS:** Curating from an independent position is not Szeemann’s invention, but he was the first to give that position a profile. I actually realized a number of my most important exhibitions in the position of a free independent curator: *Für Augen und Ohren* in Berlin in 1980; *Art Allemagne aujourd’hui* in Paris in 1981; or the 4th Istanbul Biennial in 1995. And when I leave the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in 2007, I will arrange the Nordic Pavilion of Finland, Norway and Sweden for the Venice Biennale out of a “free” position. And by the way: as an employee of an institution you can also take liberties and realize projects all over the world. But we’re approaching a situation in which we’re going to have more “free curators” than institutions. Then that freedom will become a problem.

**SR&KS:** How would you describe your relationships to the artists? To what extent is your work collaborative? Do you actively involve the participating artists in your exhibition concepts?

**RS:** For me, exhibitions are only conceivable and only make sense on the basis of very close relationships with the artists. Who am I making the exhibitions for, if not for the artists?

**SR&KS:** The participations of the public was already an important concept in the performance and action art of the sixties, for artists like Beuys, Paik, Vostell – artists you worked with. And the same still applies today (or perhaps applies again today). Has the definition of this principle, this concept, changed in comparison to the sixties? Can it really be a key to a freer understanding of art?

**RS:** The participation of the public should take place in the mind. That was no different with Beuys, Paik and Fluxus, and I think it’s what artists still want today. The fact that the public is occasionally invited to participate directly these days often within the framework of technical, interactive artworks, that the so-called Homo ludens is addressed, is an appealing phenomenon. But often it’s also just a way of diverting attention from a lack of substance in the artistic idea, a lack of what should actually constitute art. So I prefer a conceptual participation, discourse and talks. Artists have a different task than to entertain audiences.

**SR&KS:** How do you involve the public in your projects?

**RS:** I invite the public to think with me.

**SR&KS:** In *Curating in the 21st Century*, Gavin Wade and Teresa Gleadow discuss the term “curator” that has come to play such a key role in the art world. Are you a curator? Or how do you refer to yourself?

**RS:** “Curator” is the designation that has come to prevail for this work; originally, though, it meant something different. I often describe my position as such of a conductor, I could also accept the term “producer”.

**SR&KS:** Do you think it’s possible to learn to be a curator? Or are you of the category who claim that you’re either born a curator or you’re not? What qualities does a curator have to have? What can schools or courses teach?

**RS:** You can’t learn to curate, because you can’t learn inspiration. What you can learn is how to organize projects and communicate them to the public. You can’t learn to be an artist at an academy, either. But if you’re an artist, maybe at an academy you can learn techniques for expressing yourself better.

**SR&KS:** Can you give us an example of an exhibition you thought was especially good and tell us why you thought it was good? What qualities does a good exhibition have to have?

**RS:** The answer to that question would be an entire lecture in its own right. Once I talked about the exhibition that had been the most instructive for me. The reason it was so important was that it failed to live up to what it had explicitly set out to achieve. But that proclaimed aim – it had to do with the dialogue between the northern and southern hemispheres, between the cultural periphery and the cultural centers – was manifested in that context for the first time, and had to be attempted. This subject matter interested me most and therefore it was interesting to analyze why it had failed. In 50 years of practice I found out that I can only learn from shows that failed. To find out why they failed. Good shows can make you happy – but you don’t learn anything from them.

**SR&KS:** Are there certain criteria by which you curate an exhibition? Chronologically, formally, etc.,

or does it depend on the respective exhibition? What exhibitions have you curated, and do they have a common denominator? Do you have a certain curating style?

**RS:** There is experience, and there is the aim. The aim is essentially always the same – to work with the artists who make the themes of the times in which we live visible. Since my first exhibition in the gallery in 1964, the projects have been based on one another; that’s where experience comes in. Every exhibition, regardless of the subject or the location, builds on the previous one. You could call that a curatorial style, but no one has ever thought about it that way.

**SR&KS:** You were interested in the periphery, the margins. And today? Has that changed? What are you interested in?

**RS:** I still find the periphery, the artistic “side-streams”, the margins just as interesting as ever. Mainstream art, art-fair art is boring.

**SR&KS:** You’ve been involved in the art world for more than forty years. How has curating changed within that period? How do you think the function or role of the curator has changed? Do you see differences as compared to when you started out?

**RS:** The field of vision has broadened. We work in a global art arena. Half a century ago the only free art was Western art. The quality of the exhibitions hasn’t changed, just their size. And the role of the artistic director has changed, but not necessarily his skills and qualification. To put it in simple terms: whereas forty years ago the curator saw himself in the service of the artists, today many of the internationally active young “star curators” see the artists as their material. Like collectors, curators should grow with the artists of their generation. They should recede behind the artists, steer things from the background. Too many curators make the mistake of seeing themselves as super-artists, of aspiring towards a career like a star conductor, of thinking and acting solely in terms of career strategies.

**SR&KS:** Today you’re the artistic director of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, one of the very oldest museums. What does your work consist of? What advantages do you see in working in such an old institution, what disadvantages?

**RS:** Take a look at my development: gallery owner, free curator, institution DAAD, institution ifa, free curator. Then the invitation to direct a large museum like the Fridericianum in Kassel; to give it a new face between the documenta exhibitions, was a great challenge, but one I couldn't resist. The only place artistic postulations are possible is a museum such as this one.

**SR&KS:** Does curatorial practice in museums differ from curatorial practice elsewhere? Who are you responsible to? How can deliberations that arise from curating be reflected in an institution, if at all?

**RS:** Entirely in the Kantian sense. To begin with I'm responsible to my own artistic conscience, my own standards, secondly I am responsible towards the artists and third - but not least I have to have responsibility towards the space, to the local conditions. Then comes the responsibility towards the public that is supposed to partake of the artistic processes. By fulfilling that responsibility, I fulfill my responsibility towards my employers – the city, the state – as long as I stick to the budget. It is simply always the same. Right now I am responsible to the city of Kassel, tomorrow it might be any other place in the world in case of a Biennial, for instance. My stance would be the same if the Fridericianum had been a museum with a collection of its own. Then, however, there would also be a responsibility towards the future by building a collection.

#### IV. Collecting

**SR&KS:** How and when did you start collecting? According to what criteria? What is the main emphasis of your collection? Has your collection changed in the course of time? If so, what is its main focus today? Where is your collection located?

**RS:** By the end of my fifteen-year gallery activities, a number of artworks had accumulated. A basis on which over the course of the years a collection could be formed. Qualitatively and quantitatively, the emphasis was on the works of Beuys, Paik, Kōpcke, Cage, Williams, Vostell, Schmit and other Fluxus artists. Then Polke, Brehmer, Hödicke, Ruthenbeck, Richter, Böhmler, works that had emerged from my joint work with the artists. I merely expanded and continued that principle. All of the works in my collection bear a direct relation to my work with the artists, within the framework of free curatorial work and institutional projects alike.



Since the Fridericianum is not a museum, i.e. does not acquire works for a collection of its own, I myself have purchased a number of things that document my work there as well, in the *documenta* city. Logically, the emphasis of the past years has been on works by artists from the Balkan region and Turkey. I like to describe it as “Fluxus und die Folgen”. Parts of the collection are on loan to the Neues Museum in Nürnberg. Another part will probably be given to a new Museum for Contemporary Art in Istanbul in a few years. In my home I keep mainly works on paper: conceptual drawings, archive material, documents.

**SR&KS:** What issues are associated with collecting?

**RS:** The proper storage of the works until a suitable place is found for them is sometimes a problem. Fortunately, most artworks are more robust than one might assume.

#### Captions

**1** Opening „Neodada, Pop, Decollage, Kapitalistischer Realismus“, 1964 photo: Jürgen Müller-Schneek Archiv René Block

**2** Sarkis, *Rice and discussion place*, exhibition view, 4th Istanbul Biennial, Orient/ation, 1995, photo: René Block

**3** Joseph Beuys, *Schlitten*, 1969, 50 copies + 5 artists proofs sledge, torch, felt, and fat-sculpture, 90 x 35 x 35 cm photo: Uwe Walter, Berlin Edition Block

**René Block** grew up near Düsseldorf before he discovered Berlin as his field of action in the year 1963. The gallery founded in 1964 became the base for his ‘curatorial building,’ which received a roof with the invention of TANAS (20 08 – 2013). With the exhibition „The Unanswered Question. Iskele 2“ Block considers this building completed.

René Block opened a gallery in Berlin in 1964 at the age of 22, whose first exhibitions and performances were arranged with then also young artists like Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Wolf Vostell, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik and the international Fluxus group a.o. In 1974 he opened an exhibition space in New York with "I like America and America likes Me," by Joseph Beuys. At the same time Blocks started to work as an independent curator, he curated "Downtown Manhattan: SoHo," 1976, and "Für Augen und Ohren", 1980, both for the Berlin Festival as well as "Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui" for the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1981. From 1993 until 1995 he determined the program of the exhibition service at the Institute for Foreign Relations (ifa), which is responsible for the presentation of German art abroad. From 1997 until 2006 René Block was the director of the Kunsthalle Museum Fridericianum in Kassel. In 2008 he founded the artspace TANAS in Berlin, a platform for Turkish art. In Denmark he was cofounder of Kunsthalle 44 Moen and functions as its artistic director. Some other important exhibitions: 1990 "The Readymade Boomerang", 8. Biennial of Sydney 1994 "Iskele", contemporary artists from Istanbul, ifa-galleries in Stuttgart, Berlin, Bonn 1995 "Orient/ation", 4. Istanbul Biennale 1997 "Pro Lidice", Museum of Fine Arts, Prague 2000 "Eurafrica", 3. Gwangju Biennial, Korea "Das Lied von der Erde", Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel First international Biennial Conference, Kassel 2003 "In den Schluchten des Balkan", Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel 2004 "Love it or leave it", 5. Cetinje Biennale, Montenegro (together with Nataša Ilic) 2007 "Welfare – Farewell", Nordic Pavilion (Norway/Sweden/Finland), Venice Biennial 2010 "Starter", inaugural exhibition for ARTER, Istanbul 2013 "Eine kleine MACHTMusik", Museum ESSL, Klosterneuburg/Wien 2013 "Iskele 2 – The unanswered question", TANAS and NBK, Berlin.

**Sylvia Ruttimann** has studied art history and has graduated as a Master of Advanced Studies in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK, she is working as a translator and art educator in Basel.

**Karin Seinsoth** studied art history and has graduated with a Certificate in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK. She is currently working as a project manager at Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

# Re-Staging of an exhibition-concept by Manon Slome and Joshua Simon

In 2008, a group of international participants, young curators, and lecturers of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) generated a set of questions on the *Aesthetics of Terror* exhibition. Originally planned to be shown at the Chelsea Art Museum, New York, the show was pulled by the curators Manon Slome and Joshua Simon following 'institutional demands' that would have compromised the integrity of the project. After this cancellation, which was shortly before the scheduled opening in November 2008, Slome then resigned from her position as chief curator at CAM.

Following these incidents, the curators: Olaf Arndt, Moritz von Rappard, Janneke Schönenbach, Cecilia Wee, in their exhibition *Embedded Art* (Akademie der Künste, Berlin 24.01.2009 - 22.03.2009;), offered "virtual asylum" to *Aesthetics of Terror*, inviting curators Manon Slome and Joshua Simon to present their exhibition through *Embedded Art's* video projection programme. Through this inclusion, Slome and Simon introduced the selected works in Berlin and the *Aesthetics of Terror* weekend was the only occasion for visitors to view these works as an entire installation before they were drawn together as a book project, released with Charta Books in 2009.

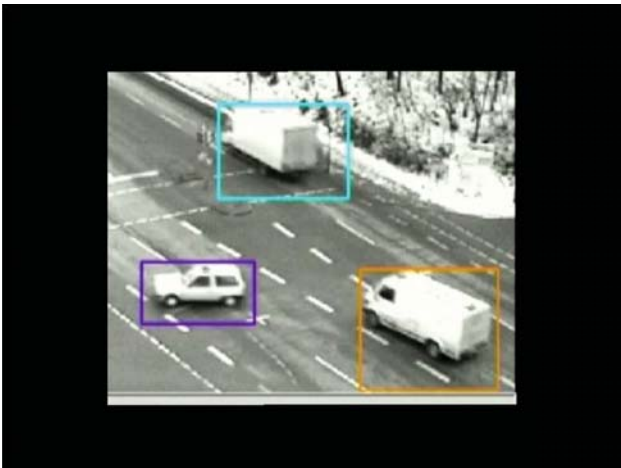
The Postgraduate Programme in Curating also exhibited the project at the White Space, in Zurich as a slide show with images from the Berlin show and other documentation, together with a list of questions on the context and meaning of the project. This was accompanied by workshops and talks with Joshua Simon, Friedemann Derschmidt, Karin Schneider, Tal Adler.

Terror is, in and of itself, an image making machine. The very point of terror is a spectacle that plays endlessly in the media. In the events of 11.09.2001, thousands have died, but billions of people watched the attack and the falling towers endlessly until those images were etched into the global psyche. While terrorism and its representations have been widely discussed ever since the attack, very few of these contemplations have tackled the issue of specific formal qualities and pictorial strategies of terrorism.

The exhibition *The Aesthetics of Terror* tries to do exactly that; namely, it investigates certain visual characteristics of the spectacle of terror and its echoes in contemporary art. The exhibition employs the distinction made by artist Roe Rosen on the principle gap between representations of underground terrorism, produced by terrorist groups, and images of State terror - this is the gap between figuration and abstraction. The representational apparatus of State terror, says Rosen, is based on the blurring or erasure of central figures, exchanging it for

abstraction: Smart Bombs' aerial views of bombardments, for example, or the blocking of visibility by grids or satellite type images that obscure rather than illuminate. On the other end, representations of underground terrorism strive for a central, powerful figure or symbol – the portrait of a suicide bomber, collapsing skyscrapers and the icon of bearded Osama Bin Laden with his golden gown and triangular composition - "this is an icon in the religious sense: a human, semi-divine person whose very appearance defies the divide of life and death," Rosen claims (*Western (Maarvon) – New Film Magazine*, Issue 1, Dec. 2005, p. 59).

The works in *The Aesthetics of Terror* map the relationship between abstraction and technology; colour and violence, pixilated images and sovereignty, saturation and contour, authenticity and resolution. *The Aesthetics of Terror*, suggests an emergence of an artistic sensibility. This has been informed by the imagery and politics of terrorism in the media.

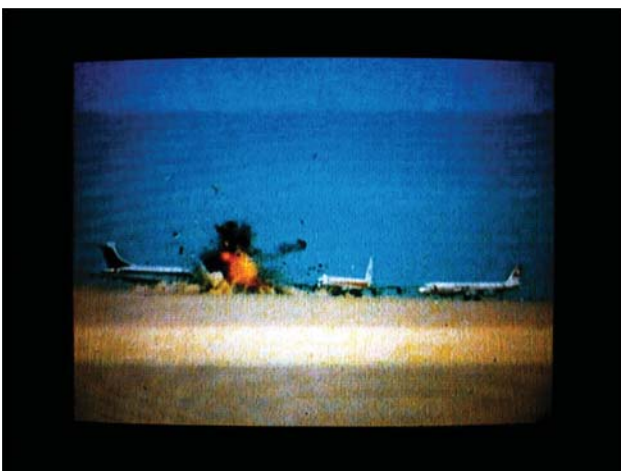


Harun Farocki, *War at a distance*, 2003, 58 min. Courtesy of the artist + Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

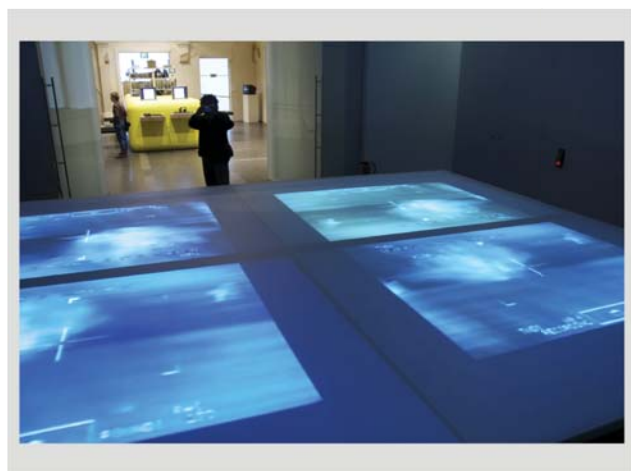
We started to talk about the exhibition „aesthetics of terror“ when we heard that it was cancelled.

We read the catalogue and began to question media, art, representation, and the power of images.

How could they imagine art to be so dangerous?



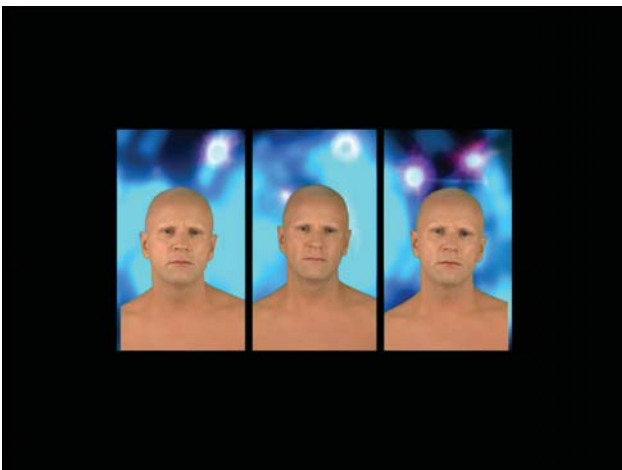
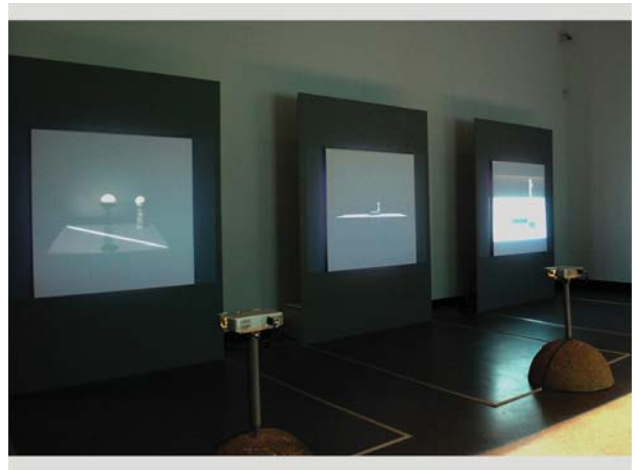
Johan Grimmonprez, *DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, video, 01:08:00 min courtesy of the artist + Sean Kelly Gallery







Jenny Holzer, *Hand prints green white*, 2006, oil on linen, 4 elements, 58" x 176" x 1.5", Courtesy of the artist + Cheim & Read, New York



Björn Melhus, *Deadly storms* (2008), 9-channel video installation, 00:07:27 min

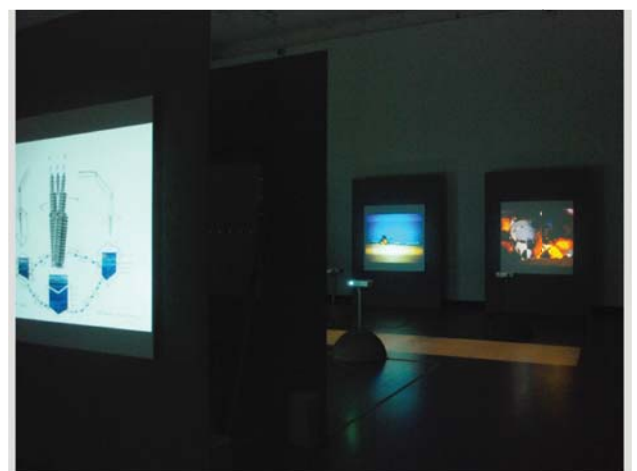
How do media images shorten a specific situation into an icon – freezing it into one picture that does not create contradictions or complexity?

Are some works of art capable of representing more complex analyses?

And had we as well handed over „explanations“ to images and media?



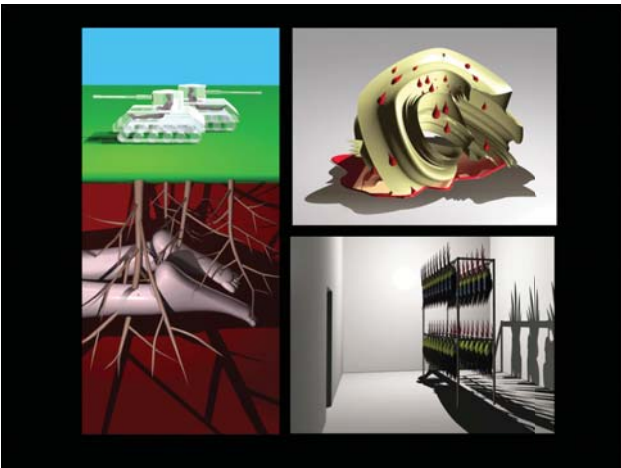
Teresa Diehl, *Same Time, Different Landscape* (2009) detail, Glycerine soap, filament Courtesy of the artist





Richard Mosse, *KILLCAM*, 2008, hd video and youtube downloads, 05:52 min quicktime movie hd, courtesy of the artist + Jack Shinman Gallery, New York

How are we addressed? By media? By art?  
 As viewers who are safely at home but still feeling agitated? As individuals? As specific groups? How are you addressed?



Yves Netzhammer, *We belong to our organs, so we can only partly plan our lives*, 2008, 9-channel video installation, 20 min loop, Courtesy of the artist + Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main



Martha Rosler, (from the *bringing the war home series*), *beauty rest*, 1967-1972, photomontage, 22" x 26", Courtesy the artist + Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York



# Aesthetics of Terror

## Manon Slome

The use of “aesthetics” and “terror” in the same sentence is more than disturbing. What is meant by each term, and how can they be linked? From the start, let me emphasize that I do not equate the word “terror” only with the actions of “terrorists” and war with its opposition, as in “the War on Terror.” The Iraqi war, which began on March 20, 2003, was entered into under false premises; thousands of soldiers have died; tens of thousands have been horrendously wounded; and over three hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed, maimed, and traumatized. Through government sanctioned abuse and torture of detainees, and the refusal to abide to the protections of the Geneva Convention, we have squandered our claim of spreading democracy in the world: indeed, former Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales, called such a democratic conception of politics “quaint.” These circumstances must also be seen and understood as terror. As critical theorist Giorgio Agamben asserts:

A state, which has security as its sole task and source of legitimacy is a fragile organism; it can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terrorist.<sup>1</sup>

As for the use of “aesthetics,” I use this term in a neutral sense, as in a study of the forms and principles by which the images under investigation are used, not with a reference to the word’s popular connotations of beauty or value. I am in search of what can be termed an “aesthetics of terror” much in the way that the nomenclature “fascist architecture” immediately connotes a style of building. At this stage, we may not have the clarity of distance as in the aforementioned example, but such an aesthetic of terror is, I believe, permeating our popular culture and that of the visual arts. As Henry Giroux expressed it in a powerful book, *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism*:

Just as the necessity of fighting terror has become the central rationale for war used by the Bush administration and other governments, a visual culture of shock and awe has emerged, made ubiquitous by the Internet and 24-hour cable news shows devoted to representations of the horrific violence associated with terrorism, ranging from aestheticized images of night time bombing raids on Iraqi cities to the countervailing imagery of grotesque killings of hostages by Iraqi fundamentalists.<sup>2</sup>

The link between terror and aesthetics first became apparent to me in the preponderance of images I kept seeing in galleries that seemed to belong more in the pages of Time magazine or in news coverage than in an art space—depictions of tanks and soldiers, riots in the streets, bodies strewn on the ground in the “aftermath” of conflict. As striking as many of these photographs were (some meticulously printed and presented, others “raw” with the negative edges of a contact sheet kept as part of the composition, some real footage, others staged), I questioned their function in the museum/gallery setting. Were they protests? Did they make visible (a claim I have heard) images that the newspapers would not print because of their inflammatory nature—disclosing what the government wanted to

keep hidden? Or did this translation or appropriation of war imagery, images of suicide bombers, real or fictional, itself become another trope, a kind of pop, in the sense that it was an uncritical mirroring of images already circulating in our culture, only now the soup can has become a gun? Did they move viewers closer to an apprehension of truth, allowing them to get closer to an independent experience of terror, or did they simply isolate and aestheticize the experience, projecting and protecting at the same time?

A seemingly unconnected incident heightened this questioning. I was in a department store in New York and saw a coat that was “designed” to look like the coat worn by a homeless person. A sleeve was fastened with safety pins to the body of the coat, a twisted piece of rope formed the belt, mismatched buttons were poorly stitched along the front, and threads dangled everywhere. The price tag at \$3,500 made it one of the more immoral objects I have seen and I was struck yet again by the principle of absorption, by how the market/fashion apparatus can transform and thus make palatable (invisible) aspects of our world that either don’t conform to the consumer visions of America or would somehow challenge the prevailing fictions. If the coat becomes an example of “urban chic” and thus removes us from noticing the “homeless” connotation any more, cannot the same be done with warfare—a question that is central in Martha Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home* series. If, in a sense, our life of comfort and security can be assured by a war “out there,” fought by others, what price do we put on a human life, a limb, a dying child, a bombed village? “Some things money can’t buy. For everything else there is Master Card,” goes a contemporary advertisement. For the illusion/delusion of being “tough” on terror and protecting our access to oil, it seems that we are, indeed, often willing to exchange the priceless for profit.

The mechanisms for selling war were much like any other commodity-based campaign. The *New York Times* reporter, David Barstow, revealed the attempt by the US government to achieve “information dominance” through the use of “message force multipliers,” retired military officers acting as “military analysts” whose supposed long service has “equipped them to give authoritative and unfettered judgments about the most pressing issues of the post-September 11 world”.

Hidden behind that appearance of objectivity, though, is a Pentagon information apparatus that has used those analysts in a campaign to generate favourable news coverage of the administration’s wartime performance . . . The effort which began with the build-up to the Iraq war and continues to this day, has sought to exploit ideological and military allegiances, and also a powerful financial dynamic: most of the analysts have ties to military contractors vested in the very war policies they are asked to assess on air.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to the “homeless” coat and the marketing of war (via the circulation of terroristic motifs such as camouflage, masked models, and war-oriented video games), I was reminded of Slavoj Žižek’s comment:

“. . . we should be aware of the dangers of the ‘Christification of Che,’ turning him into an icon of radical-chic consumer culture, a martyr ready to die for his love of humanity.<sup>4</sup>

One thinks immediately of today’s resurgent fashion for Che T-shirts which sport an image of that wild haired, handsome, and defiant revolutionary whose stylized portrait used to decorate every college dorm wall in the 1960s. Žižek’s words indicate a seemingly inevitable connection between authentic revolutionary

liberation and violence: when “belief” meets the commodifying mechanisms of society’s paradigm du jour, either oppression of the “radicals” or savage resistance of these “revolutionaries” must result. Regardless of how the situation might be framed, it often seems that violence is a tacit premise in the argument for liberation. But perhaps another approach to examining Che’s transfiguration from terrorist to T-shirt icon would be to suggest that a “Chicification of Che” that has allowed designers to capitalize on a perceived element of “coolness” in defying authority figures. The ideologically vacuous popularity of Che and his representation on fashion products likewise devalues the incalculable human cost of a violent revolution, without regards to side or sensibility. Perhaps the most damaging effect of these “cultural” purchases, however, is that they appease the consumer’s (supposed) guilt about being “socially conscious” or “politically active.” Rather than heightening our vigilance, participating in the “Che aesthetic” serves to sanitize our national or personal self-perception by making tolerable, and even fashionable, narrative threads of violence we are exposed to in the media, or in our lives. It is utterly irrational (but nevertheless psychologically expedient) to venerate and glorify militant activism and principled resistance to foreign influence (as with Che), while concurrently maintaining that insurgency and ideational dissonance in the Middle East are inherently the result of a radical unreasoning evil.<sup>5</sup>

The iconography of what I am terming “terror” can be said to have entered world consciousness with the attack on the World Trade Center (I am aware of writing from the relative security of America—for those who have lived their whole lives with terror, imagery, or its starting point are of little concern). What emerged in terms of the visibility of the act was the power of terror as an image-making machine, an exploitation of spectacle. Thousands died in the attacks, but billions of people endlessly watched the falling towers until those images were etched into the global psyche. Many writers and artists considered 9/11 a work of art with which few could compete.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Ruff also did not see the need to elaborate on this new visuality: in his Jpeg series, he simply downloaded from the Internet images of the falling towers, as well as other natural and manmade disasters, preserving intact, as Baudrillard wrote in the *Spirit of Terrorism*, “the unforgettable incandescence of the images.”<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard continues:

Among the other weapons of the system which they turned round against it, the terrorists exploited the “real time” of images, their instantaneous worldwide transmission just as they exploited stock market speculation, electronic information, and air traffic . . . The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as an image event.<sup>8</sup>

I want to make it very clear that I am not resorting here to talking about images of terror as the final stages of a society of spectacle as described by Guy De Bord: war is far from an “image event,” as Susan Sontag has eloquently pointed out in *Viewing War Photography*.<sup>9</sup> To speak of spectacle or an image war in this way is to deny the horrendous reality of those who suffer in real time and space from the violence that has been released and which rages without apparent end. What I do refer to, however, is the way the paradigms have changed in the current fiascos of our War on Terror and contemporary issues of terrorism. Image making has become a significant weapon in a distinctly new kind of warfare; as much as in politics, war is fought through ideological representation in the media as well as on the bloodied streets of Iraq and Afghanistan, Mumbai and Madrid. Cyber Jihad and

Celebrity Terrorism (the latter term coined by CNN following the dissemination of images of the terrorists through the global media following the assault on Mumbai) are fought out in media images whose worldwide dissemination can influence an entire generation in the making. As the Mumbai attacks and the grisly executions from Iraq and Pakistan so clearly illustrate, hostage taking is no longer about having demands met, but rather to ensure increased international coverage. As W.J.T. Mitchell says in a powerful essay, "The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable Word and Image in a Time of Terror":

Terrorism, then, is a war of words and images carried by the mass media, a form of psychological warfare whose aim is the demoralization of the enemy and not the direct destruction of military personnel or equipment. I don't mean by this that it is not a real war, but that it is an updated version of a very old kind of war, one that is conducted mainly by symbolic gestures of violence, one that attempts to conquer the enemy through psychological intimidation rather than physical coercion. Terrorists do not occupy territory. They deterritorialize violence, making it possible for it to strike anywhere. The randomness and unpredictability of terror, coupled with its sense of over determined symbolic significance, produce a different kind of battlefield, one that has no front or back . . . The whole notion of a conventional, military "war on terror" in this light is quite incoherent, confusing one kind of war with another. It is the sort of asymmetrical warfare that is doomed, not just to failure, but to actually strengthening the enemy against which it is waged.<sup>10</sup>

What Mitchell points to (besides the fact that our current war strategy is hopelessly out of touch with the realities on the ground) is that we are beyond a "camera mediated knowledge of war" (Italics mine): the camera, and all its media extensions of film, video and Internet and cell phones have become active participants in a struggle that is as symbolic as it is brutal, as the image is elevated to "a prominent feature of social and political power."<sup>11</sup> Yet, at the same time as we are bombarded with images of the violence of terrorism, the War on Terror is rendered as invisible as possible by the government propaganda apparatus supported by the networks. As Ara Merjian wrote in an edition of *Modern Painters* devoted to the issue of art and war:

Despite the refinement of surveillance technology, we grasp far less about events in Iraq and Afghanistan—their textures, tempos, bodies, and banalities—than even citizens of the first "television war" saw of Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

The lists of soldiers' deaths are tucked deep inside the newspapers while any imagery that is released by the media is censored and sanitized. What we are fed instead are carefully crafted speeches or photo-ops like "Mission Accomplished" (see *Top Gun*) or the inside of Saddam Hussein's mouth as the devil incarnate is "brought to his just deserts" and humiliated in the public media by a dental inspection. The dangers for the Administration of unregulated imagery were, of course, brought to a head with the Abu-Ghraib photographs, which showed our troops engaged in anything but the spread of democracy.

This dialectic of visibility and concealment, of disclosure and obfuscation and its echo in contemporary art is central to the investigation in *The Aesthetics of Terror*. This contrast and distinction was articulated by Israeli artist, Roee Rosen, on the principal gap between representations of underground terrorism, produced by terrorist groups, and the obfuscation of images of State Terror—banning images of returning coffins or maimed soldiers, the replacement of war coverage by blurred night vision or thermal imaging, censored documents, and the like. In terms of the

“aesthetics” of terror, this gap becomes the space between figuration and abstraction.

The representational apparatus of State Terror, says Rosen, is based on the blurring or erasure of central figures, exchanging it for abstraction: smart bombs’ aerial views of bombardments, for example, or the blocking of visibility by grids or satellite type images that obscure rather than illuminate. On the other end, representations of underground terrorism strive for a central, powerful figure or symbol—the portrait of a suicide bomber, collapsing skyscrapers, and the icon of bearded Osama bin Laden with his golden gown and triangular composition—“this is an icon in the religious sense: a human, semi-divine person whose very appearance defies the divide of life and death,” Rosen claims.<sup>13</sup>

What I would further suggest is the emergence of an artistic sensibility that has been informed by the imagery and politics of terrorism in the current culture as they have been formulated and conveyed through the popular media. Artworks might imitate or mirror this media rhetoric, identify its mechanisms to the viewer, critique it, push back or protest against it. For example, Coco Fusco’s examination of the apparatus of psychological torture used in interrogation is filtered through the rubric of a reality show; Harun Farocki and Johan Grimmonprez dismantle news coverage of hijackings and war coverage; Jon Kessler creates war machines with imagery derived directly from magazines and action heroes, while he exploits the concept of real time action and documentation. The artists discussed in *The Aesthetics of Terror* map the relationship between abstraction and technology, color and violence, pixilated images and sovereignty, saturation and contour, authenticity and resolution.

Several interesting questions present themselves. Are these artworks concerned with the operations of terror behind and through the media representations, and not so much with any actual experience of violence? Does that gap take the viewer one further stage away from the apprehension of violence and terror, too? When an image of war or terrorism moves from the newspaper or news networks to the gallery or museum, what causes the shift from an image having “documentary” relevance to it becoming an aesthetic object circulating in the art system? As artists navigate these boundaries, either through direct translation or through appropriation, does violence retain its power to inspire fear, or does this contextual transposition fetishize violence, stripping it of meaning through aestheticization? Does this art “bight” as I referred to Leon Golub’s work in an earlier exhibition catalogue, *Anxiety* (Chelsea Art Museum, April 2003) just as America was entering the war? (Works by Leon Golub, Joshua Neustein, Mona Hatoum, Reynold Reynold, and Patrick Jolley made palpable the physical and psychic disruption of that period.<sup>14</sup>) Can the work be said to carry a sense of moral denunciation and outrage akin to say Goya, Grosz, or Dix? Or does this work itself become a self-conscious participant in the spectacle of consumerism of images, an appropriation of which “terror” becomes one more trope? It is with these questions in mind that *The Aesthetics of Terror* was born.

[ ... ]

A final group of artists under discussion look to history as a lens through which to make sense of the present. As Naeem Mohaiemen expresses it so succinctly, the accelerated speed of events can be overwhelming to a politically engaged artist: I started feeling like a hamster on a wheel. There was something soul-deadening about always responding to the news. Because so much of that

project was constantly in reactive mode and headline driven, it was not just activist art interventions, it started becoming emotionally exhausting. Every day there would be a fresh outrage in *The New York Times* (or the *Times*' under-reporting itself would be the outrage) and you would feel compelled to respond through your work. It eventually crowded out any space for contemplation. Partially as a reaction to that I started retreating further into history—to find a quiet space where I could find a vantage point to consider confrontation and the revolution impulse.<sup>38</sup> *Red Ant Motherhood, Meet Starfish Nation* (2007) is part of a series in which Mohaiemen investigates historical sites of death. In this triptych, Mohaiemen contemplates the mass graves of the twenty-two members of the Sheikh Mujib family (Mujib was the founding leader of Bangladesh) killed in the 1975 military coup that overthrew the elected quasi-socialist Mujib government. The third panel quotes text from Lawrence Lifschultz's report on alleged CIA involvement in the coup. These warm, rusty red images were captured as Mohaiemen sat all day by the graves, "through a (surprisingly) uneventful Friday. No visitors came: no mourners, no politicians. Only some insects (soldier ants) and the gardener who waters the grave sites."

Part of Mohaiemen's motivation here is to explore what he feels is the almost fetishistic interest in excavating a "foreign" connection to events, a grand theory of conspiracy that is layered onto even the most dramatic historical moments. "Everybody just 'knows' the link exists, no hard evidence needed. Smoking guns are assumed." Mohaiemen's *War of 666 Against Sixty Million* (2007) is made of degraded images from the TV broadcast of Hanns-Martin Schleyer's funeral. Schleyer was the head of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) and the Federation of German Industries (BDI) when he was kidnapped on September 5, 1977 by the extreme left militant organization Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), known in its early activities as the Baader-Meinhof Group. Murdered in captivity one and a half months later after the German government did not give in to the RAF's demands, Schleyer, a former mid-rank SS officer, received a State funeral and a three-minute silence in the Daimler factory. While the kidnapping and assassination provided the German State with a pretext to dramatically strengthen the level of surveillance and detention, for RAF sympathizers the national hysteria surrounding Schleyer's death revealed the continuing roots of crypto-fascism within the German economic miracle. Thus both parties were locked into a black-and-white vision of conflict. The other side was always "evil," "Hitler's children," "fascists," and "satanic" (hence 6-6-6 in the title, from the horror film *The Omen*). Yet they also exaggerated their opponent's strength, leading Nobel laureate Heinrich Boll to disdainfully call it "the war of six against sixty million." (The same day Schleyer was shot to death by his captors, RAF members Andreas Baader, Jan-Carl Raspe, and Gudrun Ensslin were found dead in their cells in a Stuttgart prison. Basing his celebrated 1988 series of paintings *October 18, 1977* on newspaper and police photographs, Gerhard Richter, evoked the historical event and its politics of representation.)

Reflecting on the ambiguous images from the funeral of SS officer turned martyr and national hero, Mohaiemen asks what we can make of such a hyperventilating ceremony. His response was to contrast the sophisticated technology of both surveillance apparatus and the media coverage with a deliberately "low-tech" and tainted process. He secured a damaged VHS player to produce a blurred signal and played the funeral sequence repeatedly until the tape degraded to produce a static storm when played in slow motion. Interference, abuse, damage, chimera, and the occult, as visited on popular perceptions, reflect Mohaiemen's preoccupation with failed revolutions. What often begins as a leap into utopia too often ends debased and corrupt and the fight for freedom ends in a police state.



Zoya Cherkassky's *Jewish Terrorists* (Fanny Kaplan and Herschel Grynszpan) (2002) shows porcelain figurines of two tragic Jewish terrorists pointing. On August 30, 1918, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was speaking at a Moscow factory. As he left the building and before he entered his car, Fanny Kaplan, a Russian revolutionary and descendant of a Jewish family, called out to him. When he turned towards her, she fired three shots. When it became clear that Kaplan would not implicate other political opponents of Lenin, she was shot on September 3. On November 7, 1938 seventeen-year-old Herschel Grynszpan walked into the German Embassy in Paris and shot Third Secretary, Ernst von Rath, to avenge the brutal abduction of Jewish Poles from Germany, among them, his parents. For the Nazis the shooting supplied the pretext for massive pogroms launched against Jews in Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland—the Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. In the subsequent twenty-four hours, Nazi storm troopers along with members of the SS and Hitler Youth beat and murdered Jews, broke into and wrecked Jewish homes, brutalized Jewish women and children, destroyed synagogues, hospitals, and schools, and looted Jewish businesses. Thirty thousand Jews were sent to concentration camps. Shown in Tel Aviv during one of the most deadly years of the Second Intifada—when Palestinian organizations were sending suicide bombers to Israeli towns, and the Israeli military re-occupied refugee camps and initiated targeted killings in Gaza and the West Bank—Cherkassky's Fanny and Herschel stood accusing. So what kind of art is this? What is the intention of these artists in bringing images of war and terror into the immediacy of the art space, and how does it influence our reception of events? Much of the work is decidedly painful, as the viewer is often placed in the central and complicit position of eye-witness. I, for one, was often unsure how to process the information or the feelings that the works aroused, but the experience of curating the original exhibition, writing this essay, and immersing myself in discussion with these artists gave me a sense of hope, even sanity, too often missing in our public life. Looking at art in the midst of war and horror may appear to be a trivialization, and an exhibition of this kind might be the artistic equivalent of the Che T-shirt referred to at the beginning of the essay—assuaging our guilt through the pretensions of artistic activity and intellectual research.

While the art is not didactic, it does, I believe, engage in us a sense of “critical citizenship” that encourages a rethinking of the crucial role of images in our media-saturated world. When simultaneity of event and image are coupled with the omnipresent fear of war and terror, the image can be used not only for entertainment and information, but also as both a weapon and a shield. It is crucial for us to learn to “see” the difference and resist the demagogic strategies to which a media driven society can be subject.

### Notes

- 1 Henry Giroux, *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism, Global Uncertainty and the Challenge of the New Media*, Paradigm Publishers, 2006, p. 42.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 3 The New York Times, April 20, 2008 p. A1.
- 4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT, 2003.
- 5 For the thoughts expressed in this paragraph and for his meticulously careful editing, I am indebted to Joseph Saei.
- 6 [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11).
- 7 Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (translated by Chris Turner) Verso, 2003, p. 4.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

9 "Looking at War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death," *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2002, pp. 82–98.

10 *The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror*, 298-9 W. J. Thomas Mitchell – *The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror* – ELH 72:2 ELH 72.2 (2005) 291-308

11 Mitchell goes on to say: "This blocking of the scopic and vocative drives receives its most literal rendering, of course, in the now familiar scenes of decapitation that circulate on television and the Internet. These scenes are in themselves 'unspeakable' and 'unimaginable' even as they symbolize the ultimate interdiction of speech and vision, and are themselves subjected to censorship on American television, while widely circulated on the Internet."

12 *Modern Painters*, April 2008, Ara Merjian, "Diminishing Returns," p. 57.

13 "Basic Instinct Meets the War in Iraq," *Maarvon* – *New Film Magazine*, 1, 2005.

14 See exhibition catalogue, *Anxiety*, *The Chelsea Art Museum*, 2003.

[ ... ]

38 *Ibid.*

**Manon Slome** is founder and chief curator of *No Longer Empty*, an organization which engages new audiences for contemporary art through site specific exhibitions in non traditional spaces. Since the organization was formed in 2009, she has curated some 14 exhibitions which have been accompanied enriching cultural and educational programming that have sought to leave a legacy for the community. She was Chief Curator of the Chelsea Art Museum from 2003 -2008 where she worked with such artists as Leon Golub, Mona Hatoum, Jose Parla, Federico Uribe, MIMO Rotella, Michael Bevilacqua, Miwa Yanagi and Shu Lee Shang. Group shows she curated include "Dangerous Beauty," "Such Stuff as Dreams are Made on" and "The Incomplete." At the Guggenheim Museum, (1995-2003), Slome organized *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, *China 5000 Years* and *the Art of the Motorcycle*.

Slome has curated exhibitions internationally and has published and lectured widely on contemporary art. She was also a curatorial consultant to the Annenberg Space for Photography for the exhibition, *Beauty Culture*. She is a recipient of the Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellowship at the Whitney Independent Study program. She earned her Doctorate at the University of Sussex, England and pursued post- doctoral studies at Columbia University, New York. She is currently working on an exhibition for the affordable housing project in Sugar Hill designed by David Adjaye under the auspices of the Broadway Housing Community and working on a book, "Running on Empty" which covers the first five years of *No Longer Empty*.

**Joshua Simon** is director and chief curator at MoBY – Museums of Bat Yam. He is co-founding editor of *Maayan Magazine* for literature, poetry and ideas, *Maarvon* (Western) – *New Film Magazine*, and *The New [eɪ] Bad Art Magazine*, all based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Simon is a 2011-2013 fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, The New School, New York, and a PhD candidate at the Curatorial/Knowledge program at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Simon is co-editor of *The Aesthetics of Terror* (Chrata books, 2009), and the editor of *Solution 196-213: United States of Palestine-Israel* (Sternberg Press, 2011). His book *Neomaterialism* came out earlier this year (Sternberg Press, 2013).

# Rainer Ganahl

## interviewed by Katharina Schendl and Ingela Johansson

**Katharina Schendl and Ingela Johansson:**

Would you describe your work as an anti-capitalist art production?

**Rainer Ganahl:** I don't think in these terms.

What is "capitalist" and what is "anti-capitalist"? We all live in an economic order that requires financial sandwiching but we should not allow financial witchcraft with sand, as we had it with the recent supreme mortgage crisis to name just one obvious example. Banking that serves people is necessary, but rogue banking that privatizes profits and leaves losses and bailouts to the general public is unacceptable.

Some aspects of my work as an artist address these issues, but I try to refrain from taking positions: I just observe and replicate the language used in it, as it is political or financial. Currently I'm doing Credit Crunch Meals, informed by daily financial news which is often obscene and hideous. I find it necessary to cope with this often obscene economic injustice, with real effects on people's lives, and add some of mine, made of perishable food – a very direct way to counter the abstract world of high and not so high finance and politics.

Now, does the fact that I deal also with capitalist or anti-capitalist aspects make my work capitalist or anti-capitalist? It is really up to the beholder. People can read it the way they want, but the moment somebody buys something from my Credit Crunch Meal Series (let's say a potato in the shape of a misshaped dick with a life span of five to fifteen days, depending on your tolerance for rotten food) we would enter capitalism.

If the collector waits to the end of the show, he could eat it or have it moulding in the fridge. These food pieces are given away for free, are made for consumption or for one day display only. Franz West wanted my Lenin carved into a piece of Bergkäse from my MAK performance. He stored it for some

months in his freezer, but eventually I had to rescue it in a pretty dire state. I am not even sure where it is right now, but I asked my Brussels gallery – where we showed it deformed after four months over the due date without refrigeration – not to trash it. It is now in some kind of do it yourself Mausoleum in various bags and canister, if no cleaning person trashed it unauthorized.

But since I don't want to cater just to anti-capitalist forces in our society, who sympathize with one-way art – meaning: immediately disposable perishables – I also have some of my veggie-stars rendered immortal with porcelain.<sup>1</sup> These sculptures are made for the table and are used to stimulate participation by the host and all dinner guests. You are free to recombine and sculpt everything around them, most preferably money symbols, company logos or business news headlines.

**KSEIJ:** If you give the production the same value as the artwork, is the production more democratic than the art itself? Who is included in the production?

**RG:** Let me be very frank: I don't produce any value. As an artist I only make art and propose something that can be valued or trashed. The circulation, the acceptance or the refusal of what I do determines the value of my work. I am not the one who decides this: it's the curator, the collector, the critic, and the beholder. Concerning democracy in art, I just mentioned that my porcelain renderings are utterly democratic since a collector is invited to add his own food creations next to it: s/he should sculpt out of his/her sausage some kind of sexual organ (for example) in whatever realistic or unrealistic way. But democracy starts already simply by participating in all these games. As you know, if we are in China, we might run very early into trouble as did Ai Weiwei.

**KS&IJ:** To make changes, should artist leave the 'art world' or is it possible to make changes from inside the art system? Or is it an illusion? In what sense does that have an impact on the local and the global, on which scale?

**RG:** Again, it is not the artist who stays or leaves the system. It is the art system that accepts or rejects somebody and the artist is mostly powerless and can barely influence it apart from making good or bad work. Now, am I in the art system or outside it? Do I get fancy invitations by museums, which I have to turn down like a Catalan, or not? I of course, don't. So I don't have this problem of being in or out of something that is so abstract and so bizarre and so impossible to manipulate. Most of my works I have made in the fringes of the art world, with money coming only from institutions if any. Do I feel squeezed and corrupted by the system? I wish! (joking) Nobody really cares and nobody tries to influence me, to "buy me" or "corrupt me." Success is the illusion and the problem. But relative failure to paddle through that world of money and influence is pretty healthy and has served me so far well. I have relative little storage problems from over production, no collapsing prices, no illegal Swiss account problems, not too many scheduling conflicts. I have barely had to turn down any invitation, and I don't need assistance for emailing and phone answering. I even can enjoy answering questions to students of curatorial studies in the middle of the afternoon without creating an unmanageable work backlog. I don't have to worry too much about what I say and can even right away publish it on my web site, in the end my only outlet for my work.

So in short, concerning the art world - or lets say the art village or art enclosure - there is nothing to run away from for the majority of artists and there is really no big impact to have in case someone becomes megalomaniac and wants to change something. The fact that nearly everybody runs after the same few artists at a relatively short-lived given moment is something that no artist can change. Independent of whether this effect is called fashion, herd instinct or something more colloquial, it is wide spread and indeed is not anymore limited to local borders but is global. If somebody really wants to have an impact in this world one has to resist these systems, ignore them. To sum it up in a very naïve but illustrative and pedestrian way: If you go to an opening, you feel stupid; if you stay at home, they feel stupid.

**KS&IJ:** Is it important to define a practice in order to be great at something, or is it to be clear with what you engage in?

**RG:** It depends what you understand by practice. Speaking of myself I do what I like to do and stay within my confines but if you click through my web site (ganahl.info) you see that I do many things. Are they related? Yes and no, depending again on what kind of a perspective you take.

When does somebody become great at something? When real love and intrinsic interest and relevance in something enter the game...Why are you really dealing with art?

**KS&IJ:** In your essay *When attitudes becomes - curating* (2004). What is your position here in relation to autonomy and commodification of objects is there an element of cynicism involved in this statement - playing with the artist as post-Fordist-working force? Or, how is this not counterproductive to anti capitalism?

**RG:** Currently, nobody produces anything for me with the exception of someone finishing up my porcelain production for which I have to pay all by myself without really a show waiting. When I wrote that I was really in a big production jungle with plenty of war shows - so people had to paint for me, work on ceramic tiles, make drawings and many more things - it was a bit as if I had to counter the madness of the Iraq war with the madness of heavy hands on productions.<sup>2</sup>

Of all that stuff, NOTHING, really nothing sold. I do still have the entire production scattered all over the place and pay for storage. Some of that stuff has also been taken hostage by the court system (I won the process after six years in court); some by a gallery that doesn't want to return it and some by the elements (badly stored). Some of the paintings are rolled up and blocking my way to the bed and I bump into them every evening and every morning.

It was my choice to engage in this excess and I enjoyed it a great deal. Did I compromise my autonomy as an artist and committed the crime of commodification of objects? I don't think so, since it all was purely made to communicate and not to sell. The results were unfortunately on my side: nobody in the end purchased anything. This is may be a good example to explain my logic of "moderate failure" as the best recipe for success because had I sold works

at the time I might really have produced much more and that could have been really traumatic and kept me from moving on. Look, now with my self-financed porcelain stuff: I have to pay it myself and only make what I really want and love and what I can afford and not for any market demand. Thus, things are kept in check. Post-Fordism is of course our 'condition humaine' wherever we look whether we like it or not. For the records, the artist almost never was a Fordist producer even though some Asian artists tried to prove the opposite.

**KS&IJ:** The artist is often invited to transform a space. They make a similar reading of the environment as curators. The artists are often producers and organizers of their own work, so there are elements of curating skills already implicit in their work, we guess that is what you mean by: "Curators start to interfere and compete with artists in the artistic decision-making process", what do you see in regard to this power-relation in an exhibition making process – how can it be fruitful? Or do you think it is possible to make resistance towards becoming instrumentalised? Do you draw the line when you negotiate your work condition and set up a framework in the dialog with the curator?

**RG:** Artists are of course curating their own works but this shouldn't be reversed in the sense you seem to flirt with: we don't need curators making decisions that are artistic. I really meant what I wrote. I just got a call by an artist friend of mine, who complained how difficult it was to work with a specific curator who all the times tried to interfere and make important decisions. Since I am not involved in this case I don't mention names but recently, one of my really bad experiences was at the MAK, Vienna with Baerbel Vischer who was really trying to interfere all the time telling me not only what I can show and what not but also what I can produce and what not. This concerned drawings and was not a cost issue but an issue of power.

Now, the relationship between curators and artists is already well defined in your question: the curator invites and sets up the framework in which the artist does his/her work. Now, there is no linear system that tells you this is art and this is context and of course, contexts define works. But the fine line has to be negotiated before hand and during the work. If an artist complains badly one should start listening, and vice versa. If a curator complains the artist also better listens. Money and general resources too are issues that always cause tensions. It is a good idea to

negotiate upfront those limits and get an idea whether the artist's intention might fit or not. But sometimes, some people just don't get it.

Needless to say, the best curatorial work is the one that makes the impossible possible, which encourages solutions that seem out of the budget, out of time, out of reach. There is also a need for curators who are flexible when it comes to last minute changes. Artists while installing for better outcomes can often intuitively cross fixed minds, on standard results. Once in place, the situation might change and it is of so much help if a curator tries to understand what the alternative is instead of insisting on previous plans that might not even really work.

Due to previous misunderstandings – which as such is not a problem - Baerbel Vischer got the numbers wrong, on the placement of three windows. Once I was in Vienna, I immediately corrected the positioning of the new windows but the lady simply refused as if it would be technically impossible, as if it would cost most more money, as if I had nothing to say. The carpenter in place and ready to go, she made such a huge scene – including screaming and yelling at me - that they nearly cut it on some non-sense level. Only once I got a minute to explain it to the carpenters, who immediately also opted for my placement directions, was the worst solution avoided. From that moment on, nearly every decision became a big problem and I was working with a woman who wanted to cross me on every corner. Needless to say, the catalogue, part of the contract with the MAK, was finally made impossible and the working relationship was poisoned throughout the process. Substantial additional money and help which I organized for a 200 page catalogue was not able to flow to the production of the publication directly but was supposed to go to the MAK's internal catalogue division creating almost no difference on their proposed 60 page version. The resulting conflict of that ended with no publication and most of the support money lost. When Noever, for whom Vischer worked, and who she turned against me, finally was kicked out of his job due to corruption, I knew what they were talking about. A curator who used the best and most spacious room a museum has to offer as only their office – an office of the size of the Reichskanzlei on the Beletage – had to pack his things up and leave in shame.

**KS&IJ:** When you were studying at the Whitney Program you mentioned that art is something that takes place outside the reading room, away from

the intellectual discussions in the class. Art was only one optical device to look outside our windows". Can you shortly explain this relationship between art and theory again?

**RG:** Maybe one day I have to re-read and may be rewrite that essay. The relationship between art and theory is of course a complicated one but not one that is impossible to manage or one that needs to lead to headaches, though it can. Well, for beginners, let's say that there is art here and theory there. Let's insist on a division of labour and a difference in context. Let's also assume practical differences, reading, writing and speaking here, art making there, even though that in terms of practice the overlapping starts meanwhile rather sooner than later.

But let's first focus on the structure of compensation, which lets art making be much better financed for less actual work. If writers - and even curators - don't find ways to get paid with artworks, they are awaiting a poor life even if they are successful. The golden parachute is of course the nearby university or the museum or Kunsthalle since I don't want to speculate on the attractiveness of fine minds for better-off partners - also a way to find compensation for theoretical work. If somebody still wants to erase the differences between theory and art then just let's look at the income gap between a successful international artist and a successful international writer or theoretician.

OK, let's be a bit more precise: I myself belong to one of the earliest Kuenstler-creatures who practiced work with the pure mind and wanted to sell it as dirty art work. By the way I still keep doing so. But I understood very early on, that I needed to drop out of my PhD program in philosophy and write for magazines if I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist. So meanwhile, it is part of an academia of young artists who incorporate readings, writings, talks and other forms of knowledge products into their practices. They love to be coached by theoreticians and implant them like trees right into their works. Books in German contemporary art are what once chairs represented: the ideal artistic prop to be meditated upon, the perfect muse to be found in nearly all group shows in the last couple of years. And so do curators. The next Documenta tours as publication event, with the curator as editor in chief. We get 100 notebooks from a spectral mixture of fine minds that serve like streetlights for something bigger to come.

In art school too, a theoretical turn has taken place and introductory classes must include now theory as well as nude drawing and human anatomy. On the more perverse end we see now PhDs made in fine art, the academization of a practice that by definition never wanted to be a "Doctor of Philosophy" but rather its sick, hallucinating patient. In Holland entire art schools turned into research labs engaging with vocabularies that made you wonder whether art was still on anybody's mind. In all this happiness with cross overs the basic formal for definitions and distinctions still remains that one offered by a simple speech act: This is, or this is not. I accept it as art, or as theory if I am told so but in spite of its eloquent uttering or less eloquent stuttering it is again up to the beholder, reader, listener, or consumer and purchaser to decide whether it's good art or good theory we are encountering, or engaged with.

So what is the relationship between art and theory: It is what it is, it is what it wants to be, and it is what it claims to be? But only one really one of the two walks away well paid. Only one gets into the platinum and diamond mileage programs. Only one gets the saying when I come to plastic speech. And usually it's the loud voice with less content that tries to instrumentalize the other and not so much the other way around.

One of my first topics I seriously was studying when I entered university was that between theory and practice by the Adorno, Horkheimer, Marx and Habermas. It was a very important topic and our self-interest sympathized with the fusion of these two in order to look like workers, in order to minimize the gab between the classes and in order to get a voice that can be heard across divisions. Marx's eleventh Feuerbach thesis: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it", was like a coronation, an ecstatic light at the end of a tunnel. We too are part of the working population, and we recognize the theoretical aspect in any kind of work, independent of whether it is lapidary or not. But somehow, in the current climate of theory and art exchange I want to more focus on the differences and insist on them. I am almost more interested in keeping the divide for real and not pretend that it doesn't exist. Whenever I meet a real critic, writer or curator who is without an institution and outside the machine and outside school for more than 10 years, my respect grows exponentially, if they keep it up, if their criticality is still vibrant and lucid. I don't want to see them in bed with silly artists and project managers.

**KS&IJ:** The constant study-project, your study of language as a way of criticising Imperialism and Eurocentric traditions. Is this a life learning process? Do you also translate your artistic process into a life-learning project? When does an artwork start and when does it end? Is it on going machine, a practice of production, what could make you stop?

**RG:** Yes, it is a life long process and yes, it keeps me alive. Its part of an anti-Alzheimers regime that hopeful keeps me focused for many, many years to come. When does an artwork start and when does it end? The answer is simple again: When an artist says so and somebody believes it – or has no other choice but doing so. Yes, language acquisition is an on-going bio-machine with social effects. For me, it also creates a context in which works of art can be created. It is not the learning itself that becomes art it is the learning that creates a context for art making in which anything might be allowed and justified as art products. Since I elaborated on this in many other places, I keep it short: when will it come to an end. Hopefully never but needless to say, depending on my occupations and daily obligations I have seen better times studying. I am currently focussing on Chinese and still need another 10 years and hopefully many months in China, something I am not necessarily able to come by right now. Learning is not only about critique, but also about understanding and change.

**KS&IJ:** Quoting from your essay, *When attitudes becomes curating* (2007): “We more and more see now also artists collecting, curating, writing and dealing as well as collectors, writers and curators making art and reflecting about artistic production in the role of writers and art historians.” It is interesting how you distribute your own works. Mr Ghislain Mollet-Vieville received many postcards with phrases “Please, teach me...”, which in a way is forming a body of a private collection. This means you take control over the perception and value system - making your own choices - that will have a collection of your art works. Could you elaborate more on the role of the collector and your work in relation to distribution systems?

**RG:** Well, you see this in a correct way. “Please, teach me ... “ was not only a about an impossible request, a solicitation for help but also an enunciation, an indexical reminder of a practice of mine, that is superimposed with practicality and meaning, learning and art. But you are only partially right in your second assumption concerning collecting. Giving something away for free doesn't guarantee

that somebody really keeps the stuff received. In many cases they don't. A payment structure is a better guarantor for a presence in a collection than something that doesn't come at a cost. I do have some collectors but not many. Ghislain Mollet-Vieville is a man I really appreciate and we did work together on a couple of projects but I wouldn't look at him as a collector of mine since he never bought anything of mine. Unfortunately, I have very few collectors and they haven't really played a role in the production and distribution of my work. There are only two exceptions: Generali Foundation, Vienna and the Uni-Credit Collection, Milan / Vienna. Both have works of mine in their collections and have extended invitations for exhibitions that led, and have led to much more than just a work for sale. Only galleries or institutions have been playing that role for me.

**KS&IJ:** ]We disagree with your statement that a curator has to defend artists. Don't you think that the job description is a different one? Does the curator not circle more around the relationship between art and audience, in which language they are, if so, able to talk, look, love or hate each other?

**RG:** I say that and mean it, but I don't say that the only function of a curator is to defend an artist. But simply showing an artist is a way of defending an artist. Curating is of course a very complex story that also doesn't need a job description. It is mostly defined while on the job and can consist of nearly anything. I would not even exclude toilet cleaning and prostitution to name just some extremes. Of course, sex work is not a normal part of curatorial work but it could occur given certain circumstances. In well defined places curatorial job expectations might fit given profiles easier than on the field out in nowhere where audiences have to be first established and art explained as if talking to children.

Institutions are not things that exist as such, they also have to be negotiated and re-established anew once protagonists change and they are in perpetual change. The mobile is the basic structure of anything we are involved with. Today, you might be just the moister of one of the hanging weights but in a couple of years your situation might transform an entire arm. In fact it will, it has to change and your time will come.

Interview conducted in New York, November 8, 2011.



#### Notes

1 <http://www.ganahl.info/crunchporcelain>

2 See <http://www.ganahl.info/iraqdialogs.html>  
and <http://www.ganahl.info/morenews.html>

**Rainer Ganahl** (born 1961) is an Austrian born artist. His work consists of photographs, videos and performances. From 1986 until 1991, he studied at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna (Peter Weibel) and the Kunstakademie Duesseldorf (Nam June Paik). He was a member of the 1990/91 Whitney Museum Independent Study Programme in New York. His best known work, *S/L (Seminars/Lectures)*, is an ongoing series of photographs, begun in 1995, of well-known cultural critics addressing audiences. The photographs, taken in university classrooms and lecture halls, not only show the lecturer but also the listeners and students in the audience. In a similar way, he documented his own process of learning an "exotic" language (e. g., *Basic Japanese*) into an art project. In his *Imported-Reading Seminars* held from 1995 onward, the group study of theoretical works from specific countries were documented on video. His latest exhibition studied the linguistic diaspora of Jewish immigrants. Rainer Ganahl represented Austria at the 1999 Venice Biennale.



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