Curating Live Arts

Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice

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CHAPTER 13

The Artist-Curator, or the Philosophy of "Do-It-Yourself"

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Everyone recognizes the role that artists play today in conceiving and producing exhibitions, festivals, and other diverse cultural events. Whether conceived as complete works in themselves or as scenographic projects consisting, for example, in rethinking how to hang a museum collection or organize an evening of short performances, arrange exhibitions and events conceived by artists, these artist-conceived events have become such an integral part of the institutional artistic landscape that we sometimes forget their foundations, dynamics, and practices. When an artist organizes an exhibition or a performance, they are not only a creator acting within and for the institution; they might also be acting independently to create interventions in the public space, sometimes by choice or necessity, sometimes individually or collectively. Certain artists organize exhibitions or festivals in the spirit of community self-organization, inherited from the alternative cultures of the 1970s and 1980s. Others take the position of independent curators who present projects in unofficial spaces or act as directors of artistic events like festivals or off-biennales. Artists have also built structures that are meant to produce and give value to their own work. They might organize, in their own name, a temporary exhibition, event, gathering, or even establish a contemporary art institution.

The idea of the artist taking charge of his or her own presentation is not new, whether autonomously or under the auspices of an existing organization. Art history has documented numerous initiatives that are founded on self-exhibition and self-presentation by individuals (such as Courbet's *Pavillon du Réalisme* in 1855) or collectives (self-exhibition by Impressionists at Nadar in 1874). This model of autonomy originated in view of liberating creativity for everyone

and denouncing the alienation of creators within the dominant system, and is also found in other creative domains—beginning with nineteenth century literature through the phenomenon of self-publication. A writer like Balzac, for example, established a printing press to publish his own novel. Moving forward into the twentieth century, different kinds of initiatives multiplied, along with artists' ambitions. Results were quite different. The self-exhibition practices of the first avant-garde—from the futurists of Fluxus to the surrealists—did not have the same configurations as later groups of activists and alternative collectives of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Judson Church Group and the organizers of the Happenings. It is also interesting to note that alternative culture is composed of a widely divergent set of practices and strategies for action. It is useful, for example, to distinguish the events organized by improvised groups of artists in abandoned buildings from more structured collectives functioning as associations or cooperatives. Are there not in fact important differences between associations that operate within a single space and those of collective movements that present on-going events, festivals, and virtual galleries that operate without an actual physical space? The criteria for this independence can be understood in different senses.

In Anglo-Saxon and North American countries, it somehow seems natural that artists take charge of their own work in this way. In Canada, there is the example of the Association of Artist-Run Centres network (AANPAC) that is an integral part of the larger contemporary arts landscape, and in German-speaking countries, artist associations have been part of a self-managing tradition since the end of the nineteenth century.[1] The various modes of action of artists' collectives bear witness to their activist character. Certain collectives generate close collaborations with citizen groups and so engage in shaping a place for exchange and collective creation. This is the case of Group Material, a collective that in 1982 took to the streets in New York City's Union Square with a poster exhibition to protest the threats of real estate developers. This kind of self-organization is at the service of militant citizenship, and does not have the same aims as artist-run spaces run by collectives who are interested in battling a system that is alienating for artists. The example of artist-run spaces is particularly illuminating.

In the wake of the social protests and activism from 1960 to 1970, artist-run spaces represent a movement that brings together a multitude of collectives joined through a spirit of community self-organization and by the values of exchange, cooperation, and solidarity (Detterer and Nannunci 2012). Although quite different from one another, at their origin those spaces shared a number of common traits, among which is that the artists took charge of their own means of production. Self-management is thought of as a way to deal with artists' precarious working conditions, as well as their difficulties in finding sponsorship within a network or in presenting their work in a gallery. In the 1980s, a historically strong moment for the expansion of these spaces, they were particularly ambivalent in terms of their support of creative process.

Although artist-run spaces were a powerful political force in the promotion of live arts, in the 1980s the artistic community was particularly struck by income inequality and career advancement. As sociologist Raymonde Moulin noted, established artists profited from this new development (1997). By organizing their own events in living spaces (apartments, lofts, workshops) or in abandoned sites (airplane hangars, garages, old factories), they were able to compensate for the lack of support from inside the institutional arts systems. They seized the right to present their work. The principal of do-it-yourself, that has been the basis for most exhibitions and performances in artist-run spaces, is not always a response to a financial situation in times of crisis. Vigorously arising within punk culture of the 1970s, this do-it-yourself credo is an ideology as well, and one that calls for taking a radical stand against the seats of power. Self-exhibiting, self-production, and self-publishing are strategies for producing one's own support and also a way to create a parallel culture and to shake up, as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé declared in view of artist-run spaces, "systems of hierarchy, with each artist fulfilling, depending on each case, different roles: curator, editor, publicity agent, etc." (1997: 11).

Even as it rejected the dominant cultural system, alternative culture built bridges with official institutions, and so, beginning in the 1990s, became an indispensable mediator for these influential networks. The figure of the artist-curator, which until that time incarnated an anti-institutional position, progressively changed its image. In place of those artists who practiced self-representation within a group because it was impossible to do otherwise, was substituted the image of artists who were capable of reconciling creation and curatorial practice in both a controlled and autonomous fashion. The principle of do-it-yourself was not in this instance at the service of a collective and cooperative, because that was in conflict with the dominant ideology. But it was constructed as a claim to individual independence at both creative and economic levels. Well-known artists such as Damien Hirst, Maurizio Catelan, Marina Abramovic, Ai Weiwei, and also Bansky embodied this generation of artists who were at once experts, pragmatists, and also anti-establishment. These artists had reached the peak of notoriety and were able to afford the freedom to organize, with complete independence, events in abandoned spaces[2] or in places that they themselves founded and managed.

In this regard, the case of Marina Abramović is particularly instructive. As the representative of an artistic practice often difficult to present—performance art—she founded structures able to compensate for the inabilities of many institutions to exhibit and archive this artistic genre. In 2003, under the auspices of her Independent Performance Group, she worked with a collective of fifteen performers whom she directed in her role as curator. The objective was to prac-

tice re-enactments of historic performances—her own among those included, along with those of other well-known figures of the genre. This group ceased its activities in 2013. By then, she had another project in development: the founding of an institution dedicated to the defense of performance art. In 2013, the artist founded the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) in an old theater in Hudson, New York. As well as being recognized as a pioneer of performance art, with work shown in the most reputable museums in the world, Abramović continues to cultivate her independence from the art world's officially sanctioned culture, keeping in mind the importance for a younger generation to renew ties with the collective spirit of the Futurists, Fluxus, Dada, the Russian constructivists, Bauhaus, and Black Mountain College.

If the "alternative" position of "star" artists like Abramović appears to be, on many levels, ambiguous—how can one be effectively inside and outside the institution?—she situates herself in reality beyond the habitual split between official and parallel cultures. When artists organize exhibitions themselves, or when they create their own foundations in view of promoting their work or defending their art, this affirms above all the idea that artists have qualities and competences that authorize them better than anyone else to exhibit creative forms that are rarely or poorly represented in public institutions. In this regard, artists of the minimalist and conceptualist generations played an essential role. By founding their work on the basis of process rather than materiality, visual artists like Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth, Michael Asher, Donald Judd and many others, played a role close to that of the exhibition organizer or museum conservator. In 1979, Daniel Judd developed his own foundation within a complex of old military buildings in Marfa, Texas, with the objective of showing institutions how to exhibit his work, as well as others of the minimalist and conceptualist movements. In the case of performance art, for which Abramović is surely a living legend, do-it-yourself takes on yet another resonance because the principle of independence is somewhat inherent to the practice itself. As RoseLee Goldberg has written: "By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists . . . Indeed, no other artistic form of expression has such a boundless manifesto, since each performer makes his or her own definition in the very process and manner of execution" (Goldberg 2001: 9). By founding her own institution, Abramović sought, as did Judd, to expose institutional deficiencies; but less to demonstrate how to exhibit art that is a priori not possible to exhibit, and rather to preserve the principle of liberty and the community spirit with which it was naturally associated.

When thinking about the practices and modes of action that are set into motion by artist curators, the initiatives of visual arts creators come to mind. There is nothing surprising about this because an exhibition—in the artistic domain and in its more general sense—refers to a visual offering of objects presented in a certain order in a specific space. The materiality of what is shown is the most important aspect, to which one might add that the history of the artist curator is mainly dominated by that of the artist "scenographer," by which I mean an artist who seeks new and novel solutions to mounting and arranging their own and other's artworks in the exhibition space. In the field of performance art, the question of curating must be asked in another way, because the artist is positioned in a system of artistic self-representation, making work arising out of their own bodies, and also entangled with individual or collective self-promotion. In the case of Marina Abramović, who practices performance art as an art of self-representation, she had no choice but to become her own manager and organize her performances according to an organizational system similar to that which functions in the world of theater, dance, and music. In its organization, The Marina Abramović Institute more closely resembles a theater rather than a museum or art center. However, along with the structural alliances that performance art shares with the performing arts, there is a close tie to the visual arts; the exhibition is as centrally important as the representation.

The do-it-yourself ethos described is less of a desire to shift power and bring live arts back into the hands of artists, and more an invention of an autonomous field, a sphere of freedom within the phenomenon of the globalization of art and culture. The curating of artists, even if largely institutionalized today, is far from a homogenous and uniform field, and so the interest here in analyzing its multiple aspects.

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NOTES

Translated from the original French by Dena Davida.

1. André Ducret (1994) has written about the role that artists played very early on in Switzerland in developing public patronage.
2. This refers notably to the *Freeze* exhibition organized by Damien Hirst in 1988 in the abandoned warehouses in the Dockland area of London; the *Fuck Off* exhibition organized by

Ai Weiwei in 2000 in the fringes of the Biennale of Shangai; the festival of independent art *No Soul for Sale* organized in in 2009 by Maurizio Catellan and Massimiliano Gioni in the X space Initiative in New York; and also the recent exhibition *Dismaland*, coordinated by Banksy in the area surrounding an old open air swimming pool in Weston-super-Mare, a whale station near Bristol.

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EMBODIED SPACE

"Soft-Curation," Pollination, and Rhizomes

YVES SHERIFF

Pollination. Although this term seems already well-used in art, it was very relevant in 2011 when I started a research and exchange platform with choreographers. Understood in botanical terms as different ways to transfer genetic information, pollination in a curatorial context refers to establishing a good environment in which creators exchange knowledge. All participants must engage in high quality conversations that are circulatory, nonbinary, multireferential, stretched in time, and critical in a formal and abstract way that includes the language of both dance practice and academia.

Rhizome. This term, also in fashion now, refers to how, as a curator who takes care of one project to the next, the ensemble of projects I work on looks like an organic structure. I follow Deleuze and Guattari's observation of the rhizome as having "multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representations" (1987), an image that applies well to dance. Because of its particular exponential evolution of forms, the rhizome allows an expansion of propositions, connected one to the next with shared references but with possibly different and independent representations. This idea removes practice from an empirical and hierarchical history of dance, and situates it within a horizontal, self-perpetuating network.

"Soft-Curating." My practice of soft-curation, a term I invented, involves an ongoing dialogue between the choreographers and me. We discuss how resources will be shared; the quality of the questions that shape artistic content; how to situate the work in its social, political, and economic context; and how to seek consen-