

The Artist as The Curator as The Artist (*The Art of Curating or How about a Paracuratorial Turn?*)

A series of irregular events with presentations and conversations at Corner College 2016.

Curated by **Dimitrina Sevova** in collaboration with **Alan Roth**

Organized by Corner College

Curatorial Concept

The Artist as The Curator as The Artist (The Art of Curating or How about a Paracuratorial Turn?) is a new series of presentation and conversation-driven irregular events critically interrogating the curatorial turn, exhibition-making practices that sometimes go beyond the notion of the exhibition, the practices of curating performed by the artist, and the performative potentialities of the curatorial without a clear programming policy and museological framing. It questions how the political and aesthetic potentiality of the discourse can be made practical, searching for a new vocabulary reflecting on the idea of what an exhibition could be from the point of view of the artists and their current exhibition practices and curatorial endeavors.

Through the interplay between the knowledge about an exhibition and the knowledge emanating from that exhibition with its multitude of “ontologically ambiguous things” (Elena Filipovic) and the actual context they create, the series studies by what means “the exhibition is a medium” (thus the claim of Documenta 12), both the critical practice and material aesthetics of duration. With this we would like to undermine the system of conventional assumptions of what can still be called an *exhibition*, and find other potentialities of exhibition making as a medium and curatorial methodologies. The series is about sharing forms of knowledge and experience which are highly subjective, and with this argument the series can be understood as a self-directed learning process.

In-between critical analysis and the consideration of curatorial ontologies as inventive potentiality, the series makes a productive space of physical encounters, focusing on the working conditions and socio-cultural and economic nexus of exhibition production and its spaces between artist, audience, curator, institution, display, and the outside of the art institution – relations simultaneously motivated by aesthetics and politics, by the impersonal and individual. Who is the exhibition maker today? How has the artist as the curator influenced and changed the politics of display, exhibition making, artist practices, and the perception of art at large?

The emergence of the *curatorial* as a concept in the 1990s presupposes an operation of critical complicity that in itself couples curating and counter-curating, generating in the performative relations between them an abstracted and embodied holey double that is

simultaneously highly subjective and plural, or collective, in the sense of co-productive processes, of the interplay of critical and inventive unbounded thought with elements and narratives appropriated from elsewhere, rather than single authorship. This is not only a co-production between humans, but incorporates signs and pre-existing inorganic elements of other multiplicities and fluxes.

If the *curatorial* performs collective sensibility, it is not simply a shift away from the curator, and certainly not the replacement of the artist by the curator – it is neither the practice of art nor the practice of curating. The conceptualization of the *curatorial* gives another dimension to the medium of exhibition making as an expanded field of transdisciplinarity beyond the art institution, beyond curatorial practice under the sign of the institutional position. The treatment of a space produced by relations, as in Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*,¹ makes possible a spatial and nomadic turn towards a perpetually shifting space-time equilibrium of ephemeral fragility and precarity.

These practices and conceptualizations of ideas resonate in the recent concept of the *paracuratorial*, coined with rather negative connotation by Jens Hoffmann to designate the dispersion of the exhibition into other activities with ephemeral and event character beyond the exhibition making or the institutional space. He invited three other positions to articulate counter positions on the *paracuratorial* in the response section of *The Exhibitionist*. "This practice defines curating not as bound to exhibition making, but rather as encompassing, and making primary, a range of activities that have traditionally been parenthetical or supplementary to the exhibition proper."² It is no longer merely about appropriating the activities of other arenas into the art institutions' theater of operations as a kind of second-wave institutional critique.³ At times, the performative institutionalism of para-institutional practices drifts away from the art institution and exhibition space into the social urbanity or rurality, bringing different fields into contact, even as it turns the border into a permeable membrane through which materials and immaterial elements can diffuse back from paracuratorial excursions into the exhibition space, with touches of institutional critique and New Institutionalism.

To what extent is the exhibition as a medium fragmented into eventualized bits of the space and time), and might tend to lose its aesthetic and political consistency, bearing in mind the critical argument of Lívía Páldi, who wrote in response to Jens Hoffmann: "We are living in an age that is literally drowning in events, with the hyping of event culture and an almost fetishistic, marketing-driven, festivalizing approach to discursivity. In this context, paracuratorial activities can both support this overabundance and facilitate a counterflow to overwrite existing scenarios."⁴ We maintain that the idea of the event is still full of revolutionary potential and contains the possibility of turning perceptions and escaping the institutionalization of art, with activities beyond the traditional role of the curator and the institution of art. The paracuratorial is an affirmation of chance, with a potentiality for change. Thus we ask whether there could be an exhibition driven by events, or whether this is a radical break with the exhibition as a medium. We can refer to what started at Cabaret Voltaire in 1916-17, and resonates in Harald Szeemann's curatorial approach as "structured chaos," perhaps most powerfully exemplified in his not fully realized initial idea of a *100-Day Event* for Documenta 5 in Kassel under the title

1 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland (Paris: les presses du réel, 2002 (French 1998)).

2 Jens Hoffmann and Tara McDowell, "Reflection," *The Exhibitionist*, No. 4, p. 4 <<http://the-exhibitionist.com/archive/exhibitionist-4/>> (accessed 2016-02-06).

3 *Ibid.* Jens Hoffmann and Tara McDowell referring to Vanessa Joan Müller's invited response in the same issue, "Relays," pp. 66-70.

4 Lívía Páldi, "Notes on the Paracuratorial," *The Exhibitionist*, No. 4, p. 73 (71-76).

of *Questioning Reality – Pictorial Worlds Today* (1972).⁵ And presently, in the program *Obsession Dada: 165 Feiertage* that accompanies the exhibition *Obsession Dada* curated by curator Adrian Notz and artist Una Szeemann at Cabaret Voltaire.

These new curatorial mobile modes in-between create on-going platforms or other methodologies of knowledge, participation, research and slow forms of collective production that engage with archives and research, which access what lies beyond the borders, “the unknown, unintended, uninvited, unacknowledged, suppressed, uncomfortable,”⁶ and the unwanted.⁷ These intermediate zones of the curatorial generate critical models or modulations of structures and fabulations of be-coming-together, of polyphonic and collaborative practices that produce shared and contested spaces, forms of resistance, virtual structures actualized by interventions or exhibition display.

Performing the exhibition (or the paracuratorial) and performing the institution (or the parainstitution) embodies an ecology of co-existence of new institutional models that breaks with site-specificity and comprises performative organic and inorganic elements of the situated knowledge of environmental dynamics and new contexts – sensitive complexity “beyond the nucleus of the art field.”⁸ An example is “the flexibility of a loose institutional structure like European Kunsthalle,” a project of Vanessa Joan Müller & Astrid Wege in close collaboration with artist Dorit Margreiter. European Kunsthalle is intended as a performative presence and exists wherever its projects take place, a virtual design or para-institution that goes through durational actualizations of itself from one exhibition project or intervention to the next in a nomadic and parasitic manner. “An institution without a space and without its own funding, European Kunsthalle is a friendly parasite, dependent on the hospitality of others.”⁹

In *Making Art Visible* (2001), curator and writer Igor Zabel reflected on the ongoing symptoms of changes in the curatorial field: “[T]oday, when the idea of art is no longer connected only to a specific type of object but often to constellations, relationships, and interventions into different contexts, the division between artist and curator is less clear, especially since both activities tend to meet in an intermediate area.”¹⁰

5 “With his selection of “Questioning Reality – Pictorial Worlds Today” as the exhibition title, Szeemann gave documenta 5 an unprecedented programmatic focus. The original concept of a “100-Day Event” developed in 1970, which had replaced the idea of the “Museum of 100 Days” with an actionistic, performance-oriented program, was abandoned, perhaps in response to experience gained from earlier exhibitions, such as *Happening and Fluxus* (1970), which had been closed in response to massive popular protests. Yet it came as a surprise at first that Szeemann retreated with his exhibition from the “illusory freedom of the museum in the streets”, returned to the hallowed halls of art, and presented a predominantly intellectual concept in tabular form in lieu of the planned action-oriented event.” Website of documenta <http://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_5> (accessed 2016-02-07).

6 Emily Pethick, “The Dog that Barked at the Elephant in the Room,” *The Exhibitionist*, No. 4, p. 77 (77-82).

7 *The Museum of the Unwanted*, series of exhibitions conceived by artist Clare Goodwin, 2014-15.

8 Astrid Wege & Vanessa Joan Müller, “Kunsthalle: A Model for the Future,” *ONCURATING.org*, Issue 21 (December 2013; ed. Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger), pp. 60-61 <<http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-21-reader/kunsthalle-a-model-for-the-future.html>> (accessed 2016-02-06).

9 *Ibid.*

10 Igor Zabel, “Making Art Visible,” in: *id.*, *Words of Wisdom. A Curator’s Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, (New York: Independent Curators International (ICI), 2001), pp. 175-176. Republished in Igor Spanjol (ed.), *Igor Zabel: Contemporary Art Theory* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2013), pp. 154-157.

With this series *The Artist as The Curator as The Artist* (The Art of Curating or How about a Paracuratorial Turn?), the focal point is not about particular relations between artist and curator, or the curating curator vs. the curating artist. We would like to envisage inhabiting this intermediate area and map recent exhibition making and projects in a non-linear historiography, and explore how curatorial practices have been changed and affected by the heterogeneous art practices that operate with(in) the curatorial. How do they directly influence the politics of display and methods of "making art visible," that expand the medium of the exhibition into more dispersed forms of the dissemination of art? How does the artist as the curator operate in these intermediate zones? How does the curatorial coincide with many sides, able to connect them or produce discontent between them? How does the impersonal and intersubjective immanent action of sketching a plan, a diagram or program, inaugurate events of new subjectivity?

The artist-curated exhibition envelops heterogeneous practices, lines of dissent and unconventional strategies, some of them embedded in an art institutional context, others performing social forms, striving to break the institutional comfort and to inhabit other zones of activity, production and dissemination of art and knowledge. The artist turn to curatorial practices immediately presupposes other forms of exhibition making, a medium without any objectives, like Joseph Kosuth who sees the exhibition as a work of art itself in his "curated installations" that do not promote a historical view but reflect the current moment and invite the viewer to participate in complicity in the production of the meaning of the art works. They express highly subjective forms that cannot be easily appropriated by the system of institutions as operative tools of the museological index.

Artists' subjective approaches and methods have intervened and changed even the role of the (institutional) curator and their practices of exhibition making and organizing. One can say that curators are indebted to the artist as the curator for having gained a certain freedom for operating within the institution and collection. At the same time, curatorial premises change the artist's practices. The aim of the series is to re-think the traditional role of the curator as the keeper of the collection, which derived from the Latin *curator*, meaning *overseer*, from *curatus*, past participle of *curare*, *to take care of*, and survey how this care-taking has been transformed into a politics of care (a politics of right, subjectivity and justice) and even life as a work of art (an aesthetics of existence), an engagement with our immediate surrounding and the invention of other protocols of use. Here, the curatorial is not detached from the artist's production, and their interdependency intervenes in and occupies an open space, unfolding the participatory and emancipatory potentiality of the so-called educational turn in curating.

Many key exhibitions have been curated or co-curated by artists. Artists have become more and more involved in curatorial activities, as the nature of their practices are changing, too. The boundaries between making art and exhibition making could be re-thought, especially on the background of Hans-Ulrich Obrist's comments as early as the mid-1990s, during the intensive curatorial turn, that "the exhibit is more and more of a medium, and more artists claim that the exhibit is the work and the work is the exhibit."¹¹ Another important reference we can make here is to the extensive research of Elena Filipovic, "When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artist as Curator,"¹² where she wrote: "A history of the artist as curator remains to be fully written." With the series of presentations and discussions at Corner College we do not intend to write such a history, but rather to invite artist-curators to present their own experience with curating and the curatorial, with expanding the practices of Self-curating, looking for new strategies towards the position of the artist as a curator. This series is about all

11 Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Mind over matter" (interview with Harald Szeemann), *Artforum International* (1 November 1996).

12 Elena Filipovic, "When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artist as Curator – THE ARTIST AS CURATOR #0," *Mousse*, No. 41 (24 August 2015) <<http://moussemagazine.it/taac0/>> (accessed 2016-02-06).

those artists who “took into their own hands the very apparatus of presentation and dissemination of the work they had produced – and often that of other artists as well.”¹³

The curatorial engagement or commitment to “Making Art Visible” (which is different from that to “Making Art Public”) means to disseminate and reflect it while maintaining the discursive weight of irreducible differences and taking power relations into consideration in order to politicize aesthetics. When Gustave Courbet built his *Pavilion of Realism* (*pavillon du réalisme*) in 1855, setting up an exhibition independent from the authority of the state in a self-organized exhibition space, it was an act of making art visible, and inventing a visual machine for a more refined display of his own works, rather than of merely making art public. The pavilion where he displayed forty of his paintings was a temporary structure built off Champs-Élysées in the vicinity of the official Salon-like Exposition Universelle. On this occasion he wrote a manifesto (the first in the history of art), which gave the next generation of avant-garde artists tools to resist and struggle for their independence and intellectual freedom. He saw the artist in the position to translate a broader social context, through his own assessment and experience of it, to living art.

The traditional role of the curator as the keeper of the collection was embodied by Marcel Duchamp, not without irony yet based on serious self-curating of the collection of his own works, in his project *La boîte-en-valise* (*The Box in a Valise*, 1936-42), but with a many-folded subversive potentiality that influenced the up-coming generation of artists and their heterogeneous paracuratorial methodologies of institutional critique to invent the function of their para-museum-institutions, with surprising perspectives on curating, collecting, spectatorship and the collaboration between power structure and art. Those performative operations are capable of generating an institutional fiction at the heart of the bureaucratic aspects of art and the institution of art itself, not only on the art institutions. Marcel Broodthaers’s para-institutional and “nearly bureaucratic enterprise” of his *Musée d’Art Moderne* (*Museum of Modern Art*) is a “fictive museum” – a process of building an “institutional fiction” mocking the very notion of work and the administrative order with its specialized labor and tools of management.

From the moment when Marcel Broodthaers proclaimed this is a museum – a performative uttering with which he set up and founded the museum – in his own living room, or at Documenta 5, his *Musée d’Art Moderne* generated institutional critique, a progressive body of work that not only resists institutions and the institutionalization of both art and spectatorship, but examines how the process of institutionalization takes place and “the logic of administration that can be seen as operations of self-legitimizing performativity.”¹⁴ He employed himself as the museum director throughout the first years of the *Musée*, which became his long-term project of a ghostly museum with an odd self-administration of Kafkaian type with its own peculiar apparatus. His approach was not simply binary, “embedded in or resistant to the dominant culture.” On the one hand the museum was a response to the mass unrests of May ’68, on the other, a reflection on radical bureaucracy that occupies a detached or counter-institutional space, that becomes the double of the institution, in the sense of a twisted and diabolical double – holly subjective and impersonal. The *Musée* gradually de- and re-institutionalized and de-familiarized many relations of the systems of collections, orders, epistemes, value, and display, including the artist-audience relation in the melancholic manner of a “one-man bureaucracy.” Simultaneously, it critically interrogates the position of the artist and authorship in the relation between social/formal and one/many, and overlapping concepts of interiority of outside/inside. When Hans-Ulrich Obrist cites Suzanne Pagé’s definition of the curator as a “commis de l’artiste” (an artist’s clerk), one can take this rather strange definition further, without trying to give it clarity, to

13 *Ibid.*

14 Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-1976* (Cambridge/MA and London: The MIT Press/October Books, 2010).

conclude that the curator produces the bureaucratic double of the artist, and the artist produces the double of the bureaucracy of curator.

This double interplay is at stake in Harald Szeemann's *Agentur für geistige Gastarbeit* (*Agency for Spiritual Guest Work*): "The agency was a one-man enterprise, a kind of institutionalization of myself, and its slogans were both ideological, 'Replace Property with Free Activity' and practical, 'From Vision to Nail' [...]. It was the spirit of '68."¹⁵

Another example among others could be the artist Tadej Pogačar's long-term project of establishing fictitious systems of institutions, relations and operating within the actual institutions, in order to research and present hidden and overlooked mechanism. The artist became the director of the P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. *Museum of Contemporary Art* (from 1990 until today), founded by himself, which the artist incorporates into the context of actual institutions. He invented strategies of parallel and delocalized forms of institutionalism, practices that produce deterritorialization and transmutations, and disable the modes of rationalization in a particular institutional context. Literally P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. can be read as "para-site," the power of the false to displace and uncover – fiction as a method of "para-institutionalism."

Lia Perjovschi's *Knowledge Museum Kit* (which incorporates previous projects of hers, like her Contemporary Art Archive, 1990 until today), which can be viewed in terms of both a particular artist's oeuvre, and simultaneously as a curatorial oeuvre, is a method of working, of fabricating an inorganic body rather than a series of art works, that fabulate "paracuratorial" and "para-institutional" forms in a para-academic system of pseudo-scientific objectivity. In Clare Goodwin's project *The Museum of the Unwanted*, "in the chance encounters and processes by which the 'unwanted' becomes creative catalyst," the project unfolds in changing group exhibitions exploring artistic practices based on various collection strategies, blurring the boundaries between art work and exhibition display, from an empty shop in the city of Zug to the Kunstmuseum Olten and then on to somewhere else.

Curator Jens Hoffman and artist Carsten Höller, in a conversation in Stockholm in 2002 immediately after the opening of Documenta 11, came up with a provocative idea they would build a project on, discussing the relation between curators and artists in several installments: "The Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist." They did not expect their expression, which became the title of an anthology of artists' and curators' contributions, to be attributed literal meaning: "it is really much more of a question than a statement," a poetic and critical reaction against the instrumentalization of artist practices.

Last but not least we look forward to seeing "how an artist would curate a major international overview exhibition," as Manifesta 11 unfolds in Zurich this summer, curated by artist Christian Jankowski.

Text: Dimitrina Sevova in collaboration with Alan Roth

15 Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *op. cit.*