

Anton Vidokle  
**Art Without  
Artists?**

01/09

It is clear that curatorial practice today goes well beyond mounting art exhibitions and caring for works of art. Curators do a lot more: they administer the experience of art by selecting what is made visible, contextualize and frame the production of artists, and oversee the distribution of production funds, fees, and prizes that artists compete for. Curators also court collectors, sponsors, and museum trustees, entertain corporate executives, and collaborate with the press, politicians, and government bureaucrats; in other words, they act as intermediaries between producers of art and the power structure of our society.

A press release for a recent conference on curatorial practice (at which I originally presented this paper) portrayed the figure of the curator as a knowledgeable and transparent agent moving between cultures and disciplines – a cultural producer par excellence. Furthermore, it seemed to suggest that art has become a subgenre of “the Curatorial”:

The conference “Cultures of the Curatorial” aims at positioning the Curatorial – a practice which goes decisively beyond the making of exhibitions – within a transdisciplinary and transcultural context and exploring it as a genuine method of generating, mediating and reflecting experience and knowledge. . . . Between art and science forms of practice, techniques, formats and aesthetics have emerged which can be subsumed under the notion of the “Curatorial” – not dissimilar to the functions of the concepts of the filmic or the literary.<sup>1</sup>

The necessity of going “beyond the making of exhibitions” should not become a justification for the work of curators to supersede the work of artists, nor a reinforcement of authorial claims that render artists and artworks merely actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts. Movement in such a direction runs a serious risk of diminishing the space of art by undermining the agency of its producers: artists.<sup>2</sup>

### **1. Overreaching**

Curatorial practice is predicated upon the existence of artistic production and has a supporting role in its activity. While artists may well produce art in the absence of curators, if no art is being produced, curators of contemporary art, at least, are out of a job. For this reason, attempts to curatorially “produce” art and artists by the simple expedient of including them in a show often result in little more than a curatorial embarrassment, as in the famous case of Roger Buergerl’s inclusion of celebrity chef Ferran Adrià

e-flux journal #16 — may 2010 Anton Vidokle  
**Art Without Artists?**

in the last Documenta.<sup>3</sup> While Adrià may indeed be a genius as a chef, his talent does not automatically turn his cooking into a new form of art, and neither did Buerger's framing of it. As Buerger said shortly before the opening of the show:

I have invited Ferran Adrià because he has succeeded in generating his own aesthetic which has become something very influential within the international scene. This is what I am interested in and not whether people consider it to be art or not. It is important to say that artistic intelligence doesn't manifest itself in a particular medium, that art doesn't have to be identified simply with photography, sculpture and painting etc., or with cooking in general; however, under certain conditions, it can become art.<sup>4</sup>

All true up to a point, but what is that point? What are these "certain circumstances" that Buerger alludes to, under which cooking can come to be considered art? Part of the reason why the transformation of cooking into art did not take place at Documenta is that Adrià's cooking was not already anchored in the stream

02/09

of commodities and careers constituted by the art system; in this regard it is interesting to note in comparison that Rirkrit Tiravanija cooks and is still recognized as an artist, though in reality he is only an average cook.<sup>5</sup> The extraordinary aspect of his cooking is not its quality as cooking, but rather its presentation by Tiravanija himself as *an artist who cooks*. It is important to distinguish between the artistic decision to include an activity within an artwork and the curatorial power to designate something as art or like art through its inclusion in an exhibition.

Another example of how curatorial power can be distinguished from artistic authorship by its legislative authority over what takes place within the space of art could be seen in the last São Paulo Biennial. Whereas, in a kind of grand authorial gesture meant as a comment on the crisis of biennials, the curators first announced that the entire biennial would be devoid of art, the concept later changed, presumably when this gesture was found to discourage professional visitors from attending. The void became merely partial: only the second floor of Oscar Niemeyer's biennial building was to remain empty, while the ground floor became a "public square," "opening itself up as the *ágora* in the



Ferran Adrià, head chef at El Bulli restaurant.



Graffiti on walls, pillars and railings of the São Paulo Biennial pavilion; Photo CHOQUE.



Kenworth W. Moffett with Ken Noland and Clement Greenberg.



Filmstill from *Tout va bien*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972.

tradition of the Greek polis, a space for meetings, confrontations, frictions.”<sup>6</sup> However, when a group of local graffiti artists decided to intervene and tag the second floor, the curators reacted in a punitive, institutional fashion by having one of them arrested and then testifying against her in court, leading to her being jailed with common criminals for nearly two months and eventually sentenced to four years’ probation.

This incident again brings to mind the work of Tiravanija, who also encouraged indeterminate, open spaces. At an opening of one of his early exhibitions in New York in the early 1990s, a belligerent visitor picked up some of the raw eggs Tiravanija was intending to cook with, and proceeded to smash them against the gallery’s walls. But in this situation, no one was punished, or even asked to stop and leave. This negative action was allowed to run its course, just as any other activity in the space of Tiravanija’s artwork, and this person eventually stopped and left the gallery.

Yet another example of such a tendency is the “Curating Degree Zero Archive,” a traveling exhibition of “curatorial research” designed as a kind of artistic installation. Conceived by curators, the exhibition circulates through a network of public art institutions largely run by curators. The issue is not whether curators should have archives or open them to others, or to what degree this is interesting or not; rather, the question concerns whether the people in charge of administering exhibitions of art should be using the spaces and funding available for art to exhibit their own reading lists, references, and sources as a kind of artwork. Even more ludicrous is the fact that the dissolution of the self-contained (autonomous) artwork is cited as a justification for supplanting the work of artists in the museum altogether, as shown on the website of this curatorial project:

Archives have become an increasingly common practice in the art world since the 1960s. On the one hand, there are archives founded by artists or collectors; on the other, a more recent development, there are those founded by curators, who sought to make their collections of materials accessible and make their selection criteria public. That desire may have arisen from the dissolution of the notion of the self-contained artwork, which has been eclipsed by a contingent art object that makes a new form of cultural memory necessary and always contains a note of protest and a critique of museum practices.<sup>7</sup>



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992, 303 Gallery, NY.

## 2. The Job

Curatorial work is a profession, and people working in the field are not free agents but are rather employed to perform a task on behalf of an institution or a client. It’s a job, both for those affiliated with institutions and for so-called independent curators. With the job come institutional power, a degree of security, and a mandate for a certain range of activity, which may involve a certain sense of institutional authorship, but emphatically, to my mind, does not include artistic claim to the artwork on which this activity is predicated.

While some artists occasionally do work as curators, it’s important to acknowledge that the relationship between artists and curators is structurally somewhat like the relationship between workforce and management: like the workers, most artists suspect that their “supervisors,” the curators, do not really understand the art, that they are controlling, egocentric, and ignorant, and are mismanaging the (art) factory and mistreating the producers (something like the scene from Godard’s sausage factory in *Tout va bien*). Yet there is real resentment out there, not very different from the feelings artists harbored towards art critics in the 1960s and ‘70s. Many artists – from extremely established artists to younger practitioners new to the field of art – feel that curatorial power and arrogance are out of control.

For artists, precarious working conditions have been a reality for most of the history of modern and contemporary art. Artists have never benefitted from the kind of organization that many Fordist factory workers or other unionized laborers managed to achieve, and whose improved wages, hours, and working conditions

improved the situation even in many non-unionized fields. Artists, in their capacity as artists, have always worked as independent producers, mostly without stipends, salaries, pensions, unemployment protection, or contracts.

Naturally there have been exceptions, such as the artists' union in the USSR. However, it's enough to read the letters of Rodchenko to realize that the union was more of a problem than a solution: it was an instrument of a totalitarian state, the ideology of which by that time excluded Rodchenko's type of production.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, he was unable to receive a pension and died in poverty. Meanwhile, at the center of the so-called "free world," Mondrian also died in poverty in New York. Neither ideological structure provided much security for even the most accomplished artists.

Before we attribute the rise in popularity or social relevance of curators since the 1990s to larger ideological, geopolitical, or economic shifts such as that from Fordism to Post-Fordism, let's again consider the institution of art: it seems to me that this increase in social significance came partly from the declining power of art criticism, with curators assuming the agency of the critic in addition to their executive power in the museum. It may be argued that art critics did deserve to be marginalized for having vastly overreached at a certain point in the 1960s, when it seemed more culturally significant for a certain art critic such as Clement Greenberg to write about a work of art than for that work to have been made in the first place. But imagine the frustration of the artist who believes herself to be liberated from the tyranny of the critic only to discover that the situation has changed: rather than two competing powers – the critic and the curator, who could be played against each other – there is now only a single totalizing figure that she cannot bypass!

Furthermore, are we sure that this curatorial gain does not bring a correspondingly diminished status for the artist? The nightmare scenario for artists is that the supervisors bypass the workers altogether and begin producing art themselves, or automate the process of art production to render artists redundant. For owners of the culture factory – whether state or privately owned – it would be rather convenient if artists, who are a historically disobedient group, could be replaced with a disciplined contingent trained to obey authority, and production costs slashed through the elimination of a large part of the labor force. In such a scenario the economic gain would be enormous, entailing the replacement of a group that holds the rights to their own production with

one comprised of salaried employees.

### 3. Curator as Producer

Last year I was invited to speak at a conference in Philadelphia on "curatorial activism." One of the participants spoke about her salaried directorship of a New York art institution as an activist practice. When I pointed out that people who are paid to go to a demonstration are not activists, but essentially hired bodies, the audience became visibly uncomfortable. But my point was less about money than why it is not enough these days to take on a challenging job, do it well, with real dedication and engagement, and take pride in that, without trying to upgrade its status by presenting it as activism, cultural production, or the production of art.

In fact, the debate with regard to the boundary between curatorial practice and artistic production is one that curators are engaging in among themselves, as Michelle White makes clear in a recent conversation with fellow curator Nato Thompson:

I also think that the term cultural producer, aside from the particular conditions of our moment, is a healthier or more honest way to articulate the contemporary role of the curator. It acknowledges the complexity of the collaboration that has to happen when something like an exhibition is organized or a project is carried out, which involves, as you said, a much more complex institutional web of financial as well as physical logistics from the relationship of collectors, patrons, boards of trustees to the possibilities of display space. It is certainly beyond the simple curator/artist dichotomy. But at the same time, in working on site-specific projects or exhibitions with living artists where collaboration is essential to produce meaning, I have found myself questioning the boundaries of my involvement in the aesthetic and conceptual production. So, I wonder, are there risks in assuming this more egalitarian position as producer?<sup>9</sup>

To respond to this question: yes, there are big risks for artists. As an artist, how do you exactly say no to the curator who invited you to participate in a show, but seems to want to credit herself as a collaborator or co-author, when you risk not being invited the next time? While perhaps politically and socially well-meaning, this type of approach runs the risk of making an unsolicited claim of co-authoring artists' works commissioned by the curator. I really do not think that many artists feel that collaboration with a curator is essential to

06/09

e-flux journal #16 — may 2010 Anton Vidokle  
Art Without Artists?

produce meaning. To my mind, this type of claim would be an extremely unwelcome and unwarranted intrusion, particularly if one keeps in mind that the figure claiming this share of authorship is not some underpaid art installer or intern researcher, but someone with the power to include, commission, or exclude artworks.

Similarly, it seems to me that we should also be very careful to avoid assigning any kind of meta-artistic capacity to curatorial practice. While steps taken in this direction have often been made with good intentions, invoking the expansion of a more general category of “cultural practice,” they nevertheless carry with them the danger of lending credibility to something like a potential colonization of artistic practice by academia and a new class of cultural managers. If the artist is already expected to question the social, the economic, the cultural, and so forth, then it goes without saying that when a curator supersedes the artist’s capacity as a social critic, we abandon the critical function embodied by the role of the artist and reduce the agency of art.

If there is to be critical art, the role of the artist as a sovereign agent must be maintained. By sovereignty, I mean simply certain conditions of production in which artists are able to

07/09

determine the direction of their work, its subject matter and form, and the methodologies they use – rather than having them dictated by institutions, critics, curators, academics, collectors, dealers, the public, and so forth. While this may be taken for granted now, historically the possibility of artistic self-determination has been literally fought for and hard won from the Church, the aristocracy, public taste, and so on. In my view, this sovereignty is at the very center of what we actually understand as art these days: an irreducible element considered to be the “freedom of art.”

I suspect that it’s not coincidental that the rise of the “independent curator” has taken place alongside a pattern of increasing privatization over the past couple of decades in the cultural field. Curators and institutions of art, whose authority is in part derived from representing public interests and being responsible to the public, are increasingly becoming private agents guided largely by self-interest. For this reason they have begun to assume the appearance of something with authorial characteristics, while still retaining a certain claim to objectivity in their evaluation of art and in their obligation to public address.

It has recently been pointed out to me that



Martha Rosler, *If you lived here...*, Dia Art Foundation, 1989-92.

as artistic production becomes increasingly deskilled – and, by extension, less identifiable by publics as art when placed outside the exhibition environment – exhibitions themselves become the singular context through which art can be made visible as art. This alone makes it easy to understand why so many now think that inclusion in an exhibition produces art, rather than artists themselves. But this is a completely wrong approach in my opinion: what most urgently needs to be done is to further expand the space of art by developing new circulation networks through which art can encounter its publics – through education, publication, dissemination, and so forth – rather than perpetuate existing institutions of art and their agents at the expense of the agency of artists by immortalizing the exhibition as art's only possible, ultimate destination.

#### 4. Artist as Curator

On the other hand, there is quite a history of artists making use of certain aspects of curatorial and organizational work in their practice by assuming the role of curator. At times this has been a response to the inadequacy of existing institutions, their hostility to artists, or their total absence – prompting the creation of many of the artist-run spaces of the 1970s – or as a response to a particular emergency, as with ACT UP and Gran Fury. As Group Material, Martha Rosler, and other artists in the 1980s demonstrated, curating can become a part of artistic practice just as any social form or activity can. For example, Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here* began as an immediate response to a lack of institutional support for an exhibition she was invited to do at the Dia Center for the Arts. Rosler felt that the best way to do something there was by positioning herself as curator/organizer – a kind of one-person institution rather than an individual artist. This resulted in a project comprising several exhibitions on housing and homelessness involving numerous artists, architects, activists, and community groups, which then turned out to be a seminal artwork that influenced several generations of artists including Rirkrit Tiravanija, Renée Green, Liam Gillick, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Marion von Osten, and many others.

Likewise, what passed largely unnoticed in Paul Chan's production of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* was Chan's peculiar positioning of the artist in relation to the work: he did not write the play, direct it, or act in it. The set was essentially a city street. Chan's artistic involvement consisted largely of spending many months teaching as a volunteer in a local college, building close relationships with local community groups and grassroots organizations

– in other words, creating the conditions necessary for the production and reception of the play, while ensuring that part of the money raised for the project would go to local needs other than culture.

I feel that whereas artists' engagement with a range of social forms and practices not normally considered part of the vocabulary of art serves to open up the space of art and grant it increased agency, curatorial and institutional attempts to recontextualize their own activities as artistic – or generalize art into a form of cultural production – has the opposite effect: they shrink the space of art and reduce the agency of artists.

An artist can aspire to a certain sovereignty, which today implies that in addition to producing art, one also has to produce the conditions that enable such production, its channels of circulation. Sometimes the production of these conditions can become so critical to the production of work that it assumes the shape of the work itself. This should not be confused with the job curators have and the work they do. As an artist, I would not attempt to propose a solution for curators; they themselves need to come up with ways of thinking and working that do not undercut the sovereignty of artists.

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08/09

e-flux journal #16 — may 2010 Anton Vidokle  
Art Without Artists?



09/09

e-flux journal #16 — may 2010 Anton Vidokle  
Art Without Artists?

1  
“Cultures of the Curatorial,”  
Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig,  
January 22–24, 2010. The press  
release is available on the  
Academy’s website,  
[http://www.kdk-leipzig.de/ve  
ranstaltungen.html](http://www.kdk-leipzig.de/veranstaltungen.html).

2  
While I agree in principle with  
the description of “the  
Curatorial” as it has been  
articulated by Irit Rogoff and  
practiced by such figures as  
Maria Lind – insofar as that  
curatorial methodology and  
knowledge is not limited to  
exhibition-making only, and can  
be productively applied to many  
different activities from book  
publishing to teaching – my  
concern is with a rather large  
gap between theory and  
concrete power relations that  
exists within the culture  
industry, and only grows due to  
misunderstandings.

3  
As Manuel Borja-Villel  
commented, “With all respect to  
Adrià, whom I consider to be an  
absolutely brilliant cook, I  
believe that he is responding to  
a certain dilettante  
extravagance of the artistic  
director [Roger M. Buergel], who,  
in my view, conceives of the  
political space as something  
merely festive and communal.”  
Jennifer Allen, “MACBA Director  
Takes On Culture and Cooking,”  
*Artforum*,  
[http://webcache.googleuserco  
ncontent.com/search?q=cache:7rk  
tJrhVy10J:artforum.com/new.p  
hp%3Fpn%3Dnews%26week%3D2006  
46](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:7rkTJrhVy10J:artforum.com/new.php%3Fpn%3Dnews%26week%3D200646) (accessed April 25, 2010).

4  
Documenta 12 Press Release,  
June 13, 2007,  
[http://www.documenta12.de/fin  
leadmin/pdf/PM/Adria\\_%20en.p  
df](http://www.documenta12.de/financeadmin/pdf/PM/Adria_%20en.pdf).

5  
It is interesting to note that  
Adrià actually seems to  
understand this in a way, while  
Buergel does not. Here is a  
statement Adrià gave to the  
*Guardian*: I feel like an intruder.  
Artists all over battle all their  
lives to receive an invitation to  
display their work at Documenta  
and now I, a cook, am asked to  
go along! So I worry. It’s not  
going to be a dinner I am going to  
make and – while I do have some  
ideas – I am not sure yet quite  
what I am going to do. I have met  
the organiser Roger Buergel who  
believes that to create a new  
cooking technique is as  
complicated and challenging as  
painting a great picture. He says  
that he sees the work we do as a  
new artistic discipline. He says  
that our work shows cuisine  
should be a new art form. I am  
thrilled and honoured to be given  
the chance to attempt this leap.

6  
See press release at  
[http://www.28bienalsapaulo.  
org.br/presentation](http://www.28bienalsapaulo.org.br/presentation).

7  
See  
[http://www.curatingdegreezer  
o.org/archive.html](http://www.curatingdegreezer.org/archive.html).

8  
See Aleksandr Rodchenko,  
*Experiments for the Future:  
Diaries, Essays, Letters, and  
Other Writings*, ed. Ed. Alexander  
Levrentiev and Jamey Gambrell,  
trans. John E. Bowlt (New York:  
Museum of Modern Art, 2005).

9  
Michelle White and Nato  
Thompson, “Curator as  
Producer,” *Art Lies*, no. 59 (Fall  
2008), See  
[http://www.artlies.org/artic  
le.php?id=1659](http://www.artlies.org/article.php?id=1659).