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Letters to the Editors: Eleven Responses to Anton Vidokle's "Art Without Artists?"

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Published in issue no. 16 of *e-flux journal* in May 2010, Anton Vidokle's polemical "Art Without Artists" essay stimulated a number of heated responses, primarily from curators. Over the summer we asked some of these respondents to put their thoughts in writing, and invited a few others to also register their positions with regard to the problems, if any, in dissolving boundaries between artistic and curatorial work.

This is the first in an ongoing series of letters to the editors featuring reader responses to issues or individual essays published in *e-flux journal*. To offer your own response, write to journal@e-flux.com.

Maria Rus Bojan

In my opinion, the argument made by Anton Vidokle in "Art without Artists" is a very rare, and sharp, critique of curatorial meaning production and its side effects on the art world. Indeed, as Vidokle observes, there is a certain lack of critical questioning with regard to the validity of the actual curatorial-cultural model. And furthermore, there is a lack of critical distance necessary for properly investigating whether the challenges of these new modes of curatorial practice are indeed useful in contributing to a substantial re-thinking of the triadic relation of artist/curator/audience.

But however important the question of whether the curatorial job should remain a service or be perceived instead as a creative process, it remains a secondary issue in my opinion. We now find ourselves in the unprecedented situation of creating a huge infrastructure for art, while art itself has almost disappeared from the process altogether. An acknowledgement that the current establishment and capitalist preconditions for artistic work suffocate and undermine the core function of art should come first and foremost, and should provoke serious reflection and concern.

An ethical crisis and a lack of critique within the art world have certainly contributed to this situation, but on a more pragmatic level, the lack of criteria and defined rules that could better protect the art world, combined with the feeling of inferiority experienced by art practitioners in relation to PR specialists, have led to this paradoxical situation. It is not my intention to criticize the role of public relations or the advertising industry in general, however. Rather, I wish to underline the effects of publicity's invasion of our specific field, and consider how

an increasing demand for image production has exerted itself on both artists and on those who work in the service of art.

PR agents have justified an infiltration of all levels of the institutional art world by emphasizing the compulsory degree of recognition and celebrity required to participate in the field of art. And they have reached their goal of becoming a supreme arbitrator of attention. Now, the artist's production can no longer be presented and promoted without first being filtered through various teams of experts, and in this way, without knowing, artists have tacitly subjected their work to a new form of censorship.

Sure, it is risky to pronounce this word, "censorship," precisely because these experts are primarily curators and art historians; but let's be sincere and accept that the power relations are inherent and that artists are the ones who bear its burden. Let's acknowledge that the field unfortunately will never have enough resources to please everybody. In almost all cases, institutional programming must follow economic interests, and naturally only those artists whose works fit the specific requirements are selected for presentation in the end. Even if it is truly appreciated, artistic value and the actual artistic message count for very little when the institution's primary interest lies in generating profit. In fact, the entire machinery of the institution is employed to attract larger audiences, by conceiving an ever-increasing number of creative projects. And in most cases this happens with the full consent of the artists. And if there is some conflict between artists and curators at the moment, it is not necessarily generated by power games within the field, but are mainly the results of society's pressure and its need for fame at any price.

The Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter was one of the first to observe that a surplus of creativity will lead to a crisis for capitalist society. Synthesizing the very substance of modern times, "creative destruction" is a key concept for explaining a "process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one," warning of the dangers that accompany such changes.¹ To unite the terms *destruction* and *creation* in one expression is in fact to generate the most perverse combination possible, precisely because real creation should, rather than destroy anything, contribute to the consolidation, continuation, and completion of innovation. But when creativity is cynically and incessantly exploited, not out of necessity but for profit, then we are no longer talking about the natural process of replacing old forms with new

ones, but about a process of subduing creation, of subjecting it by all means to the capitalist order.

Unfortunately, all sectors of life have been corrupted by this negative creativity, and this is the reason why, with regard to the internal dynamics of the art field, one should immediately distinguish between the individual act of creation, which is positive and affirmative because it is born from a sense of urgency, and the negative internalized creativity that has more to do with the political, economic, and power-related dimension, than with the real meaning of creation as such.

Under the pressures of this new form of capitalism, and in the name of so-called social solidarity, contemporary society has allowed too many people to lay claim to the real act of creation, and has left too much space for mediocrity to take its toll on the real artists. Only mediocrity needs brands and aggressive creative marketing strategies for launching its products. Good art does not. Because good art will market itself, it requires no other creative input, and will therefore always reject this kind of collectivism in creation, which to me seems very close to the communist concept of cooperativization.

The good news is that despite this creatively disguised, corrupted capitalism, art has resisted and it will continue to survive in any circumstances.

And thank God there is no such thing as democracy in art! In the world's pantheon of values there is only room for the real creators, for artists who express the inconvenient truths of their time in unique and radical ways. So we should not concern ourselves too much with those who forget who they are and what their real mission is. Their punishment will come in the form of a serene forgetfulness.

Maria Rus Bojan is an art critic and curator based in Amsterdam. She is the director of the international program of Art Rotterdam and is co-director of Project Foundation, a platform for contemporary art and new formats of exhibiting.

Beatrice von Bismarck

Considering the current popularity of independent curators, the increasing number of curatorial studies programs, and the density of discourse concerning curating at conferences and in publications, the questioning of the role of the curator in relation to that of other participants in the cultural field, above all in relation to artists, doesn't come as a surprise. The debate concerns nothing less than the terms for participation in meaning production and its processes, of inclusion in and exclusion from the field of art. From which position should this

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power be exercised, and what are its techniques and strategies? Has the curator come to occupy the single most powerful position in the field, amalgamating and emulating all others – those of artists, critics, and theoreticians alike? This is the assumption underlying Anton Vidokle’s argument. Has the curator thus become a meta-artist with exceptional designating and legitimizing capabilities who can consecrate his or her own work as art?

While this debate has appeared and reappeared since the late 1960s, enhanced by two parallel developments – conceptual critical approaches in the arts on the one hand, and the rise of the freelance curator on the other – it doesn’t seem to have lost any of its unquestioned assumptions regarding how artists and their work are to be distinguished from other practitioners in the field or members of society at large. In order to avoid any mythical undertones related to creativity, freedom, or self-realization, I would like to shift the argument to a differentiation between the notions of “curator,” “curating,” and the “curatorial.” Instead of comparing professional positions (curators vs. artists, critics, and so forth) and tasks (curating vs. making art, critique, etc.) with their respectively assigned privileges, powers, and status, I would suggest to shift the focus to the specific condition in which these positions and tasks appear as part of the constellations constituting the “curatorial.”

The status of the “curatorial” reflects a long history of challenges posed to the conventions of the curator’s profession and to the activity of curating. Over the course of the twentieth century the “curator” – in its inception, an institutional position connected to museums – was increasingly professionalized while being simultaneously challenged by de-professionalizing tendencies following the rise of the “freelance curator,” who was understood in terms of a commitment to individual projects rather than to a single institution. In accordance with this development, the original tasks formulated by the museum – collecting, preserving, presenting, and mediating – became more wide-ranging and complex. While administrating and organizing, selecting and contextualizing, acquiring and allocating funds, publicizing and social networking are all understood now to be part of the job, the most fundamental definition of “curating” is the making of connections: between works or art, artifacts, or informational materials, but also between them and different sites (such as studios, collections, or museums), people (artists, collectors, sponsors, curators, gallerists, critics, or theoreticians), as well as discursive, social, cultural, economic, or political

contexts.

At no time were these tasks exclusively reserved for “curators,” even when artists claimed the right to participate actively in making their own work public and perceptible as a precondition for the art to be presented as such.² What’s more, in recent years different arts, disciplines, and professions have adopted parts of the “curating” task – film, dance, theatre, architecture, and their related studies are involved in curatorial activities, as are philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists. These overlappings, synergies, and competing interests render the curatorial a self-reflexive constellation, itself involved in making constellations and dealing with them.³ The curatorial designates conventions against one another, takes analogies between making constellations and immaterial work into account, and intentionally reveals how precariousness and the privileges of an exceptional social status characterize working conditions in the curatorial field. The conditions of certain positions and professions in the field are as much a part of negotiations within the realm of the “curatorial” as are its various tasks, techniques, and strategies. They form flexible and ephemeral combinations in much the same way as “curated” objects, spaces, persons, or discourses. Within this structure of dynamic constellations, the “curatorial” allows itself to assume, mirror, and expose the existing relations of public address, economy, and subjectivization in the artistic field. It is through that it may visualize potential modifications, alternatives, and changes, and ultimately gain its aesthetic as well as political relevance. The debate concerning the status of curated artworks and the role of the artist her/himself is thus less about disconnecting art from artists than about how they are to be embedded in the public realm. Up for negotiation are the conditions under which artists are to be responsible for the specific means by which their work becomes public.

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Liam Gillick

In one of the Marx Brothers’ films, Groucho Marx, when caught in a lie, answers angrily: “Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?” This apparently absurd logic renders perfectly the functioning of the symbolic order, in which the symbolic

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mask-mandate matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate.⁴

What Anton Vidokle points out in “Art Without Artists” is not a new observation – and he would be the first to admit this. Yet what has changed this time is the source of the argument. For Vidokle is at the center of many collapses and redefinitions. He is not an artist who makes large claims for the autonomy of his praxis – on the contrary his work is often completely misinterpreted as being a conference, a series of discussions, or a transfer of information. The crucial issue here is that these misinterpretations of his work are also completely accurate insofar as the misunderstandings are part of a sequence of maneuvers invoked through a progression of side-steps in and out of institutional and neo-institutional terrain – between autonomy and the zone within which one becomes implicated.

The question here is not whether or not an artist is a good human being or whether a curator is a controlling art operator; there is no doubt that both are equally semi-true and patently false, and that they are produced and validated only by pledging allegiance to the old order of conceptual art, with its accusations of hypocrisy, tokenism, and its love of the idea over and above gestures of radicality and the rejection of the commodity. But questions of authorship and instrumentalization will not suffice to realign and redesignate roles in the contemporary arena. And questions that circulate around the curatorial do not prevent the potential of cultural work that yearns for autonomy.

What we really face when these doubled categories of instrumentalization and a desire for transparency are pitted against a more Trotskyesque desire for embeddedness, constant skepticism, and semi-autonomous engagement, is a battle of ideas that echoes deeply seated left-wing disagreements. The validation of cultural work through mediation by those who have been identified as “good” presents an audience with the task of verifying the roots of what is presented because it has already been presented before, and leads to a shutting down of potential and places a relative of the neo-Lacanian big other into operation. This process within cultural studies, curatorial education, institutional presentation, and the “curatorial” links with forms of moralistic coding used within language and the law in ways that cannot be represented or acknowledged regardless of how hard we try to see through the transparent screen of the didactic and the completely sourced. However hard one attempts to account for everything, that very desire alienates its

subjects completely in the end. The question here concerns authority and the claim to cultural validity. Many practices today cannot be consolidated within any singular overarching curatorial perspective. To then abandon the contradictory subject altogether in favor of language and the law would be an act of cowardice in the face of the irresolvable. That is the technique employed by the dominant culture. That is the American way – from the town hall meeting to the workings of the Supreme Court. Not a perfect role model for all its apparent democracy and belief in the rule of law.

It is this dilemma of an apparent radicality framed only through didactic language and a plea for commonly understood enlightenment legalistic structures that Vidokle is questioning. The solution does not reside within self-conscious post-authorship in the face of excessive curatorial instrumentalization even if that is what he suggests in his text. The crisis is one of power, language, and the law. The prospect of operating under the regime of a big other, even if it does not exist, is the only thing that might suffice to account for the determined drive to create art without artists or even art.

Years ago in the UK there was an old barroom test that the left would use to speculate on who would need to be eliminated once the revolution came. And we can find a parallel in the possibility of projecting artists and curators into positions of real power and speculating on what might take place if they were ever to get hold of a Ministry of Information. But it is this absence of real world projection that haunts the terrain in the thrall of the big other where the artistic and the curatorial still struggle to animate roles and potentials – in spite of the fact that they are already reconciled with the fact that material that has not been already validated can have little function within a critical structure. This is concerned less with criticality than with sustaining an isolated critical super-self-consciousness – the neo-institutional analogue to the ironic clowns and the painter of unicorns.

Liam Gillick is an artist based in London and New York.

Jens Hoffmann

“Art Without Artists?” inspires a variety of ruminations: on the relationship between artists and curators, the position of institutions, the bureaucratization of curatorial work, and much more. But first and foremost – though this was not the main objective of his essay – it reflects the current confusion regarding the practice of curating.

Perhaps this response may seem to come from left field. While I passionately advocate

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strong curatorial voices and the idea of the curator as author, I also care deeply about art, artists, the creative process, and most importantly the display of art. I agree that some curators have taken on a far more active role in the art system – at times to the point of becoming overbearing – yet the majority of curators working in hundreds of museums across the globe have not assumed such a role, and most of them work on a rather less prominent platform. I also do not share the author’s fear that the sovereignty of artists is in danger. As Vidokle himself says: Artists can continue making work without curators, whereas curators cannot curate without artworks.

The aforementioned “confusion” is a result of a number of developments in the art world over the last twenty to forty years. The changes we are witnessing today in the field of curatorial practice follow from critically engaged artistic practices that emerged in the late 1960s – especially those associated with institutional critique – which have been appropriated by curators, and in particular independent curators. This may initially seem like a contradiction, as institutional critique set out to examine, question, and criticize institutional power and its hierarchies, including the relationship between artists and curators. Yet many of the independent curators who have emerged over the last twenty years, mostly in Europe and to a somewhat lesser extent in the United States, have been looking for ways to open up rigid exhibition protocols and stiff institutional structures, and to propose unorthodox exhibition formats that can be highly critical of the art system itself. With the rise of the independent curator in the late 1990s, academic programs focused on curating, as well as theoretical discourses around exhibition making, began to flourish. The current concept of curatorial practice as one that transcends the mere organization or display of artworks in gallery spaces owes much to these developments.

It might sound strange coming from someone who seems so deeply entrenched in the art world, and who has championed the apparently progressive idea of the curator as author for some time, but I often feel that I am sitting on the sidelines of most curatorial debates today. While this has a lot to do with my fundamental love of art, which fewer and fewer curators seem to share, it is even more strongly related to my sense of the debate around curating as being ultimately not very interesting or meaningful. My desire to focus on exhibitions as the main platform for the mediation and dissemination of artistic and intellectual concepts, the production of knowledge, and our experience of art and culture is perhaps

unfashionable. Yet I have no investment in the idea of “the curatorial” as a strategy for bypassing art, or for the exhibition.

I am also not necessarily wedded to the notion that curating must strictly revolve around art, but I am deeply concerned that leaving the exhibition behind would mean leaving behind a crucial tool for the examination of social, cultural, and political issues. The potential of what an exhibition can be, and how deeply it is entrenched as a social ritual in society, has not yet been fully explored. It still offers many untapped possibilities for artists and curators to mediate content, whether artistic, political, cultural, or something else. The “curatorial” will be interesting as a concept when we realize its value as a methodology for engaging with the world as it opens doors to new forms of mediation. And in some way, Vidokle himself is a perfect example of how non-curators can utilize the “curatorial; his practice as an artist is indeed very curatorial, yet it is also decisively artistic.

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Adam Kleinman

Thank you Anton for your thoughtful text, “Art Without Artists.” I am concerned, however, that it misses a larger concern by narrowly defining a curator as a figure who works solely with artists. Look at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with curators of education who present symposia in fields far beyond art – in sociology, psychology, economics, as well as art history and theory. As such, and as a corollary to your text, I would like to ask, rather than why Ferran Adrià was included in an exhibition at all, but why he could not have been included in the exhibition *simply as a cook?*

On a similar note, look at the YouTube Biennial to be presented at the Guggenheim this fall. While a major social phenomenon is worth considering, the method of simply restaging an already existing infrastructure strikes me as lazy. But more importantly, rather than bringing individuals directly involved in social media such as bloggers, web designers, entrepreneurs, YouTube celebrities, or even sociologists; artists have been invited to serve as a jury that will decide which “works” are to be included or excluded, presumably to add some sheen of criticality or authenticity to the event.

I wholeheartedly agree with your sentiment that today it is no longer enough “to take on a challenging job, do it well, with real dedication and engagement, and take pride in that.” In fact, if we consider many curators and institutions to

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act as authors in order to create new forms of authority, then the situation is probably even worse when their exhibitions are delivered, slapdash, to a public. Why is this happening? What is at stake? Since you brought up both disciplinary colonization and transparency – really the clearing of an existing authority so as to set up new rule – I would like to quote Homi Bhabha on the subject:

Transparency is the action of the distribution and arrangement of differential spaces, positions, knowledges in relation to each other, relative to a discriminatory, not inherent, sense of order. This effects a regulation of spaces and places that is authoritatively assigned; it puts the addressee into the proper frame or condition for some action or result.⁵

Could curatorial laziness in fact be more nefarious? That is, do steps to gather other fields into the art machine represent an attempted coup by curators and institutions to create the grounds to become the public intellectual distributors *par excellence*? Furthermore, so as not to pick on curators solely, I have to ask whether artists are implicated as well? Can an artist honestly bemoan curatorial overstepping while simultaneously using “appropriation,” whereby “objects” of culture are “acquired” by usurping authorship from a primary producer? Is it not true that acts of appropriation are considered to add a layer of *criticality* to the work? Here we find an age-old tension, not between different cultural producers, but between artist and craftsman, as you suggested with Tiravanija’s average cooking skills. Artists as well as curators promote a state of exception wherein their work is “sovereign” because they have taken sovereign control of the distribution of a given discourse – which now marks the self-reflexive stance that distinguishes “high” culture. Although labor relations are certainly at stake, the real questions concern what type of culture we live in, and to what extent it is shared globally or is simply that of a quasi-mythic class.

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Sohrab Mohebbi

This is a simple proposition, or rather an observation regarding the position of the curator of contemporary art spaces in relation to the position of the artist: if the artist – post-Duchamp – decides what is art, then the curator is the one who decides the status of non-art within the art space, of everything in the exhibition space that is not a work of art.

Traditionally, the curator was the caretaker of the work of art. The curator identified and rewarded artistic genius and was the mediator between the artwork and the public, bringing the work to the public space and making it accessible to the audience. However, the autonomous modern art object, free from royal patronage and religious significance, demanded increasingly to be interpreted and explained. Thus over time the curator came to not only present the artwork, but also explained why and how it is art.

The blurring of the boundaries between art and life and the readymade gesture on the one hand, and the disputed futility of avant-garde committed art and its social promise on the other, increasingly generated the need for curatorial contextualization and interpretation. Thus, from wall labels to press releases, from African masks to newspapers, from archival material to advertisement packages, and from industrial artifacts to lectures and seminars, the curator became a sovereign overseer of non-art within the art space, to the extent that the art spaces at times had no art at all.

In *Man Without Content*, Giorgio Agamben touched upon a particular crisis in contemporary art criticism when he suggested that, while art was always defined and situated in relation to its shadow (non-art), the art that has been made and exhibited following Duchamp has not only embraced, but has become, this shadow. In the contemporary art space, through various forms of curatorial intervention, what used to be a simple wall label has now expanded into an inventory of objects and discourses that further complicates the already complicated problem of simultaneously exhibiting both art and its shadow. The question concerns what distinguishes non-art deemed art by the artist as such from the non-art presented by the curator as curatorial intervention. One is art and the other is context; but when placed side by side, does one become the other or vice versa?

The curator as author solidifies his or her position by creating what could be called a curatorial gap, something similar to the pedagogical gap of the explicative order as described by Rancière/Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Seen from this angle, in order to maintain curatorial specificity and authority, there should be a gap between the artwork and what it means, and the curator is the person who helps the ignorant viewer cross the gap, step by step, via curatorial mediation, through the context/knowledge that the curator provides. As Rancière shows, a form of gap is necessary in maintaining any kind of authority, and he shows how the hierarchical structure of society is preserved by sustaining such gaps. And for the

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curatorial position to gain and maintain its specificity within the cultural sector, the curatorial gap needs to be preserved.

The curator is the one who has decided to not produce, to be a non-author. While artistic work demands authorship, the curatorial defies it. Therefore, in most instances, curatorial authorship is at odds with the ethos of the profession. The curator needs to destroy the gap, not to preserve it, and needs to allow the will of the audience to follow the will of the art, and not the intellect of the curator. If this could at times be achieved by the introduction of a recent edition of the Yellow Pages, or of a model of a new hybrid car, then there should be a place for it on the margins of the white cube.

Sohrab Mohebbi is a writer/curator currently based in Brooklyn. He received his MA from Center for Curatorial Studies, and was a founding member of 127 band, Tehran.

Nato Thompson

Anton Vidokle's essay "Art Without Artists" certainly tackles an important shift not only in the field of curating, but also in the field of artistic production writ large. To distill the argument, Vidokle makes a case for the increased autonomy of artists and for the reduction of the legislative and creative control of curators, whom he feels often overstep their bounds. His argument is that the expanded curatorial field simply shrinks the realm of possibilities for artists, that "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."

Certainly, Vidokle's text is polemical and for that reason, it must dig deep into clear-cut categories and stark oppositions. The curator and the artist must be considered as somehow fixed identities. Yet in the age of a flexible economy in which individuals must often wear numerous hats in order to survive, it is strange to find such strict typologies. When does an artist become a curator? When does an artist become an institution? When does a curator become an artist? When does an institution become an artist?

Vidokle makes us feel as though these categories were quite apparent, but certainly it is in this confusion that we find the argumentation begin to slip. While Vidokle adequately addresses certain arrangements of curatorial power in institutions over the authority of the artist, he does not acknowledge the complexity of production that occurs outside these categories. While the sovereignty of the artist is of critical importance, its primacy is less

apparent if we do not consider the larger perspective of everyday life.

Vidokle separates the roles of artist and curator via an economic framework in which the curator serves as management and the artist as worker. While this breakdown certainly serves the purposes of argumentation, it is only approximately accurate. The dynamics of power and labor in the current economic climate are absolutely critical to understanding the modes of cultural production at work today, and it is extremely important to not misrepresent them. For, certainly, there are relationships between artists and curators that operate according to this industrialist model of labor. Certainly, some curators have jobs at institutions and some of those institutions stand in direct relation to power. And, certainly, many artists work under precarious labor conditions. But, of course, we are also aware of numerous artists whose financial position within galleries vastly exceeds those of any curator. Do these exceptions (which unsurprisingly enough tend to be the artists in the bigger exhibitions) count as "artists" if we are to continue with the dichotomy of management versus worker? How far should we go with an economic breakdown of their roles? What happens when the curator works for the artist? Does this shift in the economic relationship change their identities?

This linguistic game might feel silly, but such is what happens when one follows an argument to its logical conclusion. In an age of flexible labor conditions, strict labor categories will always find contradictions. If artists are workers, then what is their relationship to other workers? Are all workers artists? In an age of neoliberal capitalism, wouldn't it be accurate to state that most of the infrastructure of the arts is based on workers? Where do gallerists, installers, and receptionists fit in? What is the role of the schools at which some of the artists teach? What is the role of the granting organizations that hand out funds? And this is only the art world. Where does the creative power of those caught outside the gears of the art community fit in? Where do all workers fit in?

Certainly, this might be an obvious point, but my intention is simply to remind us that the world of cultural production is vast and open-ended. To talk about the autonomy of artists, without consideration of the greater battles facing workers, means continuing to operate in cahoots with an antiquated logic of the artist as genius. Certainly, many of the most regressive forms of criticism are built upon the de-linking of artistic actions from the very conditions of labor that surround them. And, certainly, the market will forever praise the myth of the artist-genius separated from his or her conditions of labor.

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I want to be careful in unpacking this because any quick assumptions can lead to terrible tropes that we must certainly be tired of seeing over and over again. Vidokle is right in his suspicion of the overreaching curatorial role. In an age in which the author has supposedly died, we find the social capital gained by authorship all the more tempting. As artists gain power through authorship (and those invested in that authorship, like their dealers), they simultaneously find curators trying to catch a ride. But, at the same time, we must understand that while curators may be guilty of this, so too are many artists who do not credit their studio assistants, the workers at museums, and the entire enterprise of people who work to make dreams happen. In the film industry, it is worth noting, there are lengthy credits at the end of the show that evidence the complexity of making cultural projects happen. Strange times indeed when the film world is more progressive than art.

Vidokle mentions Paul Chan working as a producer on *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans as a form of art. In this example we find some of the problems that can accompany this constant emphasis on the artist. Chan himself denies this kind of authorship when it comes to such a vastly complicated public project, for certainly one must acknowledge the theater company that produced the play. Did Paul's credit as artist supersede that of the Classical Theater of Harlem? Or what about the people from New Orleans that assisted in the production? Or how about the production crew that worked so many hours to get the play off the ground? I must admit equal culpability. *Creative Time* also foregrounded Paul's role at the expense of other contributors. The project was often referred to as "Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: a project by Paul Chan." It is my experience that most art organizations feel they must maintain a sole author in order to make the project more legible to funders and audiences, and to cater to a prejudice for the mission of serving individual authorship. I bring this example forward to warn against the hazards of reinforcing antiquated notions of authorship. How perversely bizarre, and revealing, that the art world continues to cling to the economic privilege that comes with authorship by leaving one name on complex cultural projects.

Certainly, the backstory to these tensions involves that ghost that haunts all cultural actions in these times: social capital. This strange transactional form of power only goes to those credited with authorship, and thus the battle begins. For without social capital, these squabbles over crediting wouldn't feel so intense. But, of course, this has little to do with creating possibility or making art, and rather

more with the ability to leverage the power of authorship. Because many curators operate from institutional positions we find they use the creative power of artists for the purposes of garnering social capital. So when Roger Buerger includes the chef Ferran Adrià in the last Documenta, he does so with a tacit understanding of what this manipulation of the social capital of a high-profile chef might do for him in the field of art. But, of course, the same goes for artists, who will often borrow from everyday life and use it for the purposes of their own career. Commercially successful artists might cull from the treasure trove of political movements in order to leverage the street cred or social capital it affords them. Or social based artists might use everyday cooking skills in order to create what would typically be considered a fundraising cocktail party. How can the conservative ambitions of much of what passed for relational aesthetics be considered much else?

Taking a step back, we identify an even more tenuous position. For, certainly, in an information age in which the production of culture is one part of a massive service sector, we find the nitpicking between artists and curators to be just a petty squabble in a much larger neoliberal market of precarity. In some instances, the battle between artist and curator is a battle between management and management. While the nuances might resonate with us, the overall social impact is extremely limited. Until we identify the concerns of artists and curators (as well as those of the other people tied to the art infrastructure such as teachers, art-world bureaucrats, security guards, installers, gallery receptionists, grant writers, marketing directors, the unemployed), we are missing the real onus of what Vidokle argues. For his point, if expanded, could lead to a much more aggressive call to arms.

Ultimately, the question can be distilled into an equation between power and the possibility of producing new worlds. In most instances curators stand in the way, working as a buffer against the critical potentiality of artists. The power equation comes into focus when it is recognized that the person with power often acts in accordance with power and their expressions result in the production of consistently alienating situations. But the mistake is to think that all artists are somehow immune to such conditions. There are far too many successful artists whose work continues to prop up conservative ideologies, and their practice garners far more power than any curator. There are many examples where the artist's role vis-à-vis the non-art-world workers could be considered that of management as well. So, the question of who

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is management and who is worker can only be case by case. The important thing to ask is in what way do these relationships unleash new conditions that resist the conservative logic of capital and power.

Nato Thompson is Chief Curator at New York-based public arts institution Creative Time.

Vivian Rehberg

It has been quite some time since I voluntarily stopped curating exhibitions, so my curatorial experience is limited and my brief remarks on Anton Vidokle's text, "Art Without Artists," come from the margins, from my position as spectator/art historian and critic. Although it is very refreshing to read an artist's perspective on this topic and I admire Vidokle's sincerity, I am not quite sure how seriously to take his characterization of the relationship between artists, curators, and critics as almost exclusively one of tyrannical interference. Once I finished luxuriating in a good, honest dose of schadenfreude with respect to my curator friends, I thought, surely the situation is not as bleak as he makes it sound. For this important conversation to move forward, beyond polemic, one has to admit exceptions.

Vidokle adopts the laudable position of artist advocate, which puts curators and critics willing to take the bait on the defensive. He makes a persuasive argument for a radical revision of the skewed hierarchical division of labor between curator and artist, in order to restore a notion of artistic sovereignty, or creative autonomy. However, I cannot envisage conditions of artistic production freed from the diktats of "institutions, critics, curators, academics, collectors, dealers, the public, and so forth." The mere existence of the artwork produces these relations, which are social, economic, and political, and capitalism thrives on them.

These days almost anything can be curated – daily news cycles, book and music selections, fashion shows, boutiques, gym equipment, online marketplaces, and posh-restaurant cheese trays (I'm not kidding). I suppose some would much rather eat from an especially well-curated cheese selection than one that has not been curated at all, though I prefer both knowing my options and making my own choices. The broader cultural use of this term "curate," which has become increasingly widespread in the Anglophone media, and its meaning and significance consequently diluted, may have an unexpected impact on the more specialized art curator. In the most banal sense, curating implies that an expert or team of experts has selected items of a specific quality or worth that will appeal to the greater public or a quite

targeted audience. "To curate" is not simply an action verb (from the Latin *curare*, to care for, as every curator has heard ad nauseam), it is an action verb that adds a specific kind of value. Curating adds the symbolic value of caring, of carefulness. But it also imposes layers of interpretation on the experience of art that Vidokle believes are "not necessary to produce meaning." I agree. However, if exhibitions are thankfully not "the singular context through which art can be made visible as art," they are still the conduit via which the greatest majority of us can be granted access to art. Wouldn't it be just a matter of time before an artist could lodge similar complaints against any new networks, or educational and publication efforts, that might arise to counteract curatorial power?

The influence of curators is undeniably pervasive. That the role of the curator has subsumed that of the critic is an unfortunate outcome of the perceived porosity between two activities I personally find quite significantly distinct, and to an extent, incompatible, but which the art world accepts as interchangeable. I'm not complaining; I find this situation unfortunate for reasons that have nothing to do with legitimacy or visibility and everything to do with criticality. However, just as I'm not convinced that written texts and exhibitions are similar propositions or occupy the same critical terrain, I'm also not convinced that all of the actors in the art world accept that curators and artists, or exhibitions and artworks, are interchangeable. Some of us do not. My evidence for this, however, is purely anecdotal.

Vivian Rehberg is an art historian and critic, and a contributing editor at Frieze, based in Paris.

Dorothee Richter

Anton Vidokle has selected the Curating Degree Zero Archive as an example of the curatorial practice of exhibiting one's own archives as a kind of artwork. I wish to set forth some arguments to contradict this assumption. In this connection, I should like to point out that the practice of artists and of organizers has changed since the sixties; artists like George Maciunas, Claes Oldenburg, Joe Jones, and Addi Köpcke, to mention only a few of those involved, began at the time to pay increased attention both to the relation to the public and to methods of distribution. These new aspects of cultural production corresponded to new forms of post-Fordist commodity production, to a shift in the organization of work processes throughout society. Such a shift in shared areas of action culminated in new meta-levels, for instance, they brought about networks and transfers of know-how. In consequence, the avant-garde among those engaged in cultural work became

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aware at an early stage of these changes, criticizing them while at the same time acknowledging that the framework for new cultural production must be regarded as being wider than hitherto imagined; for cultural production, they realized, ought to cross the borders of traditional culture and insist on playing a role in society as a whole.

Whether this is possible and under which assumptions this should take place opens up another set of questions. I would therefore argue that cultural production today cannot clearly distinguish between artistic and curatorial aspects, both of which combine a great variety of signs and media to create a meaningful message. However, and on this point I would certainly agree with Anton, in some respects curating involves a new hegemony; you only have to see Harald Szeemann in the midst of artists at documenta 5, which unmistakably presents a hierarchy that reminds one of the power relations between a king and his knights. However, with the Curating Degree Zero Archive we wished to provide the possibility of gaining an insight into the practices adopted by curators and by artists that are currently described as curatorial practices. (And in this sense the Postgraduate Program in Curating in Zurich also reflects upon the field.) Moreover, we are interested in how these practices convey a meaning, since every cultural production communicates a certain message to the public, the wider implications of which are important. Its aim is to create a new public and to trigger unexpected discussions and debates that are centered around power relations and political articulation in the field of vision/visibility within and far beyond the art field.

Dorothee Richter is head of the Postgraduate Program in Curating at Zurich University of the Arts, a Fluxus researcher, co-initiator of the Curating Degree Zero Archive, and editor of www.on-curating.org.

Jacopo Crivelli Visconti

In 1961, as his contribution to a group exhibition to be held at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, Robert Rauschenberg sent a telegram to the gallery with the text: "This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so." Turning a telegram into an artwork was a foundational act with regard to what would later be defined the dematerialization of the art object, and, to what is probably more relevant here, the sole responsibility of the artist: the "I" who decided what was a portrait, and therefore an artwork, was an artist, not a curator.

In his text "Art Without Artists?" Anton Vidokle seems to long for those happy times when artworks, even conceptual ones such as Rauschenberg's, could be created without the

annoying involvement of curators eager to discuss its meaning or the best way of displaying it. It could be argued that Iris Clert was in fact acting as a curator, by accepting Rauschenberg's proposal (which allegedly had to be rescued from the garbage, as it was thrown away at first) and, even more radically, conceiving of a show that consisted solely of portraits of herself. But arguing all that would be to sustain that Vidokle's position is wrong, and that "some kind of curator" is in fact always needed, and, as a curator, this is not really the way I see things. Not unlike the literary editor, the translator, or the referee, the curator plays a fundamental role, but should be prepared and willing to be invisible, if required. Though it is quite a consensual proposition that a curator today could legitimately decide that a telegram is an artwork or that it can be displayed alongside artworks, if this is done blatantly, something is wrong.

I believe, on the other hand, that curators play a key role as "intermediaries," to borrow Vidokle's expression, in allowing for artworks to be seen, or even produced, in the best possible way, or in any way at all. This might be true anywhere, but it certainly is especially true in a country like Brazil, where museums and cultural institutions in general are constantly struggling with a shortage of funds, lack of long-term planning, and political or even more undecipherable agendas. In such a context, a curator's humble, practical, and often frustrating job of raising funds, or struggling to convince whatever committee or institution of the value of an artistic project, can quite simply make the difference between a good idea and a tangible, visible artwork.

In such a context, the curator's task is akin to the one Vidokle considers most urgent: "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." In Brazil, and most likely in many somewhat developing countries, the art context is still shaping up, and the "new circulation networks" are often the only networks available at all. The fact that curators can and will play an important role in those contexts doesn't mean that artists will be excluded, but, quite the contrary, that they will be represented by curators in institutional and even bureaucratic arenas, and can thus concentrate on more interesting issues, such as producing art. It should be clear that this has nothing to do with a latent desire to be considered co-author, which Vidokle seems to identify in many curators. More often than not, however, it does take the two (the artist and the curator) to be able to make things happen.

In this sense, I have always had the

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impression that the relation between artist and curator is, or at least should be, deeply different from the one Vidokle describes: it is not about defending one's territory, but about building a common ground. Personally, I find there is hardly anything more rewarding than seeing impressive, beautiful, touching, thought-provoking works produced by artists I know and whose work I respect, and whom I might even have had the honor and pleasure of working with. And I truly believe that at least some of them are sincere when they tell me they were touched by reading something I wrote, or intrigued by an exhibition I organized, even if they were not the subject of my writing or did not have their work in the exhibition. I guess we have the feeling of being in this together, and what we share is an ongoing conversation. Or, to put it differently, this small text might be a portrait of Anton Vidokle if I say so, or it might be another narcissistic self-portrait of a curator, if he says so. But if we want to have an open-minded and fertile discussion about the whole issue, it is well beyond doubt that it takes, at least, the two of us.

Jacopo Crivelli Visconti is a writer and curator, based in São Paulo.

Tirdad Zolghadr

In 1972, artists reacted to documenta 5 with boycotts and open letters, protesting against Harald Szeemann "using artists like paint on canvas" and otherwise "overreaching," to use Vidokle's term. It's unfortunate such an uproar is unimaginable today. Which is to say I agree with many of Vidokle's points. The thick oral history of curators abusing their prerogatives is growing thicker by the biennial, while art is widely employed to boost curatorial reputations for multi-knowledgeability and to ennoble semi-academic careers. And the idea of a happy level playing field between artists and curators is indeed far too pastoral.

However, even more startling is the idea that curators getting-out-of-the-artist's-way will remedy the situation. I don't have the space to go into this, but please do realize that curators posing as mere butlers before the corridors of power – the custom Vidokle appears to advocate, one which still dominates 95% of curatorial practice – are all the happier to pursue their agendas behind smokescreens of modesty. "Don't mind me. Artists first." What's more, the old tradition of seeing artists as intrinsically harmless is no longer enough. It's worth mentioning that Daniel Buren's 1972 tough-talk negotiations with Szeemann allowed him to run his stripes across the documenta like some madcap Atari game – to the chagrin of many artists.

In Vidokle's essay, a Catalan cook and a

Brazilian courtroom prove the follies of curatorship, and, ipso facto, artists engaging with practices that are not part of the "vocabulary of art" serve to "open up the space of art," while curators do the contrary. Even the freelance curator, famously and pathetically powerless, becomes just another heaving Minotaur in this seamless narrative of victimization. And the irony of e-flux wielding more influence than most curators I know – freelance and institutional combined – will not be lost on many readers. But e-flux is an outstandingly productive model, and for each of Vidokle's examples of artistic agency I can give you one or two in which the spaces of artists are regularly "opened up" to the despair of those around them, with audiences, interns, political minorities, pop cultures, painful local histories being cutesified, tokenized, plagiarized, instrumentalized, and condescended to, in one venue after another. This impunity doesn't stop at curators, and the notion of "opening up" the space of artists as if they were caged tropical parakeets is deeply misleading.

The impunity in our field, so proudly bereft of the most basic checks and balances, is second to none, reminiscent perhaps of the "Benefit of Clergy." Medieval clergymen were not under the jurisdiction of civil courts, and could escape imprisonment or execution by simply reading the "Neck Verse." Miserere mei, Deus, secundum misericordiam tuam. A practice that was gradually banished once enough people had memorized the verse. Consider the class privileges, the institutionalized fraud, the mystical exceptionalism before the law. It's an acceptable comparison. If art is being used to warrant critical karaoke and brute exploitation, and if a conversation on ethics is really a priority, then a Call To Order should be a little more comprehensive.

Tirdad Zolghadr is an independent writer and curator based in Berlin.

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1

See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962), 83.

2

For further elaborations of my argument see also Beatrice von Bismarck, "Unfounded Exhibiting: Policies of Artistic Curating," in *The Artist as ...*, ed. Matthias Michalka (Vienna: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 31–44; "Curatorial Criticality: On the Role of Freelance Curators in the Field of Contemporary Art," in *Curating Critique*, ed. Marianne Eigenheer (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007), 62–78; "Curatorial Acting: Art, Work and Education," in *Creating Knowledge: Innovation Strategies for Designing Urban Landscapes*, ed. Hille von Seggern, Julia Werner, and Lucia Grosse-Bächle (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2008), 166–193.

3

The MA program Cultures of the Curatorial as well as the conference of the same name in Leipzig (for which Vidokle's paper was originally written) reflect the transdisciplinary and transprofessional character of the "curatorial," including as participants, guest artists, mediators, and theoreticians from different professional, artistic, and disciplinary fields. For more information, see <http://www.kdk-leipzig.de/pr ogramm.html>.

4

Slavoj Žižek, *The Big Other Doesn't Exist*, *Journal of European Psychoanalysis* Spring - Fall 1997

5

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 109.

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