

Artslant

Curator Corral: Five Curators
September 14, 2011
By Marcus Civin

I am an artist and in terms of my own activities in the realm of curating, I think of myself as an organizer, one who extends invitations. And I think of myself as an instigator; I want to build decent, clean platforms to see work made by artists I admire.

I have begun to ask curators how they think of themselves and what they want to accomplish. I am including here a sample of this research. I think the statements in and of themselves are beautiful. At this point, though, I have even more questions than when I started—wistful, political, personal, practical questions...

For example, is working as a curator a form of justice (bringing to light the unknown)? Is curating an impulse to educate? What kind of work is possible/risky/impossible in a commercial context? What kind of work sails or fails in a community center? What kind of objects, documents, or collections does a curator keep in their car, in their pocket, on their desk, in their home? What kinds of freedoms do curators take? Where, if at all, does the curator show their hand as a mediator or an author? Where, then, is truth? What, then, is moral? What can never be shown? In curating, do we hope for something new, or do we hope for curators as custodians, for continuity of tradition?

The curators who write-in here, as a group, are: an associate director of a gallery in London; an independent curator who has worked at alternative art spaces and university galleries, recently around Chicago; a curatorial team who prefer to stay anonymous at this point, in reflection on their work in Mexico, Los Angeles, and New York; an artist and curator who runs a house-as-gallery project in Baltimore, Maryland, called Guest Spot; and a final curator who let me ask her the hardest questions. I am particularly interested in this group—a young group—because, to me, they speak with honesty, humor, and even some wonder about what they are doing, like they are inventing themselves.

Becky Koblick

Where do you work? Why?

I am currently an assistant director for **MOTINTERNATIONAL**, a commercial gallery in London's East End. I started as a curatorial intern in my first semester of graduate school and will now become the associate director of our new location opening in Brussels this September. I work in a commercial gallery because I think that it affords the opportunity to build long-term relationships with artists. I also believe, contrary to some popular suppositions, that it can be an ideal arena to push boundaries, to try things out. Other than the obvious financial concerns, you are free to approach exhibitions from any angle you choose.

What are you working on right now?

Besides my work at MOT, my current research is focused on California as a space where Manifest Destiny and the Psychedelic Revolution collide. Living and working in London over the past two years has afforded me some distance to recognize sensibilities shared by artists working in Los Angeles. This line of research will hopefully feed into several tributaries.

Can you talk about an artist you have liked working with?

I once had to hire two escorts for Joe Sola in London.

If you could choose one inspiring curator who is no longer alive and study their work, who would that be?

Colin de Land.

If you could choose one inspiring curator who is alive and study their work, who would that be?

I often resist texts on curating. However, Robert Storr has written on the topic with such clarity that within that brief moment of reading, I completely understand my role as a curator. It is very empowering, if only momentarily.

Also, Shaquille O'Neal because, lets face it, "Size DOES Matter."

What has been your most challenging assignment as a curator?

I once had to hire two escorts for Joe Sola in London.

How do you assess a project after it is completed?

Time.

What is the best exhibit you have ever seen?

How about a list of favorites from the past year off the top of my head starting with "*DISTANTS*" *BY THE DISTANTS*, Erik Frydenborg's first solo show with Cherry and Martin; Harun Farocki: *Against What? Against Whom?* at Raven Row; Alexander McQueen: *Savage Beauty* at the Metropolitan Museum; Amelie von Wulffen at Greene Naftali.

What do you believe in?

As a curator, I believe in my role being transparent. Authorship is so often a point of contention in the field, and I avoid an overly heavy hand, but I always acknowledge at least some curatorial presence. I think that helps dispel the myth of autonomy.

In terms of the exhibits you would like to see, who is missing? What isn't included?

There are too many let in and too many left out. I would like to see more risks being taken in who is being shown.

In terms of working in a commercial gallery, can you give an example of the kind of freedom you have been afforded to approach exhibition from the angles you choose?

One example would be my work with MOTINTERNATIONAL in 2010, in that under the umbrella of a one year experiment, the gallery dispensed with conventional programming. It was intended that through this abandonment of traditional exhibition programming the gallery would be able to react to ideas from artists and curators almost immediately, with projects merging and usurping each other in a free-form reaction to current ideas edited by the director. This meant that projects did not have to fit into traditional exhibition time-scales, they could collide, interact and even cancel each other.

How does size matter?

Size DOES matter is the title of an exhibition on the theme of scale in contemporary art curated by Shaquille O'Neal in 2009 for New York's nonprofit Flag Art Foundation. Shaq had this to say on curating. "As a curator, I have a responsibility to the artists, who are my 'teammates', we all have to make each other look good--no different than what I do on the court."

In what way have you been able to acknowledge your curatorial presence in your work?

It is not always so specific but for instance *Building Up From The Left Over*, 2006, a pop-up exhibition I co-curated with Jesse Benson in an vacant storefront in Downtown Los Angeles had an overarching theme both in its subject and in its structure, we specifically constructed the interior so that every piece in the show was viewed from outside the shop windows. This is very different than the presence I had in *Just Another Wordpress Site*, 2010, in which I was invited by Light & Wire gallery to curate an on-line exhibition where I in-turn invited Jacob Ciocci, who I

knew would respond to the format brilliantly, to create a project for the web platform. In this exhibition my presence was essentially felt as a facilitator. I never underestimate the importance of simply making things happen.

What would be an example of someone you think would be a risk to show?

Stay tuned.

Jessica Cochran

In his recent essay, “Anti-Humanist curating: Finding a way further in,” Matthew Poole reflects on how the “workings and ethics” of contemporary curatorial practices are often complicit with what he calls the “limits and problems of liberal Humanism.” In other words, in attempts to communicate ideas to a public, curators (and artists) are instruments of the same types of subjectivity production as are major corporations such as Apple or Target. Sure, curators (or relational artists) create participatory realms, for example—but how are they radically displaced or any different from the consumption-driven “creative consumer” practices of big business? Poole asks whether anti-Humanist methodologies put forth by writers from Deleuze to Foucault can, as he says “impact” curatorial practice.

Can we as curators get away from the impetus of social amelioration, from making a public uncritically “better?” Can curatorial practice “actively reconfigure the commoditization and instrumentalization of art and its reception?”

Well, that’s a tall order. The reality is, that many of us curators, in addition to our own independent projects, work for institutions that rely on a precocious mix of private and public funding—and thus rely on satisfying certain agendas and quotas for which the subtext always seems to be: how can we get bodies in the door?

I have been curating for four years, and most of it has been within institutional frameworks of small “alternative” spaces and university art galleries. Fortunately in my current situation at a university, our funding is less body driven and more student-driven. This means that we are charged with supporting academic programs through exhibitions that are pedagogical, timely and substantive. Our funding relies more on student retention than visitor retention. Now, however, I am looking to develop an independent curatorial practice that is modeled on models of research and institutional critique: in terms of history, site, media and narrative, how can I make the invisible visible? How can I, as a curator, create space for the amplification of the complex “everyday” in expansive, research-driven ways? How can I, as a curator, locate the everyday within an aesthetic dimension that is artist-driven, challenging and legible at the same time?

In other words, I’d like to use my role as a curator to take small grains of ideas and catalyze them into projects that attempt to identify our collective place(s) as constantly shifting, self-reflexive subjects of language, history and cultural symbolics. Using values from institutional critique (research, data, performance, criticality) I’d like to conceptualize projects that bring artist-driven projects together into curated situations—exhibitions—that investigate particular sites, events, media, history and people in layered and discursive ways. Something like a documentary film-cum-exhibition.

I recently completed my first independently curated exhibition working in this situational model of curating. I curated an exhibition, called “This is Paul Halupka,” for Contemporary Arts Council in Chicago, about a “random” near stranger from my near past. Paul is twenty-five and a self-employed graphic designer I met briefly while working at Art Chicago. While it mattered less who the subject of the exhibition was, I was more interested in the legitimization and investigation of an unexceptional identity through extensive, relationally driven projects. If the media constantly hyper-focuses on “average” people, can an exhibition about a “joe” complicate

or expand the way we understand the mediation of subjectivity? The exhibition also functioned within a legacy of artists who engage strangers—Sophie Calle, Aleksandra Mir, Barbara DeGenevieve, Vito Acconci and many others.

Is this kind of curatorial practice going to emancipate me from an uncritically Humanist or neo-liberal ways of working? Maybe not. But I think it complicates the ways that curators can act as both authors and mediators. It allows the curator to work creatively, as the originator of an idea, but allows for the unknown to happen, and it results in a space that is pedagogical and slow. And if the curator can provide material, financial and intellectual support to the artists enlisted to engage her idea that's obviously ideal.

galería perdida

Truthfully, there is a lack of definition in what we designate as our curatorial practice. Often it is reflected in our mission to compromise the definition of studio practice with that of the curatorial. Certainly this is in conjunction with the various artists who have agreed upon the parameters we often deploy: spatial restrictions, form as a concern, executed language. This method of collaboration we find particularly satisfying. It presents a challenge to the artists, but also one in return. Owing to the nature of the contract, we are left wondering as to the artwork we will actually receive. The discussion here begins with our idea of the curatorial as a mutable form--essentially turning it into sculptural material. We can decide the material in which it will take and request the artists to comply with these considerations. Perhaps a foolish endeavor if one is putting together an exhibition, it highlights a considerable identification of trust. This is shared between both parties. On that of the artists willing to bend the idea of practice, and in our resignation to work with whatever piece we receive. And like a puzzle, we begin to put the pieces together. This material of course is an open descriptor. It simply alludes to what we want to see in the end.

Curating develops out of a collecting instinct. Our practice as a whole involves the gathering of images and objects; it is fitting then that we approach this process with similar tenacity. We find value in the need to bring together objects of distinct origins, drawn from various sources, and produced by multiple parties. This creates a history of the object that allows itself to be retold, fitted by the lens in which we view it. So while we set to present an intriguing group of works, their individual value is not hierarchical. In fact, perhaps to the chagrin of the artists, we look to level the playing field by including anonymous or found images, artists at differing career paths, and defining their platform for viewing. This can be best reflected in an exhibition we are currently organizing for the Luckman Gallery in Los Angeles for 2012. Titled *La carne de burro no es transparente*, it gathers two-dimensional works that are all seemingly documentarian and executed in black and white. Juxtaposing archival images with artist-created works, the ostensible truth behind the images are obfuscated by their collectivity. Can you trust a room full of "true" images? These works are anchored by three videos produced in Mexico. They are set deliberately as fictions, yet we are open to their vulnerability in becoming truthier.

Despite an exhibition's serious overtones, we take care in injecting whimsy into the process. It cantilevers the heavy tone with a more earnest one: an open door for engagement. An exhibition is whimsical by nature—to a degree, of course—but how visible this whimsy may be is another matter. There is a significant amount of information that we retain during this process that we neither make available to the public nor the artists. It can be an esoteric fact or thread connecting one or more works, the hanging of a particular work, or boiled down to the selection of the typeface used on all materials, including what you are reading now.* Regardless, this hidden conversation we understand will be unlikely revealed, yet we are hopeful of its potential. It is not imperative that this reveals itself, but its lowly life is what builds the quality of the exhibition—for us, at least.

This brings to mind the question of access and awareness to the public. Public is a variable definition at best, but one identified as either a curious party or an obligated one. Either of which we acknowledge at a distance. It's nice to address universal concerns, but unrealistic. So, we keep the dialogue as truthful as we can. *We* know and show specific things and *you* know and keep specific things. This tête-à-tête is that quiet encounter that we suggest is profound but no less a guessing game. Being in the dark is half the fun or half the ruin.

Our exhibitions ultimately support our wider scope of interests that exist outside of the exhibition's timeline. They point to a body of concerns that should be in conversation with one another. Though they are socially inclined, the projects themselves may rest on the laurels of more formal concerns. To divorce the two however would be in error. Formal devices are political constructs, not unlike "a tracking shot as a moral act." So despite the appearance of a neutral presentation, once again this hidden ideology is echoed in our development. Taken together they formulate an incomplete sentence on our politics; whether expressed by yelling it all at once via our project *Matryoshka* or quietly lamenting that *all we ever wanted was everything*.

Rod Malin

Originality

Prior to my departure, from New York to Baltimore, I had just a few weeks to do all the things needed for a sudden move. I wanted to schedule a few last studio visits with a new space in mind. *I Like the Art World and the Art World Likes Me* caught my attention in the middle of all the moving details. So I contacted Eric Doeringer, the curator and also a participating artist. And in a week's time, we had chewed some meaty dialogue and discussed copyright and originality. I would say Doeringer's work is the product of an amplified golden bootleg syndrome, in which he addresses artists' needs to reference their heroes in their own work. This salivating cesspool mentality is evidence of the power of seduction and seen in the glorification of art branding. This is also influenced and supported by institutional pedestal petting, or the tendency for artists to seek validation by referencing iconic sources, either in opposition or in support. The recycling of intrinsic value instills an echo effect in the cultural preserve. The challenge of curating work under these circumstances is something that concerns any artist, maybe enough so that it would justify an artist—Doeringer, myself—playing the role of curator.

In thinking about my new space I could only reflect on my own artist practice. It personally took more time to fight the urge to justify my existence as artist than it took to call myself curator. Being an artist, I knew that my role was simply to ask questions. However the state of the learned artist practice was based on credentials and credence, where the role of the institution is to focus on providing tangible answers to those questions. I've seen this process creating a paradox with most young artists in a learned institution, by forcing students to justify their existence prior to exploring the residual nature of creating Art. In terms of originality, I believe the enticement of copying does not come from the lack of innovation but rather from a cultural desire for creditability and the fulfillment of ego.

Balance of Idea, Object... and Home

A Sol LeWitt wall drawing demonstrates a relationship between an idea and the art it produces; justification of its existence relies solely on that level balance between the conceptual and the physical. A few years back, I was surprised when conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner told me that his Sol LeWitt wall drawing in his dining room would be cut out during his home renovation, then later reinstalled after construction was complete. I had assumed that the wall drawing would simply be destroyed along with the wall and then recreated after the new wall was constructed. Why else would LeWitt intentionally create wall drawings coupled with specific process instructions that could regenerate the drawings?

I'm interested in the idea of the non-neutral spatial contexts within which contemporary art can exist. One such space is the home; the owner's ability to apply personal values and change structural relationships builds new contexts that challenge the institutional premise of viewing contemporary art. Ownership has an umbilical relationship with conceptual art, in that the work relies heavily upon context to create a boundary within which dialogue can take place. Usually this dialogue is only considered in an institutional context and prone to be cut off when the work is purchased by an individual whose intent is solely for a private use. That's why most galleries prefer collectors who remain institutionally connected rather than off-the-street consumers. In this way, value is placed on the relationships that support accreditation as an end in itself.

Craft

When I came across Gina Dawson's heart-wrenching, intricately crafted paper and fabric monuments to rejection, it stirred both my personal fear of my learned hypocritical attitudes towards craft and an overwhelming excitement over re-appropriation of institutionalized hierarchy. The work is taken from negative responses Dawson received via letter from a host of art institutions. I met Dawson in her Bushwick studio while still making my move to Baltimore. As Dawson pulled out a bag full of cut strips of paper from her studio storage drawer and mentioned decoupage, a chill ran up my spine. I was subject to the same fine art bureaucracy that hindered connections between those who sought sanctioned forms and those who didn't.

Space on its own terms

The past year or so I began a focused research on artist-run art spaces. I came across two spaces just outside of Chicago, where Frank Lloyd Wright started his home practice. Ironically, these spaces were almost around the corner from each other. "The Suburban," founded by Michelle Grabner & Brad Killam, was a space disguised as a home dweller's garage. Their program practiced a non-curation approach, giving artists control to establish their individual criteria. Right down the block, I stumbled on "He Said, She Said," a space created by Pamela Fraser and Randall Szott in their home to present a dualistic program. Each exhibition contributed to an ongoing dialogue about the co-inhabitants' conflicting vision for the space. The disjointed views stemmed from whether it should be seen as an art gallery or merely as a place to share the activities of people who work in different contexts.

In the exploration of artist-run spaces, I found that the default labels were always D.I.Y. or alternative, regardless of the expertise, focus, or relative level of innovation. It seems easier to simplify and categorize, rather than see these ventures on their own terms.

In 1971, Gordon Matta-Clark and Carol Goodden created the restaurant Food, a place managed and staffed by artists in Soho, New York. The restaurant was ahead of its time in that it served fresh, seasonal local foods. Almost a half a century later, the nostalgia surrounding Food is evident, even though the restaurant was short-lived and was considered more of a place for artists to gather than an establishment to eat. At the time, artists were drawn to the area south of Houston not because it defined what was *au courant* or because it was "Soho," but rather as part of an archetypal example of organic inner-city regeneration. Today, it seems innovation is always at the mercy of labels and revisionist history. Is it possible for a space in the contemporary era to defy classification and elude nostalgia?

Dara Greenwald

Do you consider your work as a curator a form of justice, a form of giving value, an impulse to educate... some, none or all of the above?

The root of the word curate means to care for. I feel that work I do is about caring for what I present and the ideas coming out of it and oftentimes but not always this is about the history of social movements. I also see it as both educational and social. Often my projects are about hidden, repressed, or under-represented histories so presenting objects and materials about these histories is educational for the viewers. I also see it as social. Most of my projects have a

coming together of people. So the opening and the public programming is a social space that is very important to me.

Would what you do as a curator be possible in a commercial context, say in a commercial gallery?

I'm not sure.

What kind of freedoms do you take in curating? Where, if at all, do you think you show your hand as a mediator or an author?

I think that how I choose to place videos together in a certain order in a program and which pieces I bring together in terms of interacting with the other pieces is where my subjectivity is most evident. In terms of shining a light on marginalized histories, the audience can tell what I am interested in of course. Also in doing public programming, I really try to make it an event in which people come together and interact.

For you, what is the difference between an art exhibit and a documentary?

Interesting question. I actually think that much of my interest and work comes out of a documentary impulse more than an interest in exhibition. It is just sometimes the best form to tell a story is an exhibit, sometimes it is film, and sometimes it is a text. I come out of a conceptual and activist art tradition as well in the exhibition is an important cultural form.

Can you claim, to the best of your ability, to be presenting the truth?

All I can say to this is that I do a lot of research and don't just let my imagination run wild when I present, describe, or contextualize a cultural object.

What is the difference in your approach to an anonymous found object, a consumer object, and a (at this point) known artist's art object?

All of these objects come out of a context and are part of the story of our existence. They also were all produced under different material and ideological conditions with specific power dynamics. If any of these objects helps me present stories or ideas that I think are important, I will use them in a cultural event, talk, exhibit, screening, etc and I often attempt to reveal the conditions under which they were produced so as not to flatten them as all being equal.

Do you collect art? What objects do you keep in your home?

I collect art by friends. In my home I have a lot of prints both historical and by members of Justseeds Artist Cooperative. Living with objects is different than creating an exhibit - so I tend to like pretty, funny, or colorful stuff especially if it has hilarious animals, but I doubt I would organize a public exhibit about hilarious animal art (although I would certainly attend it).

Special thanks to Juli Carson, Mark Tribe, Joey Morris, Skye Gilkerson, and Andrew Berardini who have pointed me towards the work of these and other curators.