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Unraveling the Exhibits

Conversation between Daniel Baumann, Martin Jäggi, and Marianne Mueller

Zürich, October 2015



Martin Jäggi: How did you come up with the idea for the exhibition *They Printed It! Invitation Cards, Press Releases, Inserts and Other Forms of Artistic (Self-) Marketing?*

Daniel Baumann: Two elements of my own biography were crucial. In the 1980s, my father was sent invitations at home. I thought some of these were great, and I kept them. It was a cheap way of collecting art and pinning it to the wall. Then, a press release from the American artist Trisha Donnelly for her exhibition at Casey Kaplan in 2007 caused me to pay somewhat more attention to the development of invitations and similar documents. This invitation was minimal and apparently conceived by the artist herself, without any information about what would be shown in the exhibition or about the artist. Instead, there was a cryptic text that seemed to have been written on a typewriter. This was apparently part of the work, part of the exhibition, just as her refusal to make her work accessible or extol herself was part of her artistic position, her conception of art (she still hasn't published a catalog). The result was a fascinating range: on the one hand, the invitation produced by someone else as an advertisement for the artist, and on the other hand the press release or invitation designed by the artist herself, which was perhaps art. This is how I started to collect these kinds of products more intensively, especially press releases written by artists. I had already systematically set aside invitations from certain galleries, and then afterward noticed that something interesting has taken place in this area in the past thirty years. Now that the tradition of sending items by mail is disappearing, I thought that this overlooked chapter of art history deserves somewhat more attention.

Marianne Müller: For a long time, invitations were considered proof that an exhibition occurred in the first place. If you wanted to document your activities as an artist at the Swiss Institute for Art History (SIK), you had to send the invitation in analogue form, not digitally. Only then did they add an exhibition to the appropriate list.

MJ: Is that true? And the SIK still has all those invitations?

DB: Then they might have the largest collection of them. That reminds me of the invitation *One Behind the Other* by Lawrence Weiner from 1976. The invitation from Galerie Schöttle was the exhibition itself; it was an artwork and at the same time “only” the announcement. Weiner is, of course,

someone who used this medium very early on.

MJ: The field of invitations truly came to be actively cultivated only with conceptual art. This has to do with the proximity of conceptual art to advertising.

DB: Exactly. Of course, you have to ask whether people were already conscious of this proximity at the time. In the 1970s, there was that famous American VW advertisement that at least today almost looks like conceptual art.

MJ: You have to keep in mind that advertising in the Anglo-Saxon world at the time was very strongly text-based. Beyond the interest in written language, there is also a link to conceptual art, which became established around the same time.

DB: Building on this, according to my theory, artists such as Louise Lawler began to make active use of this hybrid field, and basically to take advantage of the perversion, the unclear boundaries of the announcement of the exhibition, which is the work and simultaneously an advertisement for the exhibition, for the institution, and for the artist. This was distinct from Fluxus—more disillusioned, or clear-sighted. Another artist who took the same line was Martin Kippenberger with his claim that all his invitations, which he actually made himself, made up his graphic oeuvre.

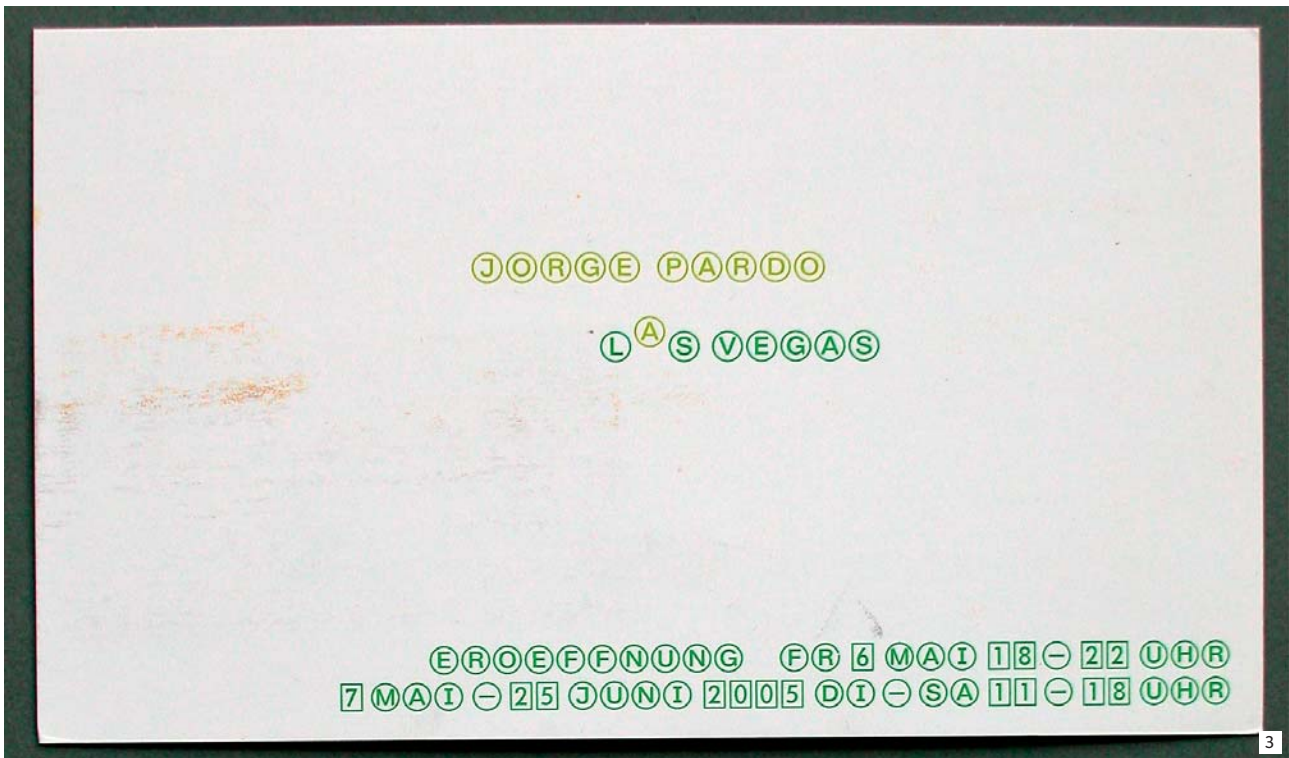
MJ: I find the aspect that you just mentioned interesting. It seems as if invitations are those components of the system in which something like a power struggle between artists, institutions, and galleries is fought out.

DB: You're right. It seems to be the only place where this power struggle, which otherwise takes place behind the scenes, becomes somewhat visible.

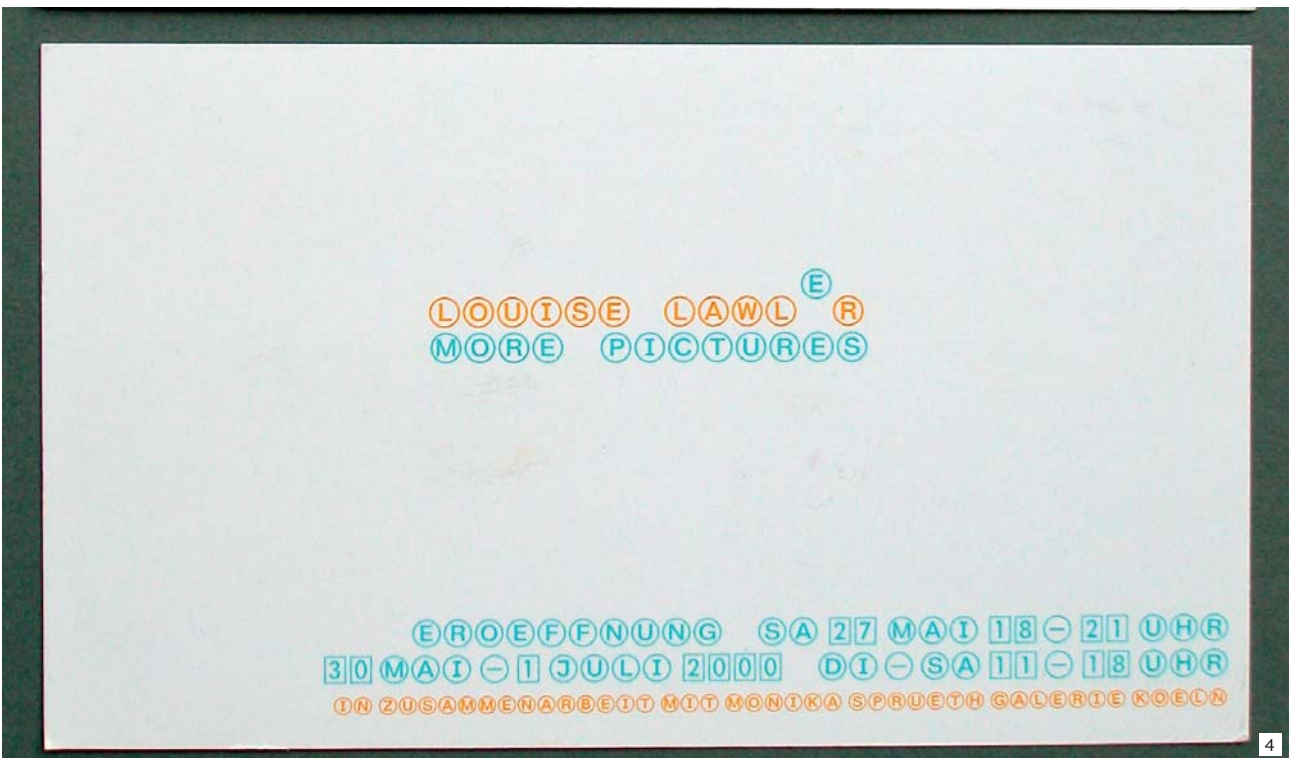
MM: And this can be disastrous, since you don't want to send a terrible invitation to anyone. The graphic design can cause you to no longer identify with an exhibition at all, which can mean that you either have to make a parallel product—which is difficult—or send out a small number of copies.

DB: This opens up another collection, or chapter: exhibitions with two or more invitations.

MM: The press release is another place where traces of such power struggles become visible.



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MJ: At the moment everyone is writing such cryptic, pseudo-poetic, pseudo-theoretical texts. I think this is a kind of refusal to talk about oneself.

DB: It has to do with the question of the power of interpretation. Some artists simply don't want galleries or curators to write something or chatter, and so they prefer to write something themselves, often something that is not immediately understandable.

MM: Or like myself: they prefer not to communicate at all. That, of course, also has its advantages. I have the impression that artists have to do an increasing amount of work themselves. It's no longer enough to make art. Today you have to upload a self-portrait, provide a short CV in English, a text on the work, and the captions and technical information—and all that before you have even traveled to the venue and set up the exhibition. And, of course, you should also document the exhibition yourself before you leave.

MJ: In addition to a refusal, it is also an attempt by artists to annex the areas of poetry and theory.

DB: Of course, here too the old dream of artists being able to do everything plays a role. Film-making, writing, graphic design, music, dance, theater, WhatsApp... To me, an interesting example in this context is the Berlin gallery neugerriemschneider, which commissioned Jorge Pardo to do its graphic design in the mid-1990s. To this day, all the gallery's artists must subordinate themselves to this design, or can benefit from it.

MM: Although he provided a purely typographic solution.

DB: Which is also playful, elegant, and relatively open-ended. This makes every exhibition appear equal, and if people don't like it, then it's Pardo's fault. The gallery Meyer Riegger followed another approach for a while—a compromise, so to speak—by using a monochrome A3 format and inviting each artist to choose a text. The format and structure were thus set in advance, and the content could be freely chosen.

MJ: And so the gallery projected the image of a certain intellectual ambition.

DB: The same is true of a whole group of this generation of galleries that started up in the 1990s and whose invitations I systematically collected:

Contemporary Fine Art, Modern Institute, Gavin Brown, Meyer Riegger, neugerriemschneider, and several others. They all approached invitations conceptually, as an art project, invitation, advertisement, and self-branding in one. It could have to do with the fact that at the time they wanted and needed to make a name for themselves as young, new galleries.

MJ: These galleries all work in a similar manner in the sense that they strongly identify themselves with a consistent program. They are galleries that not only see themselves as showrooms, but—at least at the time—also to some degree as *Kunsthalle*.

DB: Yes, program galleries. I've noticed, though I haven't quite systematically looked into it yet, that the gallery 47 Canal, which is a generation younger than those that we just discussed, brands itself not through its graphic design, but by consistently having artists write the press releases—or at least, that's how it looks. This is how it established itself as an art gallery. Another typical element is the fact that they only send their invitations digitally. As I looked through my collection of invitations, I also noticed that especially in Switzerland, among exhibition spaces and institutions, there are a few who have conceptually set this business of invitations in motion. At the time, we also did this at New Jersey, but the exhibition space Low Bet already did it in the 1990s, as did Forde. And, of course, *Kunsthalle Zurich* under Beatrix Ruf as director.

MJ: I remember that the *Shedhalle* already had a fairly consistent graphic design under Harm Lux.

MM: Your observations assume that these institutions worked with professional graphic designers. I don't know if that was always the case. I could imagine that smaller galleries, such as Pablo Stähli in the 1970s, handled their graphic design more or less themselves.

DB: I remember that in its early days the leftist magazine *WOZ* had a bad layout, which in the early '80s people saw as a form of resistance. Was bad graphic design seen as authentic until people noticed that this is also a form of academism?

MJ: I think in the '80s, graphic design became incredibly important. This also has to do with the New Wave and the role that graphic design played in it. Alternative products suddenly distinguished themselves with a very striking design. A good example is the *Fabrikzeitung*, which is comparable to *The Face* and

the graphic design of Neville Brody, *i-D* magazine, or even the record covers of The Smiths, for instance. Stylish graphic design became part of a pop subculture.

DB: The gallerists at neugerriemschneider, Sadie Coles, etc., whom we just discussed were teenagers in the 1980s, like us. If you open up a gallery ten years later, then this experience with pop music and graphic design has an influence on your branding.

MM: Although in the '80s they still very much did it themselves. You could go to the cooperative print shop ROPRESS, and they could print things using black-and-white templates that you had prepared on a typewriter. You no longer had to use Tipp-Ex. You could correct a few letters here and there, but basically you pasted the various layers of film together yourself.

MJ: I think that the possibility of desktop publishing brought about a major change. Typesetting was no longer expensive, and more complex graphic design became possible.

MM: But, with regard to invitations, what I find interesting is the influence of conceptual art, which we mentioned at the beginning. I mean the idea that the artwork begins to exist for the viewer when an invitation or a press release is sent or received, and is only revealed on a visit to the exhibition. I find the period of time that lies between those points (the temporal and spatial shift) interesting, as well as the tension of idea/text and material/space in general and the spatial distance (one is found at home, and the other in an institution). I wonder, were there other artistic positions that were conceptually so beneficial to this "genre" of self-marketing, or other media in addition to invitations? Will you also show posters in the exhibition?

DB: Not so many. That would be a separate field in its own right. There are some by Michael Riedel, because his invitations and posters overlap. I have all of Wade Guyton's, because he took a very different approach with his posters, which seem to work so differently from his abstract art. Have institutions developed interesting concepts? It seems to me that the majority work with text and pictures.

MJ: Yes, many Swiss institutions are similar in that regard.

MM: It's mostly the same graphic designers.

DB: Do we see this so clearly because we ourselves are Swiss? Is this the case elsewhere, too? And yet, it is no coincidence that this exhibition is taking place now at Kunsthalle Zurich. We are always part of the zeitgeist, a mirror of it.

MJ: I believe that it is a Swiss phenomenon to a certain degree. Exhibition spaces here first make a graphic design concept and then the exhibition. I think that this has to do with graphic design education in Switzerland: there is a long tradition here of training graphic designers with their own individual style.

DB: Typography is very important, the Basel school...Perhaps we should say that the field where a typography-heavy design resonated most widely was art, since this is where writing was readable as a visual sign with the knowledge of conceptual art and minimal art. This continues to be the case today.

MM: But also because you can make beautiful things. I think that as a graphic designer in typography you have more freedom in art than in advertising.

MJ: How can you brand yourself as a gallery? With your program, but that is somehow immaterial. And otherwise with typography.

MM: That's how marketing works: when you want to be recognized, then you do something that is recognizable. I don't think that this is particularly Swiss. But I think that sending invitations also has to do with the fact that until recently people traveled less often. Today you might not remember the invitation so much because you aren't sent one in the first place. Instead, you might remember a gallery's exhibition booth.

DB: Or they're sent digitally. Nowadays it's actually only the less interesting galleries that send something by mail. The good ones don't send anything anymore, or they can afford very thick cardboards.

MM: I almost think that will make a comeback. What other strategies of artistic self-marketing are there besides subverting and ironizing common ideas?

DB: I see two main strategies. One is that you say that the traditional level of communication—the press release, the lecture, etc.—is part of your own

artistic position, and so you reflect on this level and give it a form that is also readable from the outside, but is recognized as art from the inside. Then there is another, in which the institution takes on this responsibility of communication on its own, without coordinating with the artist. In this case, artists rely entirely on the symbolic capital of the venue. There are all kinds of variations between these things, but they are not particularly interesting as artistic positions.

MM: I think that invitations are interesting when they don't have the appearance of invitations, but of life or art. Like the invitation for the exhibition at Pierre Huber in Geneva by Olivier Mosset, for example. It works because the pictures don't have anything to do with what is written on the card. And it has its own materiality. Why isn't mail art part of the exhibition?

DB: Because mail art declares itself as art, seeks to be art from the beginning, and this ambition is part of its appearance.

MM: But this somewhat contradicts the fact that you said that you're interested in artists' marketing materials.

DB: It's about who uses marketing or advertising also as a free space for art. None of these things claim to be art. Except perhaps Kippenberger's invitations, but these only in retrospect. And ninety percent of these things definitely aren't art. But it is absolutely possible for them to be received as art retrospectively.

Captions

1, 2 A Selection of Invitations and Other Ephemera. © Kunsthalle Zürich.

3 Jorge Pardo, *Las Vegas, Berlin*: neugerriemschneider, 2005.

4 Louise Lawler, *More Pictures*, Berlin: neugerriemschneider, 2000.

5 Trisha Donnelly, New York: Casey Kaplan Gallery, 2007.

6, 7, 8 Installation views, *They Printed it! Invitation cards, press releases, inserts and other forms of artistic (self-)marketing*, Kunsthalle Zurich, 2015.

Daniel Baumann is the director of Kunsthalle Zurich. He was co-curator of the 2013 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, worked for the Adolf Wölfli Foundation at Museum of Fine Arts in Bern, and co-founded the project space New Jersey in Basel. He started an ongoing exhibition series in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 2004, and is a regular contributor to magazines such as Artforum, Mousse, Spike, et al.

Martin Jäggi is a critic, curator, and lecturer at the Zurich University of the Arts. He has widely published on photography and contemporary art and lectured at F&F Schule, Zurich, Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen, as well as at Universität der Künste, Berlin. In 2009, he was honored with the Greulich Culture Award for his writings on photography.

Marianne Mueller is a Zurich-based artist, mostly working with photography and video. Her preferred formats are installations and books. She collects observations of quotidian environments that she later re-contextualizes in her works, often in reaction to the specific site of an exhibition. She is a professor at the Zurich University of the Arts. She has participated in numerous group and solo shows in Switzerland and abroad. Her books include *Stairs Etc.*, 2014; *The Proper Ornaments*, 2008; *The Flock*, 2004; *Standing Still / Travelling Slowly*, 2002; *A Part Of My Life*, 1998.

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info@caseykaplangallery.com
Hours 10-6

For Immediate Release

Trisha Donnelly

Exhibition dates: May 11- June 14, 2007
Opening: Thursday, May 10, 2007, 6-8 p.m.
Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 10-6 p.m.

I incline towards the minds of others
and all it is
all it is - is
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3 parallel pains

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Trisha Donnelly, Pamela Fraser, Liam Gillick, Annika Von Hausswolff,
Carsten Holler, Brian Jungen, Diego Perrone, Julia Schmidt, Simon Starling
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