# Co-productive Exhibition-Making and Three Principal Categories of Organisation: the Background, the Middleground 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.[1] 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.[2] 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).[3] 'Coalesce: Happenstance' at SMART Project Space, (2009) was the most recent instalment in an evolutionary project.[4]

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 embroided 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.[5]

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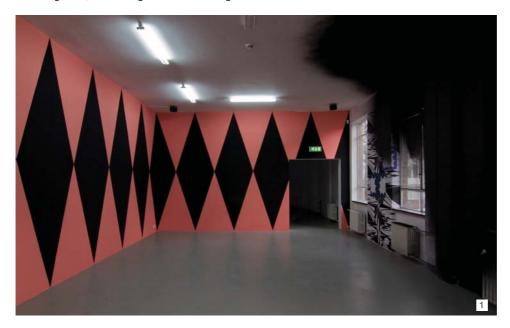
1) surrounds the viewer who moves through it
2) the viewer interacts with only partly
3) contains the viewer in its space of display

By applying Susan Stewart's understanding of landscape (and the gigantic) as a 'container' of objects and mobile viewing subjects[6] 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.'[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.'[10] 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.'[11] '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.
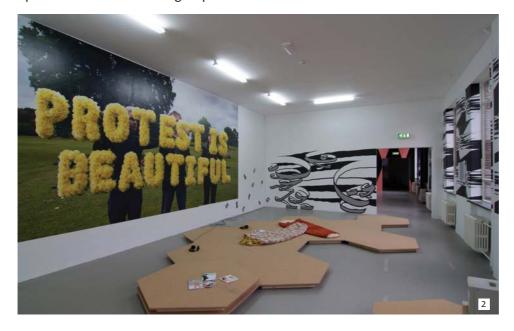
3. The foreground represents a space of containment, in which the viewer is requested to take part in a subject-to-object relationship with those artefacts, images and works of art that could be categorised as autonomous objects for study in their own right. Such works arrive in their complete form and 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'[12] 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 Siegelaub's curatorial projects, benefit from considerable hindsight for, even during the 1960s, the term 'curator' was never used by Siegelaub 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 Siegelaub 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 is 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 Siegelaub, Interview with the author. For a comprehensive examination of Siegelaub'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 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 Huddlestone , 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** Ibd.

**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.*

*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, appoaches 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.*