Assuming Asymmetries
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Assuming Asymmetries
Joanna Warsza

“It was both magnificent and cynical,” said Christoph Tannert, the East German curator of the exhibition “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” (The Finitude of Freedom), organized on both sides of the former Berlin Wall in 1990. At that very moment, as the Wall fell and the prospect of German reunification appeared, art was necessary as a language to mediate tensions, to bridge a city torn apart, and to express the inexpressible. At the same time, the asymmetry of this experience could not be greater. The project took place in a deserted no-man’s land in the middle of Berlin, until very recently a death strip, for some, and for others a tourist attraction. Art came to repair that gap, to bring together—physically and symbolically—those separate worlds.

“Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” is one of seven under-researched public art exhibitions featured in this publication. At CuratorLab we have spent the pandemic years 2020 and 2021 re-visiting and documenting some of the most groundbreaking European and US context-sensitive exhibitions of the 1980s and ’90s. Our main method was one imposed by this specific point in time: a series of online conversations. Paradoxically, the pandemic condition made many of our interlocutors more available to talk to us at length. The resulting research includes the dialogues with curators, participating artists, and organizers involved in those extraordinary projects. A key focus of our inquiry was the embedded asymmetries present in those shows, and in art at large. We focused on such questions as: How can art productively navigate political tensions? How have artists and curators addressed the ethical dilemmas of the border condition, of inside and outside, working across walls and fences—whether physical, political, or social? Why is participation so hard to catalyze and conduct? How have artworks come to constitute a practice of “situated knowledge,” engaging with the contexts in which they are produced or exhibited? And finally, what can we learn from the exhibitions discussed here when developing non-violent forms of curating today?

The book opens with two essays, one by the researcher and architect Sofia Wiberg, and the other, by the philosopher Jonna Bornemark, asking if an asymmetry can ever be ethical, and, if so, when and how? Wiberg postulates that in participatory practices we need to go beyond the “happy talk” and success stories conducive to the institutional report, committed people talking together in harmony. “What if, instead of trying to squeeze into an egalitarian ideal, we view asymmetries as never static, yet always present? Rather than reducing the complexities and frictions that occur in these processes to temporary errors, we might acknowledge and work with these as something unavoidable, crucial to stay with and make room for, because they convey important knowledge.” Bornemark’s essay introduces an asymmetrical ethics through the examples of pregnancy, the human-horse relation, and BDSM sex, seeing in them as a potential practice of enjoyment: “Becoming two, becoming one, and becoming pure life.”

All the exhibitions featured in Assumming Asymmetries were very much part of the political, social, artistic, or urban time and place in which they occurred, and they are introduced chronologically here. The publication opens with “Construction in Process,” an artist-driven spontaneous collaboration with the Solidarity movement in Łódź, Poland in 1981. This multilayered artistic initiative was based on values conventionally gendered female, such as hospitality, generosity, care, and coexistence. And yet its legacy has, thus far, been owned and shared primarily by men. We aimed to shift the narrative of the show by making space for a few of the female voices among the artists and organizers of this unforgettable artistic experiment in solidarity.

“U-media” was a somewhat overlooked curatorial project by VAVD editions that took place in Umeå, Sweden in 1987. It sought to explore the diffusion of new media in the public realm and infosphere, and the way these were already altering the way we perceive reality and operate within it. We revisit this event as a gentle but inventive problematization of the notion of “the public sphere” that worked across physical space, public institutions, and the commercial media of Scandinavia.

Our journey continues with the already mentioned “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” in the autumn of 1990. Initiated by the dramatist Heiner Müller and the artists Rebecca Horn and Jannis Kounellis, the show was installed at various locations around the city’s former no-man’s land, and included work by eleven internationally acclaimed artists. In a series of conversations with both its East and West German curators, participating artists, and the researcher Sarah Alberti, the chapter captures a unique social and political condition of the city, situating art as a kind of seismograph of the—at once longed for and traumatic—reunification of Germany.

Regarded as the first major exhibition of community-based art in the United States, “Culture in Action” was a city-wide project organized with the support of Sculpture Chicago and curated by Mary Jane Jacob in 1993. Various art projects engaged with the social, political, and economic fabric of the city, ranging from collaborations with tenants’ associations...
to AIDS support groups. We explore this project as one example of a possible starting point for artists and curators seeking non-extractivist methodologies of working with communities. “Culture in Action” also sets a precedent by raising questions that remain urgent today: How can institutions make space for community-based practices that, until recently, took place quite independently of museums? How can instrumentalization and tokenism be avoided when working collaboratively? As curators today, we asked ourselves how we could continue to learn from artists and audiences who navigated the complexities of race, gender, and class in 1993.

Sonsbeek Park in the Dutch city of Arnhem is Europe’s first and longest running public art exhibition, launched back in 1949. Its eighth iteration, “Sonsbeek 93,” curated by Valerie Smith, represents another conceptual strategy to counter decontextualized “plop art” with a site- and situation-responsive alternative. The exhibition worked with the social, political, and ecological context of the specific locations in which its works were produced. We revisit “Sonsbeek 93” as a transition point between 1980s conceptions of site-specific work and the forms of non-monumental intervention and socially engaged art that emerged in the 1990s.

“Fem trädgårdar” (Five Gardens), curated by artist Carlos Capelán in Simrishamn and Ystad in southern Sweden in 1996, was conceived as a regional cultural project to celebrate the picturesque landscape of the Baltic coast. However, it turned into something much richer, speaking from the periphery, cultivating collaboration, and disrupting anthropocentric assumptions along the way. One of the main issues with which it engaged was philosopher Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of a societal “garden mentality” which seeks to create a world in which all the weeds have been rooted out, leaving only beautiful flowers and vegetables. Ahead of its time and overlooked in the mainstream art discourse of the Stockholm-Malmö axis, “Fem trädgårdar” has become for us a Scandinavian forerunner of critical, non-extractivist approaches in the field of curating.

Ida Biard’s “La Galerie des Locataires” has, from 1972 to this day, used the window of a Parisian apartment as one of its key exhibition spaces. Defined as an adaptable structure rather than a physical space, this peculiar “gallery” subverted conventional models of artistic dissemination and, as this chapter reveals, continues to conduct an extended exploration of the contract between artist and audience, the temporality of art, and its ability to actively influence everyday life.

Finally we look at INSITE, an ongoing series of exhibitions along the San Diego–Tijuana border, launched in 1992. Since its first edition, held in the neighboring cities of San Diego and Tijuana, it has contributed in multiple ways to mutual understanding on both sides, while focusing on cultural interaction and socio-political issues of the border condition: specifically, the constant exchange between adjacent states, immigration, and the daily movement of labor back and forth. We focus on INSITE’s particular and reflexive format as a curatorial project, one that problematizes inequality while attempting to resist cultural paternalism.

All these projects are pertinent today because of their capacity to raise questions about the highly complex and complicated relationship between communities, artists, and curators. Between what separates, and what unites. They make us more aware of methods of curating that present ways in which difficulties, tensions, and asymmetries can be assumed and problematized, but not deepened. While seeking to avoid the infliction of harm, they reveal that, ultimately, homogenous public space doesn’t exist. Instead, it needs to be read, experienced, and analyzed via an expanded, feminist, intersectional, multidirectional, political, and collaborative practice, for which art is a sensitive medium and measure.

This book has a parallel “sibling publication,” Curating beyond the Mainstream: The Practices of Carlos Capelán, Elisabet Haglund, Gunilla Lundahl, and Jan-Erik Lundström, produced under the editorial guidance of our guest lecturer, Maria Lind, and with the help of our curatorial assistant, Vasco Forconi. I would like to thank them both, along with all my colleagues at Konstfack, and CuratorLab’s course participants, for their resilience and persistence in making these two publications a reality.
Perfect Harmony: On Asymmetries in Collaborative Processes
Sofia Wiberg

In the final reports on participatory projects, whether in the field of public art or urban planning, complex processes are often concluded with the display of success stories, photos of happily committed people talking together in harmony. What takes place in these photos is well-composed and symmetrical; the emphasis is on dialogue and collaborative process as a space for consensus and balanced power relations. It's an image of what the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed describes as “Happy talk,” where complicated and messy situations are subsequently presented as simple, smooth, and successful.1

What are we engaged in when working with participatory arrangements in public art and planning? To work with urban planning and public space is to engage in questions about how we and future generations, both human and non-human, are going to live together. It’s about democracy, connection, incompatibilities and inequalities. It’s also about taking decisions in relation to a future that is still unknown but about which there are different ideas as to how to resolve the problems we currently envisage.

The way these collaborative situations are framed also raises a lot of questions. Who decides who is allowed to participate or not? Who sets the agenda? Who organizes the room? Who sits and who stands? Who holds the pen? Who gets paid? Who decides what will be dismissed as noise and what will become recognized as a voice? It's impossible to include all perspectives at the same time.

Participatory arrangements are therefore by necessity exclusionary and always deal with asymmetries. Saying that we should "make the city available to all" sounds great but is deceitful in that it skirts responsibility for the exclusion of—perhaps incompatible—life forms, projects, futures.2

What if, instead of trying to squeeze these situations and relations into an egalitarian ideal, we view asymmetries as something that are never static yet always present? What if we highlight the fact that the frameworks that shape how we interact are always conditioned? Rather than reducing the complexities and frictions that occur in these processes to temporary errors, we might instead acknowledge and work with these as something unavoidable, crucial to stay with and make room for, because they convey important knowledge.

The interesting question then becomes not “are these frameworks exclusionary or not?” but rather, “which exclusions result from these frameworks?” “to what effect?” and “how are these legitimised?” We can then ask how we might strike a balance between, on one hand, acknowledging that asymmetries, while not static, always exist, and, on the other, continuing to work to abolish them.

Rather than formulating an idea of collaboration as just and equal in advance, and applying it to these situations, we need to understand these processes as ethical situations in themselves requiring careful discussion.

This implies listening carefully in these situations. In the literature on listening, it is said that a prerequisite for political listening is a degree of unpredictability. To listen when you already know what you want to hear is contradictory. Listening is therefore making oneself open to hearing something that one did not know beforehand, but that might already be there. To expose oneself to this kind of listening means to temporarily surrender control and security, as what we hear may require us to change, which may cause some discomfort. As the education scientist Audrey Thompson emphasizes, this means learning to “stay with the hard questions.” To open yourself up to being affected and moved (in unexpected ways) by what you hear, without deciding beforehand what it will be.

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Asymmetrical Lessons: Pregnancy, Horses, and BDSM
Jonna Bornemark

In Western societies and philosophical traditions, the equality of rational subjects has long been understood as an ethical ideal for intersubjective relations. This ethics presupposes a relation between two independent subjects who are autonomous, rational, and (self-) transparent. And even where this understanding of subjectivity is not applicable, the ideal remains the same. We can ask ourselves if we are locked up in a certain understanding of subjectivity resulting from considering ethics as egalitarian relation. So let's take the opposite approach. Let's take a closer look at ethical asymmetrical relations.

When we look around us we see that we are actually surrounded by asymmetrical relations that can in fact be ethical; concrete interactions and practices where bodies stand in relation to each other. In order to learn more about asymmetrical ethics, I will take a closer look at three such relations and practices: the experience of pregnancy; relations between humans and horses; and some sexual practices of BDSM (Bondage, Dominance, Sadism, and Masochism).

My starting-point is that these three practices are—or at least could be—ethical. I will begin with a very naïve definition of what it means to be ethical, departing from a common sense and intuitive question: does a particular relation seem fair to all its parties? In order to discover some of the key elements of these relations and practices I will focus on the concept of will, and of what a body is or can be within them.

First of all, a few words on these practices and how they may be considered as ethical. We could discuss whether pregnancy should be viewed as a practice. It is not an exercise, or something you can leave and come back to when you feel like it. Perhaps it is, rather, a situation. Consequently it is not unethical but rather “non-ethical”: that is, outside the ethical domain, since it is something that “happens to you.” Yet this is not all there is to it. It is a relation, and as such the behavior of the pregnant person may be considered as ethical or unethical: just consider people's reactions to a pregnant woman smoking. The actions of the pregnant mother affect the fetus, however the relation is asymmetrical because those involved have vastly different roles and degrees of power and responsibility.

The human-horse relation is an old one, but there is a lot going on with it in the present era. New practices and theories are being developed. What they all share is a serious consideration of the ethical challenge of constructing relations that are not founded on the threat of violence. The bit, the spur, the whip – all are tools of violence by means of which this big animal is made to obey us. Also there has been a lack of recognition for the cognitive and emotional skills of the horse, a species more capable than assumed in the tradition (against which we are still in revolt…) in which Descartes could state that animals have no feelings and no capacity for thought. Nevertheless, I do consider it possible for humans to have an ethical relation to horses.

Out of our three asymmetrical ethical practices, BDSM is the least discussed in philosophy. Also, BDSM can be practiced in ethical ways because it is premised on explicit and mandatory consent between adults. Violence is often a central ingredient in BDSM, yet its basis in consent can make this violence ethical.

So let's explore how these asymmetries can be practiced in ethical ways, and how this could affect the idea of the ethical.

Will

In our discussion of ethics, and specifically in the consideration of the difference between an egalitarian and an asymmetrical ethics, the role of the will seems central. The first question tends to be: does such a practice follow exclusively the will of one party and not another? How can this willing be structured differently? What do the active parties want in these practices?

Pregnancy

If there is a choice at the beginning of this practice it is the mother’s: does she want the baby? We could also say that the fetus wants its life, it is a will that is mostly dependent upon the will of someone else. We could say that a will or a drive towards the life of the fetus is sometimes stronger than the will of a pregnant body—resulting in a failed abortion, for example. However, to understand pregnancy as a battle of wills does not really do justice to the phenomenon because the concept “will” is too strong: the fetus is not yet someone that wants something in a verbalized or self-conscious cognition. There is a possibility for will. A concept that is better suited here might be “drive,” since there is direction, something taking form, and the presence of possibilities. Here there is a clear asymmetry with the pregnant mother who may be a very autonomous person with a strong will. Yet very often the “will” of the pregnant person is not unitary. It is shifting, many-layered, and
complicated. What does one want in pregnancy? Do you really know? You want a life, a human life, you want health—but do you know what health is? (I speak as the mother of an autistic child). You want a future. Yet to want this is to not really know what you want. If you know what you want, you might know (i.e. think you know) too much—foreclosing the future rather than opening to it.

**Human-Horses**

The question of the will is maybe most problematic, or sensitive, in a relation to horses. Here we have two already constituted beings. While they both have wills, we have a tradition of only recognizing the will of the human being. That is not completely true, of course, if one looks at historical accounts of older practices in which man and horse worked together in the forest—although here there is little room for will on either's part: each just does what it takes to survive. Once one gets into the details, however, many wills are involved in giving structure to this work: where and how to go about it. And each party must be attentive to the will of the other. Wise horsemen know that it can be dangerous not to listen to the horse because it may perceive what a human cannot, answering questions urgent for both—can we walk on this ice?, for example.

In newer practices such as Liberty Dressage, where communication takes place without bit and spurs, there is an increasing discussion about how to listen more carefully to the horse. In this case there is a recognition of the basic asymmetry of the relation: the human being decides where the horse lives, and when human and horse should be together. It is a practice where humans buy and sell horses. Yet within this asymmetry, a recognition of the other’s will may be possible. Positive reinforcement is one way to go about this—in short, it is a practice where the horse is given some kind of reward when it follows the human’s lead. This could be understood as the human creating a certain desire in the horse, performing a kind of manipulation. It could also be understood as a practice that provides the horse with a voice when it can say no, as the human can ask the horse if it wants to train today, if it wants to be ridden or if it wants to have a blanket on.

Beyond both manipulation and giving the horse a voice, there is also an intertwine of wills. With the horse’s capacities as its starting point, the human will is already shaped by the horse; the human promotes certain movements, which shape the will of the horse, which in turn shape the human’s will and its direction anew. There is an exploration of what is possible here.

**BDSM**

Indeed, the issue of “what is possible” returns when we consider BDSM. As stated above, these sexual practices are based on an egalitarian relation: all parties must be consenting, and this is non-negotiable. On this basis power dynamics can, nonetheless, be explored. There are even practices of "consensual non-consent": where there is an agreement that there are no safe words. A practice that is most of all a practice of trust (on the submissive’s part) and of listening (on the dominant’s part). And this listening is a listening to “what is possible here.” The dominant partner wants to push the submissive to their limit, but this must be enjoyable (in one way or another)—perhaps surprising the submissive at what can become a source of pleasure for them. This is a deep listening to another's body, close attention to its sounds, motions, the colour of the skin, etc. Only through this passivity toward the other can the activity be performed. The dominant is in control, but their will only takes shape if it is rooted in the possibilities and limits of the submissive. The top is really the bottom...

There is another exciting tension in the question of the will on the part of the submissive, and this tension is paradoxical: the submissive wants to not be in control, thus also to not know what they want. The will is very clear, as a starting point, but after that there is exploration and not knowing in advance what one wants. This is a will to give up the will. What is gained as a result? The answer is of course a deeply individual one, but what is known as “subspace” is one way to verbalize it. Subspace is a psychological state of mind and a physical reaction to pain. It can be an experience of leaving the world to enter a floating state. It could perhaps be formulated as a suspension of the will, a departure from responsibility, cognition, sociality, etc. Just existing, beyond all these demands of the world in a realm of intense sensation. Similarly, domspace is sometimes described as a loss of world in which only the signs of the body (bodies) in front of the dom exist. There is no longer any clear border between passive listening and activity: the dom rather exists within, or on the border of, the sub. They live only there. The connection between listening and acting is immediate.

Both these experiences go in a spiritual, or even mystical direction—as they are also often described.

We have already discussed bodies, but, beyond the question of the will, let’s look more closely at another aspect of how these relations are structured.
Bodies

Pregnancy

In pregnancy the asymmetry is foundational. This is not two bodies standing in relation to one another. The pregnant body is a landscape to the fetus. And the fetus is a promise of the pregnant body: it is both alien and identical to that body. There is pure otherness, and total intertwinement. It could even be said that the logic of X=X does not apply here.

BDSM

In subspace (and domspace also, perhaps) there is a similar loss of the experience of being two/three/four, etc. Or maybe this is actually central to any passionate sexual encounter. The body is ecstatic, losing its limits, as in the orgasm—where there is no longer any room for the experience of another time (if you think about what to eat for dinner, it is a really lousy orgasm), and there is not even any space for being two—if we take such an encounter as our example. This goes for any sexual encounter, but maybe is emphasized in BDSM: you start off as two, often objectification can be central, there is distance between two bodies, and there is touching that is exactly a play between two, but focusing at the border to such an extent that there is only the border. And when the border is no longer the skin but mucus membranes, the border folds into itself and becomes a place where the mixture of bodily fluids erases differences. In BDSM this kind of intensifying pleasure is mixed up with pain, making the body of the submissive open up, and close up, opening the subspace. Here the pain and pleasure, hardness and softness, control and trust, which are exposed give access to another sphere of life than does everyday existence.

Human-horses

When it comes to the relation between horses and humans, we could easily be led into thinking that at least here there are two bodies, clearly defined in relation to one another. Yet if we listen to what is sometimes called a centauric feeling, or centauric moment, we find something else. We could argue that there is such a creature as a centaur, when a human being rides a horse. Here there is a common bodily direction, a common balance, and a weight in motion. And there is a shared center of orientation. The human being can feel the structure of the ground through the feet of the horse, and there is an attunement to one another that can result in a common atmosphere. In a joint movement there is not necessarily one active party (steering) and one passive (steered). Yet the relation is not equal either, rather it is exactly asymmetrical. All the movements of the human being are affected by the movement of the horse, the rider receives the movements from the horse as they continue in their own body, and it is only from there that the rider’s activity begins. They are given to a horse as a starting point for new movements. This intertwining can become so nuanced that the different body parts of the centaur relate to each other in similar ways as different parts of one creature. There is a plane of the centaur here, a body that becomes one.

Conclusion

Asymmetrical ethics have a similarity to egalitarian ethics: they both understand “ethical” as an enjoyment, some kind of gain or at least as a lack of suffering for everyone (and everything?) involved. But there are also several differences. The most conspicuous is probably their different relation to power. An egalitarian ethics strive toward an egalitarian distribution of power. This is not the case in asymmetrical ethics. An asymmetrical ethics include practices that unavoidably start in an unequal distribution of power as well as practices that strive toward an unequal distribution of power. The question of power is often at the center of ethical discussions, but we might also note that beneath this lies a more hidden discussion about subjectivity. When power is uneven in one way or another, the demand to have similar types of responsibility, and thus of subjectivity, diminishes. Furthermore, in the examples above subjectivities are not something fixed (like a fixed will that demands to be heard), but rather something to be explored.

So we have at least two lessons to learn here:

All these asymmetrical practices point toward a pactivity (a term I propose), i.e. practices where movement and subjectivity are neither passive nor active, but include both. This can be exemplified by the dominant partner in BDSM: they are only able to be active through listening to the submissive. Their activity can only begin with a listening to what is possible. And in the centaur there is a similar movement between rider and horse as a continuous series of listening and acting, receiving and responding, both at the “horse-pole” and the “human-pole.” Such is also the experience of giving birth: taking the force of labor, which cannot be controlled, and continuing it: actively giving birth. I.e. the power comes from beyond the self, but the self can continue it and give it a direction.

Pactivity changes the role of the will. The will is here not something already constituted, it is always in becoming. The will cannot be fully constituted for, in its dependence on the
other, it cannot know where it wants to end up. The will should perhaps be understood rather as a direction, and as a drive, that can only be concretized in its meeting with another. Pactivity means that we are an active part of something that goes beyond the self.

The second lesson is that here we are exploring experiences that do not obey the classical logic of X=X. In these asymmetries there are no clear borders where one subject begins and another ends. The borders are, in different ways, blotted out. Yet borders can also grow anew. Maybe our language, as well as our logic, is too static, and does not allow for these experiences? Maybe we here need a poetry where words can be born rather than being already constituted.

And finally: these are all practices of enjoyment. Maybe they can even be characterized as enjoyments of asymmetries. Becoming two, becoming one, and becoming pure life. It is practices of taking part in the movement of form-taking, that we as human beings are part of, but never control. It is to be part of life.
Konstrukcja w Procesie
(Construction in Process)
Łódź, 1981
October 26–November 15


Organizational committee: Lech Członkowski, Jacek Jóźwiak, Andrzej Kamrowski, Viola Krajewska, Marielle Nitoslawska, Małgorzata Potocka, Józef Robakowski, Tomasz Snopkiewicz, Ryszard Waśko, and Piotr Zarębski

Curator and initiator: Ryszard Waśko

Edited by Edy Fung, Marc Navarro, Hanna Nordell, and Tomek Pawłowski Jarmolajew
The Making of Konstrukcja w Procesie

Eddy Fung, Hanna Nordell, Marc Navarro, and Tomek Pawłowski Jarmolajew

The exhibition “Konstrukcja w Procesie” (Construction in Process) took place in Łódź in Poland in the fall of 1981, during the very brief time window between the emergence of the trade union Solidarność (Solidarity) and the introduction of martial law in December of 1981. In the spirit of the times, solidarity and coexistence became the key principals of the project, and ideas of hospitality, collaboration and production were woven into the organizational texture and life of the exhibition. Locally anchored and internationally connected, the exhibition was the result of a creative cocktail of camaraderie, fake institutions, and unconventional alliances initiated by a group of local artists and filmmakers. It was a transitional moment for contemporary art as well as for political resistance coming from the dawning workers movement, and Solidarność stepped in as a much-needed patron for the exhibition. What made this moment possible? Who worked to make it happen? Could it happen again?

Over 50 international artists connected to the post-minimal and conceptual art scenes of the 1970s were invited to Łódź—sometimes referred to as “the Manchester of Poland” because of the city’s high density of textile factories. The list of invited artists included Sol LeWitt, Nancy Holt, Dóra Maurer, Richard Long, Rune Mields, Dan Graham, and David Rabinowitch, among others. The initiator was local artist Ryszard Waśko, together with a group of artists and filmmakers connected to the milieu around the Film School and the group Warsztat Formy Filmowej (Workshop of the Film Form). There were no women members of the Workshop, even though they actively contributed to its environment. Nonetheless the organically formed constellation that became the organizing committee of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” enabled a more open structure for participation.

A self-organized, bottom-up endeavor, “Konstrukcja w Procesie” was very much driven by values which are gendered female such as care, hospitality, and a knack for co-existence. And yet the list of participating artists comprised mostly men. One of our starting points will be to look at another list, that of the organizing committee. This featured several women artists, curators, and filmmakers, and it was these women who actually made the exhibition happen. We untangle the threads of the first edition of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” in 1981 from today’s perspective by critically reflecting on its legacy and its myths, its independent spirit, and its alliance with the workers’ movement and engagement with questions of labour. The chapter presents in-depth interviews with filmmaker and translator Marielle Nitosławska, who in addition shared with us her documentation of the strikes that took place at the same time; the producer and curator Viola Krajewska; the participating artist Rune Mields; as well as the show’s initiator, Ryszard Waśko.

“Konstrukcja w Procesie” became a disruptive element and, for many workers, artists, and citizens, a catalyst for forms of engagement and participation. “Before, there was talk of ‘art workers’, ‘art labourers’, but these were just slogans. At ‘Konstrukcja w Procesie’, however, it was the reality,” as Viola Krajewska explains. The state of exception that “Konstrukcja w Procesie” entailed narrowed the distance between art and the everyday life of Łódź, giving the event a central role in the manifestation of a will for change and transition. In some ways, art became a form of safe-conduct enabling a more democratic and emancipated use of the city, its spaces and institutions. For the organizers, it provided a much sought-after connection between art and life, a chance to build on the legacy of the constructivists.
In dialogue with those three female voices and through conversation with the project’s initiator, Ryszard Waśko, we will ask how that ethos of solidarity and coexistence operated both within and outside institutional frameworks? And what can we, as cultural workers, learn from it in relation to the political turmoil of our own times?

The exhibition was a unique alliance between artists and the trade union Solidarność. Founded in the shipyards of Gdansk a year earlier, it had become a growing organization of resistance, counting 10 million members. It opened doors that in Communist Poland were closed for independent artists, which included channels for production, distribution, and exhibition beyond government control. For a few weeks people came to Łódź from far and wide to witness and be a part of the event that consisted not only of a large international exhibition, but also a show of art produced in Poland during the 1970s, entitled “Falochron” (Breakwater). “Konstrukcja” was accompanied by seminars, screenings, dinners, conversations, and performances. Józef Robakowski directed the documentary *Konstrukcja*

Organizers distribute leaflets from a truck driving through the city. Film still from Józef Robakowski’s *Konstrukcja w Procesie*, 1982

A month after the event martial law was introduced, drastically diminishing the momentum of change. Yet this interruption only made “Konstrukcja w Procesie” shine in an even more exceptional light. A few years later, the idea of the show was picked up again and led to a series of new iterations: “Process und Konstruktion II” (Construction in Process II) in Munich in 1985; “Konstrukcja w Procesie III” in Łódź in 1990, and again in Łódź in 1993 with “Mój dom jest Twoim domem” (My Home is Your Home—Construction in Process IV); in 1995 the Negev desert in Israel was the venue for “Co-existence—Construction in Process V”; “The Bridge—Construction in Process VI” took place in Melbourne, Australia; and, in 2000, “Ta ziemia jest kwiatem—Konstrukcja w Procesie VII” (This Earth is a Flower—Construction in Process VII) in Bydgoszcz, Poland.

The impact on public space of the original event cannot be evaluated solely from its artistic interventions, which were mostly located in a factory specially adapted for the purpose. Its use of public space as a crucial arena for dissemination and interaction meant that the event was widely publicized to mobilize the citizens of Łódź. The organizing committee combined propaganda and direct-action strategies such as the distribution of flyers, the interpellation of passers-by, and the use of public transport as an advertising medium. These strategies at times blurred the boundary between political demonstration and artistic representation.

But the question remains whether this mobilization and the involvement of various actors—Solidarność, citizens, workers—would have been possible with other types of artistic practice in which representation has a determining weight. It is worth mentioning that as Lucy Lippard pointed out “communication (but not community) and distribution (but not accessibility) were inherent in Conceptual Art. Although the forms pointed toward democratic outreach, the content did not.” Considering that most of the artistic propositions in the event correspond to Lippard’s definition of conceptual practice, we can better understand the basis of the success of “Konstrukcja w Procesie.” The production of many of the works required coordinated organization and sympathy between multiple actors. Even though these works could hardly be understood as problematic or openly critical of the government, the forms of production and reception required in the circumstances, enabled forms of relation outside the control of the powers that be.
“Konstrukcja w Procesie” paved the way for an independent and social dissemination of contemporary artistic practices in which the traditional role of the official institutions was deactivated. Today it stands as a reminder of the need for the legitimization of artistic practices conducted in active collaboration and solidarity with other parts of society and which, as such, go beyond the consensual and official art historical framework. The exhibition still questions the consensus and its master-narratives which hinder the emergence of more critical approaches. In the words of Viola Krajewska: “It is possible, extra-structurally, extra-institutionally, to build something with a handful of people based on trust and personal energy.”


Eight Frames per Second
A Conversation with Marielle Nitoslawska
Hanna Nordell

Edy Fung/Hanna Nordell/Marc Navarro/Tomek Pawłowski Jarmolajew/Joanna Warsza: Could you please take us back to the autumn of 1981 in Łódź? What was “Konstrukcja w Procesie” and how did it come about?

Marielle Nitoslawska: Maybe before we go on to talk about the event itself and its organization, I think it would be very interesting to talk a bit about the wider context that enabled the group of organizers of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” to become a group, and about the political, historical and institutional context within which the exhibition took place.

In August 1980 the Solidarność strikes began in the Gdańsk shipyards. So, there was a huge political mobilization that began to sprout in the country. Already in late August, a strike had been organized at the National Film School in Łódź, where I was a student. As far as I know it was the very first school to mobilize so quickly, two months before classes started. Those of us who were to form the small organizational cluster of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” were definitely part of this movement. At the school we were in full solidarity with the workers in Gdańsk. People such as the well-known dissident Adam Michnik came to talk to us, we slept at the school and this is when the Solidarność student organization was created. Our student movement demanded a larger representation in the school’s senate, changes in the curriculum and a change ofector. It was basically a revolutionary movement to renew the school. I became one of the elected student representatives in the senate. Józef Robakowski was our candidate for the Rector and our candidate Janusz Polom was appointed Dean of the Cinematography Department.

Also, the entire project of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” was very closely related to the Workshop of Film Form, Warsztat Formy Filmowej (WFF)—now a well-known avant-garde artist group—created in 1970 at the school by students and graduates who were young professors there at the time. WFF included Kazimierz Bendkowski, Wojciech Bruszewski, Paweł Kwiek, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Janusz Polom, Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Różyczki, Zbigniew Rybczyński and Ryszard Waśko. Through various projects during the decade that I lived in Poland, I collaborated with seven of the group’s members and got to know them well,
although the group didn’t formally exist anymore by the time I arrived at the school. It’s worth remembering that WFF was a radical movement in a very classical film school, so it seemed quite natural that ten years after the group’s creation, a number of its key members had the fire to shake things up again.

Another shaping fact was that “Konstrukcja w Procesie” took its inspiration from the famous Łódź constructivists of the 1920s and ’30s. There was an art historical connection that was very present at the film school mostly because the WFF artists self-identified in continuity with the constructivist ethos. The idea of the exhibition therefore did not just come from anywhere, it was very deeply rooted in the artistic history of the place.

So, all the members of the core organizational committee were directly connected to the film school. The large factory that we found for the project was a three-minute walk away, so it was also very closely connected geographically. And all kinds of official and unofficial underground support for the exhibition came from the school. I do not know if there was any financial funding, but certainly we got lights, cameras, and other equipment that we needed from the school where we had confirmed allies.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: In trying to map the event we have been looking at this photograph of what has been described as the organizing committee of “Konstrukcja w Procesie,” which you also mentioned. Since it was an artist-led as well as an independent project it would be interesting to hear your thoughts on this group of people. Does this photo show those that were considered the event’s main organizers? [See photo on page 22]

MN: Well, yes and no. The group photograph is definitely the one that has been most widely reproduced. However, it shows not only the actual organizing committee of the exhibition but also others that were very closely associated with us, principally the group that worked on the film Konstrukcja w Procesie, directed by Józef Robakowski and produced by Viola Krajewska. The organizing committee itself was a bit narrower than one sees in the photograph. But all of us were part of what you might call an ideological support group. And there are maybe one or two people missing from the photograph that were also key to making everything happen. The core committee, those who worked full-time on the organization and the physical execution of the exhibition, were from left to right Piotr Zarębski, Jacek Jozwiak, Rysiek Waśko, myself, and Tomasz Snopkiewicz. We saw each other every day for months on end. In this photograph you also have Józef Robakowski, Viola Krajewska who was a student in the production stream of the School, Małgorzata Potocka who was Józef’s partner and a student in the directing department of the School, and Leszek Czołnowski who was a teaching assistant there. The whole group was a natural extension of the movement of renewal at the Film School, and we had already manifested ourselves as activists in that context. Nobody was chosen to be a part of this grouping, it was all very organic.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Who is missing in this photograph?

MN: Andrzej Kamrowski, who was highly active and present in the core organizational committee, I do not see him in the photograph. He was probably just not around that day. This makes me think of Susan Sontag’s idea of how a photograph can make history.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Could you tell us a little bit about the production and organization of “Konstrukcja w Procesie”?

MN: I always say that we painted the whole inside of the factory with little art paint brushes! There were no supplies in Poland at the time. There was just nothing in the stores, the shelves were empty except for canned lychees and little shrimp chips from Vietnam, and Polish canned peas and vodka. So, everything we needed, including paint, nails and so on, was found through some underground channels. This also included the exhibition factory space, which had been a repair shop for city trams—Andrzej Słowik who headed Solidarność in Łódź, was a tram driver. Doors would open for us as we were known to be the Solidarność folks from the Film School.

With regards to my role specifically, I was the only one who fluently spoke and wrote in English. Also, I had an old Volkswagen bug at a time when nobody had cars in Poland. I was on a scholarship from Canada, which meant that I was not only independent financially but also had the possibility of a status that was definitely a privileged one. So, for anyone that has read Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, I fit her definition of freedom.

I remember very well when the call went out to all the artists. The invite list was determined by Ryszard Waśko and I was key in the correspondence process because of my English skills. Once the letters had been sent, the artists started to respond enthusiastically because of the exciting context of Poland being in the midst of a revolution. You know, the mythology of artists and workers
joining together in solidarity has a profound history, so everybody wanted to come. We could not pay for travel and shipment of works as we had no money, so everyone had to fund their own way to Łódź. We asked the artists to send us their project plans and we would execute them here in the city. We went to the factories and asked for assistance with the production of the artworks. Because we had the support of the city’s Solidarność leadership, all doors would open for us. Before the exhibition began Józef Robakowski had the brilliant idea of making a film during its course and filming started when the artists arrived. The idea was that each artist would conceive their own performative appearance. Viola Krajewska, the film’s line producer, was definitely key in this project.

**EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: There is so much of this ethos of solidarity in the narrative of “Construction.” You were part of Solidarność and, of course, the importance of solidarity was in the air. But how did the workers look at the event?**

**MN: That is a great question, for several reasons. I would love to see the television footage from the opening of the exhibition—there are photographs of TV cameras in the original catalogue so that material must exist. Andrzej Słowik from the Łódź Solidarność organization spoke at the opening and he came together with a small committee of workers. All the speakers at the opening praised the international connection of workers and artists. The place was jam-packed. There must have been around 300 people there, it was the event to be at in town. But there were no workers there aside from Słowik’s group. There were no real connections made, aside from all the material support we received from the Łódź Solidarność workers. Communist society was very stratified. There was no notion of active mediation to connect marginalized communities to the art world as we understand it today. At some point during the exhibition, there was a big trip planned during which all the participating artists went to the largest and most important textiles factory, the Poznański factory, where the workers were on strike. The artists wanted to manifest their support for the workers, so a large meeting was held between the workers and the artists. I did not go that day because I was too busy at the exhibition. But I felt maybe a little bit awkward about it, I had filmed in that factory and I knew what poverty and terrible work conditions existed there. But there was this recognition among the artists and us that everybody in Solidarność was trying to help one another. Everything was made possible by and done under the flag of Solidarność. But there was no wider community involvement on our part as we understand it today.

**EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: It would be interesting to learn a little bit more about the life around the main exhibition. What was happening in terms of screenings, talks, and so forth?**

**MN: It was buzzing, absolutely buzzing with life. Even at the exhibition space the artists were collaborating with each other to set-up their works, and many of them said that this was a unique situation. The whole thing was like a happening. Somehow, I participated very little in the numerous screenings, meetings and events that took place in private spaces and outside the exhibition factory, because I was always running around fixing things. For the couple of weeks that this was all going on we were there full-time, I do not remember when we slept. The main places of gathering and exchange were the factory and a small restaurant just across the street. Since there was no food to be found in the stores, we had a deal with this restaurant so that people could eat and drink there, so this was where social life flourished. And both places were only a ten-minute walk from the hotel where the artists were staying. Since we never had any money Ryszard got the rooms through Solidarność connections. Everybody was helping everybody if you were in the right network.

When it comes to the events around the exhibition the thing to remember is that there was already a well-established self-organized exhibition culture in Łódź—exhibitions were held in people’s private apartments and there was this culture of working completely outside of any institutional setting. There were some allies in the museums or galleries because of the WFF connection, and there was this alliance with the film school. So, when push came to shove somebody urgently needed something for the exhibition or an event, we would just run down the street to the school, talk to somebody there, bring a little vodka for somebody and get it done. I have never seen a list of all the events that took place, but it was a bustling atmosphere. People were living close to one another, moving from place to place, drinking, eating, always crossing each other. It was as if a community life had suddenly formed itself. And, of course, there were all kinds of interesting little intrigues that circulated as they always do when artists gather. And the Konstrukcja film crew kept moving around it all.

There was a real sense of camaraderie among our small organizing cluster. Ryszard Waśko was an incredible mobilizer in that way. Had he not been there, there would have been the normal thing that happens in groups with jealousy and all of that. But it just...
was not like that. We were a gung-ho group, and nothing could stop us. There was a wonderful working atmosphere as there sometimes is in artistic coalitions, and we have to speak of friendship as being a factor. Many experimental groups everywhere have been based on friendship, which has not really been written about enough. And when I say friendship, it is interesting to think about the women in such groups. I mean, there were not many of us, just a few. And there was a hierarchy—of course we had discussions, but ultimately, Rysiek would make the decisions. But he was not a dictator. I felt that it was a partnership.

**EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Did you follow subsequent editions of “Konstrukcja w Procesie,” and how it evolved?**

MN: Not at all, I did not follow subsequent editions and I will tell you why. Martial Law was declared in Poland soon after the closing of the exhibition. My partner Janusz Polom and I had visits from the police at night because he was the “Solidarność Dean” and I was a “foreigner activist” during the Solidarność period. During this time, I had this 16mm camera lent to me by the National Film Board of Canada. Access to filmstock was very limited but whenever I could find a bit of it I was filming strikes and more political things, and people around me knew it. These materials were in our apartment, so we had to drive late one night to hide them in a barn outside the city. So, there was this kind of threatening atmosphere. I was always nervous because all student visas had been cancelled and I was afraid of getting thrown out of the country and not being able to come back. So, when we got an opportunity in 1984 to go to Mexico to teach, we took it. Then we started a new life in Canada. For me, “Konstrukcja w Procesie” was really an isolated and unique moment in history because of its context and process, which could not be reproduced. I knew that the “Construction” exhibitions continued outside of Poland, but I did not follow them.

By the way, since Martial Law put a halt to all our activities in December 1981, the original exhibition catalogue as you know was produced in New York by some of the artists who participated in the exhibition: Peter Downsbrough, Richard Nonas and Fred Sandback with the financial support of Sol LeWitt. On the last pages of the catalogue there is a text that says, “The following letter is a letter received from Łódź Poland in January 1982.” That is my letter. And the reason it was never signed, is that I was afraid. We knew that it would get out to New York, Richard Nonas had sent out a letter to all exhibition artists asking for documentation for the publication. But my life was in Poland and I did not want to get kicked out. So, I never signed it. Soon after the lockdown, Ryszard Waśko got a DAAD scholarship to go to Germany. And I remember sitting in my flat a day or two before his departure and typing this text on a very thin piece of onionskin paper, that was to be folded and hidden. I went to the train station and gave it to Ryszard who smuggled it to Berlin. His was a very emotional departure. I remember that day as if it were yesterday.

**EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: You mentioned shooting footage of the strikes. Do you still have it?**

MN: I do. Can you believe it? I actually have them in my home basement and there is one that I just pray is there. I’ve never gotten around to digging them out, life moves forward too quickly. I usually had only a 100 ft. roll of 16mm film, you know, these are three-minute things. Events are happening in front of you, but you only have three minutes. For example, there was this amazing women’s march in Łódź that I filmed from a window, where women went out on the streets with big strike posters saying “CHLEBA!”—bread!, in Polish. I also stuck my way into the actual signing of the official Solidarność registration with my camera. But it was always just these tiny little bits that I would film at eight frames per second, because I did not have enough film. So, of course, it is all extra accelerated, but I always thought I would optically print it and slow it down in the future, to make these short synthetic clips. For me—and this is something I have talked about with Viola Krajewska over the years—the time around “Konstrukcja w Procesie” represented a kind of revolutionary energy and group initiative that for sure has contributed to defining our way of being in the world. Numerous other initiatives came from this very powerful constellation.

It has been interesting over time to think, why cannot this sort of energy be manifested all the time? Is that not how we would want the whole world to be? And why can it not happen now? Certainly, in the arts, we know that the energy needed to create counter-narratives that redress postcolonial, race, or gender issues is more likely to occur outside of established institutional contexts.

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The following is a letter received from Łódź, Poland, in January, 1982.

From the social viewpoint, "Construction in Process" became a unique phenomenon. The small group of people who gathered around Wasko's studio provoked a joining of forces towards a common goal by institutions which diametrically opposed functions in the regime. In the end, sponsors were Solidarity, city authorities, the Film School, several galleries, the city association of artists. Thus a citizens' group managed to convince custimerly hermetic institutions to sponsor a common project and to co-operate with Solidarity. This occurred at a timely moment when Solidarity was in full swing and all one needed for action was a good idea and lots of energy. In retrospect we were very lucky with the timing of the exhibition, as there was a six month lapse between the country raging with workers' strikes and the declaration of national 'crisis'.

Sheer luck it seems that in that spot within a span of time, half a dozen individuals organized funding, found the factory, renovated it, kept up contact with the artists within 50 or so artists abroad, organized hotels and food, established contact with the factories which were to execute the sent-in projects. This was done in a country which was in total shambles economically, where paint, nails, even light bulbs were no longer to be found in a store. Wasko didn't sleep for three months.

Today, this story seems like a tale from another land. The "normal state of affairs" has returned to this regime. It is called the state of war. Just as the massive opposition surfaced naturally during the rise of Solidarity, so the state authorities are now discolorizing their true colors.

An event which occurred only three months ago is unthinkably today. Individual initiative has been forbidden. Each institution has been given strict rules as to permitted activities, each disobedience being severely punished. The worker is ordered to work, the museum to direct art, the artist to keep silent.

During the show, I remember one of the visiting artists expressing surprise at the fact that industrial materials are not used in art, in a country where factories are so easy in access. In Poland such a development has been literally impossible. In the last fifty years there has been no use for the factories in sculptures or commemorative monuments. In fact, in this show the sculptures and commemorative monuments are in favor to this day. "Construction in Process" was the first large showing of tendencies in art related to the notions in art and architecture which started in Eastern Europe since the war. In fact, it is not accidental that the exhibition coincided with the 50th anniversary of the founding of the PZPR. It is organized by many of the most important of the artists of Kobro, Strzeminski, Staszewski, and others. It initiated at the time the first Polish and international collection of avant-garde art in the city of Lodz, which remains to this day Poland's only museum of modern art.

Developments in art aside, it has always been impossible for an "artist" to have a place in society. It is illegal to run independent galleries. As a result, the artist's studio or home became a relative notion. Yet they were allowed a large dose of freedom, due to the fact that their sphere of influence was rather limited. They were not publicized, only an informed "entourage" had access to them. However, it is only thanks to these galleries that traces of the most recent developments in art were disseminated, however impossible for others to trace. Traces were in the society at large. At that time, Poland also saw the beginnings of independent film and video. The National Film School in Lodz became the center of a very active and many talented artists. Wasko later joined an avant-garde group in Lodz, perhaps better than any other art form, pinpoints the problems of the "independent" Polish artists. In a country where there is a rare luxury item, where all labs are state run, it is illegal to own a home or a car because of the "entourage". The artist has no choice but to reach out for state sponsors. Yet each cultural institution, along with its other functions is a pawn in a complex watch-dog machinery. The essence of the concept of patronage, distribution, publication, controls of form and content, have resulted in the stodginess of the entire cultural environment.

Solidarity aroused hopes in a new patriarchy one which guaranteed complete freedom for the artist. For the first time in over 30 years, workers' autonomy and self-government was recognized. Yet the excitement of the Solidarity movement in 1980 had kindled hopes for a real and long term cultural relaxation and freedom. Yet the smog, the clouds that followed December 13th, the climate has become sterile. Since one month, when the state of war was declared in Poland, all of the changes has ceased to exist.
Nightwatch
Marielle Nitoslawska

Marielle Nitoslawska: These photographs were taken at the entrance to the huge textile factory that the “Konstrukcja w Procesie” artists visited, then called the “Zaklady Marchlewskiego,” and today the “Poznański Factory” complex, even though it is no longer a factory. I remember that back then I really liked to photograph the city at night. Although the workers were involved in strike actions and protests at the time when these photographs were taken, they are still coming in for their night shift as the factory continues to roll around the clock, albeit at reduced capacity.

“Who gave the order to shoot in December?” Sign reminding passersby in Łódź of a strike in response to rising food prices that took place in Gdańsk in December 1970. Several people were killed during the strike, which took place in the same shipyards where Solidarność was formed ten years later. Photo: Marielle Nitoslawska

“We demand butter in stores.” Photo: Marielle Nitoslawska

“Fund-raiser for the protest action.” Photo: Marielle Nitoslawska

Next page: on the right of the image a sign reads “Truth is power.” Photo: Marielle Nitoslawska
Für die Frauen von Łódź
A Conversation with Rune Mields
Marc Navarro

Marc Navarro: How did you receive the invitation to participate in “Konstrukcja w Procesie”? Did you have contacts within the Polish art scene before participating?

Rune Mields: I had participated in two art biennials in Poland, but I had never been to Poland myself. I believe, as Ryszard Waśko told me at the time, I got the invitation to this exhibition because I had taken part in documenta 77.

MN: What was your impression of Łódź’s artistic community?

RM: It’s very difficult to say because I didn’t know the general art scene in Poland. And since “Konstrukcja w Procesie” was actually an exhibition that went in the direction of the minimal and conceptual, the participants were mainly those who preferred the minimal and conceptual in their art.

MN: The history of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” makes one think about concepts such as “hospitality” or “cooperation.” What was the relationship between the event’s participants and its organizing committee like?

RM: It was wonderful. It has to be said that it was also a very difficult time for Poland. Łódź was under Solidarność, one of the co-organizers of the exhibition, so it was not easy to go to a restaurant to order food. Nonetheless, the organizers managed to rent a small restaurant, actually more of a pub, where there was a long table and everyone in the exhibition could gather. We all got the same food and also roughly the same drinks: beer and schnapps.

When Rune Mields (Münster, 1935) was invited to take part in “Konstrukcja w Procesie” she was already interested in the use of mathematics as a form of representation. For Mields, numbers expose a paradox: on the one hand they are inextricable from life itself, but on the other, humans have developed numerical systems throughout history to impose order and sustain (alienated) social structures. Numbers manifest not only in the form of signs or ornaments—but a part of Mields’s extensive research—but also through their punitive effects as the operational language of governance and the administration of lives.

Through these operations, Mields seems to echo something which tends to escape our gaze. Yet the formal severity of some of her series such as the one described, and the use of mathematical language, should not be taken merely as formal adherence to the precepts of conceptualism. With the rigidity and density of her language, Mields expose the ambivalence of form: even in its most aseptic and minimalist manifestation, it cannot be detached from the social conditions that sustain its appearance.
asked Ryszard if it would be possible to meet one of the workers and talk to them about their situation. Because that seemed particularly striking to me. That was organized and I talked to them—I assume they were from Solidarność—about their working conditions, their childcare, and the general situation for them and so on. And then, as I often did, I composed a short text afterwards and read it aloud for the film—all dressed in black against a black background—saying that the living conditions of women workers in Poland had to be improved considerably.

MN: How would you assess the relationship between workers and artists from today’s perspective?

RM: The workers, those we met, were very positive towards us. Of course, that also had something to do with the fact that we were there at the invitation of Solidarność and that, on the other hand, we worked hard during the time we were present. I was probably in Łódź for six or seven of those days. And we were really interested in their living conditions and their affairs. And we didn’t just pick it up on the side.

You also have to take into account that later on, for example, in “Konstrukcja w Procesie,” the situation was completely different, because the artists didn’t go to the Grand Hotel somewhere after work, or to a bar in the evening, but they were basically just as miserable as other Poles. So, there was no real gap. And, also, because the artists went on general strike.

MN: How was the reading of the Manifesto staged?

RM: At that time, I always had my bedclothes in my bag. It was a big sheet that was 3x3 meters of black thin cloth. So, I could hang it on the wall behind me and had a black background. In Robakowski’s film it was all black in black. I also had a black cloth over my face.

MN: You were one of the few women participating in the event as an artist. Other women were also part of the organizing committee. How do you see the role of women in “Konstrukcja w Procesie” from today’s perspective?

RM: It’s not quite as bad as it was back then. For example, I have to say the following: I asked to be picked up from the train station because I don’t speak Polish. And I stood at the station after arriving in Łódź and no one came to pick me up. And then I went down to the street, and there was just a lonely couple walking around on the platform. The couple came up to me and asked me very carefully if I was Rune Mields. They didn’t know I was a woman. They assumed I was a man because my first name is masculine in the Nordic countries, in Sweden and Denmark and Norway. When the exhibition was being set up, there were of course also female partners among the artists. They helped in the same way, and that’s how it always is: one decides and the other does it. That’s how it is. With women artists, it is usually the case that the women not only make the decisions, but also make the work. They have to do both. Unless, of course, they have a partner who is male.

MN: As a participant in some of the later editions, what changed in relation to the first? I’m wondering especially about cooperation and the mood in the group?

RM: The first exhibition was relatively closed and relatively peaceful—also in terms of people, because we always ate together. The later exhibitions were not so closed and more extended, and some artists were very insistent on their status as important artists. The difference between successful and less successful artists had become bigger.

MN: Where do you think the newfound interest in “Konstrukcja w Procesie” comes from?

RM: I don’t know if the interest is really there. If you ask me for my opinion I would say that I find it interesting. I’m too old for that now. One must not forget that I am now 86 years old.

MN: In your opinion, were women left out of the exhibition?

RM: Well, as much as they were generally on the outside at the time—which they still were to a relatively large extent. I said in an interview in the mid-'80s: “We will have equality in the visual arts when just as many mediocre women are exhibited in museums as mediocre men.” And that is still not the case today. Today, top women are always hung next to mediocre men. The mediocrity must be balanced out. I must add that mediocre art should not be exhibited in museums at all.

- 75% of the (shift) workers in the textile factory in Łódź are women
- 6,000 women work in one factory, for example
- There are about 20 factories in Łódź
- The women work 40 hours per week
- The women work on a piecework basis in 3 shifts
- The first shift goes from 05:30–13:30
- The second shift goes from 13:30–21:30
- The third shift goes from 21:30–3:30
- The women work alternate shifts
- The women have to eat while working
- Two women oversee 12 machines with about 300 spools
- In the weaving mill the noise level is 60–80 dB
- In the spinning mill 45 dB
- In the spinning mill in summer the temperature is 60°
- The women get 6,000 złoty per month
- From this salary the women have to pay 1,000 złoty for a place in the kindergarten
- These conditions have to be changed

For the women of Łódź

Facts gathered by Rune Mields during a visit to one of the textile factories in Łódź. Handwritten note by Viola Krajewska, who assisted Mields in writing her manifesto *Für die Frauen von Łódź* (For the Women of Łódź), 1981. Private archive of Viola Krajewska
Sharing Nothing, Causing Something
A Conversation with Viola Krajewska
Tomek Pawłowski-Jarmołajew

Tomek Pawłowski-Jarmołajew: How did you end up in the “Konstrukcja w Procesie” organizing committee?

Viola Krajewska: I was a postgraduate studying the organization of film and television production at the film school in Łódź. It turned out that my studies were a piece of cake. It was so easy that the most interesting thing you could do was to come in, pass everything very quickly, and then devote yourself to studying the school. And friends. During that time I was friends with the Cinematography Department, especially with Piotr Zarebński and Tomek Snopkiewicz. After two years of studies and a summer holiday, I was supposed to discuss my diploma with the dean. Snopkiewicz and Zarebński persuaded me to come earlier, because something cool was happening. It was about “Construction,” which was being prepared by members of the University Renewal Movement, which I immediately joined. I had several roles there. On the one hand, I took part in preparing the exhibition. I assisted the artists in the production and sourcing of materials in the factories, such as the large steel pipes for the Rabinowitch installation. I remember that I also painted on the wall, very carefully, the inscription for Takahiko Iimura’s installation: This is the Camera which Shoots This. It was the first installation I had ever seen that showed feedback. I also looked after Rune Mields, who chose as her site of action the women workers’ strike in the Poznański factory. The weavers’ strike. Mields already had a very strong understanding of feminism, which we were only just coming across. She asked me to find her a mantilla—a Spanish hat, preferably black. I don’t know how I got it—probably from the film school’s prop room. Wearing this mantilla she gave a performance in which she read out what she had learned from the female workers. That sent shivers down my spine. I have here the original notes that she dictated to me in German. This is information she obtained from the striking women.

TPJ: Which other works were particularly important to you?

VK: Fred Sandback’s installation, which consisted of stretching a rope from the ceiling to the floor in a high room of an empty flat in a pre-war building next to the Grand Hotel, was incredibly powerful. Another important work I helped with was Ken Unsworth’s installation which was composed of large stones hanging on wires above the hall floor in a circle, defying the laws of gravity. They looked brilliant. There is an anecdote connected with this. The Customs Office didn’t want to let those stones through the border, because they didn’t understand how stones from Australia could be transported to Poland. It was beyond their comprehension. They suspected some horrible subversive activity. They tried to take those stones apart, but they didn’t succeed. Then there was François Morellet’s incredible performance, which also defied gravity. He climbed these poles from which, falling in flight, he formed a regular shape on the ground. Completely unbelievable things.

TPJ: It sounds unbelievable, a bit like a science fiction art exhibition. How did you manage to realize such ambitious and often complex projects with such limited resources?

VK: This accumulation of outstanding works and names of artists who gave their all was preceded by a collaboration with the workers. A social project of visits to factories, getting materials from factories and production plants. They really were almost non-existent at that time. Even paint was so hard to get, like a trophy. Most things were not bought, not acquired, just given. We were supported by Solidarność, so the workers were very willing to help us out with what they could. It seems to me that the greatest sci-fi was precisely this social project. Where something truly out of nothing, out of a complete economy of lack, out of poverty, something surpassing real possibility was realized through intense, energetic exchange. Sharing nothing, causing something. And it was a paradox, because communism in general promoted union of the world of art with the world of work which was a sham, an illusion and propaganda. Suddenly, at the end of that period, when the system was crumbling, this union became real for a moment. The world of work and the world of artists created something together, as in the legend of constructivism. Just like in the pre-war a.r. Group in Łódź, which was about a revolutionary, working-class avant-garde. At that time there was talk of “art workers,” “art labourers,” but these, too, were just slogans. At “Konstrukcja w Procesie,” however, it was the reality.

TPJ: You were also Józef Robakowski’s assistant in the making of the documentary film about the event, which was an exhibition within an exhibition. It constituted a parallel space to the main exhibition for the presentation of work and performative actions. It was also an opportunity to go out and act in the public space of Łódź.
VK: It happened by accident. One evening we were sitting in the Archive of Contemporary Thought, Maria and Ryszard Waśko’s flat, at an organizational meeting. At some point Robakowski arrived with the news that the Educational Film Studio had agreed to produce and direct a documentary about “Konstrukcja w Procesie.” However, they needed a script on paper by the next morning—a document of some kind—but it was already evening. I was singled out for the task. I was given a typewriter and I promised myself that I wouldn’t leave the room until I had completed a few pages of script. I typed it out, Józek read it, crossed out two sentences and took it to the Educational Film Studio in the morning, and it worked. Józef adopted a method of production in which the three cameras he had somehow managed to get hold of were shared between the crew, together with film. I was in the team with Tomek and Piotr Zarębski, who had incredible sensitivity to detail, such graphic thinking about film images. We did a take on Henryk Stążewski’s head, where Piotr filmed his auricle for a very long time and in depth. As if he could hear the voice of art from all over the world with this ear of his. We also tried to realize Sol Lewitt’s concept with the proposed symbols for Łódź, Gdańsk, Wrocław and other cities: a square, a triangle, a circle etc. We decided to assign the circle to Łódź and we asked people from Łódź to form a circle. In the film, I’m the person who explains everything to the people we meet on the street and answers their questions. There were more situations like this, not all of them are visible on the screen in the final version. Although in the credits I am listed as Robakowski’s assistant it soon became apparent that this was not quite a producer’s role. All these things were intermingled: the making of the film, the installation, the set design and putting the finishing touches to the works with the artists.

TPJ: What was the atmosphere within the organizing committee and how were roles and responsibilities shared out?

VK: The committee was headed by Ryszard Waśko, who was the real spiritus movens of the enterprise. Waśko gave everything to the situation, including his private flat, where preparations for “Construction” took place. During the event, he used up all his energy and emotional resources every day until the very end, and this emotionality was somehow incredibly kind. He was able to generate incredible amounts of what is described as good energy. And this good energy was there. Even if we, the younger crew, watched some minor disputes between our older friends—members of the Film Form Workshop who had already done many projects together. They had their own pasts, different moments, perhaps some internal hierarchies. However, at the time of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” I did not notice any major disputes over people’s different functions in the project. There were no arguments about who was the initiator, who was the most important and so on. There was a division between making the film and making the exhibition, yet there, too, things were interchangeable and inter-mixed. Because in this exchange of energy there was a kind of unbelievable multitasking, as we would say today. Everyone did everything. We were mopping the floor, doing interviews and holding the camera. It turned out that this was actually the best, because there weren’t that many of us, either. At some point the structure started to become horizontal, non-hierarchical. Waśko functioned well in this non-hierarchical structure. He saw that things were happening. He was able to suspend his ego for a moment in favour of the fact that the artists were happy, that they were being taken care of, that someone was helping them to arrange a visa, someone was helping them to get paint, and someone was taking them to a party, someone was translating, being a guide, helping to finish the work, and so on. And no roles were given, no hierarchy...
was constructed, because when things were happening, it was so dense that there was just no time for that.

TPJ: What about the situation of women and their role in the team?

VK: Women were not members of the Film Form Workshop, even though they actively co-created that environment. They appeared from the side of the organizing committee of “Konstrukcja w Procesie.” This comprised myself, Marielle Nitoslaw ska and Maria Waśko—Ryszard’s wife, who played an invaluable role. She was the one who took on this invasion of artists. She coped fantastically, trying to be a caretaker of the Archives of Contemporary Thought rather than a housewife. At the same time, she functioned in “Konstrukcja” partly as an artist.

TPJ: You mentioned that “Konstrukcja w Procesie” took place in multiple locations, not only the exhibition space but also public spaces and private flats, such as the Archives of Contemporary Thought?

VK: Yes, there were multiple sites and performance places as part of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” and the “Falochron” exhibition. They included the cinema hall at the Film School, the Museum of Art, and also a factory space where works, objects and installations were displayed and performances took place from time to time. The Archives of Contemporary Thought was the address given in the letter of invitation of artists to Łódź. Some artists would take a taxi straight from the airport or train station to the Archives of Contemporary Thought. They would stand in front of a huge block of flats and look at this high-rise building trying to locate the institution, but it was just a private flat on one of the floors. It was the first experience of newcomers from another world, from the other side of the Iron Curtain, in a place or a world where one must suspend notions of realism and literalism. A very important place parallel to the exhibition and Waśko’s flat was the “Przekąska” bar, which functioned as an informal command center for events in other places. Waśko writes about it in the publication The Artists’ Museum: “The manager of a workers’ eatery called ‘Snack’—which was located 100 meters from our hall and was known as one of the most miserable pubs in Łódź—came forward with a proposal to put the restaurant at our disposal for the duration of the exhibition. And I literally bent over backwards to turn this squalid pub into a decent place where an exceptional party took place, attended by a considerable number of “Konstrukcja”’s artists. There was nothing to smoke at this party, so we cobbled together our own cigarettes and modest selection of dishes, until dawn. Despite the large amount of alcohol and modest selection of dishes, nobody was so weak-headed as to nod off during the evening. Everyone held their own very bravely. We took shots and small glasses of a hundred millilitres, chased with tea or mirinda. The alcohol did not flow uncontrollably either. It was an accompaniment to the incredible, positive emotions. It was more of an underlining than a releasing agent.”

TPJ: Intensive work went hand in hand with intense fun.

VK: There was an incredible mood of euphoria in the air. Today we would say [we were] high. While we’re on the subject of kitchens and parties, I also remember one private place worth mentioning, apart from the canteen and the factory itself. It was Piotr Zarębski’s private flat, where an exceptional party took place, attended by a considerable number of “Konstrukcja”’s artists. There was nothing to smoke at this party, so we rolled our own cigarettes with tea leaves. And there was not much to serve the guests to eat, so we made toast in the oven with potato slices. A very unique catering project. In order to get any food at all, we had to undertake some food searches. To go to the shops—we didn’t have time for that—so we were running on fumes. On the other hand, one thing that was never a problem was booze, no end of which was poured out. That was the atmosphere and it’s really amazing that nobody walked around like a zombie. We were so constantly sublimating and distilling that we walked around completely lucid in consciousness. Because whatever we put into our bodies, the energy, adrenaline and euphoria of being in contact with others put us—in our best humanity—back on our feet and upright.

TPJ: Was this combination of fun and alcohol also one way of communicating with guests who spoke other languages?

VK: Sometimes we had to communicate using, let’s say, an international conglomeration of languages. A lot of things had to be signalled, shown, bodily expression activated. This was conducive to understanding, but it also allowed us to remove certain masks from our faces. I remember one such moment. One of the artists present at the party was Felix Adrien d’Haeseleer, coordinator of the Internationaal Centrum Voor Structuranalyse en Constructivisme. A reticent Belgian from Brussels, speaking mainly French—slim, tall, pleasant, but completely disoriented—during this party he slowly, then suddenly, started to understand. He was at the show, he knew what was going on, but he didn’t quite get how it was all possible. I’m not saying that he was so affected
by his tea cigarette that he had an epiphany, but he experienced a kind of illumination as we all stood there and talked passionately in an unknown language, yet understanding each other perfectly. He said—“Now I understand. I understand what Solidarność means!” It was probably a mystical moment for him. He tried to explain to us what I now understand more precisely in hindsight, from a distance. It is said that the greatest artistic act performed during “Konstrukcja w Procesie” was not so much the works created there on the spot, that they were not imported—although that was also amazing. It was not so much that some factories and workers, or human solidarity, helped to make this exhibition happen. Rather it was some incredible, almost non-conceptual energy contact that took place, which we had achieved a bit earlier within the framework of the creation of Solidarność. It was as if Felix had only just understood Solidarność as a socio-political project. An incredible upheaval. How is it possible that, with such a lack of anything, there is such a large quantity—almost an excess—of something that actually exists only as a utopia in places which are full of everything? In other words, some incredible energy of understanding.

TPJ: The incredible energy you describe was later to transform the event into a regular institution, despite this being initially obstructed by the sudden declaration of martial law just after the exhibition ended.

VK: After the exhibition, the artists decided to donate the works they had created during “Konstrukcja w Procesie” to Solidarność in Łódź. Just as a.r. Group donated their International Collection of Modern Art to the Municipal Museum of History and Art [now Museum Sztuki (Museum of Art)] in Łódź before the war. They decided that as a collection capturing this historical moment, it should stay here. Consequently, a proposal was put forward to establish a gallery which would take care of it, preferably in the same place, allowing the ideal arrangement of these works of art in space. A regularly functioning institution was planned as a place of documentation, a living museum of the event. There were two officials, Słowikowski and Kropiewnicki, who favoured the project. They helped, they supported it, they probably paid for the artists’ hotels. They provided a roof over their heads and food. One day there was a presentation of the exhibition to the mayor. We showed the guests around with a larger team and presented the idea of the new institution. Then the mayor asked who would be the head and director, because such a place needs an institutional formula, which we hadn’t thought of at all. All the men present looked at each other and pointed to me.

I was supposed to go with the papers to the city hall. On the 9th or 10th of December I went to Wrocław to get the necessary documents, which I didn’t have in Łódź. And that’s where martial law found me.

This is where my part in the story of “Konstrukcja w Procesie” ends. The next time I was in Łódź was probably a year later, or even longer. I came back for my postponed diploma exam. I was not involved in whatever happened afterwards. However, all my later activity stems from the experience of “Konstrukcja w Procesie.” I used this energy to create my own project, WRO. It is possible, extra-structurally, extra-institutionally, to build something with a handful of people based on trust and personal energy. Without special funds. We have been in existence for 31 years.

They said that I had a background in organization and content having studied film production and cultural studies. I have here a document from the 8th of December “Meeting of the Working Group” where everyone is mentioned by their last name and only my name is followed by “Director Krajewska.” It’s ridiculous! So, I was appointed director with a handshake from the mayor.

TPJ: The avant-garde a.r. group (“revolutionary artists” or “real avant-garde”) was founded by Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, and Henryk Stażewski in 1929 in Łódź.


Translated from Polish by Ewa Kanigowska-Gedroyć.
Artists Support Solidarność
A Conversation with Ryszard Waśko
Edy Fung, Hanna Nordell, Marc Navarro, Tomek Pawłowski Jarmolajew, and Joanna Warsza

Edy Fung, Hanna Nordell, Marc Navarro, Tomek Pawłowski Jarmolajew, and Joanna Warsza: What was “Konstrukcja w Procesie” and how did it come about?

Ryszard Waśko: I was living in the ‘70s in Poland under the “communist” regime, and there was no chance to organize an independent event at that time. However, when Solidarność, the Solidarity opposition movement, was born in 1980, I suddenly saw a chance to make an international show that would be independent from any state institution. “Konstrukcja w Procesie” was launched in the city of Łódź, almost as a new art center in the hands of artists. We wanted later on to hold new editions of the event since Poland, and Eastern Europe in general, needed such a format. But the declaration of martial law at the end of 1981 destroyed our dreams. We continued to work on the format in Munich. “Konstrukcja” became a free and independent event, going from country to country between 1981 and 2000. It was not like the Venice Biennale or documenta, where everything was kept in one location. Instead, we went from place to place, worked with people from different countries and diverse cultures to keep the idea fresh. And the project is still alive. I was visited last year by a curator from Brazil, who was excited about a new edition. Let’s see.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Do you think the fact that you defined yourself as an artist had an effect on the way you organized “Konstrukcja w Procesie” and other exhibitions?

RW: I started “Konstrukcja w Procesie” as an artist, because I disagreed with what was happening in the art world. I was trying to change things and to put forward an idea that would be different from the mainstream. I had the feeling that it was my duty. Together with many of my colleagues we started by proposing a collaboration not only with other artists, but also with curators, collectors, scientists, and workers. It was something of a miracle for people coming from neoliberal parts of the world. If it was not for the selfless effort of the whole group of people in the organizational committee, “Konstrukcja w Procesie” would never have happened.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: A discourse about social change is very present in the art world right now. How was it to work toward social transformation in alliance with Solidarność back in the ‘80s? Were you allowed to speak...
out about certain issues? How did censorship affect those processes?

RW: Many things were suddenly possible because of Solidarność. The movement was born out of opposition to the political situation, as a social uprising. Did you know that there were uprisings in Poznań, in Gdańsk, Szczecin, Wroclaw, and other cities? And all these protests in different years were crushed by the regime. Why? Because people stayed in their specific groups. The workers did not trust intellectuals. And suddenly in the '80s workers for the first time invited the intellectuals to join the protests. That is why Solidarność was so successful, because there actually was solidarity among people. You need to remember that 10 million people were in the movement.

When starting “Konstrukcja w Procesie,” we immediately thought about cooperation with the workers. There was nothing that you could buy in the shops at the time, no paint, no food, anything. The only way to make a project of this scale was with the cooperation of the Solidarność union. In the meeting with Solidarność leaders, I remember there were 150 workers in a big room talking about everything. They were discussing how many bars of soap they could give to people; how many cigarettes to cut from a long cigarette of 10 meters. They were dealing with daily problems. I was wondering how I was going to tell them about the concept of international art, and I was scared. When I first spoke, the leader was negative. But his advisor convinced him and said, “We need artists. We need their support. We need international art. The artists support our movement, so we have to support them too.”

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: And then?

RW: Immediately I received a letter of intent from the leaders which had been sent to each local Solidarność branch in the factories and enabled us to get free materials. Artists could take any kind of steel they wanted from the factories. The workers offered to help make their sculptures after finishing their eight-hour shifts. They were staying on after 5 pm and working till late at night for the artists. If there is a powerful idea, things can happen. Beuys was saying: everyone is an artist. And that is true. If you engage people, if you ask them to help, to co-create, everyone becomes an artist, too. It is a natural process. So, this is how it worked.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Can you tell us more about the interaction between artists and workers, and how the strike became part of “Konstrukcja w Procesie”?

RW: Solidarność declared a one-hour general strike against the regime throughout Poland. There were women workers from these old textile factories—incredibly huge halls with hundreds of machines from the nineteenth, or even the eighteenth century. I asked Solidarność leaders if we could join the strike. We went there with Rune Mields, a very feminist artist. She started to cry because of the unbelievable working conditions of the women. They were working more than eight hours a day in these harsh environments with crazy levels of noise and of dust, they were like concentration camps. Rune was inspired to talk to the Polish women about emancipation, and when she saw how they worked, she got it.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Would you say “Konstrukcja w Procesie” was the first event in Poland to address issues of inequality such as the status of women?

RW: In Poland at the time, the word feminist was almost non-existent. The first time I heard it was in the West. If you look at the history of Polish art, you do not see many women artists, maybe five to ten of them such as Eva Partum and Natalia Lach-Lachowicz (Natalia LL), but there are not many. The domination of men in art was almost natural. Therefore, in the first “Konstrukcja w Procesie,” I did not consider this problem as a basic issue we could address through the show. I just invited artists who I thought I might appreciate. I invited a few women though—Dóra Maurer, Nancy Holt, and Rune Mields. I did not think of inviting them from a notion of feminism.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: We were hoping also to meet your wife Maria, who was also part of all the editions of “Konstrukcja w Procesie.”

RW: Yes, she’s an artist and a filmmaker too. She says that without her help, I wouldn’t be able to make anything. And that’s true. She has always been so supportive. I love her and what she’s done for me. Not everyone can sacrifice the goal of his or her own life to anothers’ ideas. That’s why we have been together such a long time.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Were you against institutions at the time of the ‘81 edition, yet at the same time self-institutionalized?

RW: When we started “Konstrukcja w Procesie” in Poland all institutions belonged to the state and consequently the whole concept had particularly negative connotations. We felt, however, that just putting my name on all the letters we sent out inviting artists to the event was not enough. We decided to set up a so-called institution, something like a virtual organizational body that didn’t exist. We even created a logo for
“Construction in Process” in Israel, and the Fluxus dinner? How do you find them?

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: We had a collective screening yesterday. The idea of inviting artists to come and work on site together seemed very important. Many of the artists participated in several editions of the event. What were the core methods of “Construction in Process”?

RW: The core of each “Construction in Process” was the place and the context—be it social, political, or environmental. For the first “Konstrukcja w Procesie,” the point was the clash with the actual situation, with the times, with Solidarność, and the event functioned around the changes taking place. In Israel, there was another type of confrontation with a political situation because the project was organized after the peace process that began with the Oslo agreement between the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. We were invited to support this peace process through art. There were many ideas the artists created earlier in their own countries. It was a very interesting experience for many artists in how to improvise in a context that we didn’t know. When we did the project in Australia, western art met with indigenous art on an industrial site.

There were many artists who took part in all the editions of “Construction in Process,” and each time the local situation would produce a kind of refreshment to mind and spirit. The only thing all the editions had in common as a shared basis was that the artists must be present for the event.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: We would like to ask you about hospitality. It seems that shared activities such as preparing food, eating, and spending time together were as important to these events as was the final effect of the artworks produced. One of the editions was called: “My Home Is Your Home.” How did this idea of working together arise?

RW: We once invited Palestinian and Israeli artists to meet in the Artists’ Museum for seven days. They came to Łódź to work on a shared project. One evening we decided that instead of going to the restaurant to eat, we would cook. There was a small kitchen. The artists seemed to have some issues between themselves. I did not understand the language, but it looked as if a conflict was in the air. I decided to make a special dish—pierogi, you make it mostly for Christmas in Poland. The Palestinians barely spoke English, so the Israeli artist had to translate my Polish to Hebrew. At the beginning of this celebration there was still tension, but when they started to make pierogi the whole atmosphere became very relaxed. The table offers you the food and creates another relation among people. To me, soup was a symbol for each edition and people knew that there would be a “Ryszard soup,” so I was cooking for like 150–200 people. It was mostly red borscht because red was like blood, a metaphor for energy. When you come together to work or teach, food offers another connection. All the simple elements create everything. A good atmosphere works in a different way. It is about social relations, and the energy released in cooperation.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: A powerful idea in “Konstrukcja w Procesie” is openness to the general public beyond the art world. Was “Konstrukcja” about addressing something bigger—civil society in general? How did you come to this idea?

RW: I have seen how art became a professional discipline only quite recently in modern history. It has been a nice change to witness this and artists today should respect this fact. To me, artists can show their respect by being available to meet outside their studios, by making an effort to be present in public during their exhibition openings, for example. What I have been trying to do is to create public situations for artists, curators, and galleries together...
because at the end of the day, we are all humans, however crazy and strange.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: We have been talking within our group about the legacy of the project. It seems that there have been gentle but emphatic calls for a new “Construction in Process” from several sources. Where in your view would the urgency for such an event come from, and what do you think people are calling for?

RW: There is a spirit in art and in the air. People feel it. Today, from my point of view, art is in general boring and stagnant. The art market has driven every gallery here in Berlin to show the same type of work. The pressure of the art market on artists has determined what kind of work they should make. “Konstrukcja w Procesie” is and was about making change, taking action. Even if one does not know if anything will ever change, it is still worth trying.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: Is it an attempt to fight against the dominance of the art market?

RW: I do not know if it is against the art market, but it is about trying to do something else that could change something. Because art is about being alive, moving things around. When I came to Berlin twelve years ago, I got a big studio and thought, “Finally I can work!” I was working like fifteen hours a day making paintings. I was so happy. But after a while, I realized I was sitting alone. Nobody was visiting me. From time to time, a collector or an artist came to have a drink, but nothing was changing. There were no calls because all my friends were in other studios alone at the same time also working. There was no cooperation, no coexistence, no solidarity. “Ryszard, did you sell something?” That was the main question being asked whenever I went to openings, nothing like, “Let’s make something.” I remember during the ’90s, ’80s and ’70s, artists were always trying to do something—to meet, to discuss, to make a little project or whatever. Artists from all over the world wanted to take part in “Konstrukcja w Procesie” because it was a space for dialogue. Artists were talking to galleries and curators. There were no separations. That was exciting. This is perhaps why the project is still relevant.

EF/HN/MN/TPJ/JW: You just mentioned the artworks that surround us in different parts of our lives. Can you tell us what is that behind you? It looks like a collection of artworks under wraps?

RW: My intention was never to create a collection because I’m not a collector. This collection happened in a spontaneous way. It was created by artists through gifts and exchanges without any commercial goals. It just happened. The other day I was thinking about the poet Allen Ginsberg and his song about generosity. Today we have forgotten about this word. I believe this is how we should work again to become human, right?

“Do the meditation Do the meditation Do the meditation
Learn a little Patience and Generosity
Generosity, Generosity, Generosity”
(“Do the Meditation Rock,” 1981)

This conversation took place at Ryszard Waśko’s home in Berlin in autumn 2020.
Artists: Lars Ahlström, Peter Andersson, Volker Anding, Audio Arts, Christiaan Bastiaans, Guillaume Bijl, Dara Birnbaum, Klaus vom Bruch, Victor Burgin, Marie José Burki, Ulises Carrión, Christian Cavallin, Decay Pitch, Antonie Frank, Marianne Heske, John Hilliard, Doug Hall, Marikki Hakola, Jenny Holzer, Res Ingold, Jussi Kivi, Stefan Karlsson, Barbara Kruger, Niels Lomholt, Hans Anders Molin, Terje Munthe, Boris Nieslony, Torill Nøst, Marcel Odenbach, Ólafur Elíasson, Finnbogi Pétursson, Dan Reeves, Nigel Rolfe, Ane Mette Ruge & Jacob F. Schokking, Elsa Stansfield & Madelon Hooykaas, Bente Stokke, Torben Søborg, Ulrich Tillmann, Bettina Gruber & Maria Vedder, Måns Wrangell, Fredrik Wretman, and Graham Young

Curators: VAVD Editions (Peter Andersson and Måns Wrangell in collaboration with Lars Ahlström and Hans Anders Molin)

Locations in Umeå: Bildmuseet, Västerbottens Museum, Bildhörnan, Tullkammaren, Galleri EST EST EST, KC-Nord, Stadsbiblioteket, KRO, Folks Hus, Ögonblicksteatern, Rune Johansson Radio-TV, Västerbotten Folkblad, Kabel-TV, Västerbottens lokalradio, shop windows, and workplaces

Edited by Vasco Forconi and Maria Lind

Jenny Holzer, Survival Series, 1983–85. The photo shows the sentence “Vissa stenar tål inte att vändas på” (Some stones are better left unturned), as displayed on a large LED signboard outside Folks Hus. Photo: Roger Nilsson © Jenny Holzer / Bildupphovsrätt 2021
U-media: A 1987 Experiment in Public Art in Northern Sweden

Vasco Forconi and Maria Lind

In the fall of 1987, Umeå, a small riverside city in northeastern Sweden, became for eleven days the arena for a curatorial experiment that scattered several artworks across the city’s public space and media sphere, embedding them in different physical locations and adapting them to different mediums.

“U-media” included a text-based work by artist Jenny Holzer, reproduced on a large LED signboard outside of Folkets Hus, the local community center on one of the city’s main streets, and an exhibition in which individual artists and art collectives adopted the format of fictitious businesses and institutions. There were also numerous sound and video works broadcast on the local TV and radio stations. This largely forgotten curated project with an international scope presented to a wide audience the works of over forty artists from Europe and the Americas.

The project was curated by VAVD editions, an interdisciplinary group active in Sweden from 1983 until 1990, whose members included artists Peter Anderson and Måns Wrange, the civil rights researcher Pål Wrange, the designer and literary historian Lars Svensson, and the aviation expert Roland Zinders. VAVD editions sought to explore the ways in which the diffusion of new media acted both in the public realm and in the infosphere, altering the way we perceive reality and operate within it. Among the many projects curated by the curatorial collective are “The Aerial Kit” (1984–1989) and “Chameleon” (Moderna Museet, Modern Museum of Art, Stockholm, 1986). “U-media” stands out as an early and inventive problematization of the notion of “public space,” across physical space, public institutions, and the media.

At the end of the 1980s Umeå was perceived as a progressive city, yet peripheral to the dominating Stockholm-Göteborg-Malmö triangle, making it an ideal context for staging an experiment that would not find space in the major art institutions. A university was founded in the city in 1965 to which a number of progressive professors, researchers and students were drawn.

VAVD editions’ experience in supporting international exchanges of artists and artworks, the close collaboration with the local artists Lars Ahlström and Hans Anders Molin, and multiple institutions, along with the curatorial resourcefulness demanded by a limited budget, allowed “U-media” to acquire a hybrid and multifaceted format. There was no direct precedent in recent Scandinavian exhibition history, and no significant successors either.
Challenging the Nordic Exhibition Tradition
A Conversation with Måns Wrange

The dialogue that follows is based on a conversation between Måns Wrange and CuratorLab 2020/21 that took place online in winter 2020.

CuratorLab: “U-media” is a somewhat mysterious project—a pioneering curatorial initiative in Umeå in 1987 which few people know about. As one of the co-curators, could you please introduce it for us?

Måns Wrange: “U-media” was a curatorial project that explored both the physical and mediatized public sphere of the city of Umeå. The project was divided into several different parts and sub-themes. The overall theme could, in short, be formulated as how media, both in terms of the mass media and new media and communication technologies, change the notion of the public sphere, the perception of reality, and the way we view the world and operate in it.

Maria Lind: What was the scale, how many artists were involved, and how many locations?

MW: “U-media” included around forty-five artists from twelve countries in Europe, North, and Latin America—of which, with one or two exceptions, none of the artists from outside Scandinavia had been shown here before. The project was dispersed at around fifteen different locations in Umeå, which could be divided into three types of publicness: public space, public institutions, and public media. In public space the project used different outdoor information platforms, for example, a large LED display board, a wall newspaper, a shop window, and an outdoor display case. Almost all public institutions in Umeå were used as sites for art projects including the public library, a public cinema, the community center, a public theatre, the two museums, and the public and artist-run galleries. Lastly, projects were produced for and broadcast on public cable TV and local radio, as well as through new communication technologies such as fax.

ML: “U-media” went on for eleven days, with minimal funding. Who paid for the project?

MW: The funding, which in relation to what this kind of a large-scale project might receive today was ridiculously small, came mainly from the municipality of Umeå. As I remember, it was around 30,000 Swedish kronor.

ML: Why did “U-media” come about, and who are the “we” that you are referring to?

MW: VAVD Editions had for some time worked on issues around both new media technology and older means of communication in relation to notions of center and periphery and the global and the local. From these perspectives, Umeå was a very interesting context. The majority of the population, as well as the economic centers in Sweden, are concentrated to the southern part of the country. Umeå is the major center of the northern part of Sweden, which is sparsely populated over a large area. It was and still is the knowledge center of northern Sweden, with a university founded in 1965 and a new art academy which started the same year as “U-media” in 1987. The city also has a rich cultural life with several interesting cultural institutions and artist-run galleries, and a very active local radio station. It was also one of the first cities in Sweden to have a local public service cable-TV channel. Umeå offered, in other words, a lot of interesting possibilities for a project like “U-media.”

Since we had so few funding options for both “U-media” and other projects, we had developed a kind of “friendly parasite strategy” where we collaborated with different institutions, where we brought the idea, and did all the...
curatorial and organizational work, and they funded it. A project like “U-media” would also have been much more difficult in a larger city, like Stockholm. The advantage of smaller and progressive cities with high ambitions is that you often have a constructive underdog mentality. By collaborating with the right people, daring projects can be easier to accomplish, especially since everybody knows each other in a small city.

ML: Can you give us a couple of examples of art projects that were part of “U-media”?

MW: We curated, for example, an exhibition at the public gallery Bildhörnan in the form of an expo, one of those trade fairs where different companies pay for showing off their products to both the business world and a wider consumer audience, where you have a sort of interface between the commercial world and the public. This part of the project focused on developments in the art world, which exploded in the 1980s and in which both artists and art institutions had increasingly adopted the business models and marketing strategies of the consumer industry. We transformed the gallery into a generic commercial trade show in which artists working with the form of a fictitious company or institution presented long-term projects in booths in the same way real companies do at a trade show.

The “trade show” presented, for example, a fictitious airline called Ingold Airlines, founded by the artist Res Ingold. He had earlier participated in real expos, for instance, in an international airline expo in Switzerland, where he was also interviewed on TV as a representative for smaller airlines. For “U-media” Ingold presented a large sign of the airline’s logo, promotional materials, the airline’s uniform, and the airline’s video commercials.

Another invited artist was Guillaume Bijl, whose art practice transforms galleries and museum spaces into different kinds of fictitious enterprises and institutions, from a casino to a psychiatric hospital. The show also included a fictitious museum, the Klaus Peter Schnüttger-Webs Museum, which was started in a suburb of Cologne in 1986 by Ulrich Tillmann, Bettina Gruber, and Maria Vedder. The project was a critical commentary on the new museum boom in West Germany during the early and mid-’80s, often based on private donations. The opening of the fictitious museum coincided with the opening of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. At “U-media” they presented material from the museum’s opening—a videotape, a poster, printed matter, and press materials. Another example...
was a radio project with the local radio station where artists produced works specially made for the medium of radio, such as the group Audio Arts’ piece, which was based on re-edits and manipulations of a number of Swedish radio programs, and a TV project for the newly established local public cable TV channel.

ML: Who worked with cable TV and what did they do?

MW: One part of “U-media”s TV project included works that critically investigated TV as medium through the medium itself. Ulises Carrión’s work Aristotle’s Mistake explored the genre of TV documentary, commenting on one of the most famous media spectacles of the last century, the 1960s dramatic triangle of Aristotle Onassis, Maria Callas, and Jackie Kennedy, from seven different stereotypical cultural perspectives. Another work, Volker Anding’s Dienstag, was a surreal reflection on the passive consumer TV culture. In the other section of the TV project, a number of Nordic video works were broadcast by, for example, Antonie Frank and Asta Ölafsdóttir.

Besides projects for cable-TV and radio, we also curated works for new communication technologies such as fax, which was a novelty at the time and not yet available to the mass consumer. We also had a piece by Jenny Holzer for another new medium, LED screens, those gigantic screens that appeared in the early and mid-’80s, used for text-based commercial messages in public space. We collaborated with Folkets Hus, the People’s House, which had a large LED screen outside the main entrance to the community center’s newly built complex on one of the main streets of Umeå. Holzer’s piece was based on her Truisms series, which we translated into Swedish and selected to serve as a critical commentary on the public announcements by the municipality of Umeå, which were presented on the community center’s LED screen. This was done without any framing of Holzer’s statement as being a part of an art project. Like the sentence “SOME STONES ARE BETTER LEFT UNTURNED” which was inserted after the announcement of a congress of the long-time ruling party in Umeå, the Social Democrats.

Julius Lehmann: Jenny Holzer planned the same project for Skulptur Projekte Münster in 1987, but it couldn’t be realized for budgetary and legal reasons. On German television it would have cost about 2,000 marks per thirty seconds of screening, and the time slots for advertising could only be used for commercials. So it didn’t work out in the end. I was always a fan of this project using the television as a way of getting into people’s homes and their living rooms. In the Skulptur Projekte Archives there are only some conceptual sketches for the TV spots as part of the correspondence as well as the watercolor storyboards. But two other works could be realized there as her contribution to the exhibition. If you think about the way artists work and about so-called site specificity, it’s interesting to see how the same idea can be realized in different locations.

ML: Did you see any of the Skulptur Projekte Münster?

MW: Yes, Skulptur Projekte Münster was of course one of the historical references we had for art projects in the public realm, with its first edition in 1977, although I knew it only through its catalogue. I saw, however, the second edition which was in 1987, the same year as “U-media,” and right before “U-media” started.

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand: Looking at the United States at that time, with
projects such as “Culture in Action” in Chicago (1993), there were intense conversations about the National Endowment of the Arts and its aim of broadening conceptions of public art. This was motivated by a need to secure more funding and specifically to facilitate transient or “temporal” projects that were not confined to art objects in space. What was the conversation about public art in Sweden like at this time? And were these pieces seen as public art per se?

MW: When we curated “U-media,” there had been no projects like this in Sweden before. As you mention, on the US-American scene, you had had several projects that went beyond the traditional genre of public art. You also had organizations like Creative Time in New York, which has been active in this field since the mid-’70s. I think, however, that several of the sub-projects in “U-media,” as well as other projects that VAVD Editions curated during the 1980s, relate more to the type of projects that evolved in the 1990s with new genre public art such as your example, Mary Jane Jacob’s “Culture in Action.” In Sweden, the discourse on public art was rather traditional as was the curatorial practice: there were hardly any independent curators, and most institutions showed conventional group or solo exhibitions. “U-media” took place during a boom of the commercial gallery scene in Stockholm, first with neo-expressionist painting and later with so-called postmodern art. VAVD Editions was operating in between these two trends. This was also the reason why we started VAVD Editions, since there were very few shows or projects that we were interested in. The art academies were also quite traditionally oriented.

AME: Did “U-media” receive international attention? You talked about inviting international artists, but did you speak about this project internationally, after the fact, and—if so—in which venues and what ways?

MW: Not really. Other than the artists who participated in the project, who, of course, spread the word about it within their artistic community, there was no international attention as far as I know. But you have to consider that this was before the internet and the globalization of the art world when the so-called international art world basically consisted of a handful of NATO countries. At least this was how the major art magazines defined the art world. The rest of the world was considered as a “local scene.” So, there wasn’t any interest in Swedish or Scandinavian art, and there were only a few artists from the region who were active in the so-called international art scene at the time.

ML: How was “U-media” media received by other media, in reviews, and by the inhabitants of the city?

MW: The size of the audience was considerable since the project was spread out over the entire city and also through local TV, radio, newspapers, the community center, etc. But I can’t give you a general overview of the public reception since this was, of course, very mixed depending on which artworks they saw. As for reviews, we had more reserved pieces in the local newspapers and more positive ones in the national papers. There was a large review in Dagens Nyheter (the main national morning paper) and one in Aftonbladet (one of the two main national evening papers). As you know, it is very rare now for a show to be reviewed in...
more than one national paper in Sweden unless it’s at Moderna Museet or is a blockbuster show.

ML: Were there particular examples of curated projects that you had in mind when you put “U-media” together?

MW: No, not really. This was a time when the art scene was very focused on commercial galleries and large museum shows, and you didn’t have that many biennial-type exhibitions, except for Venice, Documenta, São Paulo, and a few others. The projects we thought were interesting came from countries like the Netherlands, which had a very interesting international conceptual and new media scene with some progressive art institutions and artist run organizations, and many artists from other countries living in Amsterdam. This was very much due to the fact that Amsterdam was a rather cheap city to live in at the time, combined with a very generous grant system for artists. There was one earlier project in Amsterdam, “Talking Back to the Media,” that VAVD Editions was in contact with and which also dealt with new media but from other perspectives than “U-media.”

Marc Navarro Fornos: While researching Kulturhuset’s (House of Culture, Stockholm) history around this time, we learned about two video art exhibitions “Video/Art/Vdeo” (1985), and “Japan nu/Sverige nu” (Japan now/Sweden now, 1988). They seemed to be two important exhibitions in terms of video and moving image. What was your relationship to these exhibitions?

MW: Yes, I actually participated in both exhibitions! Until the mid-’90s, there was hardly any interest in video art institutions in Sweden. The only institution that had some knowledge and ambitions in terms of video art was Moderna Museet, thanks to the curator Monica Nieckels who was in charge of the film and video art department of the museum. Kulturhuset also organized and hosted a few shows. But several of these exhibitions were also co-organized by artists. “Japan nu/Sverige nu” was curated by the video art organization Video NU, in which I was active. My brother Pål Wrange and I curated several shows at Moderna Museet in the beginning of the 1990s in collaboration with the Stockholm Film Festival, just to mention a few examples that I was involved in. This also goes for the whole video scene during this period in which basically everything was self-organized. Artists curated video festivals, started organizations that distributed videos, and were critics and video art historians. I wrote, for example, several articles in both film and art magazines, lectured about new media art, and co-wrote a chapter on the history of Swedish video art together with Gunnel Petersson in the book Konst som rörlig bild (Art as Moving Image) which is a survey of the history of experimental film, digital art, and video art.

ML: Importantly, this was before video entered the art market. So yes, there were not many restrictions, if an artist made video, and—if it was an artist who was kind of ideologically aware—he or she would make their videos available through one of the organizations you mentioned, and they would get paid through those organizations. But you wouldn’t have galleries behind them asking the artists to be a bit selective and maybe avoid showing the work other than in shows where the work can be sold, or where there is really big visibility—in a blockbuster exhibition, say.

HN: When you think about new media it is often connected to a chain of reactions that usually follows its introduction in the public sphere. These reactions can come in the form of almost undetectable restrictions and control originating from both governmental as well as commercial instances, but—depending on the political context—also in the form of strict censorship and anti-democratic restrictions. Did any of the projects presented in “U-media” deal with issues of this kind relating to control, privacy, and censorship?

MW: A few works dealt with aspects of these issues, for example, Marcel Odenbach’s work As if Memories Could Deceive Me, Klaus vom Bruch’s work Azimut, and of course some of the Survival and Truisms series by Jenny Holzer.

Joanna Warsza: Certain ideas of publicness within the private realm of technologies may appear very common today. Social media are private platforms, however, they are being used for some kind of illusion of public expression or public speech.
You said that with “U-media” you were interested in publicness and public institutions, but how did you understand these ideas in relation to new technologies?

MW: During the 1980s, there was a similar and rather utopian discussion about how new technologies, such as video and cable TV, could be used to create a “democratization of the media” which would form an alternative public sphere. “U-media” linked to the discussion about new media as an extension of the public realm, but from a more critical perspective.

Edy Fung: Did you want to test something in terms of social conditions with “U-media” by dispersing works around the city?

MW: I wouldn’t say “U-media”’s main focus was to critically investigate the sociopolitical context of the city, even though there were individual projects that could be interpreted from that perspective.

ML: When you look at “U-media” now, thirty-four years later, what do you think worked really well, and stands out as something that you’re still interested in and perhaps even proud of in the project? And also, what do you think were the weak parts of the project?

MW: To curate a project that uses an entire city as an arena for a large number of artworks located in public space as well as at various types of public institutions and galleries in combination with art projects for public media channels such as radio and TV, was a quite radical idea three decades ago with few preceding similar projects. Today this is a rather standard formula for many public art projects and biennials. However, some of the sub-projects in “U-media,” which adopted a “chameleon-like” interventionist strategy where the art projects were “embedded,” inserted, and adapted to various public contexts, still feel rather interesting. The relation between center and periphery, the global and the local, and the transformation of the public sphere by new media technologies are also still rather current issues.

The project’s weak aspect is that, except for some videos and a few other works, the artists’ selection had to be limited to primarily European countries due to “U-media”’s minimal funding. Also, the gender representation could have been slightly better, which I discovered too late.
DIE ENDLICHKEIT DER FREIHEIT
(The Finitude of Freedom)
Berlin, 1990
September 1–October 7

Idea: Rebecca Horn, Jannis Kounellis, Heiner Müller

Artists: Giovanni Anselmo, Barbara Bloom, Christian Boltanski, Hans Haacke, Rebecca Horn, Ilya Kabakov, Jannis Kounellis, Via Lewandowsky, Mario Merz, Raffael Rheinsberg, and Krzysztof Wodiczko

Curators: Wulf Herzogenrath, Christoph Tannert, Joachim Sartorius

Organization: Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD / DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program

Edited by Julius Lehmann, Marc Navarro, and Erik Sandberg

Hans Haacke, *Die Freiheit wird jetzt einfach gesponsert—aus der Portokasse* (Freedom is now simply going to be sponsored—out of petty cash), 1990. Photo: Werner Zellien © Hans Haacke / Biklupphovswätt 2021
The exhibition “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” (The Finitude of Freedom) which took place in the autumn of 1990 in the formerly divided city of Berlin, owes its realization to the political developments of 1989–90. Installed at various locations along the no-man’s land of the former death strip, with contributions by eleven internationally acclaimed artists, it captured the unique condition of limbo succeeding the fall of the Berlin Wall. “In certain places, the time of upheaval is paused for a moment in order to make a different artistic policy,” stated the project’s press release, highlighting the uncertainty and political possibility of the moment.

Planned and realized immediately after the opening of the internal border between East and West Germany, the show began as a two-state cooperation on September 1, 1990 and ended just a few days after the official state ceremony on October 3, in a newly reunited country.

Four years earlier, when the idea of a dialogical cross-border exhibition of public art was born in conversations between artists Rebecca Horn and Jannis Kounellis together with East Berlin playwright Heiner Müller, the Unification was not yet in sight. Despite the reputation and networks of the initiators of an exhibition of public art on both sides of the Berlin Wall was, under the given political circumstances, impossible. The 1986 cultural agreement between the two German states, concluded after years of diplomatic deadlock, did little to change this situation, and even when U.S. President Ronald Reagan called on Mikhail Gorbachev the following year to “tear down this wall,” an imminent end to the division of the world into two blocs was barely on the horizon. The Wall was still hermetically sealed with barbed wire, armed border guards, and self-firing devices on the Eastern side, while the “free” citizens and visitors to the “island” of West Berlin occasionally used the wooden viewing platforms constructed on their side of the Wall to take a curious glance over the edge. With the so-called outpost of the free world on one side and the German Democratic Republic on the other, between “here” and “over there” ran a dividing line that made visible two opposing realities.

The genesis of the exhibition may be seen as closely connected to Berlin’s 750th anniversary, celebrated in 1987 both in the West and in the East with the presentation of art in urban space. Conceived in competition with each other, both halves of the divided city wanted to consolidate a sense of being on the right side of history. While West Berlin realized the “Skulpturenboulevard,” a highly disputed and conceptually not entirely successful large-scale project, the East celebrated the historical progress of socialism with a parade of decorated floats, the inauguration of the Marx-Engels-Forum at the Palace of the Republic, and the printing of a commemorative stamp with the motif of the Ernst Thälmann monument in Prenzlauer Berg (which was completed the year before). It was not until the sudden opening of the border on November 9, 1989, that the political situation fundamentally changed and Rebecca Horn, the main driving force behind the project, took up the idea again. A team of organizers was quickly won over to realize the exhibition: The West German Wulf Herzogenrath, who had just arrived in Berlin as the designated director of the Hamburger Bahnhof, the East German critic and exhibition organizer Christoph Tannert, and Joachim Sartorius, the head of the DAAD—The German Academic Exchange Service—which served as supporting organization for the endeavor. Looking at the printed matter and press releases, it seems that the “organizers”—the term “curator” was not yet used—receded into the background. Instead, the artistic authorship of the project idea was emphasized, almost as in a theater play: “Based on an idea by Rebecca Horn, Jannis Kounellis, and Heiner Müller.”

In just as short a time, the selection of participants was put together in a spirit of optimism while, favored by the opportunity of the moment, the significant funding of 1.5 million Deutsche Marks, including a small amount of support from the GDR, was approved from...
Quick decisions were the main feature of the planning phase: the artists agreed to come to Berlin for site research between April and May 1990, before the set-up phase began in July and August. The selection of artists was based in part on the network of the DAAD and followed the idea of a balance between international artists from Western and Eastern European countries as well as the US (although a pro-Western tendency was evident). The core was formed by Rebecca Horn and Jannis Kounellis who invited the Arte Povera artists Mario Merz and Giovanni Anselmo, joined by Christian Boltanski from France, Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Ilya Kabakov from the USSR who was then in Berlin as a DAAD grant holder. The exhibition also featured the German-American Hans Haacke and the US artist Barbara Bloom, while West and East Berlin were represented respectively by Raffael Rheinsberg and Via Lewandowsky—as the only participant from the GDR.

During the realization of the project, the general focus shifted away from the original idea of a dialogue between the two halves of the city to a critical ambivalence towards the state of political transition, something echoed in Heiner Müller’s poetically enigmatic title. In a short interview sequence in the documentary produced by Heinz Peter Schwerfel, Müller explains: “The idea was originally to find a common ground, to create differences but also connections between the different parts […]. And after the Fall of the Wall, the accent was suddenly on what separated, on what is very difficult to unite and what probably won’t go together at all in the next few years.”

Accordingly, only half of the participants realized a pair of complementary installations in each half of the “double city,” whereas most of the artists were drawn to the city center and the border strip that was just disappearing. Responding to the rapid socioeconomic, political, and urban changes, the installations created for “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” were not solely site-specific, but rather situation-responsive, reflecting the present developments as well as different sedimentations and chapters of German history. The exhibition flyer states: “The common thread in all the works is that they create an awareness of the place, they sensitize the site, and in this way they do not cover up the differences between East and West, but rather reveal them.” The artists’ approaches, however, differed significantly. Several participants refrained from working in the outdoor space, such as Giovanni Anselmo, who chose an empty East Berlin apartment and a West Berlin office space for his projection *Particolar*re. Barbara Bloom drew inspiration from the East Berlin
Museum für Naturkunde (Museum of Natural History) and the Gipsformerei (plaster cast manufactory) in West Berlin for her “palindromic” intervention Regallager, a poetic examination of collecting, storing, doubling, and symmetries. Also, Rebecca Horn, whose initial project idea related to urban space, withdrew with her multisensory installation Raum des verwundeten Affen (Room of the Wounded Ape) to an abandoned storage room on the first floor of a building on the east side of Potsdamer Platz, sealed off for a long time due to its proximity to the death strip. As a middle ground between interior and urban space Mario Merz chose to install his illuminated neon piece "Was machen? (Prospectiva dalle stazioni del S-Bahn di Berlino) [What to Do? Perspectives from Berlin S-Bahn Stations] in two transit points of daily life: a pair of historic 19th-century S-Bahn stations in both halves of the city. An engagement with spatial axes and divisions formed the starting point for Raffael Rheinsberg, who initially envisaged an intervention along the historically significant axis of Wilhelmstrasse. After a change of plans he decided on an installation of 100 cable drums (50 of them produced in each German state) for his Joint Venture, symbols of telecommunication lined up along the former course of the Wall in front of the Martin-Gropius-Bau: A connection and barrier at the same time. Jannis Kounellis, on the other hand, was inspired by the dilapidated charm of a majestic, disused power station from the 1920s in Berlin-Mitte, reactivating an old coal lorry, which, powered by a motor winch, slowly moved back and forth in the courtyard, endlessly transporting hard coal in an emblematic Sisyphian act that symbolized production at a standstill. Ilya Kabakov also operated in the terrain vague of the former border line, erecting his immersive installation Zwei Erinnerungen an die Angst (Two Memories of Fear) in the middle of the empty Potsdamer Platz, whose renewed development would not begin until the following months and years.

Other participants in the exhibition took direct aim at politically charged monuments and buildings or created temporary monuments themselves. For example, Via Lewandowsky, whose transformations of the Wilhelminian Victory Column in the West and a socialist mural on the House of Ministries (built as the Ministry of Aviation in 1935) in the East, commented on these different cultures of remembrance, monumental settings, as well as the overwriting of history. In another way, Krzysztof Wodiczko also used the blending of monuments by projecting onto the colossal statue of Lenin in Friedrichshain an image of an Eastern European shopping tourist: an image of political change and socio-economic unevenness. Intended for eternity and crafted by the Soviet sculptor Nicolai Tomski from
red Ukrainian granite in 1970, the 19-meter colossus was, by 1991, peremptorily demolished and buried in a former gravel pit outside Berlin. A second site used by Wodiczko was the facade of the Weinhaus Huth at Potsdamer Platz.

Hans Haacke created a temporary monument by reappropriating an abandoned watchtower on the former death strip. In place of its searchlight, he mounted a rotating Mercedes star, alluding to the Europa Center in the city's West and the capitalist expansion of the automobile manufacturer, which had just acquired large tracts of building land in the area of Potsdamer Platz. It is no coincidence that the title of Haacke's work, a commentary on the looming hegemony of capitalism, also echoes the exhibition title: Die Freiheit wird jetzt einfach gesponsert—aus der Portokasse (Freedom is now simply going to be sponsored—out of petty cash).

The only work remaining in public space after the end of the exhibition was the contribution of Christian Boltanski. For his The Missing House the artist chose the void of a bombed-out house between two buildings, installing on the walls the nameplates of the former inhabitants of the destroyed house, many of them expropriated and deported Jews. By highlighting an absence, he addressed the wounds of German and European history and created a non-monumental sign against forgetting and repression. The second part of his contribution, The Museum, was set up in an overgrown urban wasteland, the former site of the Grosse Berliner Kunstaustellung, where a presentation of archival documents—which Boltanski had collected with the help of two Berlin-based student assistants, Christiane Büchner and Andreas Fischer—gave an insight into the life stories and fates of the inhabitants of the disappeared house (the glass showcases were immediately vandalized on the first night of the exhibition).

The realization of the projects would not have been possible without cultural-political support, local networks, and the cooperation of numerous institutions in West Berlin as well as the GDR, in its process of dissolution. While generally well received by the press—apart from isolated criticism of the high cost for temporary interventions—little is known about the impact on visitors and passersby during the short six-week duration of the exhibition. Considering reports that the event barely gained visibility within the limits of the city—in contrast to its media presence—raises the question to what extent the well-funded showcase project actually achieved public resonance “on the ground.” An intentional side-effect of the exhibition, however, was the promotion of the city of Berlin for art and its market, pursued through a satellite program of commercial galleries (in both parts of the city), that mirrored primarily the West German and international art market.

The exhibition aimed to provide an “answer to the question of the possibilities of contemporary art and the public sphere.” What, however, was the policy of “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit”? And who was the main audience? Did it contribute to the “production” of public space and to the emergence of a public sphere in the eastern part of the city? Did it enable a change of perspective for both publics and societies, previously so different, or did the exhibition rather reflect the self-conception of the West? How did it tackle the obvious and hidden asymmetries?
One point of criticism is certainly the under-representation of East German artists, which was not only due to the exhibition’s preference for internationally known names, but also to the focus on outdoor installation: a genre “well-rehearsed” in the West, but which until then had not been able to develop as a form of artistic expression in the political climate of the GDR. Another missed opportunity can be seen in the fact that the selection of artistic positions, despite the imminent transition to democracy, did not include participatory works or calls for direct participation.

Overall, the exhibition project can be grasped from its historical situation. “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” emerged as an urgent response to a historically decisive moment. With its unapologetic embrace of a brand-new freedom, the project exposed the challenges and uncertainties of future conviviality. A heterogenous list of artists broached the idea of artistic intervention as a catalyst for history and change: on one hand, a means of building bridges between different realities and audiences, on the other, a force capable of overcoming trauma. Driven by the will of social and cultural reconstruction, the transition process had many blind spots. “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” signalled the importance of keeping a critical perspective in a time of great transformations and gave space to the emergence of counter-narratives in real-time, while hegemonic history was being written. In terms of curatorial tactics, the event spoke to a local and international audience by questioning the uses, meanings, and permeability of public space. It is no coincidence that one of the printed materials published by the organization was a map showing the location of each of the artists’ interventions. “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” extended an invitation to Berlin’s citizens and visitors to reappropriate public space and rediscover the geography of the city through the simple act of walking and traversing a street layout that until very recently was obstructed. As a case study, “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” exposes the political and social embeddedness of situated artistic practice, its failures, and achievements.

It is precisely in public space that democratic values find a suitable framework for representation, through the adaptation of historical and symbolic elements. “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” uncovered the ethics and social burden implicit in the definition of public space and the public sphere, and the prevailing asymmetry in its uses and meanings on both sides of the Wall. On one hand, assuming this asymmetry, it is an essential exercise to review the event from a contemporary perspective. On the other, it leads us to question the homogenization of public space in the dialogue between East and West, local and international. In relation to this, it seems especially relevant to analyze the project’s role in constructing a new civic mindedness driven by ideas such as “free-space,” “monumentality,” “memory,” or “commemoration,” but also the meaning of publicness and the public sphere in both the former West and the former East. These ideas are undoubtedly relevant for the configuration of a new public sphere, and fundamental to any attempt at a new historicization and critical revision of the event.

The following chapter presents a number of conversations with key players in “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit”: An interview with Wulf Herzogenrath and the art historian Sarah Alberti—conducted by Julius Lehmann—traces the genesis and reception of the project, while in a second conversation Christoph Tannert takes a critical look at the ongoing trauma of the reunification—“the dipole between what separates and what unites” in a project which he calls both “magnificent and cynical.” Excerpts from a conversation with participating artist Barbara Bloom—compiled by Marc Navarro—shine a spotlight on central aspects of her own conceptual work and on the exhibition as a whole. Finally, an essay by Erik Sandberg examines Via Lewandowsky’s interventions in urban space and at historic monuments.
A view to the other side: “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit,” Berlin 1990. Photo: Luc Wouters


2. In a kind of temporal Möbius loop, the start and end dates were deliberately chosen as part of the artistic “staging.” The exhibition began on the anniversary of the start of the Second World War and ended on the forty-first anniversary of the founding of the now non-existent GDR. See Marius Fabius, “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit,” in Kunstforum International 110, no. 6 (1990): 340.

3. Rebecca Horn and Heiner Müller were both members of the divided institution of the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts) in their part of the city. Heiner Müller was president of the Academy of Arts (East) 1990–93.


6. The wording was not a mere gesture of modesty but was in accordance with German usage—an aspect that reflects the career of the terms “to curate”/“curator.” The verb “kuratieren” was not yet listed in the German dictionary Duden in the 1980s, and the term “Kurator” was not yet common in the art field in Germany.


8. The sum of 60,000 DM planned for each of the originally two-part projects meant a much higher budget than for comparable exhibitions such as documenta 8 (1987) or “Bezugspunkte: 38/88” (1988) in Graz. See Claudia Bütter, Art Goes Public: Von der Gruppenausstellung im Freien zum Projekt im nicht-institutionellen Raum (München: Schreiber, 1997), 100.

9. Thus, alongside the invited Italian arte povera artists, all the Western allies (apart from Great Britain) were represented, which, like Russia, had previously occupied a sector of Berlin.

10. Heiner Müller (our translation) in Heinz-Peter Schwerfel, dir., Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit, 76 min, color, sound (ArtCore-HPS Film and Communication and DEFA-Studio for documentary films, with the support of the Senate of Berlin, 1990), 4:40.


12. This intertwining of historical levels is also expressed by the design of Grischa Meyer, who used an image of celebrating Soviet soldiers after the liberation of Berlin in 1945 for the printed matter and the catalogue cover.


14. Mario Merz chose two S-Bahn stations built in 1972 as the sites of his artistic intervention: Marx-Engels-Platz (renamed Hohescher Markt in 1991) in East Berlin and Lehrter Stadtbahnhof in the west of the city (demolished in 2002 in the course of the construction of the new Hauptbahnhof).


16. A comprehensive collection of press reports and printed matter on the exhibition, bound in two volumes, can be viewed at Kunstbibliothek/Kunstwissenschaftliche Bibliothek im Kulturforum, Berlin.

17. Hans Dickel, who was directly involved in the project in 1990 as coordinator of the student assistants, points to Wodiczko’s work—only on display for two evenings—as an example of the exhibition’s primarily media presence, and concludes that it communicated successfully through newspapers and art magazines but did not work as an exhibition per se. See Hans Dickel, “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit in Berlin 1990” (2007), 44.


19. Public space was not guaranteed by the state in the GDR. Oleg Yanitskii proposes the concept of “informal space” to describe certain public situations in socialist societies. See the public discussion with Hans Dickel, Andrea Bátarová, Hans D. Christ, Gürsoy Doğtaş, Anna Schober, Verena Krieger, and Claudia Tittel, included in Hans Dickel, “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit 1990 in Berlin,” 44.

A Reading of Traces: Selected Documents

Heiner Müller

BERLIN TWOHEARTED CITY*

Am I crumbling wall
Pillar by the wayside that is silent
Or tree of sorrow
Leaning over the abyss.**

—Becher

The idea of exhibiting differences and/or similarities between East and West Berlin through art was born when the Wall, now dissolving into souvenirs, was still the stake in the flesh of the city, a regulator, too, time-wall between two velocities: Acceleration in the West, deceleration in the East. Now, after the opening of the East and the headlong leap into German unity, they are coming together in an explosive mixture. After parting with the equilibrium of terror, we enter a zone of uncertainty. The artists’ works reflect this step: freedom gives back to art the element of danger (which was in large part the domain of artists and still is in large parts of the world, the domestication of art is the result).

With better vision, the blindness increases: the works show the breaking points of the Be/Vereinigung [Bereinigung: adjustment, clearing up, correction/Vereinigung: Unification] and allow a view into the abyss of freedom, which the plastic smile with which the media salivates over the planet, withdraws from the eye of the majority.

* The short text “Berlin Twohearted City” by Heiner Müller is printed as a “prelude” on the first pages of the exhibition catalogue for “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit,” directly after an introduction by the curators.

** The lines quoted here are from the poem “Verfall” (Decay) by the Marxist poet and cultural politician Johannes R. Becher (1891–1958) published in 1914. Becher, a member of the Communist Party since the Weimar Republic, wrote the anthem of the GDR on behalf of the Politburo: “Auferstanden aus Ruinen” [Risen from Ruins] (1950), Cultural Minister of the GDR and President of the Akademie der Künste (East). His participation in the efforts to release Georg Lukács after the uprising in Hungary in 1956 caused conflicts with the SED leadership that led to his political disempowerment and inner distancing from socialism.

Next page: Double page spread from the exhibition catalogue for “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit”
Heiner Müller
BERLIN TWOHEARTED CITY

Bin ich zerbrockelnde Mauer
Säule am Wegrand die schweigt
Oder Baum der Trauer
Über den Abgrund geneigt

Becher

Blutwurst

Es waren einmal eine Blutwurst und eine Leberwurst, und die Blutwurst bat die Leberwurst zu Gast. Und wie die Leberwurst ins Haus der Blutwurst kam, so sah sie unten an der Thüre und auf jeder Treppe, deren viel zu steigen waren, immer eine wunderbarliche Sache, als einen Besen und Schippe, die sich einander schlugen, einen Affen mit einer großen Wunde im Kopf usw. Als sie nun endlich ganz erschrocken über diese Begegnung in die Stube der Blutwurst getreten und derselben über die Bewandtnis dieser Dinge Fragen vorlegte, so erklärte diese jede Sache gezwungen und ausweichend. So sagte sie von der Schippe und dem Besen: »ei, es wird meine Magd gewesen seyn, die mit jemand auf der Treppe geschwätzt hat.« Zuletzt ging die Blutwurst fort, um Anstalten zu machen; da wurde die Leberwurst von [jemand] gewarnt, denn sie würde sonst gleich vielen andern mit dem Leben büssen. Eilig ergriff sie die Flucht, und wie sie unten am Haus sich umsah, so stand die Blutwurst oben im Bodenloch mit einem langen Meßer und rief ihr nach: »hält ich dich, so will ich dich!«

Brüder Grimm
Blood Sausage*

Once upon a time there was a blood sausage and a liver sausage. The blood sausage invited the liver sausage to her house for dinner, and the liver sausage gladly accepted. But when she crossed the threshold of the blood sausage’s abode, she saw a great many strange things: a broom and a shovel fighting on the stairs, an ape with a wound on his head, and more.

The liver sausage was frightened by all of this, of course, and when she entered the blood sausage’s rooms, she told her what she’d seen. The blood sausage pretended not to hear, then brushed off the liver sausage’s worries, saying of the shovel and the broom: “It must have been my maid who was gossiping with someone on the stairs.”

Then she retreated to the kitchen to check on the meal. While the liver sausage was alone in the room, she was warned [by someone] that she might lose her life like so many others before her. Hurriedly the liver sausage took flight. When she turned around, she could see the blood sausage high up in the attic window, holding a long, gleaming knife, and shouting, “If I had caught you, I would have had you!”

—The Brothers Grimm

(Our translation)

*Rebecca Horn selected “Die wunderliche Gasterei” (The Strange Feast) from Grimm’s Fairy Tales to accompany the documentation of her project in the exhibition catalogue for “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit”
WANDERING BARBARIANS
Excerpt from Heinz Peter Schwerfel’s documentary Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit, a co-production of ArteCore-HPS Film and Communication and DEFA-Studio for documentary films with the support of the Senate of Berlin, 76 min, color, sound, 1991.

1:09:46–1:12:37
Heiner Müller: I remember my first subway ride from Friedrichstraße to West Berlin: There were about two or three dead stations in a half-light, a gray light. You saw railroad policemen, nothing else. The trains went through. After the so-called “Wende” in the GDR [the “turn-around” leading to German Reunification], graffiti appeared on the walls of many houses which said, “Freedom not socialism.” Since then, you see new writing on the walls of many houses that says: “Freedom not capitalism.”

Voiceover (text: Heiner Müller): The title of our Abitur essay three years after the war was a sentence by Georg Herwegh: “The freedom of the world is indivisible.” This relates to the title of the exhibition: “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit.” This finiteness is defined by the unfreedom of others, on which the freedom of minorities is based. And when I see these pictures, it occurs to me that in the meantime, the alternative “socialism or barbarism” has been replaced, or is increasingly being replaced, by the alternative “ruin or barbarism.” There is a beautiful sentence by Herder in a text about the fall of the Roman Empire: “Then there was only the dark tumult of wandering barbarians. The barbarians are all of us.”

(Our translation)
Now or Never: Opening New Spaces
A Conversation with Wulf Herzogenrath and Sarah Alberti

Julius Lehmann

Julius Lehmann: “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” had a very unusual genesis and was realized in a relatively short time. What is your memory of the first exchange of ideas with Rebecca Horn before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the further development of the exhibition project?

Wulf Herzogenrath: I had been in good contact with Rebecca Horn for a long time. I organized her first solo exhibition at Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1977, and we worked together several times, for example at documenta 6 (1977). Sometime before 1989 she told me about this crazy idea of a cross-border exhibition in both halves of the city divided by ideology and the Wall, which she had together with Jannis Kounellis and Heiner Müller. Of course, this was still utopian, because it would not have been feasible to realize such a project in the East. The fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989 created a completely different situation. There were still two German states, two German structures, two completely different attitudes, but suddenly it became conceivable to take up the idea again. I called Rebecca and on January 22 we met up with Jannis Kounellis and Heiner Müller. We still needed an advocate at the Senate of Culture, so I also called Ingo Fessmann, at that time head of the visual arts department in West Berlin. We also needed a well-functioning, flexible organization through which such a project could be run despite the short notice—we had half a year. In a more institutional context such as the Nationalgalerie it would have required five years of preparation. The DAAD with its director Joachim Sartorius, was ideal. The team came together relatively quickly and we met at my house. In addition to Heiner Müller and his assistants, Stephan Suschke and Renate Ziemer, we now needed a curator from the East side, and that was Christoph Tannert, our best colleague in the East. The “East session” then took place on January 31 in the canteen of the Deutsches Theater during a break in Müller’s production. We were joined by Grischa Meyer, a graphic designer and Heiner Müller’s close collaborator. There was no better contact in the East. The president of the Academy of Arts was there, because fortunately the West Senator of Finance was quickly convinced that this was exactly the right idea at the right time. The composition of our team was perfect: Rebecca with her international reputation and Heiner Müller with his all-German reputation. That cleared the way for us against all reservations. And on the other hand, we curators—Sartorius, Tannert, and myself—were of course such a well-rounded team that the project seemed feasible, even though no one could imagine how it could be done in these few months.

Friendly relationships were decisive, then, for the selection of the artists. Rebecca and Kounellis put together an international team, and it was important to us from the curatorial side to have an East Berliner and a West Berliner represented as well. So, we invited Raffael Rheinsberg and Via Lewandowski, both of whom had experience with large-scale outdoor works. A few other names, such as Claes Oldenburg, Bruce Nauman, and Jenny Holzer, were also discussed, but there was not enough time. Eastern Europe was well represented with the established artists Ilya Kabakov and Krzysztof Wodiczko.

JL: You mentioned Christoph Tannert as the “best colleague in the East.” Before the fall of the Wall, collaborations across the border were almost impossible for many political reasons. How did you know each other and how did this collaboration come about?

WH: I came to the Neue Nationalgalerie from Cologne on August 15, 1989 and was still very fresh in Berlin. Of course, the first thing you do is to find out what’s happening in the city, both in the West and in the East, without us even suspecting this turning point... So, if someone says they sensed the fall of the Wall in some way beforehand, then I don’t believe a word, because I was there, and no one could have suspected it. Like many others, I sat in front of the television and watched Schabowski (Günter Schabowski, State Secretary...
of the GDR] suddenly read out this note stating that citizens of the GDR were now allowed to cross the borders. At first, no one understood it. In any case, in conversations about the art scene in the East, Tannert’s name was always mentioned with the greatest appreciation. It was undisputed that he was the most interesting and authentic representative in the contemporary field without belonging to a particular clique or an individual group. So, the choice was indisputable, just as it was clear to me that Joachim Sartorius from the DAAD was the one we had to win over to handle the project, so that the Senator of Finance would release the funds in the end.

JL: Although the funds were made available within such a short time, there was a public exchange of blows between the two city councilors for culture during the press conference. While on the western side, Anke Martiny was one of the key supporters, her East Berlin counterpart, Irana Rusta, distanced herself from this jointly funded exhibition with the critical statement “those affected don’t get a chance to speak.” How do you remember this tension?

WH: First, two important memories are associated with the opening for me. The first is the discovery of the unknown places that even our East Berlin colleagues as insiders did not know. The press conference took place in the hall of the former Prussian Parliament, a building so close to the Wall that it had been dead since the late 1960s. Today, it must always be made clear that the border was not just the Wall, but also the 100–300 meters of no-man’s land behind it. Some of the people on the East Berlin side had to leave their homes after the Wall was built, some others jumped out of the windows to escape to the West, as on the famous Bernauer Strasse. This parliamentary hall was unused and unknown to anyone for decades, although it was linked to the work of Rosa Luxemburg, an icon of the East. For years, it served as a storage room for unused furniture. We pushed the old desks and chairs to the side and prepared some space for the press conference. A real rush job. But in the end, the journalists were more fascinated by the place and the atmosphere than by artist X’s or Y’s plans. Our basic attitude was to open up new spaces in the broadest sense: artistically as well as physically and psychologically. The subsequent party took place at the Stadtbad Prenzlauer Berg swimming baths in Oderberger Strasse, which had also been out of operation for a long time. One knew that the architecture was great but even our colleagues in the East had never been able to get in there. And so, this place also became part of the whole exhibition.

As far as the exchange of blows is concerned, our colleague in the East just had a certain vision of what art should be. Although I don’t want to accuse Mrs. Rusta of anything, many famous artists from the East moved to West Germany because they were not willing to produce comprehensible art for the masses. Financially, the East’s participation in the exhibition was spartan and almost purely symbolic: 10,000 Ostmarks compared to 1.5 million Deutschmarks (DM). For us, it was more significant that the East Berlin administration turned a blind eye to us, as in the case of the border post on the former death strip, which Hans Haacke used for his installation.

Sarah Alberti: At the press conference, Irana Rusta did not criticize the artists taking part or their art works, but referred to the immense sum of 1.5 million DM for the project. This was made up of an increase of 1.3 million in the cultural budget for 1990, additional federal funds, and 10,000 Ostmarks, which was of course a lot of money for the East, but hardly made any difference overall. In her speech, she made two strong points: first, that she could have made very good use of this money to fund all the applications from East German artists that she had received for 1990 thus far. Second, she argued that the Wall was at that point in time the most impressive “work of art,” and that the funding provided for the exhibition would have fully covered the need to preserve sections of the Wall as a document of history and memorial for posterity.

WH: For me, this is a proxy discussion that targets the content of the exhibition but diverts attention to other issues, just as spending on arts and culture is often weighed against kindergartens in similar discussions.

SA: This is the moment when academic reappraisal and eyewitness testimony meet. For me, her speech, which was also printed in the daily newspaper Die Tageszeitung, represents the decisive source², while you, Wulf, naturally still recall the atmosphere that prevailed in the room back then quite differently. Even in a short video recording of this press conference, the tension is palpable. Nevertheless, my reading of Rusta’s speech is primarily as a programmatic statement on the debate about the value of the Berlin Wall in 1990 as a monument. On August 22, just a few days before the exhibition opening, Rusta had placed a preservation order on the sections of the Wall on Bernauer Strasse and the so-called East Side Gallery.

JL: A few years earlier, with the “Skulpturenboulevard” in 1987, a comparable but highly controversial large-scale project was realized in West
What distinguishes these two Berlin art projects, and how would you describe “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” in comparison to similar exhibitions in urban space such as “Bezugspunkte 38/88” (Points of Reference 38/88) in Graz (1988) or Skulptur Projekte Münster (1987)?

WH: With “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” the approach came much more from the artists’ side. This exhibition was not about decorating squares or creating a large sculpture in a beautiful, weird, or funny situation, but about making a particular situation visible. Boltanski made it poignantly clear by making the incision between East and West visible, thus addressing both the possibility and the impossibility of growing together. When Boltanski arrived, he had never seen the other side of the Wall and did not even know what the terrain looked like. He imagined that he would still see the streets and the walls of the houses there, and that you could say, “Mr. Meier lived there and Mr. Neusüss lived there.” After he came and went to the other side, he saw only a flat area where not even mice or rats could live. This empty land between East and West was terrifying for him. He was so disappointed that he directly turned around and took the plane back to Paris. That is when we thought it was over.

But then he had the idea of looking around and took the plane back to Paris. This empty land between East and West was terrifying for him. He was so disappointed that he directly turned around and took the plane back to Paris. That is when we thought it was over.

JL: You once mentioned elsewhere a handwritten note that Heiner Müller left in your personal guest book during the first planning meeting: “The future is no longer what it used to be.” Did the title of the exhibition also emerge from the first meeting you just spoke of?

WH: Heiner Müller came up with the title during our second meeting at the Deutsches Theater. We discussed different variants. “Autumn of Freedom” was one of the provisional versions, but “Autumn” was too closely linked to the “German Autumn” and the Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction) attacks in 1977.

JL: Hence the impossibility of growing together, the incomprehensibility of the border area. But then he had the idea of looking around and took the plane back to Paris. This empty land between East and West was terrifying for him. He was so disappointed that he directly turned around and took the plane back to Paris. That is when we thought it was over.

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SA: The catalogue does not mention these title ideas. An early set of minutes from January 1990 also records the title “Ohne Verzweiflung und ohne Hoffnung” (Without Despair and Without Hope). In an early conversation, Jannis Kounellis described the project as more of a moral action than an exhibition. It is also noted as such in the files of the Berlin State Archive, in a short English-language text and in the publisher’s announcement of the catalogue.

JL: But what was the moral mandate? A press report from 1990 speaks of a “play with the horror and patina of disintegrating social systems” and stresses a missionary value for the citizens of East Berlin.

How can the awareness of the historic moment be described?

WH: Art is always moral. That is why we omitted the subtitle. The fact that something like Giovanni Anselmo’s projection Particolore, or Mario Merz’s neon sign installation Was machen?, has the same value as a conceptual proposition as a large painting in oil was certainly a provocation for a majority of East Berliners—and not only those within the art scene. Likewise, it took a certain understanding of contemporary art practice to realize that Kabakov’s work on Potsdamer Platz seemed to contradict these approaches and yet was just as conceptual.

JL: The works of Anselmo and Merz were almost “nomadic” because both artists had already implemented these concepts in other places since the late 1960s and early ’70s, and they were criticized for not being Berlin-specific. And yet artworks can gain new meaning in new contexts.

WH: Exactly. Because the situation and the awareness of the historic moment was simply so palpable. The press reactions were extraordinarily positive, but the number of visitors was perhaps rather modest. The real success were the bike tours we organized on the weekends. People rode together through the border area around the Wall, where most of the objects were situated. The Victory Column is not far away, and Via Lewandowsky’s second work at the House of Ministries was also within reach. This experience of movement in the border area was as important to people as the art itself. What happens “in between” and what is the perception of this real upheaval and spirit of change? Did they ride their bikes to see artworks, or did they literally move through history and witness a situation that was already completely changed one or two years later? Today, no one can imagine that Potsdamer Platz or Pariser Platz in front of the Brandenburg Gate were completely empty. This experience fascinated many people, and art became a platform to discuss the real situation.
SA: In assessing the reception of the project, it is important to keep in mind that many professional representatives of the art world and art critics visited the exhibition expressly in order to write about it. In my conversations with eye-witnesses from both East and West Berlin, however, I have found that the individual artworks often inscribed themselves unconsciously into city walks and the opening up of the new urban space. People exploring the eastern or western parts of the city may have passed Haacke’s watchtower, and many would have asked themselves, “Is Mercedes Benz now advertising on a border tower?” Or they discovered the wooden corridors of Ilya Kabakov’s Zwei Erinnerungen an die Angst (Two Memories of Fear) on Potsdamer Platz, which first made them aware of the exhibition, after which they walked on down to Rebecca Horn’s Raum des verwundeten Affen (Room of the Wounded Ape). Another example was Raffael Rheinsberg’s installation on the death strip in front of the Martin-Gropius-Bau, with 100 cable drums from East and West, which was perceived by many passers-by as part of a large construction site.

JL: The visibility of temporary works plays a major role in the urban context. Today, art mediation plays an important part in exhibitions. What did the “Endlichkeit” exhibition’s concept of mediation look like?

WH: First, there was the headquarters in the old DAAD-Galerie on Kurfürstenstrasse, where you could get information about all the artists and locations. It was very good but frankly the number of visitors was rather modest. In addition, a leaflet was printed in large quantities and displayed at each location in waterproof stands to take away. And there was the spontaneous idea with the bicycle tours. Overall, it was rather pragmatic. There was not enough lead time for systematic outreach, and at the time it was all just a matter of getting things off the ground. We could have certainly done more, but on the other hand, mediation happened by itself because all the media jumped on board and did their own stories.

SA: I’d like to mention two more things. There were effectively live speakers at the individual locations, since almost all the supervisory staff were art students from Rebecca Horn’s class. Most of them had accompanied the artists on their walking tours of the city in preparation for the exhibition and had directly experienced the process of creation and construction of the artworks. This aspect should not be underestimated, because in conversations with visitors they were able to talk knowledgeably about the works, including from a personal perspective. The second thing is the catalogue, which contains explanatory texts as well as historical and literary references, and which served as a portable guide and indirect educational resource, available at a relatively low price.

WH: For the 20–25 student co-curators, this was an incredibly important experience. In these few months, they were able to learn that you simply have to believe in the idea and try to make it happen. You do not always need a big institution behind you, but a vision.

JL: How should we picture the dynamics of this quickly assembled team?
JL: Having already talked about the composition of the curatorial and organizational team, I would like to return to the topic of East and West. A look at the names of the participants shows that they, too, were composed of artists from Western Europe and North America as well as artists from Eastern Europe and, in one case, East Germany. How would you assess this composition and any Western bias in retrospect?

With 30 years’ distance, do you feel the East was underrepresented in the exhibition?

WH: It was born of the circumstances. Jannis Kounellis and Rebecca Horn brought in some of their close friends, and so a core team was formed. Heiner Müller stayed out of it altogether. He was more interested in Grischa Meyer taking over the typography and design, which gave the whole thing an East Berlin touch. We looked for one-to-one situations in our choice of artists. Like Raffael Rheinsberg and Via Lewandowsky, Ilya Kabakov and Barbara Bloom.

Perhaps you could say the East German side was underrepresented. But it couldn’t be someone like Hermann Glockner or Carlfriedrich Claus. It had to be someone who could deal with the outside space, history, and a certain format, like Lewandowsky. Wodiczko was important, since he already had experience with outdoor projections with political content and was an ideal fit for the team. Today, you would certainly invite more women and include the rest of the world. Why not a South American, why not an African artist? But everything had to play along. Today, you cannot imagine how the West Berlin art scene was viewed from the outside in the 1970s and mid-1980s. Apart from the “Junge Wilde” movement, there was nothing! At the same time, political and financial support for artists in West Berlin was unusually high. Fat catalogues were published on individual artists, because there wasn’t a finished concept that just needed to be implemented, but a spontaneous ongoing development that had a lot to do with friendship and relationships.

SA: In addition to this pragmatism, documents indicate that the project’s internationalism was its decisive premise. According to one press release, for example, this internationalism promised an “unsentimental, detached view that is more than necessary for the residents of this city at this moment.”56 An internal fax says: “In a time of apparent art market exuberance and many Berlin-Berlin and German-German problems and discussions, such an international orientation with these important artists seems particularly necessary.”57 No pure juxtaposition of FRG and GDR or West and East Berlin artists was intended.

WH: The internationalism was also a provocation for the broad West Berlin art scene. One can assume that cultural policy in both parts of the city expected us to promote Berlin art, and we did not play along. Today, you cannot imagine how the West Berlin art scene was viewed from the outside in the 1970s and mid-1980s. Apart from the “Junge Wilde” movement, there was nothing! At the same time, political and financial support for artists in West Berlin was unusually high. Fat catalogues were published on individual artists, because there was a political desire to foster West Berlin art. And now the scene in the former West Berlin was upset by the international focus of our project. They felt like world champions, while the Cologne artists, such as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, were bigger on the art market but were not supported in a comparable way. A delicate point.

JL: We talked about various aspects of the immediate reception and impact of the exhibition in 1990. How would you describe the long-term effect?

WH: It is great that this exhibition is now being structurally researched. It is encouraging that exhibitions that deserve to be looked at, are being rediscovered retrospectively. An example is “Szene Rhein-Ruhr 1972” in Essen (curated by Dieter Honisch): this exhibition was sensationally received in its day, whereas Harry Szeemann’s “documenta 5”—now legendary—was totally slated at the time. Important exhibitions have been completely forgotten because they were just so different. That is why it is fabulous when a team like yours or Sarah carry out research and perhaps arrive at different assessments to the actors involved and the reception at the time. I experienced the same myself in 1970 with “50 Jahre Bauhaus” (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart). I was discussing events of the 1920s with Herbert Bayer...
Berlin, 1990

[1900–1985] and he got really angry and said: "I was there! How do you know that so well?" And I replied: "Well, I have the written documents and the original minutes of the meetings here." After 50 years, he had a completely different recollection. The experience of contemporaries, the later reception, and the present perspective—all of these can be different, and close examination of these shifts has become increasingly important in art history in the last 30 years.

SA: As far as the effect on Berlin is concerned, it was repeatedly confirmed to me by those who were there in 1990 that "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" helped both East and West to grow together quickly at the level of arts and culture, because the exhibition forged close links between both sides of the city. As an opportunity for the curators to get to know each other, it opened a great many doors for subsequent projects. Meanwhile, certain forecasts and statements made by the artworks are only now coming into focus 30 years down the road. I might mention the Monument to Freedom and Reunification currently being planned for Berlin, and which is controversial because it may not express the experience of the period of change leading up to German reunification, in its complex combination of initial euphoria, increasing skepticism, and often severe disruptions to personal life. Today, "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" shows us that situational works of art that react to contemporary political developments can reflect sociopolitical transformations more directly than protracted processes of creating monuments. Equally important to me is the anchoring of this project in the present. I hope that it will be possible to place Boltanski’s *The Missing House* under a preservation order, because it is the only contribution from the show that remains in the city.

Rebecca Horn’s installation is part of the collection of the Nationalgalerie and is intended as a key work for the new building at the Kulturförum.²

JL: Why was "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" almost forgotten for a long time and why does it still remain comparatively unknown today?

WH: I think the project has disappeared from consciousness because the participants are no longer in positions where they could maintain the memory, while their successors could not grasp its uniqueness, because they did not see it—or they may have difficulty imagining its significance because of the small, inconspicuous catalogue.

JL: On the other hand, the exhibition is mentioned in the respective *catalogue raisonné* of the participating artists. For example, Hans Haacke is an artist who documents his works very precisely and thus also anchors the contexts historically.

SA: And he is an artist who, in the process, always comments on his work in an updated way. If you compare the texts he has written on his watchtower project, it becomes clear that at the start of the 1990s he always mentions his invitation to the exhibition as the initial trigger for his work, whereas in later texts "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" disappears as a reference point. Latterly, the fact that the tower was part of a site- and time-specific exhibition is not even mentioned, and consequently the role of the curators in the creation of the work is bracketed out of the image of himself projected by the artist. Another example is Krzysztof Wodiczko: in 1990 he transformed the monumental Lenin statue in Friedrichshain with his projection into a Polish Shopper with an ALDI bag, and the Weinhaus Huth on Potsdamer Platz into a safe out of which an eagle comes flying. We met in 2019 for an interview in New York and he told me that he would not do the work on Potsdamer Platz like that again today. In most of his publications since then, only the Leninplatz-Projektion is shown. So the artists, too, have contributed to the fact that "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" has disappeared to a certain extent.

WH: Artists’ commentaries are always to be considered independently of the work in a historical phase of reception. This is a crucial point and often one of the great omissions in art historical research.

JL: Among all the projects that you have realized during the five decades of your career in the field of art, why is this exhibition so important to you?

WH: The exhibition was historically unique because of the divided city. Two states, two social and aesthetic systems, and suddenly a special openness. That cannot be repeated, and I don’t know of a comparable situation, except maybe one day in Korea, but probably North and South Korea are much too different by now. Another important project for me is "Le Musée sentimental de Cologne," an exhibition on the history of museum concepts that I curated in 1979 at Kölnischer Kunstverein with Daniel Spoerri and his then wife, the historian Marie-Louise von Plessen, as well as students from the Cologne Werkschule. The art object has not only an aesthetic and a historical value, but also an emotional one, which Spoerri focused on.

JL: Sarah, you spent almost ten years studying this exhibition. What is the driving force behind your personal research interest?

SA: When I began my research ten years ago, the topic of "East-West"
and the question of the consequences of reunification were not really being discussed. The discourse that we have been experiencing in the media and academia for a few years now simply did not yet exist. For me, there was a biographical motive behind this debate: I was born in 1989, still in the GDR, in Leipzig. I am grateful for being able to live in freedom in a democracy. If the GDR had continued to exist, I would not have been able to study given my family background, I would not be a journalist or researcher today, and I would not be able to travel. I grew up with the awareness that the protesting masses made this life possible for me. “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” also prompted me to take a more nuanced look at this historical period, the euphoria of the opening of the Wall and the negative consequences of reunification, which are familiar to me from my immediate sphere.  

SA: I find it presumptuous to answer this question, since I lack the experience of seeing the exhibition in 1990. Having all sources and documents in mind, it moves between two poles: On the one hand, there is the participation of Christoph Tannert, Heiner Müller, Via Lewandowsky, Ilya Kabakov, and Krzysztof Wodiczko, who represented the “East” in the broadest sense. The role of Heiner Müller should not be underestimated. I would go as far as to say that the project would not have been possible without him, because he, as a figurehead, had a decisive weight vis-à-vis the politicians as a representative of the East with experience of the West. An example that sums up the difficulties and the speed of the times is Wodiczko’s Leninplatz-Projekt. He told me about the fierce rejection that his work provoked among the residents of Leninplatz (now Platz der Vereinten Nationen), some of whom were loyal to the system.  

Hans Haacke also commented directly on the current situation in Berlin with his watchtower, because the Mercedes star referred both to the West Berlin Europa-Center and to the car manufacturer’s acquisition of a large building plot on Potsdamer Platz. At the same time, the work makes it clear to this day that it is impossible to assemble capitalism and socialism on top of each other.  

JL: Would you consider the artistic commentaries in the exhibition as a whole to be a Western appropriation of the specific situation of Berlin in 1990?  

JL: A press interview with Heiner Müller from October 1990 concludes with the sardonic prognosis: “I am very optimistic. It will not be an idyll, this new Germany.”  

What perspective does the exhibition give on the future? What are the blind spots of the reunification?  

SA: Heiner Müller’s ambiguous title already suggests a skeptical view of the future. The word “endlich” (“finally” or “at last”) can be interpreted positively. On the other hand, “Endlichkeit” (finitude) also implies the end of freedom. In the interviews Müller gave shortly after the opening of the Wall in 1989 and 1990, this attitude becomes clear, for example when he emphasizes that the GDR is a much slower country that will be overrun by capitalism. The discussions we are having about unification today were summed up very precisely by him in 1990, when many were still euphoric. “Before the GDR realizes that it is being sold,” he observed, “it has already been sold. Germans buy Germans.”
Barbara Bloom (Los Angeles, b. 1951) lived in Berlin until 1992. Bloom settled there in 1986, when she received a grant from DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service. Her interest in collections, museology, and doubles was already present in the solo show that she presented after her residency period “Lost and Found (Eins wie das Andere)” (1987). For that occasion, Bloom took advantage of the symmetrical architecture of the gallery and installed two versions of the same exhibition with minor variations. The mirroring effect was playfully amplified by the fact that Bloom hired two pairs of identical twins to serve drinks during the opening reception. Only by going back and forth from one room to the other one could start notice the small differences, what was missing or slightly altered. The ideas of similarity and difference were also present in Bloom’s installations produced in...
the late eighties such as *The Reign of Narcissism* (1989), where sculptures, vitrine cases, and reliefs are organized symmetrically inside of a parlor-style room. In this case, the act of collecting is presented as a permeable activity that entitles collectors to transfer their own personalities into the works of others.

The title of her contribution to “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit,” *Regallager* (Shelf storage), draws our attention to a specific situation: a room full of sculptures and objects arranged on shelves. The distinction between “museum” and “warehouse” implies a different regime of visibility and access. In a warehouse, objects and artworks are systematically organized, in the museum they are carefully displayed to convey a certain discourse. Furthermore, the fact that the word “Regallager” is a palindrome again introduces the question of doubling, in this case in relation to the specific location of her contribution: the Museum für Naturkunde in the East and the Gipsformerei in the West. The fact that both institutions are public and open to everyone, draws our attention to the reasons that determine what is kept out of our gaze and under restricted access, and what is publicly shown. In *Regallager*, Barbara Bloom seems to blur the lines between what’s accessible and what’s not, and questions the criteria that put into public circulation some artifacts and sculptures while forcing others to remain in the shadows.

Museums are not neutral structures. The histories narrated by their collections, their presentation, and the way these collections were formed, are a clear statement of the ideological implications of the process of collecting, showing, and hiding, neglecting and preserving. At the same time, Bloom seems to raise certain questions: Who is the museum addressing? Under what specific conditions does spectatorship take place? In *Regallager* these contexts can only be described by an opposition, that of East and West. Yet many other questions arise in relation to those collections and the museums that hosted them: which narratives were suppressed and which others emerged in the context of a divided city? Who has the right to establish new narratives? How are meanings and stories conveyed by a certain collection altered in the context of a divided city? How does this context affect collective memory?
The Original and the Copy

Barbara Bloom: I was living in Berlin at that time. So, I had maybe a different kind of perspective than many of the artists who were coming in to do the exhibition and didn’t know the city very well. I’d lived there for several years, and I am, by nature, kind of an explorer. I had a car; I would drive around to look at different places. And I already had places that were very dear to me. Gipsformerei was one of those places. A very peculiar institution that was there just for the making of copies of classical sculpture and for housing the molds. I went there many times. I was particularly interested in the place because philosophically, at that moment, there were so many debates and so much discussion about the original and the copy, and the simulacrum. Many artists were reading Baudrillard and following his theories about the inability to tell the difference between the real and the copy. And I was thinking “this is just bullshit!” It’s completely not true. I began to be really interested in thinking about things which are similar but different. When you look at two things that are almost the same, what you note is their difference. That’s one way of pointing out the nuances and slight, complicated, difference between two things, a tool by means of which you can allow someone to look in a very nuanced way. That became a very interesting subject for me to think about: when you put two things together that are on the surface very much the same, how do you discern the difference?

Sameness and Difference

BB: I was already thinking about twins, doubles, sameness and difference, when I was invited to participate in “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit.” The Museum für Naturkunde was barely open at that time, and was barely functioning—as with many institutions in the East. Many of the rooms were in a poor condition, there was no money, but it was open to the public. Like many places in the East, it was kind of abandoned, and not really cared for. Several of the invited artists were taken around and shown different sites or proposed different sites, but I already knew a lot of sites. I began thinking about doing a work in two different places that are the same city but are not the same city. Having two places that when you went to see one you might only see one half of it, but you can’t see them both at the same time.

It began with this idea of doubles and similarity, and it soon moved into another subject. At the time I was involved with a project at Cornell University where I was granted access to their archives to photograph Vladimir Nabokov’s butterfly collection. Nabokov wrote so much about symmetry, mimicry, doubling, twinning. He was an amateur lepidopterist, a butterfly expert. He even worked at Harvard University—and not in their literature department, but in their entomology department where he categorized certain butterflies. There is a butterfly species named after him. It was amazing that Cornell just let me go into their archive to see Nabokov’s large butterfly collection. I could have stolen them. They weren’t at all cautious! Now, there’s no way you can even get access to see them. At that time there wasn’t the kind of museological lock and key and preciousness that there is now. The preciousness and the monetary value of these objects is so radically different now, so that I could never do the work that I did. You wouldn’t have access; you wouldn’t be able to move it around and touch things. I’ve done exhibitions in museums recently where I wasn’t even allowed to touch my own work.
The East

BB: Doubling and similarity and difference and East and West was one aspect. And then, by looking at this, I start thinking—wouldn’t it be interesting if we had a butterfly collection? And I started thinking about symmetry. I started reading about this, because part of the joy of doing the work that I do is you get to do all kinds of research. So, I started reading about symmetry and asymmetry and also about the architect Schinkel, about Hegel’s idea of symmetry, and about the Japanese idea of asymmetry, and got involved in reading about symmetry in relationship to fascism and fascist architecture. The presentation of my work has a kind of a minimal and reduced look to it, but the subject matter can go off in a lot of different directions, it can be kind of orchestral. From there, I decided to take photographs of very well-known symmetrical objects from nature, and then again, from architecture or gardening: the most beautiful aspects and the most horrific aspects of these, and I reduced them down to a very tiny size and pinned them like a butterfly.

In the East, at the museum, there was a vitrine. Strangely, the vitrine was open. And when you look at it from the side, it’s like it has wings that are open. Inside the vitrine were butterfly cases that came from the museum. The cases were just chosen to show a variety of butterflies: very colorful ones, tiny ones, big ones, ones that were really moth eaten and looking sad, some that were spectacularly beautiful. There were probably thirty or forty of these cases. There were a lot of cases and they just brought them down from their collecting rooms. We went through drawers and drawers and drawers of specimen boxes. And then we looked at available vitrines. They had hundreds of different vitrines at the museum. Those rooms at the museum where I made the installation have dioramas in them, animals at night and the like. We covered these because, as beautiful as they were, they weren’t really necessary to the subject at hand. Also: the little “butterflied” photographs showed everything from Blossfeldt photographs of plants, beautiful symmetrical plants, Schinkel architecture, garden design, to Albert Speer designs for boulevards, and a lot of Berlin, German, and Germany-based Nazi architecture, all perfectly symmetrical, and pinned like a specimen. Like an insect, if you pin it down, if you stick a pin through its thorax, it is dead. So, I am reducing it to something, which is tiny, harmless, and something that can be examined. And part of the thing about this Nazi architecture is its insanely large scale. It’s not just the symmetry, but also the grand scale of it. So, I am reducing it to something tiny, I am killing it, ordering it, and reducing it to a specimen.

The West

BB: In the West, I went and looked at the Gipsformerei and found many sculptures in their collections which were about doubling. All the Janus heads, all the double sculptures, all the things that we’re twinning, and I just made a list of these. They cleared out a large storage room, emptied some shelves for me, and we put the selection of objects onto the shelves like it was being stored there. I was told that at the Gipsformerei there had been a shed where they had stored a number of very important classical sculptures through World War Two. The sculptures had been moved there from a museum for protection. And they stayed there safely all the way through the war. They didn’t get bombed when the museums got bombed. However, after the war there was a fire in the building and sheds. The fire department came in and hosed them with cold water, and it was the freezing cold water that broke them. I heard that story from somebody who worked at the Gipsformerei and
was there when it happened. That is such an ironic story, that not war, or bombing, but the bumbling Fire Department would ruin all this cultural treasure.

At the Gipsformerei I also added a case containing some books that were open to pages showing texts and images about symmetry and doubling something. The books were blank with the exception of only two pages printed in them. I have done a lot of work over the years that is about collecting. I am not really a collector, and I don't really have a collector spirit. I make works which are about the desire to collect, to order, and to make connections between things. I make collections and then somebody else must take care of them. I am interested in the way that we give meaning to objects, and the way we give value to objects, and the way we give meaning personally, and as a society. I'm interested in how the value of these objects changes in time, and how you can shift something from being very valuable to no longer being valuable. How you can imbue an object with personal or sentimental meaning or how an object can transfer my feelings to you, as an individual or as a group, as a gift or as an art object.

**Die Endlichkeit**

BB: At the time of this exhibition Berlin was not a thriving metropolis. It was large in geographic terms, but in other ways its situation was very restricted and constrained. And then you had the strange thing that in the West there was all this money that was being thrown towards culture in order to make a kind of Metropolis there, which didn't really exist. Certainly not in the art world. Maybe more so in the film world, and in the music world. The worlds of classical music, avant-garde music were more thriving communities. Also in the West, theater was thriving, like the Schaubühne where such interesting stuff was going on. But the art world was very small. And there was kind of an underground punk aspect to it. Very few galleries, very little, it was tiny, provincial.

So, regarding the exhibition “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit,” I think it was probably amazing that they pulled it off and invited people to see complicated, radical, and difficult work. I have no idea what the resonance was, who came to see it, and what the visitor numbers were, or what they thought about it. But the idea that it would be this public project at that moment was fantastic. I think the spirit was like a bunch of you know, intellectual artists and writers got together and said, let's just do this. And in a way, nobody could say no, they kind of shamed everybody. Like, “Are you kidding me? You're not going to give us money for this? This is the moment, let's just do this!” And I think that was the spirit of it. Is it the most interesting exhibition? No. Are the works equally relevant? No. Is it aesthetically the most interesting exhibition? No. Are the choices of the artists somehow a little bit haphazard? Yes. But that was also kind of the charm of it. So, it wasn't with a singular vision. It wasn't like Skulptur Projekte Münster, where it's really a vision of a single small group of people who really had an idea of what an exhibition could be. It wasn't like “Chambres d'amis” in Ghent, which was singular, and the selection of people exceptional. This wasn't like that. This was like, “Get this done quickly: bam!” Don't you think so?

The above statements are excerpts from an interview conducted by Julius Lehmann, Mare Navarro, and Erik Sandberg in December 2020.
Separations and Invisible Walls
A Conversation with Christoph Tannert
Julius Lehmann, Marc Navarro, and Erik Sandberg

Julius Lehmann/Marc Navarro/ Erik Sandberg: In preparation of our interview, you mentioned that you would like to speak about “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” from an East German perspective. What do you mean by that?

Christoph Tannert: It’s very simple. I speak from experience of the rejection of art and artists from East Germany (or those who were socialized in the GDR) by the West German establishment. To this day, the achievements of the majority of East German artists are essentially not seen, not recognized, not researched, not presented in exhibitions. Behind this is an ignorance, a distancing on the part of the state, which has not presented any East Germans.

Of course, you may say my claim is not plausible. That is exactly what I always hear from the other side on this subject. But then count the exhibitions that have been mounted on this topic since 1990. Or recall the exhibition “Offiziell und Inoffiziell—Die Kunst der DDR” (Official and Unofficial—The Art of the GDR), staged in 1999 by curator Achim Preiß parallel to an exhibition of Nazi art in a multipurpose hall at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, whose selection of artists (except Neo Rauch and Eberhard Havekost) were included in the discussion. 20 years after the Wende!

I could give further examples. Pretty much all leading positions in German museums, art halls, and art associations are occupied by West German specialists. And these specialists do not know what art production in the GDR meant, they do not know the subject matter, and they are not interested in it. And they do not feel the loss when hardly anything from this period is presented anymore.

You might object that I am complaining at a high level because I am one of those East Germans who heads a genuinely West German institute. Yes, but there are only about a dozen East Germans in such a leading position. This underrepresentation is precisely the scandal.

It’s true, as an East German I helped to conceive the project “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit.” At that time, I saw it as an opportunity. From today’s perspective, I can say that I did not succeed in integrating more East German artists into the concept. The proportion of East Germans was too small, the attention to the specifics of the East (and its problems during the transition period from the beginning of the 1990s) too weak.

JL/MN/ES: In his introduction to the catalogue Heiner Müller describes the Berlin Wall “that is now dissolving into souvenirs” as “a stake in the flesh, a regulative, a time-wall between two velocities: acceleration in the West, deceleration in the East.” How did you experience this change of paces?

CT: I agree with Heiner Müller. In the East, there was no private ownership of the means of production. The efficiency of capitalist production did not apply. There were many bottlenecks. Industrial production was often interrupted because material and/or parts were missing. There was always something to wait for. In this respect, there was a larger time budget at the disposal of every Easterner. One had to spend more time organizing everyday activities and one’s entire way of life. Higher-quality consumer goods were not available in unlimited quantities. But when the flow of consumption was interrupted, one had more time for other pursuits—for reading, for listening to music, for thinking, for interacting with friends, for love...

But since Heiner Müller had already died in 1995, he could not have foreseen what many East Germans know and feel today, that although the physical
imprisoned GDR citizens, they could also travel to the West and interact vividly with their Western colleagues.

At that time, there was a real Wall and a wall in the mind. The real Wall was linked to certain views of art, to ideology. You have to remember that the postwar period (which lasted from 1945 to the early 1990s, until the withdrawal of the Soviet military from the GDR and the other former Eastern bloc countries) was a period of the Cold War. At the real Wall (once completely encircling West Berlin as well as at the border between the GDR and West Germany) ran the system border between capitalism and socialism, between the Western democracies and the unfreedoms of the society of scarcity. There were self-firing machine guns, fences, guard dogs, tank barriers, and barbed wire. People trying to escape were shot at.

The wall in the head meant that for the arts in the GDR the dictats of Socialist Realism applied. Developments in Western art were officially rejected, ignored, forbidden. Anyone whose art in the East deliberately deviated from the ideological guidelines or who was identified by the guardians of opinion as a supposed deviant or as a sympathizer of Western art had to reckon with a professional ban. Nevertheless, the ideological rules were modified, there were strict announcements, thaw periods, then tightening again, renewed hopes, and a lot of helplessness during 40 years of the GDR, but also the wall slowly melted in the minds of the East Germans, a network of subcultural alternatives formed alongside official art. And of course, in every generation there were artists who did not bow to the pressure of the system and who continued to work unflinchingly in the niches they had created for themselves until they were punished or forced out of the country.

The vast majority of artists, art historians, and art enthusiasts in the West know nothing about this. For them, the old wall still exists in their minds, art in the GDR is a cemented ideological block, conforms to the state, and its form is seen as “unfree,” non-autonomous, pre-modern, predominantly figurative, illustrative, narrative, and at worst propagandistic. Accordingly, the rejection from the Western side is considerable.

Opinions continue to contradict each other as to what place art from the GDR era should have in museums today. In discussions, especially in the cultural media, there is a pathetic superficiality and an enormous lack of information. The biggest insult for artists from the East is to be considered not worthy of museums and to be practically
“Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” was in preparation from spring 1990. Planning began when the GDR still existed as a state. It was not until August 1990 that the GDR People’s Chamber decided to end the GDR.

Incidentally, this was after a first Volkskammer vote two weeks earlier, on August 8, 1990, had failed to secure the necessary two-thirds majority. So, there was not as much support for the unification of the two German states at the time as we are led to believe today. “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” also captured this polarity between what separates and what unites, the injunction to change and the rejection of change. We were in a time of transition from one form of society to another. However, the exhibition did not have the ability to put its finger in the wound.

Perhaps it was not meant to. It was not meant to point out the social upheavals, the suffering of many GDR citizens, their social downfall, their degradation, the compulsion to completely reorient themselves. There was a lot of money involved. DM 1.5 million was available for the exhibition, as well as 10,000 marks from the GDR. A comparatively small sum in relation to the enormous profits made by the West German winners in the sell-off of GDR businesses, real estate, or the privatization of former state property by the “Treuhandanstalt” (THA).

“Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” was one of the soft factors guiding thoughts and attitudes in the process of upheaval. An art project illustrated the reorientation of GDR society and the breakdown of its economic basis.

On the one hand, it presented stars of Western art in a way that had never been seen in Berlin; on the other hand, most of the artists were implanted in Berlin’s urban space without consequence. Strong charisma and long-lasting thought-provoking impulses emanate from Christian Boltanski, Hans Haacke, Via Lewandowsky, Raffael Rheinsberg, and Krzysztof Wodiczko. The individual situation-specific installations commented on the history of concrete places. For example, Krzysztof Wodiczko’s concept, which went beyond the concrete site reference to the Lenin monument on Leninplatz (which was demolished in November 1991) to formulate a critique of ideology by thematizing the rapidly accelerating change from a society of scarcity to an exuberant consumerist and throwaway society, while also presenting his own compatriots (the Lenin statue wears a red and white striped T-shirt in accordance with the colors of the Polish flag). The positions of the other artists, on the other hand, seemed more internal to art.

“Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” is both magnificent and cynical.

From today’s point of view, I am critical that participatory and interactive projects did not become part of the project. There wasn’t a lively dialogue with the audience. The exhibition did not tell us anything about what the upheaval meant for Westerners or Easterners. The reality was that not one Westerner had to reorient himself. Not one Westerner’s life plan was shattered by reunification. In the East, on the other hand, there was not a single family in which at least one member did not have to bear the brunt of the reunification. Most of the works of art, however, said nothing about this. They stood in perfect beauty in their place and spread a sophisticated silence.
Yet there were activists who became socially active and conducted (artistic) research at precisely this point. The most important of these was the West Berlin author Helmut Höge, who became involved in the East Berlin light bulb factory NARVA at a very early stage—publishing a company newspaper and attempting to save the factory (which failed). Höge, part of the art scene, accompanied and described the upheaval for many years. He immortalized his experiences and insights in a blog for the daily newspaper *TAZ* (“Hier spricht der Aushilfshausmeister”) in a splendidly documentary manner.

JL/MN/ES: The curatorial and organizational staff of the exhibition consisted of members of the West and East German art world. In a similar manner the catalogue was a Western-Eastern cooperation as well. Michael Glasmeier’s role as editor was complemented by Grischa Meyer from East Berlin, who designed the catalogue, posters, and all the printed matter. How would you describe the distribution of roles and the inner dynamics of the team?

CT: This East-West mixture was characterized by an astonishingly collegial to friendly relationship. The openness and the obligingness of Wulf Herzogenrath, Joachim Sartorius, and the Senator for Culture, Ingo Fessmann, have not had an insignificant influence on my life. To me, the teamwork seemed like a laboratory experiment in the formation of a common East-West German mentality. All the tragic things that happened in the GDR had no direct influence on our togetherness. As colleagues from the East, we were practicing shedding our skin, learning how to westernize. Some left-wingers in West Berlin probably did not like me because I seemed too conformist.

JL/MN/ES: As a critic and exhibition organizer in East Germany you had close connections to sub-cultural scenes and counter-cultural artist groups like the Auto-Perforation Artists in Dresden, one of whom, Via Lewandowsky, was invited to take part in the exhibition. How was the exhibition received by the East German art scene? Did the local public in Eastern and Western parts of the city react in different ways?

CT: We do not know how the project was received by the public. It was received with envy by the art scenes in the East and West because it was an expensive showcase project and artists are always critical of projects in which they are not involved. But it is also clear that if the East Germans had actually been granted the right to self-determination in 1990, then some of them would have chosen a
different path than the one to the Federal Republic, and in this respect perhaps also a different kind of art, precisely the kind that cannot be seen today in all its facets, but which would not have made "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" look so homogeneous in its overall expression: Then, perhaps, artists who were critical of Western neoliberalization would have had a chance. Artists who would have testified to the desolation, provincialization, and the flood of cheap articles using other media, like painting, photography, and film.

JL/MN/ES: The exhibition’s press communications in 1990 consistently emphasize that the exhibition was an artist initiative of Rebecca Horn, Jannis Kounellis, and Heiner Müller. A group of artists and friends coming from the milieu of Italian Arte Povera (Jannis Kounellis, Giovanni Anselmo, Mario Merz) formed the core. The other participants appear to be chosen with a view to a balanced Eastern-Western ratio: Ilya Kabakov (USSR), Krzysztof Wodiczko (Poland), Christian Boltanski (France), Hans Haacke and Barbara Bloom (USA), and finally Raffael Rheinsberg (West Berlin) and Via Lewandowsky; the only artist from East Berlin. With the exception of the 27-year-old Lewandowsky, who was relatively new to the scene, all the participants had already attained a certain status in the (western) art world. Was this western drift apparent in the planning and production of the exhibition?

CT: Of course. This project was intended to present big names and, with the dominance of Western art, also to signal the superiority of Western views over the Eastern bloc. The Cold War, understood as a global struggle for ideological supremacy, had ended. This also brought about a waning of ideological conflicts. Now it was a question of which values—which canon of values—should gain social preeminence. In the GDR the deliberate stripping away of citizen rights, the de-Christianization, as well as the Gleichschaltung [authoritarian control over all aspects of life] of parties and social organizations by the State party, the SED [the East German Communist Party] with the aim of reinterpreting values in an anti-capitalist way, have left their mark on eastern Germany to this day. After all, the SED had more than forty years to implement its social model.

"Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" was to present works of art that problematized, for example, mental differences between Germans, or different interpretations of reality in different urban contexts, or the different perspectives on freedom. Many GDR citizens not only brought an unconditional desire for freedom from their experience in the GDR, they also brought with them specific experiences of dictatorship, and the collapse of the system, which West Germans could not, and still can not, comprehend.

JL/MN/ES: Site-specific installations and temporary interventions in the urban context have been practiced in West Germany since the 1970s by several exhibition formats like “Umwelt-Akzente Monschau” (1970), Skulptur Projekte Münster (since 1977) or the highly disputed project “Skulpturenboulevard” in West Berlin (1987). Was “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” different in its relation to the public sphere and its role in society, and, if so, how?

CT: Yes, the clearest difference from all these projects is that “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” was not a sculpture project of representative, prepared individual works, but a project in which each participant explored something found, made a certain investigation into the different local conditions in East and West, reacted to contexts, and interpreted them. But, as I said, this did not lead to an interaction with the audience, because the selected artists were not oriented towards this. If it had been desired, other artists could have been invited. Exemplary, however, was the mediation program, the many guided tours by curators and artists, the special events and discussions.

JL/MN/ES: The DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program—a West Berlin institution founded by the Ford Foundation in 1963 (two years after the construction of the Wall) as a forum for artistic exchange beyond political borders—functioned as host organization for the event. Why was this institution suited to an intermediary role in the 1990 period of transition?

CT: The DAAD is funded by the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the European Union. Total funding in 2017 was €522 million. It is thus a drivetrain for promoting academic and scientific exchange between the Federal Republic of Germany and foreign countries on behalf of the state. So, the DAAD was an ideal partner to help establish West German standards at this educational level as well, and to help break down the “Otherness” of East Germans—that is, differences in origin, values, and mentality.

JL/MN/ES: As a contemporary witness and an active participant, how do you see the immediate impact of the exhibition in 1990 and its long-term effect? And what would you change from today’s perspective?

CT: The exhibition had its effect then and it has it today—admittedly with...
different directions of effect. It is interesting that today there are more and more art projects that have a historical research dimension. The interest of young international artists in GDR remembrance work has increased and proven itself expressively, for example with Leipzig’s “Requiem for a Failed State” at the Halle 14 art center in 2018. There one experienced a kind of advanced research into a social mentality, with an increased interest in history to better understand the present.

Henrike Naumann (born 1984) is another young artist who is currently the focus of increased public interest. When the Wall fell, Henrike Naumann was five years old. She studied stage and costume design in Dresden and is currently one of the most exciting and successful contemporary artists.

She was too young to experience the GDR for a long period of her life. However, the imprint of her family has clearly influenced her artistic work. Letting the private interact with the public and the political, in order to empathize with upheavals and learn to understand them, is a particular concern of hers. If such an approach continues in the future, then that is very hopeful.

A society that wants to offer people a home needs events of shared lived experience. In eastern Germany, a cosmopolitan ethic is inconceivable without the recognition of specific GDR experiences. If there is no sustained debate about this within the museum, the memory-forming institution of the museum will degenerate into an identity-less, all-purpose showroom.


Sometime in the 1920s Sigmund Freud gets his hands on a piece of technology known in German as a Wunderblock. This device intrigues him enough to write a short text on it, “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” (1925), in which he reflects upon human memory. If someone distrusts their memory, they are able to supplement it with a written note, he writes. If you are to write with ink on paper, the ink is permanent but the piece of paper is not. Another method Freud suggests is to write with chalk upon a slate, here the roles are reversed, the slate is permanent but the writing can be erased with ease. The mystic writing pad that gave Freud the title of his text is a contraption consisting of a slab of dark brown wax upon which a thin waxy paper is fastened, which is covered by a transparent cellulose sheet. To write upon this one scratches it with a stylus, the paper adheres to

The Surface and the Trace
On Via Lewandowsky’s Zur Lage des Hauptes
Erik Sandberg
the wax, and a dark trace appears on its surface. To erase the writing one simply lifts the transparent sheet from the wax, the trace vanishes, and this surface is ready to receive new writing again. What interests Freud is that even though the writing on the intended surface is gone, a barely visible trace is still present on the underlying wax. This, Freud suggests, is analogous to how the human memory functions. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) he divides our perceptual apparatus into two layers, an outer which shields from stimuli, and an inner, which receives the stimuli. By applying stimuli to the outer, protective layer of the mystic writing pad a readable trace is formed; as soon as the connection between stimuli, surface, and underlying layer is broken, the trace disappears. However, if you look close enough the remnants linger on the surface beneath.

Via Lewandowsky’s contribution to “Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit” is a two-part installation called Zur Lage des Hauptes that intervenes in two historically layered and charged structures in the Berlin city-scape. This two-fold intervention shares Freud’s interest in memory transferred to material.

The first site of Lewandowsky’s work was the Berlin victory column—the Siegessäule, erected in 1873 to commemorate numerous Prussian war victories. In the hall of pillars around its base is a glass mosaic recounting the story of the founding of the German empire realized after a design by Anton von Werner, one of the most influential artistic representatives of the Wilhelminian era. It was moved from its original location, the Königsplatz (now Platz der Republik), to its current location, the Grosser Stern, in 1939. During this move another drum was added to the column, giving it its present height of 67 meters—adding extra surface for meaning to be imprinted on.

The former House of Ministries, or more precisely a mural on its facade, serves as the second site for Lewandowsky’s work. Built between 1935-36 to house the Ministry of Aviation, like much German architecture of the time the former House of Ministries is grandiose in scale—in fact it was the largest dedicated office building in Europe at the time of its construction. The building complex was mostly undamaged by the war and during the ensuing repairs the Nazi symbols were removed. On October 7, 1949 the GDR was ceremoniously inaugurated in the Festsaal of the building. Under the GDR the building served as the council of ministers and was fittingly renamed Haus der Ministerien. In 1952 President of the GDR, Wilhelm Pieck, commissioned the 18 meters long and 4 meters high porcelain tiled mural Aufbau der Republik (Construction of the Republic), created by Max Lingner, depicting the socialist ideals of the East German Republic. The transformation of the building continued after the reunification of the German States, when it came to house the Treuhand—the organization responsible for the privatization of government owned GDR enterprises. The first chairman of the Treuhand—Detlev Karsten Rohwedder—was assassinated in 1991 by an unknown assailant and the building was renamed in his honor the following year. Today it is the seat of the German Finance Ministry. With each previous historical imprint removed and new traces added to the surface, remnants of each imprint remain inscribed in the mnemonic slab of the Former House of Ministries.

The first part of the installation Zur Lage des Hauptes consisted of a frottage of the glass mosaic of the Siegessäule that was hung in front of the Lingner mural. Below it, on the ground, stood a metal basin filled with disinfectant liquid. For the second part at the other site, the Siegessäule, the mosaic was covered by a layer of white styrofoam and a searchlight was placed on top of the column. At night this white sheet was illuminated from behind to create a void-like effect where the mosaic used to be visible. Keeping Freud’s text in the
back of our heads one can see that Lewandowsky’s installation made use of two different memory-supplements: the frottage, a permanent trace on a temporary surface, and the covering up of the Siegessäule mosaic, a permanent surface where the imprint has been (temporally) erased.

Max Lingner’s mural was commissioned not in commemoration but as a contemporary tribute to the socialist values of the GDR. An imaging of the vision and reality of a modern socialist republic. After the reunification its continuing life on the facade of the former House of Ministries becomes more like a reminder of a future that never was. Meanwhile the Siegessäule, a grand monument to the founding of the German empire and its victories in battle over other nations, adapted and modified by the Nazi regime and their grandiose plans for Germania, the new capital of the “Thousand Year Reich,” with the artist’s intervention now left a bitter aftertaste on the palate.

Even though the symbols are removed from the former House of Ministries, the surface remains and new writing can be, and still is, added to it. Already consisting of many layers of modern German history, Lewandowsky added yet another one by transferring to it another sheet of traces, the frottage of the Siegessäule. Through this collision of implications a new view of history appears—what can the commemorative elements of the Siegessäule transferred to the historical layers of the former House of Ministries tell us of the contemporary history of Berlin? Lewandowsky finds a way forward for aging monuments that, as a result of rapid change, seem outdated and irrelevant. By covering up, transferring, and adding traces he creates new monuments—or at least instills them with new meaning—by transforming the old.

Through the act of transferring the frottage to the Lingner mural, Lewandowsky connects the two depicted narratives, and, by hanging it in front of the mural, it can be seen as a comment on Western imperialism's conquest of the Eastern socialist republic. Rather than tearing the monuments down, Lewandowsky suggests by contrast a path of transparency to the past. As is the case with the clean slate of the Siegessäule installation, the old significance is still there for those who seek it out, but a new surface is provided for the inscription of an alternative history. The cityscape is, then, the wax slab beneath the mystic writing pad’s surface. However many times one lifts the sheet and erases an imprint—or, in Lewandowsky’s case, hangs a sheet in front of and obstructs it—the traces linger on, embedded in the collective memory of both surface and populace.

CULTURE IN ACTION
Chicago, 1993
May–September

Artists: Mark Dion, Ericson & Ziegler (Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler), Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio, HAHA (Richard House, Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof), Suzanne Lacy, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Daniel Joseph Martinez, and Robert Peters

Curator: Mary Jane Jacob

Organization and funding: Sculpture Chicago

Edited by Anna Mikaela Ekstrand, Giulia Floris, and Simina Neagu

A passerby looks at one of 100 monuments to Chicago women as part of artist Suzanne Lacy’s work Full Circle for “Culture in Action” (1993). By honoring women who contributed to the social fabric of the city the project combated the overrepresentation of men in public space. Photo: Sculpture Chicago
Narratives and Counter-narratives

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand, Giulia Floris, and Simina Neagu

The exhibition “Culture in Action” and its context set a precedence for questions that we continue to tackle today: How can institutions make space for community-based practice? What is the role of the curator and what happens when notions of authorship are complicated? How can the asymmetries of power and exploitation, as well as instrumentalization and tokenism, be avoided when working with specific communities?

Regarded as the first major exhibition of community-based art in the United States, “Culture in Action” was a city-wide project organized with the support of Sculpture Chicago and curated by Mary Jane Jacob in 1993. Eight projects engaged with the social, political, and economic fabric of the city. Some of the selected artists worked with existing community groups, while others created their own groups, ranging from students’ to tenants’ associations, broaching themes and issues from public housing, conservation, and the AIDS crisis to representation in terms of gender and race. All projects aimed to focus public attention on the problems experienced by marginalized groups, bringing their stories to wider public awareness. In some cases, communities formed around the artists’ contributions. Through publications and lectures on its legacy, Jacob has helped shift the initially harsh critical reception the exhibition encountered, to such an extent that it is now seen as ground-breaking and exemplary in its curatorial approach. In the past ten years, a favorable art historical narrative has been established. Focusing on artistic process and participation, this chapter reveals tensions and conflicts in the historicization of “Culture in Action.” We shift the focus from curators to participants and artists, as well as towards questions of the institutionalization of community-based practice, asymmetries in social practice, and the importance of curatorial ethics.

Problematising and enriching the current narrative of the exhibition by presenting counter-narratives, this chapter comprises three conversations. Curator Naomi Beckwith, back then a high-school participant in Mark Dion’s project and nowadays chief-curator at the Guggenheim Museum, unpacks the pitfalls of art’s grand social ambitions and poses an important question for future art historians: why were these kinds of projects happening outside the auspices of formal art institutions and why were museums so slow at taking this up as a model? The second conversation is with artist Suzanne Lacy, one of few female participants in “Culture in Action” who had worked with community-based practice since the 1970s, and who worked to develop a consideration of this as important to broadening New Genre Public Art, as it became known. Lacy demonstrates how, historically, and within the Chicago cultural landscape generally, public art has been gendered male. She also observes that today, with the entry of social practice projects into museums, “Culture in Action” becomes even more relevant for its privileging of artworks and artists that brought temporality, engagement, and social context into alignment. Rather than through display, this art practice survives through writing and mythology. Lacy demonstrates how, historically, and within the Chicago cultural landscape generally, public art has been gendered male. She also observes that today, with the entry of social practice projects into museums, “Culture in Action” becomes even more relevant for its privileging of artworks and artists that brought temporality, engagement, and social context into alignment. Rather than through display, this art practice survives through writing and mythology. Lacy mentions the necessity of problematizing this form of artistic process, not to mention the extractivist or colonialist drive which can often be part of such community work.

A third conversation with Mark Dion, Christian Philipp Müller, and Mel Ziegler, who were involved in several major proto-“social practice” shows in 1993 at various stages, explores how their art negotiated the ethical complexities of community-based art and contributed to its emergence as a global phenomenon. Zippora Elders and Krista Jantowski, part of the “sonsbeek20→24” team, bring the discussion up to the present, tracing the legacies of past exhibitions in contemporary practice. Finally, in a conversational postscript, Jacob shares her own reflections on “Culture in Action.” Working from a desire to expand the category of public art and its funding to encompass temporary interventions, Jacob managed to present a diverse set of projects with varying degrees of impact that engaged with some of the most pertinent public issues of the time. As curators today, we are bound to ask ourselves how community-based practice is used to ameliorate social issues and what we can learn from artists and audiences who navigated the complexities of race, gender, and class in 1993. These issues determined the lives of Chicagoans in the 1990s and were increasingly registered in the U.S. art world. Out of our research, a variety of approaches to tackling race, gender, and class emerge for us today.

Curating Site-Specific, Community-Based, and Social Practice Art in the United States in the 1990s

According to Beckwith, “the art world was trying to prove itself useful” in the 1990s. This was also a period dominated by the “culture wars,” when conservative politicians in the US tried to reduce government funding for several exhibitions and projects that
they deemed offensive. Often, these projects were initiated by artists of marginalized identities. Following this period, and amid calls to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts, the agency suffered significant budget cuts. Some, such as artist Daniel Joseph Martinez, who participated in “Culture in Action” through the projects *Consequences of a Gesture* and *100 Victories/10,000 Tears*, saw the post-1993 moment as “the end of the artist as a free agent.” Referring to “Culture in Action” he stated: “That moment was a truly radical, innovative time in art. It became impossible to carry on with the same tactics; everything needed retooling.” In the same year, the Whitney Biennial focused on social issues and multi-media work, serving as a watershed moment in the presentation of political art. Art critic Roberta Smith described it as a “better show than usual” for its response to the realities of the ‘90s: “race, class, gender, sexuality, the AIDS crisis, imperialism, and poverty.” Although the Whitney Biennial was not focused on reaching into communities per se, language influenced by global practices around art relating to community was developed at that time.

What makes “Culture in Action” an interesting case study are its various methodologies for engaging with communities. For instance, Lacy’s feminist project *Full Circle* shows the multiple ways that socially engaged projects can simultaneously build community and reach multiple publics. By installing one hundred boulders inscribed with the names of women who built and sustained the social fabric of Chicago, the work made visible the service of Chicago women. Adding national and international contact and impact, Lacy organized a dinner attended by fourteen women widely known for their work. The dinner was then broadcast on public television. While Lacy’s project reached the general public, Dion chose to work with a smaller group over a longer time-period. Fifteen high school students participated in *The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group*, a travel and weekly study program combining art and science, based on theoretical and practical research into rainforest and urban ecology.

Jacob’s exhibition “Places With a Past” in 1991 in Charleston, South Carolina, served as an important precursor for her to understand the intricacies of reaching into communities. Displaying a mature curatorial stance on process, Jacob was interested in investigating how to reach varied audiences in non-competing ways.

However, critics and academics were not in agreement that artists engaging with communities had a radical effect. Critic and art historian Hal Foster compares community-based projects in the 1990’s to a sort of colonization of the community; “almost naturally the project strays from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a centering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise.” Referring to “Culture in Action,” he points out how these projects serve as “public-relations probes” for the corporations and agencies that supported them; Foster’s analysis fails to present the agency of participating community members, their ability to shape or criticize projects and evaluate the partnerships created between artist, participants, and partners. Other practitioners, such as artist Rick Lowe, might disagree with Foster’s position. Lowe, who in 1993 founded the still-ongoing community platform Project Row Houses paints a more complex picture of socially engaged art: “With the art world, we try to encourage a higher awareness of the balance of who gets to do what, and to leverage arts institutions as much as they leverage us. One of the reasons Project Row Houses was able to come about, to be quite frank, was because the art world needed it. I mean, it came about shortly after the embattled NEA was cut down to nothing and as people thought of art as being such an elite thing. We became a valuable opportunity for the art world to invest in, to show that it was more democratic than people thought. And we benefited from that, but they also benefited as well.”

Itígo Manglano-Ovalle’s piece *Tele-Vicinario* was the accumulation of months of work in his own community. This photograph is from the block party where videos produced by local youths were screened on the streets. The TVs were powered by electricity from community-members’ homes and local stores run through extension cords out of doors and windows. Photo: Sculpture Chicago
The ethical question of building trust with communities is tackled differently by artists in “Culture in Action.” Two projects served as catalysts for organizations that lasted beyond the exhibition. Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle’s work Tele-Vicindario engaged a group of teenagers from a low-income, Central and South American neighborhood, teaching them filming and video editing skills and helping them to organize an evening of broadcasting—a block party. Through the project, a long-term program offering access and media arts training to urban youth was created, Street-Level Youth Media. The second project to continue past the end of the exhibition, Flood by the HAHA group, presented a community-based caretaking system centered around a hydroponic garden for people with HIV. It was run by a volunteer network that continued to maintain the garden. Demonstrating that trust is necessary for longevity, these two projects were situated in the communities in which the artists lived.

Temporary projects have a fluid afterlife in public memory and an impact on discourse that is difficult to quantify. Discussing their work with the artists who took part in the exhibition, the feeling that most art critics and journalists were not mature enough to understand how to critique community-based art comes up several times. Either they attempted to quantify impact, which they usually did not have the data for, or tried to analyze their aesthetics, which were secondary or irrelevant to some projects. Jacob organized many press tours with mixed responses. Some artists, like Dion, cooperated with Jacob’s public relations efforts. While others, the duo Ericson & Ziegler and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle’s, felt that press tours and photo-ops minimized the integrity of their work. Ericson & Ziegler collaborated with a tenants’ group, formed to better their housing conditions, for their project Eminent Domain. Through communal meetings, attended by the mainly female group members, they created a paint chart where each color represented a moment in the history of public housing and its legislation in the United States. As per the request of Ericson & Ziegler’s participants, the exhibition’s official photographer did not capture their meetings. The tensions between artists and curator were palpable. As a result, the budget for the final stages of Eminent Domain was reallocated to the “Culture in Action” catalogue. Pointing to the slippages in community engagement, curator and art historian Miwon Kwon writes in One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity that artists selected groups based on their capacity to meet the needs and expectations of their project. Although this is partially true, it is also clear that participants helped shape project outcomes.

Today, criticism has matured beyond the institutionalized art world largely through self-reflection, vertical critique, and advocacy by practitioners convening and publishing. Unlike critique in the 1990s which was based on the perspective of outsiders, a machinery of responsive valuation of community practice has grown from within. In addition, the boundaries between art and activism have continued to blur as artists and curators participate in movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter or engage with Craftivism which serve to enrich and further problematize the processes of social practice. Artist Dread Scott, whose 1989 work What Is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag? sparked a national debate and became part of a Supreme Court case (referenced by Beckwith later in the chapter), discusses art and activism: “There are practical ways in which my work gets taken up by a movement. Images of A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday and Sign of the Times (2001) have been printed on T-shirts and shared on Twitter and Instagram—and that’s great. But, more importantly, my work connects America’s past to our present.” Considering the protests that swept across the world in 2020, most notably Black Lives Matter, a challenge lies ahead for a future generation of socially engaged artists and curators: responding to an urgent desire for change, while not forgetting that long-term, fundamental change requires critical reflection and considered action. Beyond the statements of solidarity that flooded the art world, often criticized as more or less performative, institutions across the US and Europe have responded by creating new roles to center socially engaged practice. One example is the Holly Block Social Justice Curator position at the Bronx Museum, which Jasmine Wahi took up in February 2020, a role that is, in her own words, “dedicated to amplifying narratives and histories that have historically been ignored, unseen, or invisibilized by institutions.” In an interview in ARTnews Wahi mentions US-based curators such as Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta (Whitney Biennial), Carmen Hermo (Brooklyn Museum), Legacy Russell (Studio Museum), and Kimberli Gant (Chrysler Museum) as practitioners working in a comparable manner, we start to notice a proliferation of this type of approach. More notably, Queens Museum, led by Sally Tallant, launched “A Year of Uncertainty,” an institution-wide project to “bring together established and emerging artists, collectives, community organizations, and specialists” to reimagine the museum. Almost thirty years after “Culture in Action,” we can see how the model Mary Jane Jacob launched outside of museums, considered “far less able to follow artists’ lead and open-ended explorations,” as she suggests later in this chapter, is now being adopted by various institutions.

The Expansion of “Culture in Action” and Temporal Art in the Public Sphere

In the United States, Suzanne Lacy and Jacob were active in launching the idea of a “new genre of public art.” Valerie Smith, who curated “Sonsbeek 93” (another chapter in this book) in Arnhem during the same year, used “site-specific or situational work” and
“public art” to describe the artworks, explaining that: “the art should be one in which the viewer participates by experiencing a complete environment rather than walking around it like a piece of furniture. It is no longer enough to place an abstract sculpture in the middle of a town square without reference or association.” In the “Culture in Action” catalogue, the director of Sculpture Chicago, Eva M. Olson, presents the project as new art for new audiences. To redefine public art, “Culture in Action” brought art closer to communities through partnerships with local organizations, and by exploring social and political issues. These novel curatorial endeavors did not foster an entirely new community-based artistic practice, rather they functioned as a venue in which artists already working with these processes could exhibit. This laid the groundwork for more robust funding opportunities. It was in the ‘90s, through the conference “Mapping the Terrain”, and its publication, edited by Lacy, amid push back from and lobbying to the National Endowment of the Arts, and along with the exhibitions of 1993, that curators, working in unison with—and sometimes opposition to—artists, facilitated the creation and institutionalization of temporal, site-responsive and specific works within the framework of large-scale multi-artist exhibitions.

The model put forward by Mary Jane Jacob became influential for various curators and critics. Among those who emerged as important in organizing, contextualizing, and historicizing community-based practice is Anne Pasternak, the former director of Creative Time, a non-profit arts organization which had produced art in the public realm since 1974 but combined socially engaged art, activism, and organizing under Pasternak’s tenure. Another important practitioner in this field is Joshua Decter, a writer and curator who has written extensively on community-based art and exhibitions in various contexts. In 2007 he organized the conference “The Situational Drive: Complexities of Public Sphere Engagement,” together with INSITE (also a chapter in this book). A seminal publication is Exhibition as Social Intervention: ‘Culture in Action’ 1993, edited by Decter together with Helmut Draxler, which, based on intensive research in the CCS Bard’s “Culture in Action” archive and complementary interviews, explores key questions about the potential of social intervention: can art be an agent for social change, and what criteria should it be evaluated on? Building on this foundation, this chapter explores the levels of impact and the proliferation of terms used by artists to describe their practice. At the same time, a different generation of Chicago-based practitioners, such as Brett Bloom and Marc Fischer of art collective Temporary Services still see the project as a relevant model: “it was so formative, a way of articulating how art could leave its places of privilege and risk something else.”

The most prolific art historian to historicize these types of projects is Claire Bishop through her book Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. This book was preceded by the article “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” published in Artforum in 2006, where she coined the term “social turn” to describe a resurgence of socially engaged art. The book presents a history of social practice and, like Mapping the Terrain, it traces the history of socially engaged practice to happenings, but further widening it to include moments of rupture, such as 1912 and 1968, to narrate the theoretical trajectory of participatory art and its ethical and aesthetic framework. In the US American context, due to its lack of public funding, Bishop describes socially engaged art as having emerged as a “compensatory sphere” for endemic social injustices. Her scholarship on social practice is critiqued for comparing disparate exhibitions and practices, attempting to conflate them, as was the case with “Culture in Action,” “Sonsbeek 93,” and “Project Unité.” More importantly, Bishop’s work does not consider whom this type of public art was supposed to be geared toward.

What is striking about “Culture in Action” is that its incongruities appear more pertinent now as ethical and non-extractivist methodologies of working with communities are still being developed. Jacob was able to shape a legacy out of her own project's novelty, never surrendering to its negative reception but choosing to spend an incredible amount of energy on preserving the memory of the exhibition—something that the art system has only been able to digest years later. On the other hand, these efforts seem to have sometimes undermined the interests of those who were supposed to be her main interlocutors, the artists, and the communities.

“Culture in Action” remains interesting because of its capacity to raise questions about the very fragile, complex, and complicated relationship between institutions, communities, artists, and curators. It also brought awareness of the limits within which curators need to operate not to inflict harm, and to find ways in which difficulties, tensions, and asymmetries are problematized, not deepened. The fact that it seems impossible to arrive at definitive answers as one instead encounters in this exhibition’s cracks and fissures myriad points for reflection, makes “Culture in Action” a project that must be studied and discussed.

We believe it is important for curators, writers, and administrative professionals to re-center the conversation on artists, activists, and community groups who have worked with these methodologies parallel to the art systems’ incorporation and institutionalization. Revisiting “Culture in Action”’s eight constituent projects that in themselves represent...
a cross-section of the multiplicities of socially engaged art, the project becomes a prime example for study. Through it we can engage deeply with questions of ethics and morals to move forward with our work in social practice, performance, and street art, community-based outreach, and community-centered institutional practice in ways that foster equity and a better society.

While reading the interviews, we encourage you to take note that Jacob’s aim with “Social Action” was to introduce socially engaged practice to a large public, while the main objective of the artists involved was to approach their chosen communities. Sometimes these objectives were incongruous. By presenting multiple entry points into tackling race, gender, class differences, and participation in community-based art, one objective of this chapter is to encourage museums, galleries, and curators to turn to artists and activists as resources.

1. The projects were as follows: The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group by Mark Dion; Eminent Domain by Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler as the artist duo Ericson & Ziegler; Flood by Richard House, Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof as the collaborative group HAHA; We Got it! The Workforce Makes the Candy of Their Dreams by Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio; Full Circle by Suzanne Lacy; Tele-Vecindario by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle; Consequences of a Gesture and 100 Victories/10,000 Tears by Daniel Joseph Martinez; and Naming Others: Manufacturing Yourself by Robert Peters.

2. Among these shows were “Culture in Action” and “Sonsbeek 93.” Mark Dion and Mel Ziegler, through the duo Ericson & Ziegler, participated in both, while Christian Philipp Müller visited “Culture in Action,” and, although he ultimately pulled out of “Sonsbeek 93,” he is represented in the catalogue through correspondence.

3. Ibid, 71.


5. The students were picked from two schools Providence-St. Mel and Lincoln Park High School. One was a private school located west of the Loop in Garfield Park, an African American area with 60 percent unemployment and one of the highest crime rates in the city. The other was a public school located in a wealthy neighborhood.


8. Centered around powerful metaphors, the work took inspiration from Terrulia and Sereno: Terrulia is the Spanish term for an informal but regular meeting where people meet and share information or discuss ideas and opinions—often in the streets during the evening. Sereno is a term for a lamplighter or nightwatchman, traditionally they announced the time for quiet and watched over the streets while aiding the community at night.


Trying to Prove Itself Useful: The Art World’s Social Turn
A Conversation with Naomi Beckwith
Anna Mikaela Ekstrand and Simina Neagu

Simina Neagu: When we interviewed Mary Jane Jacob about “Culture in Action” she said she would like to get a better understanding of the experience of living through the projects. So, maybe we can just go back in time a bit and start with the moment of ‘93, when you were a participant in Mark Dion’s community group?

Naomi Beckwith: I’ve got an entire musical soundtrack in my head for that moment.

SN: We’re interested in exploring two contexts, your experience as a teenager, as participant back in 1993, but also the context of 1993. I am thinking about the Whitney Biennial, and the defunding of the National Endowment for the Arts that year. We’re interested in your perspectives, both as participant and as art historian.

NB: Well, I think they’re two questions: What was I aware of? And what did I get caught up in? And so, you’re right about the context of 1993 being one thing in terms of the US-American art sphere. This is me speaking as an art historian first. At that time, we’re in an art world that is deeply ensconced in and not quite through the culture wars. So, it already becomes a grand political statement to say that whatever you are going to work with is for a non-traditional art audience. And if anything, the teenager in me had some cynicism about that. And I joked about how at least one of the goals of Mark Dion’s project was to pull together these two classes of students from different parts of the city. And Chicago, famously, is so segregated that when you talk about different parts of the city, you’re talking about different racial configurations as well. I came from a school in the wealthier part of the city, a mostly white school, and we were coupled with an almost all black school. Though, oddly enough, clearly, I and many of the participants in the project were black participants from the wealthier white school.

But there was a sense at that time that the art world had to make somewhat of a shift to prove itself useful to the world. Public funding was dropping out. And suddenly art had to somehow prove its public use. In terms of Mary Jane’s formulation, I think she did understand very much that any project that educated children of color would have broad support. But you have to remember that Chicago also has a long history of public art and sculpture-based public art. I also saw Mary Jane’s trajectory as one that was deeply interested in what to do with the impulse to present art in a public space, but also with that work being temporary. You can see that in the way that she curated the Spoleto Festival as well. You know, there are other examples, like Skulptur Projekte Münster. These were the models that were in her head as she was curating this new project. And artists like David Hammons whom she worked with in Spoleto were making what felt like these more theatrical moves. She was really interested in bringing in the audience as art makers. And so that’s where her idea of the public is coming from. Understanding of course, again, that at the end of the culture wars the audience needed to be broad, it couldn’t have been just wealthy and white, or even at times just adult.

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand: The notion of bringing teens from different economic and cultural backgrounds together was important in presenting this project to the wider public. How did you together with Dion approach class and race internally within the group? Did you have any conversations about these topics?

NB: I made the joke that everybody wanted the wealthiest white girl from...
I think the cynicism was aimed at something else. The participants were aware that the things that go into grants and reports were very different from what we thought we were also doing internally. We understood that this was essentially an experimental pedagogical project. We were super happy to participate, to foster our interest in the arts and, at that time, science and ecology too. I came into this as a science student, not as an art student. We knew this was an incredible opportunity. We wondered why is this artist, this full-grown man, wasting his time on a bunch of kids? If anything, we knew that it was an honor to have Mark Dion at our disposal. And on the other side, Mark was incredibly respectful of us, our ideas, our work, never condescending to us. It was probably the first time we'd all been given that much freedom of opinion and even of movement. It was wonderful. I think we just understood that, as still is the case especially in institutional practice in the United States, there are going to be these larger social justification goals that are bigger than what's happening in the crucible of the project.

I don't think I've fully theorized in my mind some of those historical moves. Why is this happening outside the auspices of the formal art institutions? Why is it that museums were so slow at taking this up as a model? These are the bigger questions for me, historically. And what are the pitfalls? The other thing I had to contend with was some of the criticism levelled at the project. I had a hard time reading and working with a lot of the critics who lambasted the Sculpture Chicago project, specifically Mark Dion's project. There was a lot of cynicism around it. I tried to understand their resistance to the project or, let's say, their critique from a distance. And it actually colored my career choices. That's when I knew: I am not going to be a critic. I am going to be in the in the midst of the art making, which is the curatorial practice, rather than standing from a kind of hindsight position, just casting judgment.

SN: You mentioned that you somehow became the unofficial spokesperson of the project. Was this a continuation of your role after the project finished?

NB: It’s true. There’s no doubt, I love the project, and that makes for a certain bias and puts me in a certain position that allows me to speak for it. Again, there are also optical considerations. The bright black child can be the spokesperson for the value of a kind of expanded notion of public art. I was totally aware of that. None of that has changed career-wise, let’s be real. That knowledge of what I have to do and what I have to perform, does not in any way preclude my willingness to participate in those worlds. There’s a reason why a project like this also made sense to me. Think: Why would a bunch of parents just ship their kids off into the care of this grown man they’ve never met? Why would anyone trust him with this? And no, it wasn’t naivete on our parents’ part. As I said before, I don’t think it was any mistake that the majority of participants in this program were young people of color. I’ve been thinking and have written before about the manner in which I grew up on the Southside of Chicago, which is majority black. I think I’ve been able to theorize over the years, especially looking at writings by someone like art historian and curator Kellie Jones, what it means to be black and take in art. It’s the way that art was always a somewhat participatory project for my community, or the visual arts were always wrapped up in the milieu of things like performance, dance, theater. Historically, this is a moment that came in the wake of black power, “black is beautiful,” a post-Civil Rights, Pan-Africanist awakening. And a big part of that political work was cultural expression. That came in so many forms: everybody was in an African dance class, everybody was in a drum class, everybody was making things. And of course, we had our traditional visual artists who were doing sculpture and painting. But when you encountered those things in a community art center, at a fair, and even in the museums at times, those...
visual things and performative things are always seen in tandem. I grew up within spitting distance of the DuSable Museum of African American Culture and History. So, the idea that these students, these young people could go into a participatory space, doing something that felt like it was attached to the world—in this case an ecological project—doing something that felt somewhat performative, wasn’t strange to a lot of these black parents.

So, I think the conjoining of an impulse toward an expanded art practice with this non-traditional “sculpture” practice, wasn’t a hard sell to our parents. It wasn’t a conceptual leap for a lot of people in the way that I think it was for a lot of critics.

AME: What has become clear when speaking to participating artists is that this was really a groundbreaking exhibition for the institutional art world and for Mary Jane Jacob, who managed to put a multitude of these types of projects together at once.

NB: I don’t think everyone involved had done some previous project like this, though. I think Mary Jane’s genius was to give it a form, but also a specific project. She didn’t invite these artists and say “do what you like,” she really had to do the legwork of finding partners. And that was what gave it such structure. Under the rubric of what we now call public practice, that was helpful.

AME: What was your relationship with Mary Jane Jacob, did you get to know her during the project? And what is your relationship with her now?

NB: At that time, we didn’t understand what a curator meant. We just knew she was an impresario that was pulling everything together. She was very active in making sure the right conversations happened with the right people at the right time. She’s very good at that.

And the relationship now is that of a true colleague, which is wonderful. She invited me for an adjunct professorship at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she’s running the curatorial studies program. What’s nice is that there’s a respect for the individual curator that I’ve become.

My conception of curatorial practice didn’t crystallize with “Culture in Action” at all. I walked away from the project thinking that was all lovely and fine, but it’s time to go to medical school. But it was many years later that I started to be able to read an exhibition and realize there is the magic hand behind it. So, it took me a minute to marry Mary Jane’s impresario-ship with the curatorial practice that I associated more specifically with institutional in gallery exhibitions.

SN: So, you went to medical school and after that you went to the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and that’s when you started working with Mark again?

NB: Yes, exactly. I was studying pre-med and then just ended up dropping all that and, in the spirit of my upbringing, graduated with a degree in African history. Then I went to the Courtauld to study art history. I literally had a chance encounter with Mark, who was giving a lecture in advance of a project for what was going to become the Tate Modern. And then he brought me in as a project manager at the Tate to work again on a pseudo-archaeological/pseudo- anthropological project with high school students and again, it all made sense to me. And we did have a conversation at the Tate about the social use-values of these projects and Tate was quite clear about their limits.

I don’t know how much Mark spoke about this. But I don’t think one can emphasize enough the influence of the Whitney Independent Study Program
on the way this project ran. He really thought of this as a continuation of this kind of Foucauldian exploration that he was undertaking as an aesthetic practice, which is: “Can we just imagine a whole new schema of organizing the world?” Again, there’s something about being open to working with these crazy kids that I think comes from Mark’s true instinct to say: “Okay, let’s just play here.”

Secondly, the Whitney Independent Study Program was run like an open conversational seminar. And that’s precisely how Mark ran these weekends that we did in addition to the trips. This was not the case of “you are my glorified assistants, and you’ll just help me put my products together.” He literally ran the seminars with guests, artists and scientists coming in almost every week, talking about ecological issues, natural history issues, or contemporary art, it was really fascinating in that way. We were going to think about ecological degradation, and devastation through art.

This meant that we already understood that conversations around art were necessarily conversations around culture at large, the world at large, that aesthetics didn’t have to be separate from society. And the way Mark’s work was explained to us was by this newfangled genre called “installation art.” None of us had ever heard of that beforehand. And my parents had never heard about installation art beforehand. So, everybody understood we were getting a great education in the bleeding edge of contemporary art at that time. And it felt human. It was never at any point intimidating. It just made space for something that formal education in the school and the kind of implicit formal education of the museum space wasn’t allowing.

So, every visitor to a museum at that time was pretty much understood as a passive participant, absorbing the knowledge given to you from the institution. I’m always shocked how many colleagues to this day still believe that this is the model. And we’re not talking about colleagues at big, encyclopedic institutions. I’m also talking about contemporary art colleagues. The model for Mark was that you take ideas, and you can morph them into art and that is a conceptual practice. That you don’t have to follow a particular history that is handed to you.

Now we have a language around the post-medium condition. And now we even have institutions that try to think through these kinds of integrated performance and plastic art practices. This is one of the reasons why I work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago for that matter. The Walker Art Center is another one that has that approach. Institutions are grappling with what to do with socially engaged art, participatory art, participatory practice. I think what we’re talking about is a narrative that may be understood by many groups, but not yet understood by art history institutions.

But what’s important to me as I still hold on very much to my subjectivity as a black woman, it’s so clear that a lot of black parents just saw off the bat what this was about and had no mental blocks toward it. As I say, just in the same way that someone like Kellie Jones has really done incredible work as a curator, doing shows like “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980,” writing books like South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s, where she basically argues that the post-medium condition was the primary black art practice. That has been so gratifying as an art historian, as a curator who does similar work. I did a show around art and music in Chicago, “The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now” and its vestiges. Those kinds of understandings are something that I may have understood intuitively, in my upbringing. But I began to understand, of course, in the afterlife of Mark’s project, that I had to find the forms and language by which these things got pulled together.

SN: It’s understandable that other types of institutions, mostly white Western institutions, founded on colonial museological practices and indebted to these kinds of taxonomies of knowledge, struggle with the idea of an expanded practice.

NB: I didn’t realize until recently that my doubt about taxonomies started at sixteen when I met Mark Dion. So now I can read someone like Ariella Azoulay and that doubt makes perfect sense. Those registers of taxonomies must be rethought. And on top of that, the archive needs to be rebuilt all together, and still constantly thrown into doubt. That was absolutely the basis of Mark’s work, with fun thrown in. I mean, it was lots of fun. I cannot underscore that enough.

I would also like to note another thing. This is where I think I may have taken a lot of issue with critical responses to “Culture in Action.” I’ve never quite understood that a lot of the criticism believes that artists somehow need to stay out of the fray of the social and political world. I have a hard time digesting that. I don’t believe that every artist clearly should be combining whatever their aesthetic vision and project is with their politics. But I don’t think that we should be disallowing artists from saying that “my politics is about an intervention into the social or...
the political." I don’t think that can be prevented because for many artists, it is important that their politics is an aesthetic project. As soon as the political target becomes clear and concrete, this is when people get a little shaky. As I said to Tom Finkelpearl, I think overall, I have a hard time assessing, making qualitative judgments about that. But the idea that somehow artists are not citizens, and that the shape of their aesthetics should not involve their citizenry, for me, is really limiting and problematic.

SN: I was also curious not so much about how “Culture in Action” influenced your practice but more how Mark’s practice has influenced your thinking around knowledge production and dissemination?

NB: I don’t think I can overstate what a huge influence it was, on multiple levels. What’s also fascinating to me about this entire project is that I think the public was more interested in the process of what we made or what we did, not the end product. So, the form it took in 1993 was this clubhouse that we sort of borrowed from the city of Chicago and the Public Parks District. And that was just a place where we did our thing. But there was an entire year before 1993 when we were undertaking this pedagogical practice. That was probably my first understanding that the public face of something is not necessarily the same as the private, process-based part of it. That was also the beginning of an understanding that to have a conceptual practice means that the form isn’t the end-all, be-all, it was really about process thinking.

The next thing that was deeply important is thinking about this question of how to recast forms of knowledge: What have you inherited as a language for describing and participating in the world? So, this is actually in line with Gayatri Spivak and the question she raised: can the subaltern speak? What terms do we have that make the intellectual limits of our world, and whose language are we not listening to, as we start to reconceptualize the world?

Recasting is like everything for me right now, in ways that I only recently started absorbing, as I am working on a project for the New Museum. It’s the mounting of a show that was curated by Okwui Enwezor, but he didn’t live to see it realized. It’s a show called “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” and it’s thinking through the politics of race, and how artists have given a plastic form to that condition. The book is mostly full of essays, thinking about the visual archive of black death and black trauma. So, there is a deep interest in that right now, it almost feels like a revived interest. And really reframing the archive, resituating it, remembering what’s in there. I’m even doing semi-fictional work, reimagining the blanks and absences in the archive. All of this is work that I began to learn with Mark. His was a bit more playful while in this current project it is literally a matter of life and death. These things are so incredibly important.

This is so funny, but like sitting next to me right now on my desk is not an art history book, but the “Birdfeeder Handbook.” And I have here in the house a diagram of a bird by Mark Dion. I’m obsessed with nature. But I just wanted to say, you can love and respect nature and still understand that its very definition is a construct. So, Foucault may say that our vision of nature has everything to do with the language and the structures of power. But that doesn’t preclude care, and love and admiration. And that way of going into not just the world, the natural world, but also into art history was important for me, just in the same way that, as I said, I could be cognizant, and even somewhat critical, of the larger social messages that “Culture in Action” put out. That doesn’t mean I didn’t enjoy it. It doesn’t mean I wasn’t grateful for it, it doesn’t mean that I couldn’t also see the incredible art historical work it is and was doing.
Anna Mikaela Ekstrand: Although the term feminism has entered the mainstream, activities to elevate, represent, and include women in society are as needed today as they were in 1993. What were you considering when you envisioned Full Circle?

Suzanne Lacy: I thought about the city, and it being male gendered—Carl Sandburg’s poem, Chicago, “City of the Big Shoulders” and “Hog Butcher for the World”; despite this, Chicago has a deep history of feminist activism, represented by, for example, the Hull House. The public art surrounding us at that time was definitely gendered male. We found only two sculptures of females, both by men, and there were no monuments made by women. Pointing that out by placing 100 “monuments” representing women all in one night was funny to me. Or, I guess, ironic is a better word. The dinner was simply another way of acknowledging cultural presence, leadership, and the contribution of women globally. It was a contemporary reenactment of a Jane Addams dinner, where guests came from around the world to plan a more just future for all.

AME: Could you talk about the layers of implication of the boulders versus those of the dinner?

SL: There is always an element of race, ethnicity, and class in my work—I work hard to ensure that there is a strong diverse representation of people. So, my first task was to mobilize women across communities into a common space, where they would talk about female leadership in their communities. I had a production team of young women to carry this out, and an advisory board to think about how to structure the project and select who would be designated on the monuments. These women nominated the local activists and activists throughout history whose names would be on the boulders.

AME: What is the role of a curator in your work?

Suzanne Lacy’s project Full Circle highlighted and celebrated the service of women in the Chicago community by placing monuments to them in the Loop, a district which in many ways was a male gendered space. Photo: Melissa Ann Pinney.
SL: I consider a good relationship with curators is a collaborative one. I recognize that their skill sets in interpretation, display, and communication with diverse audiences are much different from mine, and I respect them as colleagues in creating a new mode of presentation. The best of these, and I have worked with many of them, are curators like Sally Tallant, Alistair Hudson, Tamzin Dillon, Francesco Manacorda, and of course Mary Jane Jacob, who understand social practice at a profound level. The people who curated my retrospective—Lucia Sanroman, Dominic Willsdon and Rudolf Frieling—were amazing as a team and worked so hard to make meaning of my work and communicate it to the general public. I felt I was very much part of a team, whose members I deeply respected. I probably turned over control in the display of my work in a way that many artists would not. As I often produce in teams, much like movie production crews or theater groups, different skills are important to acknowledge and recognize and, for me, curators like Mary Jane become real partners.

AME: When we spoke to Mary Jane Jacob about the project, she told us that she was very hands-on and artist-centric, doing all that she could to realize the projects.

SL: That’s completely true; she is a brilliant curator. But I also think those are the attributes of most successful curators who work with social practice artists. When we were looking for boulders, Mary Jane discovered a woman-owned quarry in Oklahoma, and said “You should go visit that quarry and find your boulders.” I agreed and flew down there and rented a car to meet these two sisters on site. After surviving an unpaved road for miles into the interior of a mountain range, I drove into what looked like a redneck survivalist’s camp with an American flag flying and gun practice going on. We had a hysterical time, camping and toting guns and getting stuck in mud holes requiring a backhoe to get us out. I totally trashed the rental car. We picked out each boulder, scooped them up, and put them on trucks.

Then I flew back Chicago. The next night, waiting for the rocks to come in, I woke up at four in the morning—just sat bolt upright in bed—and thought: “They’re not big enough.” I called Mary Jane at 7 am. She was on it immediately. She did not question me, she just turned back the shipment and rescheduled the trucks.

AME: And Dinner at Jane’s?

SL: I filmed Dinner at Jane’s with the international women’s group who were invited to the exhibition and made it into a documentary. It has had some life in feminist circles. It was 1995 by the time it was finished, and it seemed like the strategy of filmed dinners or straightforward conversations as artworks, not as documentary, had not yet reached the display culture in museums. Maybe I could have tried it then, or even earlier during Three Weeks in May in 1977 when the performance of dinners began to emerge in my work, but it did not occur to me that this type of video might read as an installation rather than as a documentary.

AME: Your practice remained on the same trajectory.

SL: My core practice was ongoing but included with social justice issues are continual questions about “art” and how a work operates within the art world as well as the socio-political “public” realm. Remember, I am talking from a Californian perspective. Performance and conceptual artists there had relationships with museums, but I would say most of their work was self-initiated and did not grow out of museum invitations. The museum scene was not well developed in the ‘70s in Los Angeles, and it was not seen, by my crowd anyway, as a significant destination. The role of popular media
was as attractive, as was the idea of site-specific work, and of course artists’ studios and warehouses were a major venue for our work.

AME: How much of a space for commuting with the other artists was “Culture in Action” for you?

SL: It was 1993-4, and I started working in ’72, so I’d already attended and gathered for years. The idea of conversations around our work—a co-programming that Mary Jane initiated—was not new but these convenings served an important function of advancing ideas and developing critiques.

AME: It seems that “Culture in Action” was the first time that these kinds of works were put together with institutional backing, and that this was groundbreaking.

SL: Yes, Mary Jane is one of the earliest curators in this area. You might find another case or two, like Julie Lazar’s project “Uncommon Sense” (1997) at the Geffen Contemporary, the annex of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Lazar wanted to combine studios and warehouses as a major venue for our work.

AME: What other projects did you and Mary Jane work on?

SL: Mary Jane and I worked on a project called River Meetings: Lives of Women in the Delta a city-wide project that included her and Moira Roth’s “Decades of Women’s Performance” in New Orleans, 1981-82. Mary Jane was formative to my thinking, in a sense a precursor to people like Sally Tallant, former director of the Liverpool Biennial and now Executive Director of the Queens Museum, who is carrying out an agenda of “A Year of Uncertainty” to rethink a community-based museum.

AME: With the conference Mapping the Terrain you contextualized and re-wrote the history of Public Art to incorporate happenings, community-based art, and the public—moving more toward what we today call social practice.

SL: Yes. Mapping the Terrain was written as a piece of political strategy. Mary Jane Jacob, Lucy Lippard, Allan Kaprow and I—among others now prominent in these discourses, like Patricia Phillips, Jeff Kelley, and Judy Baca—convened for a three-day public event at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and a private retreat, where the agenda was to expand the conversation on public art. For years I had been harassing folks at the NEA, urging them to include temporal and process-based art as they began funding public art.

AME: Were there existing precedents?

SL: Process-based art had a venue within art museums in the 1970s, but community-based art was still considered not “good” art. We simply wanted to call attention to different attributes of art, other than pure aesthetics, as we believed aesthetics much more aligned with temporality, engagement, and context. So, we drew a broad circle around different kinds of art, from the happenings of Allan Kaprow to the community dance practice of Anna Halprin to the eco-research of Mel Chin. There are ninety or so artists, mostly from the U.S., whose work we selected to feature in a compendium of Mapping. Today the definitions have gotten much clearer, more refined, complicated and subtle; many more artists are trying to understand how the idea of the public is a part of the aesthetic production. In Mapping the Terrain, we suggested directions for theory that came from artists’ various public practices—like convenings, discourses, contexts and public space—rather than from Western European critical art theory.

AME: What theory would you have liked to see included?

SL: Our work supported a clearer link between critical pedagogy, community development, social change and current political issues and art. In fact, it is more common to hear from these theorists in today’s conversations on art. For instance, it was less common then to hear such theorists as John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Augusto Boal apply to art production. All concerned with experience, learning, power dynamics and social change, these activist scholars drew theory from pragmatic emancipatory practices in education, politics, or elsewhere. They are being rediscovered within arts discourses today because of the ascendancy of social practice.

AME: Many concepts discussed in Mapping the Terrain—a brilliant and engaging book by the way—are now part of the contemporary social practice conversation.

SL: They are, but keep in mind that our conversations grew out of practices and convenings that had been developing for years. For instance, Ian Hunter convened a series of gatherings in the UK throughout the ’90s that was formative in bringing practitioners from all over the world together, like Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, Grant Kester, and Helen Mayer Harrison, and now Executive Director of the Queens Museum, who is carrying out an agenda of “A Year of Uncertainty” to rethink a community-based museum.
Sarat Maharaj, BijaRi, Ala Plástica and Jay Koh, to name a few. Each of these artists and writers had been asking similar questions in vastly different contexts. In a sense these questions are a legacy from the ‘60s and ‘70s, and perhaps earlier. But the translation of social practice projects into the museum and art history has been an uneven and contested practice, which makes projects like “Culture in Action” interesting.

AME: So, these artists, including you, were working with temporal projects?

SL: They were time-based, contextually framed and had pragmatic social applications. *Mapping* is a book of practices, the book from the point of view of people who are doing the artwork. Obviously, many of the artists in *Mapping* are theorists as well as practitioners, but Grant’s writing has situated this kind work within the canon of Western European theory.

AME: Agreed, temporal practices like social practice, public art, community-based practice, call it what you want, is a long, multifaceted conversation in the arts.¹

SL: There is a Swedish artist that I was so impressed with in the late ‘60s who took over a museum and made it into a children’s playground.

AME: That was “Modellen,” co-organized by Swedish design critic and organizer Gunilla Lundahl and Danish artist Palle Nielsen. I posit Lundahl’s curatorial work as foregrounding social practice in this book’s sister publication *Curating beyond the Mainstream: The Practices of Carlos Capelán, Elisabet Haglund, Gunilla Lundahl, and Jan-Erik Lundström*. Did you want to make a connection?

SL: Yes, the installation reminded me of Allan Kaprow’s work in pedagogy and with children. He was interested in sociology and educational ideas and has said he was influenced by John Dewey. I asked him to write about *Project Other Ways*, a work in Berkeley with educator Herb Kohl, which he had never written about. I was interested in how this work seemed to sit rather awkwardly in his own history, and yet once you apply the lens of pedagogy, as Jeff Kelley did in his book on Allan, it begins to make a lot of sense.

AME: What you are saying is that the artistic practices and their modes of exhibiting have developed on parallel tracks.

SL: The strategies of scale, craftsmanship, and visuality have grown in museums and galleries. Technology has advanced such that the early black and white videos that were so technologically advanced and compelling to artists in the ‘70s have become intriguing anachronisms today. The representational conventions of temporal and community-based such work within the museum and gallery world. Allan did a lot of experimenting with different forms of representation and I guess in a way I have adopted that project throughout my own history. I’ve shown in art galleries and museums since curators would accept performance art and social engagement works into their institutions, but this always creates dilemmas around visuality and collectability. In “Culture in Action,” Mary Jane brought the public to the artworks, in their native environments, rather than vice versa. She had been a museum curator of note at th Detroit Art Institute and MOCA Los Angeles and she understood her task to be showing contextualized and publicly-sited work that was formerly not presented in its entirety in institutional settings.

AME: Why did this piece resurface in the book rather than in an institutional setting?

SL: It faces the same problem we all wrestled with then: how to exhibit
work, formerly so reliant on concept and straightforward narrative, have shifted. In my early performances, for instance, it was enough to stick black and white 8 x 10 inch photos on the wall with one or two artifacts. My last three major projects were experiments in long-term community works that have integrity there, but also operate (albeit differently) with scale and visuality in museum contexts. These are centered around multiscreen video installations which might not stand up to professional standards of video making. But they should be seen as hybrids that operate within two systems: the community and the art world.

AME: So how do you deal with the complexities of what was happening within the community and how it operates in the art world? And was this a concern for Mary Jane?

SL: I do not see how she would not have been thinking about it. I might place a bit more emphasis on specific questions of display as it is so much part of my own history: how does an artwork operate within the community and the art world. A patronizing view of service.

AME: I am glad that we are getting into a conversation about museum display, which by extension involves institutional support. Were these conversations happening in the '90s, or '80s?

SL: In the '80s, there were a couple of processes that are relevant. One was the growing recognition of community-based work. And the other, as I mentioned earlier, was the increased availability of display technologies to artists. However, I would argue that the skills for social practice are not clearly articulated in art school curricula even today and certainly in those decades there was little agreement on what was or was not critically successful in such work.

AME: Lundahl, who co-curated “Modellen” in 1968, speaks about garnering her skills in organizing from political organizing and pedagogy, or organizing workshops, in the '60s. Where did you get your skills?

SL: I come from a politicized era in general—the '70s—and I learned community organizing techniques in an “Internal Peace Corps” program that taught Saul Alinsky strategies. I am probably suited to this work anyway, as I was the organizer of lengthy complex games with entire neighborhoods as a kid.

AME: This dense conversation about the relationship between curators and artists and the collaborative aspects of this are in part conversations about support. Has your professorship at University of Southern California helped give you the stability to develop your practice?

SL: Yes, but there are mixed benefits to working in higher education. I have always worked in academic institutions, often as an administrator. The work taxes your creativity and channels it into systems, into classes, and into students, leaving most of us who support themselves this way always stretched for time. My work has been written about a lot and I have exhibited widely but I do not currently have gallery representation. People like me, our work within the art world survives through writing or, frankly, mythology. Someone says: “She did this piece and 500 people were in it, and it was beautiful.”

CLOSING WORDS, ON SERVICE

SL: There is a third part of Full Circle that never happened, related to direct service. I wanted to spend a month volunteering in a shelter, or a food line or somewhere I could give service, simply as a performative act, without framing it aesthetically. For me its aesthetic was in being a third component of a three-part work, a practical demonstration of the kinds of work I celebrated in the other two parts of the project, the monuments and the dinner. I had been thinking about the difference between service without implication, for its own sake, and service for an artwork.

AME: The concept of service, in multiple forms approached from several directions, recurs in your work. Jane Addams’ social work was a starting point, what other precedents did you look to and invoke for Full Circle?

SL: This project relied on the historical narratives of volunteerism and activism that run throughout the settlement house movement at the turn of the nineteenth century. The dinner party was on the 100th anniversary of the founding of Hull House. For me, the rocks acknowledge the service women give to the public sector and creates “monuments” to their service. The dinner was the recreation of the significant and generative conversations that were part of the Settlement Movement. We brought together women who were deeply engaged in political and social service from around the world, as did Jane Addams. The final unfulfilled work, the service month, stays with me today as an unfinished project.

AME: As a researcher untangling or understanding the role of service is key to approaching community-based work. How do you think these terms have aged—service and charity?

SL: Service has been seen as patronizing and colonial for quite some time, but that is shifting now. I am a Buddhist and at the heart of Buddhism lies...
service with no expectation of reward. However, as an artist I am rewarded for my work, even if it is not monetarily. I do service within my projects as an ethical position, but I also get a deep personal satisfaction in seeing the work materialize. Is that service without expectations in the Buddhist sense? It certainly often fits in with a spirit of volunteerism as such work requires more labor than is compensated. Our awareness of the actions of colonialism have caused us to question the very idea of service. This is complicated territory and will change over time, but I can’t stop believing that helping, serving, supporting, contributing, and healing are words that should be interrogated honestly but without prejudice in our practices.

Daniel Joseph Martinez’s work *Consequences of a Gesture* (1993), was a parade developed by the artist over two years, involving 35 community organizations. Photo: Sculpture Chicago

Is Art about Art or about Life?
A Postscript on Culture in Action with Mary Jane Jacob
Anna Mikaela Ekstrand, Giulia Floris, Simina Neagu

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand/Giulia Floris/
Simina Neagu: Did you see yourself as operating beyond the institutional art world in staging “Culture in Action”? Mary Jane Jacob: Absolutely, this was the raison d’être and a necessity for undertaking this exploratory program.

The research that evolved over time, through encounters with a range of people—artists and art world persons; public art, government agencies, and foundation persons; members of the public and activist or community groups on the one hand, grew out of my then 15-year museum experience. I found those institutions far less able to follow artists’ lead and open-ended explorations. They were driven by a need to have something to show, to participate in the market to which their

supporters or patrons were so tied, and to have clear PR messages—which grew out of the blockbuster phenomenon and need for greater attendance numbers. On the other hand, I was driven by my developing critique of the closed-mindedness of public art agencies that wanted modern monuments, decoration for buildings or open spaces, partnered with corporations to make privatized space seem public-friendly, and which were less able to incorporate social messages especially necessary in that era, then called multiculturalism. This confronted and posed an alternative to the demand for permanence and low-maintenance conservation, the need for the funder or funding agency to get something for their money, in which the commissioning entity "banked" on art interest, but which in fact reflected their disinterest or uncaring-ness as to how the public could incorporate such works of art into the lives they led.

AME/GF/SN: During its staging "Culture in Action" was the object of a lot of criticism, how did you handle it at the time?

MJJ: There were many reactions that were personally hard to take, some felt very pointed, accusatory, and rough. At the time we went public—we shared our work with the art world in the summer of 1993—I did not have the critical distance needed to deal with the criticisms in real time. Undertaking these projects was a 24-hour curating job for a few years, so the experience was still raw. But I was also amazed and disappointed by the narrowness of some in the art community about what they felt was wrong with "Culture in Action."

AME/GF/SN: Tell us about some of this wrongness.

MJJ: This issue of "who is the artist?" was very baffling to people—both art viewers and art critics. If the teenager has a say in a project or the community member who lives in that neighborhood, then who is the artist? Can someone without art training—and status—be an artist, too? And what happens to the quality of the art if we let the public in and share authorship? I had thought we'd surpassed these questions in the twentieth century and that we could look back to the origins of art within civilization; the critic's certification of art, the artist's certification with an MFA is, of course, a recent phenomenon. But rather than this wide view of culture in society, I believe, the very role of those in the art world was challenged.

So, another and equally complex question was "who is the audience for contemporary art?" A case in point: when I mentioned to a prominent local colleague that a block party in a near-west neighborhood of Chicago would be the culminating art event for Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's Tele-Vendendor, this person was aghast, questioning who would go there. Well, the location in question is about two miles from the Museum of Contemporary Art—not very far—but moreover, there are thousands of people who live there. Similarly, regarding Grennan and Sperandio's candy-bar project We Got It! The Workforce Makes the Candy of Their Dreams, a prominent New York art critic questioned the worth of this project because the twelve factory-worker collaborators would not become museumgoers.

Why do we not value them as an audience? Do audience members only become actual if they continue to go to contemporary art shows or support established art institutions? Cannot one encounter, one experience with art, be meaningful for a lifetime and feed back into life? Is not that the goal of art?

AME/GF/SN: Some of this criticism just does not resonate today, shared authorship for instance is more widely understood. What were the other bones of contention for critics?

MJJ: Definitely. The number of participants in each project was also an issue. For instance, Mark Dion's project was centered around fifteen kids—too few persons some thought, and so this was criticized from the outset as privileging only a few. Well, that is the way art museums have operated, we might say, always. So, to be called out for a kind of elitism by giving opportunities, especially a study trip to Belize with the artist, was illuminating about who we value and how education is offered.

And then, one of the most amazing questions for debate was "where is the art?"

AME/GF/SN: Was there no conception that art could take forms other than clearly delimited physical objects?

MJJ: Even before undertaking the experiment, I posited that maybe no art as we know it, artworks or objects, would be made. But what we could do would be to create art experiences, because these are lasting, too. Still, ultimately, when constituencies and artists worked together, many wanted to concretize that experience by making something, and the thing made—be it an installation, performances, or a meal—was a way of extending the art experience to others. Collaborators created a bond and a sense of understanding among themselves and wanted to represent that and share that with others. So, while many in the art world got caught up in asking "Where is the art? Is a hydroponic garden an installation?"—and also the question...
“Who is the artist and who is the audience?”—I think it is possible that such projects allowed us to come back to more essential questions such as: What can art do? Is art about art or is art about life? Why do we need art? Can art have a use? And if it has a use, does this mean we are instrumentalizing the art? I hate this word instrumentalizing. Are we instrumentalizing art because through the experience students learn how to read or how to decode their representation within culture? Can’t art do several things at once?

AME/GF/SN: Do you see a distinction between the reception of community-based projects in Europe versus the USA?

MJJ: I was told in some places that community is an American issue. “We don’t have that problem. We’re Swedes, we’re Italians, we’re whatever—community is your problem.” And I thought, “just wait.” It is true, we are still living with our slave past, we are still living with our immigrant conflict. It is not even a balance. It is two poles, the American dream and denigration of others. It is a messy complexity. And this is the environment out of which Jane Addams and John Dewey came, who I wrote about. A reason that we looked at those two figures to kind of ground what was going on in Chicago, not because Chicago was exceptional, but because Chicago was a kind of paradigm. It grew by millions overnight. I am forgetting my statistics, but at the end of the nineteenth century, about 77 percent of the people were born somewhere else. We always thought incorrectly of Europe as having subsidy for art, government sponsorship, and therefore, that everybody was cultured, and into contemporary art. Well, once government money started to fall away, you also find that not everybody is into contemporary art.

AME/GF/SN: Could you comment on Social Practice?

MJJ: Well, critics asked: “If we think art can have an effect, then what kind of function can it have?” Claire Bishop speaks about the need for critics to be on guard, not to get too close to their own personal experience. I had problems with that; it seemed to separate the experience from the art. She quoted Christian Philipp Müller being bored on the bus press tour, to which I would retort: This was an opportunity to talk to others, to look out the window to see a Chicago you had not seen, to reflect, to make stops and talk to other Chicagoans, to have a different experience. And this symposium-on-wheels was only one of several occasions over two years in which we brought together constituencies who never talk to each other.

This is now an accepted modality of social practice. So, when such moments were written off as feel-good, I hope we understand today that feeling good is a real manifestation of the embodiment of the process that carries with it agency for the individual that can exist also on a collective level. It is maybe the same at a conventional art opening when artists and curators and collectors feel good about works and an exhibition finally brought to pass. Each, in their own way, can be a transformative experience.
Sonsbeek 93

Arnhem, 1993
June 5–September 26

Artists: Mario Airò, Paweł Althamer, Art Orienté Objet (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin), Michael Asher, Christina Assmann, Mirosław Bałka, Blue Funk (Evelyn Byrne, Valerie Conor, Tom Green, Brian Hand, Jaki Irvine and Kevin Kelly), Alighiero Boetti, Jean-Baptiste Bruant, Tom Burr, Patrick Corillon, Stephan Dillemuth, Mark Dion, Kate Ericson/Mel Ziegler, Pepe Espaliú, Anna Gudjónsdóttir/Till Krause, Ann Hamilton, Ken Hardy, Irene & Christine Hohenbüchler, Zuzanna Janin, Kamagurka (Luc Zeebroek), Mike Kelley, John Körmeling, Liz Larner/Susan Narduli, Yuri Leiderman, Mark Manders, Annette Massager, Juan Muñoz, Jan de Pavert, Vong Phaophanit, Keith Piper, Marc Quinn, Allen Ruppersberg, Eran Schaerf, Andreas Siekmann, Lawrence Weiner, Reindert Wepko van de Wint, and Rémy Zaugg

Curator: Valerie Smith

Organization: Foundation Sonsbeek 93

Edited by Giulia Floris and Julius Lehmann

Lawrence Weiner’s posters for “Sonsbeek 93” on a public advertising hoarding (1993). Photo: Pieter Boersma © Lawrence Weiner / Bildupphovsrätt 2021
In Search of Publicness and Common Ground

Julius Lehmann

Sonsbeek Park, a 19th century landscape garden in the Dutch city of Arnhem, was the point of departure for one of Europe’s first, and longest running, exhibition series of outdoor sculpture and public art. Launched in 1949 in the aftermath of the Second World War as an open-air sculpture show in the park, the format has gradually shifted to accommodate predominantly site-specific work and interventions in public space.

However, despite its longevity and undoubted influence, there were fluctuations and breaks in continuity, illustrated in an almost emblematic way by the 15-year pause that followed Wim Beeren’s equally revolutionary and controversial “Sonsbeek 71: Sonsbeek buiten de perken” (Sonsbeek beyond the Pale).

In many ways “Sonsbeek 93,” curated by US-American Valerie Smith, stands out as a turning point in public art: a transition between 1980s conceptions of site-specific work and the forms of non-monumental intervention and socially engaged art that emerged in the 1990s. In contrast to her immediate predecessor Saskia Bos, who in 1986 had opted for a return to the park and to a more traditional display (postmodern) sculpture in glass pavilions, Smith decided to go beyond these boundaries—once again—and reach out into the urban structure of Arnhem. As a conceptual model, diagram of the exhibition’s layout, and project logo, she divided the urban area into three concentric rings radiating out from the park’s center, each with its own character: the park as a recreational area; the city center with its daily life and institutions—its “urban success and failure,” as the exhibition brochure pointed out; and finally, the rural area of the polder landscape on the outskirts.

The thirty-eight international artists and collectives involved in the exhibition were invited to explore the city and engage with its social fabric. Their selection represents a “genealogy” ranging from an older generation of artists such as Michael Asher, a father of institutional critique, to self-organized artists’ groups and younger artists in their twenties and thirties, many of whom were participating in an international exhibition for the first time—thus creating a link between the conceptual practice of the 1970s and the most recent developments.

A view of the curatorial proposal (dated November 1991) included in the catalogue shows that the artistic examination of the site formed a starting point for the curatorial concept: “The Art for Sonsbeek 93 should be site-specific or situational work in some form. [...] The work must create meaning from or for the place in which it exists,” Smith writes.

Nevertheless—and here lies the decisive difference from previous exhibitions in urban space—for her, the in-situ model, the fusion of artwork and location, was not a goal in itself but a means to establish an interaction between art and its social context. It is precisely this shift from public space to the public sphere—that reflects a new tendency in public art and opened up new possibilities for artistic experimentation. Smith’s proposal further outlines these key issues and goals as follows:

“For whom is public art? Whom does it address? Artists working within urban or rural situations, must consider the history of the place, the people who frequent or circulate there and the dominant activities of that particular locality. The art should be one in which the viewer participates by experiencing a complete environment rather than walking around it like a piece of furniture. [...] As a new concept of sculpture in public spaces broadens its definition, so too must Sonsbeek 93 respond to this ever-expanding field by raising the issue of PUBLICNESS as it relates to large audience with different perspectives. [...] I propose that Sonsbeek 93 be the COMMON GROUND on which the issue of the individual, multiculturalism and public art are debated.”

Guided by the conceptual framework of “Sonsbeek 93,” the invited artists not only used the “typical” places of art in public space such as the park and inner-city spaces, but—with great openness in the choice of artistic genre, ranging from sculpture to performance—they also realized their interventions in such diverse (social) environments, semi-public spaces, and institutions as the theatre, a former post office, the museum, a veterans’ home, the red-light district, local transport buses, a large floating on the Rhine, a cemetery, and the local jail. The thematic spectrum of their artistic contributions ranged from history and urbanism to issues of colonialism, publics and counter-publics, sexual identity, and the AIDS crisis.

Many of the projects realized for the exhibition would later prove to be key works of the artists involved. Mike Kelley made a first foray into exhibition-making by curating an “exhibition within the exhibition” revolving around the Freudian notion of the “uncanny” (shown at the local Gemeentemuseum). Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler explored “multiple authorship” through a collaboration with a group of prison inmates. Mark Dion’s intervention at the Bronbeek Museum provided insight not only into the military and colonial history of the Dutch nation, but also into individual biographies of retired army veterans. Juan Muñoz’s fictitious radio broadcast, Building for Music, created an entirely imaginary site, and Andreas Siekmann’s Square of Permanent Reorganization reflected on urban planning policy by projecting seven alternative strategies for the use of a neglected square in the city center, each addressing the needs of a different section of local society.
However, despite the search for points of connection between the artistic and social discussion and Smith’s idealistic goal of reaching out and creating a link to the social reality of Arnhem, “common ground” was hard to find. As in the case of “Sonsbeek 71” two decades earlier, this expansion into the everyday—a shift from exhibiting art to the public to exposing the public to art, one might say—was met with the suspicion of cultural elitism and, in part at least, a fierce rejection from the (local) audience and press. This revealed not only a lack of understanding or openness to the latest art practices, but more importantly the need to “build an audience over time.”

The main points of criticism concerned the inaccessibility and wide dispersion of the exhibition’s locations across the city, insufficient guidance from the maps and guidebooks distributed to viewers, and the often visually inconspicuous character of the (neo-)conceptual works. Rather symbolically in retrospect, the show got off to an inauspicious start with an opening swamped by rain, and spectators and journalists calf-deep in mud. Struggling with poor press reviews, repeated cases of vandalism, and ending in major financial problems, “Sonsbeek 93” for all its innovations—its timely update of site-specificity and shift towards social issues—as well as Smith’s nose for emerging developments in art went down as one of the most controversial editions of Sonsbeek. Its visionary character was recognized only by individual critics at the time, but “Sonsbeek 93” was received by exhibition makers and, with some delay, also became the subject of research into exhibition history.

Apart from the sculptural contributions of Paweł Althamer, Mirosław Bałka, Alighiero Boetti, and Marc Quinn, which are now part of the collections of the Sculpture Garden at Museum Arnhem and the Kröller-Müller Museum in nearby Otterlo, only two works remained on site after the exhibition ended: an only partially realized illuminated sign work by Swiss conceptualist Rémy Zaugg (Bridges of Arnhem) and a work by German artist Christina Assmann.

One of the most unusual features of “Sonsbeek 93” is its idiosyncratic catalogue. It took the form of a book comprising personal diary notes by Valerie Smith and abundant correspondence between the curator and the participating artists in chronological order from November 1991 until May 1993: Fax-letters, conversations, proposals, preliminary sketches for projects realized and unrealized, as well as photographic snapshots. It constituted an archive in its own right and, according to its designer, Wigger Bierma, “a letter to the future.” Bringing the usually invisible process of artistic and curatorial work to the fore, the book does without any introduction, theoretical essays, or explanatory texts.

This however turns research on “Sonsbeek 93” into a search for clues: The documentation of the exhibition as a collective “organism” takes on more weight than the individual artistic projects which are often presented without identifying titles and are barely documented in their finished state. A certain obscurity thus becomes the flip side of unconventional transparency and bold immediacy.

The following chapter attempts to approach the exhibition and its critical reception based on a selection of edited material and archival documents from 1993, as well as conversations with actors and contemporary witnesses conducted in 2020/21. Central interviews with the
curator Valerie Smith and artist Andreas Siekmann exemplify the curatorial and artistic perspectives on the social and public sphere. Did “Sonsbeek 93” fail in its ambitious goals or, on the contrary, did the clash of antagonistic forces in fact stimulate discussion and self-reflection as a characteristic feature of publicness?

Experiences and Ephemera: ephemera: 1) A species of mayfly (Ephemeridae); 2) Items and printed matter intended for short-term use only, such as posters, postcards, and admission tickets; What were the experiences of the owners of group ticket No. 3113 during their visit? Or, as the collected stamp marks say: “Wat/is/ Sonsbeek 93”?

1. “Sonsbeek '49” followed the example of “Sculpture in the Open Air” held in Battersea Park, London (1948, 1951). The first sculpture show in war-devastated Arnhem was initiated by the Vereniging voor Vreemdelingenwerk (VVV), a national institution fostering tourism. Its inauguration was part of the processing of the experience of war and fascism, and expressed a belief in the democratic public space which it aimed to promote. Further examples of this post-war trend of sculpture gardens and open-air shows are “Sculpture in the Open Air,” Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow (1949), “Plastik im Freien,” Hamburg (1953). In the context of this “prologue in the park” preceding the exhibition programme to a workshop. It is a road away from relative comfort to the acceptance of direct responsibilities and open endings.” Wim Beeren, “From exhibition to activity,” in Sonsbeek 71. Sonsbeek buiten de perken (Arnhem: Selbstverlag, 1973), Vol. 3, 11–13, 13.

2. “Sonsbeek 71” moved beyond the boundaries of the park (and the genre of sculpture) for the first time. The exhibition developed as a decentralized activity spread over various locations throughout the country; Wim Beeren writes in the catalogue for “Sonsbeek 71”, “It is evident that the term exhibition is only partly relevant. We have turned to the word ‘manifestation’ and subsequently to ‘activity.’ Sonsbeek 71 is more a workshop than a show. This means that the Dutch public will not be able to take a walk amongst impressive statues, but that it will have the opportunity of a much closer involvement. […] The road to this form of activity has been a long one, and many difficult decisions had to be taken on the way. It has been a road leading from a precise.


5. Camiel van Winkel, During the Exhibition the Gallery will be Closed: Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012), 85.


8. Mike Kelley’s The Uncanny was later shown in altered versions at Tate Liverpool and at Museum Moderne Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok), Vienna, both in 2004. On the exhibition as artistic medium see Alison Green, When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as a Medium (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

9. A term used by artist Mark Dion during a conversation in December 2020, when he reflected on continuity and change in exhibition formats in relation to the public, using the example of Sonsbeek and Skulptur Projekte Münster in which he participated in 1993 and 1997.


11. The publicness of the sites and the distance between them made it impossible to control ticket sales. The exhibition closed with 12,000 paying visitors. See: “Sonsbeek 93: financial debacle,” in Internationaal, 2016.


13. The second part of Zaugg’s work, which consisted of corresponding neon signs on the opposite bridge evoking associations with the “Battle of Arnhem” in 1944, was never completed. See Rémy Zaugg, The Work’s Unfolding (Oesterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 1996); for an overview of all permanent works from previous Sonsbeek exhibitions in the Arnhem city area and nearby museums, see Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal, ed. De Collectie SONSBEEK: Rekken uit de Arnhemse openluchttentoonstellingen sinds 1949 (Arnhem: Stichting Sonsbeek Internationaal, 2016).

Public Art and Public Opinion: “Sonsbeek 93” in dialogue with the city,” in an article published in De Gelderlander, September 11, 1993 which reproduced an official poster for “Sonsbeek 93” (left) and a concert poster (right) circulated by the youth center Willemeen, Arnhem that vigorously if unenthusiastically engaged with the exhibition: “FUCK ART—LET’S ROCK.”

Orientation aid for “Sonsbeek 93.” A quote from the press release: “Visitors to Sonsbeek 93 will not be able to avoid the immediacy of the experience. They will move from inside to outside, from high to low, from here to there and back again, traversing a multitude of different spaces and atmospheres. The centre will be everywhere and nowhere—at each and every exhibition site simultaneously. The structure of Sonsbeek 93 will be revealed only in each visitor’s individual odyssey.” So much for the theory; in practice, visitors first had to pick up tickets and the folding map at the information center at Villa Sonsbeek to find out about possible bike routes, footpaths, and locations. In the end many got lost anyway. Photos: sonsbeek archive.
Nothing to Lose
Stephan Dillemuth in Conversation with Valerie Smith, June 1993
Julius Lehman

Stephan Dillemuth participated in both “Sonsbeek 93” in Arnhem and “Project Unité” in Firminy contributing documentaries to each of the parallel exhibitions. The Firminy video was screened at Villa Sonsbeek in Arnhem and vice versa, creating an “exchange of audiences and places”: a conceptual linking between different sites, spaces and situations across borders. At first glance a gesture of European friendship, it merely covered up the competition between the two ambitious projects, according to Dillemuth’s own recollection.

At the time Dillemuth, together with Josef Strau, was running the self-organized project space “Friesenwall 120” in Cologne where, inspired by Gerry Schum’s (1938–1976) visionary Television Gallery he began experimenting with video as a medium of exhibition documentation. His films about “Sonsbeek 93” and “Project Unité” include interviews with the respective curators Valerie Smith and Yves Aupetitallot as well as with the artists involved. They provide insight into the preparatory phase while making the framework conditions of the respective art exhibitions visible as an implicit institutional critique.

In a montage-like manner, he uses excerpts from essayistic films about “Sonsbeek 71” and “Sonsbeek 86” by Belgian filmmaker Jef Cornelis (1943–2018) as archival footage, to create a historical perspective and ironic displacements. The film ends with a tongue-in-cheek comment. A tracking shot of the ferris wheel on the fairground in downtown Arnhem is underscored with a rock classic by The Spencer Davis Group (“Keep on Running”): the accelerated art world as a seasonal traveling circus?

Stephan Dillemuth’s interview with Valerie Smith, transcribed below, is a thread that runs through the documentary. It took place in June 1993 shortly before the opening of the exhibition and reflects her curatorial thinking, personal determination, and doubt in the face of increasing pressure and criticism.

Excerpt from the Documentary Sonsbeek 93:

Stephan Dillemuth, 56.40 min, 1993. Realized for “Project Unité,” Firminy, France

Featuring conversations with: Christina Assmann, Miroslaw Balka, Tom Burr, Mark Dion, Anna Gudjonsdottir/Till Krause, Christine & Irene Hohenbüchler, Mike Kelley, Allen Ruppersberg, Jan van de Pavert, Erhan Schaerf, Andreas Siekmann, Valerie Smith, Reindert Wepko van de Wint, Rémy Zaugg

Valerie Smith in conversation with Stephan Dillemuth, film still from the documentary Sonsbeek 93
Valerie Smith: For sure I knew I wanted to get out of the park. The structure, the model of the three circles—the park, the city, and the polder—served as a concept. But it never was a concept, it was always just a model, a structure, a kind of skeleton to hold the meat of the exhibition. But I knew that I wanted to approach the exhibition in a certain way, and the approach was to make it a research project.

I was looking for artists who were not making concrete objects, that were able to deal with the site that they chose. That they were able to either create their own world, or that they were able to take that world, that information, out there and integrate or ameliorate or construct something. I didn't want to show painting. I really didn't want to show painting.

When I started working on the '93 exhibition, I had to look at the '71 exhibition, but I feel that site-specificity and situationalism have changed considerably since the '50s, '60s, '70s, and I feel that, for instance in the early '70s, when you are talking about site-specificity you are talking about really, literally that. That is making a work for a specific site.

And here I think it is a kind of integration between site and situation, and it's much more a sociological one, much more a personal one.

[About Lawrence Weiner and the poster he created for "Sonsbeek 93" with the slogan “Nothing to Lose”]:

I wanted him to cross the line between promotion, publicity, and making work. He said he had done a poster for a band once, but he wasn't in the business of doing this. This led on for Lawrence: “Nothing to Lose” had a double meaning. Apparently, it also meant something like “never mind,” and it had to do with his relationship with the Hells Angels, and with the fascist government [during the German occupation] in Holland.
For me, it's an experiment, it's a laboratory. And yes, the work could fall flat on its face and get disastrous reviews, and I'll maybe never have another job! It doesn't matter, you know? Because I will at least have put all my entire physical, mental, spiritual being into that. And I think you have to do that. You have to be obsessed! You have to be totally involved! And I want this laboratory. That's what I want. I think it should always be a laboratory. And fuck new trends! If new trends come out of that, it's out of my control. I mean if people are interested in new trends, that's not what “Sonsbeek 93” is. Some of the artists... no one knows anything about. And I am sure it's not marketable. So how can it be new trends? But if it turns out to be new trends, then fine... But that's something that the public, the critics, and the dealers do afterward. It's not my doing and it's certainly not my intention. No, it's not my intention.

Looking Back at Sonsbeek 93
A Conversation with Valerie Smith
Giulia Floris and Julius Lehmann

Giulia Floris, Julius Lehmann: Valerie, you moved from New York to Arnhem in 1991 to prepare for the exhibition. How did you engage with the city and Sonsbeek's long tradition?

Valerie Smith: It’s true that Sonsbeek has a long tradition, but I was not very knowledgeable about its history until I was officially hired. I visited the 1986 edition, which was curated by Saskia Bos, but I remember I was not able to get a hold of the 1971 catalogue until I was appointed director of the 1993 edition. While I lived in Arnhem, I became more aware of its history and met central figures of the Dutch Art world, like Wim Beeren who curated “Sonsbeek buiten de perken” (Sonsbeek beyond the Pale) in 1971. Many people assumed I would be living in Amsterdam, but I knew that my concept wouldn't have allowed that: I had to be on the ground.

The concept that I presented was not based on a wide research about history, Sonsbeek, Arnhem or Holland. I was aware of wanting to propose something different from the previous edition in 1986. This created a misunderstanding in the Dutch press. Saskia Bos, and the Belgian curator Chris Dercon, both friends of mine, said I was criticized in the press for being critical of her ‘86 exhibition. Since I could not read Dutch, I was blissfully oblivious of what the Press were writing and I believe that protected me in a way. On the other hand, Saskia was upset, and I was embarrassed because I did not remember having said anything critical: in 1986 Saskia realized a poetic project of pavilions around the Sonsbeek Villa and out in the Park. “Sonsbeek 86” didn't inspire me to do the opposite, but it was clear I couldn't go in that sculptural direction: it is in this sense that “Sonsbeek 93” represented a reaction to the edition of 1986.

Comparisons were made between “Sonsbeek 93” and ‘71. But ‘71 dealt more with spatial relations and ‘sculpture in the expanded field.’ Many installations were permanent and monumental—so, quite different than what I decided to do. Anyway, I didn't know enough about the 1971 edition when I started to plan my exhibition, but I was impressed by Kasper König’s “Skulptur Projekte” in Münster and wanted to develop it further. I visited the 1987 edition and thought about expanding an exhibition all over the city, although my exhibition
had to be different somehow. Then, in 1986, there was “Chambres d’Amis” in Ghent, curated by Jan Hoet, which really impressed me.

GF, JL: In Stephan Dillemuth’s documentary film Sonsbeek 93, you described the exhibition as an exploratory project and a laboratory. To what extent does this apply to your own curatorial work and to the participating artists?

VS: To be honest I cannot even remember having used this notion of the laboratory but, if it is a quote, for sure I did. These art historical words, like ‘site-specificity,’ ‘relational aesthetics,’ ‘exploratory projects,’ and ‘laboratory,’ are part of a vocabulary that came up at that time. This could also be somewhere in between my reality then, trying to find a way of describing what was going to happen and giving the press something to hold on to. In retrospect, it also could have been a terminology to warn people—maybe unconsciously—that there could be some potentially unfinished, invisible and critical artworks in the show. When something is said to be ‘exploratory’ or ‘laboratorial,’ the idea of a process is conjured up and so, in this sense, the meaning was very much like late ’60s or early ’70s conceptual work. I wanted it to be that way. If it yields an interesting result, it’s great, but the most fascinating aspect is working with the artists.

This idea of the process had an impact also on my collaboration with the artists: I invited each of them to come to Arnhem for two weeks to make a proposal—or several—at the end of their stay. Then I got together with the team and I thought about whether it was realizable or not, and whether it made sense for the exhibition. I drove them around the city and its outskirts, we explored, talked and thought about the project together. Many artists went through this process, but not all of them. Some artists clearly did not work that way, but I loved their projects so much that I made exceptions. One example is Juan Muñoz, who came up with a beautiful radio narrative that he made with his brother-in-law, the composer Alberto Iglesias. They imagined a history of an Arnhem concert hall with just one voice and music. Alighiero Boetti had several proposals. We settled on his self-portrait/fountain that produced steam and the idea of finding it in the woods. Sadly, there was a narrative that was lost, because the Sonsbeek fax machine ran out of ink. And Mike Kelley was adamant that he didn’t work site-specifically and didn’t agree with this process, which is quite funny, since he ended up realizing one of the biggest site-specific projects in “Sonsbeek 93”!

GF, JL: Did you already have certain locations in mind that you suggested to the invited artists?

VS: A great help to me for building my understanding of Arnhem was Jan Brand, the catalogue editor and Ellie Gubbels, my assistant. They both lived in Arnhem and were very present. Also, the museum directors on the board, Evert van Staaten and Jan Debbaut, as well as Martin Saunders and Tom van Gestel of Mondriaan Fonds. I counted them as my allies, and they really supported me. So, thanks to their help, spending time in Arnhem for so long and driving around, always thinking about different places to collaborate with, the ideas came. It was an organic situation, and ideas came from all different levels: from me, from the artists, from Jan, from my team, everyone proposing different places.

GF, JL: You have been the first non-Dutch curator of the exhibition, which may have caused some difficulties for you. Did this fresh perspective as a foreigner also represent a potential for you to engage with the city and its particularities?
VS: My mother was French, and my husband Matt [Mullican], worked largely in Europe at that time. So, Europe was not unfamiliar to me. I am half French and half American, but the American side was very strongly perceived in Arnhem and I always felt that I was a foreigner. Many people in the city of Arnhem wanted me to learn Dutch, but this was impossible for me because I was constantly on the road, in meetings with board members to raise more money, travelling to meet artists, showing them around Arnhem, entertaining them at night, hiring people for the team. When I arrived in Arnhem, there wasn’t an existing team to work with, just Ellie and then Jan.

On the other hand, I remember that I often thought about my position in relation to Franz Kafka’s description of looking at the city “with the fresh eyes of a foreigner.” This is the positive perspective. I was not afraid to go into certain areas, or suggest them as places for an exhibition, areas other curators might not have thought of.

I had a sort of “power” by not being Dutch and with a sizable amount of money to realize the exhibition. Nevertheless, there was tension. Arnhem artists wanted to become involved. If I recall correctly, this was not encouraged. But one artist, Mark Manders, a graduate from the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Arnhem (now ArtEZ University of the Arts) was making amazing work and the perfect artist for “Sonsbeek 93.” I also wanted to get students from the academy involved, but I heard this proposal was being discouraged by their professors who suggested they would be exploited if they worked with the “Sonsbeek 93” artists. I was furious. Funding could have been found or academic credits given, but there was no interest.

GF, JL: The diaristic exhibition catalogue for “Sonsbeek 93” provides personal and sometimes even private insight into the working process. How did this concept come about? What was the reaction of the artists to the book?

VS: Jan Brand, who has been involved in the ’86 Sonsbeek catalogue, was recommended to me to be the editor/organizer of the Sonsbeek 93 catalogue. But, when I approached Jan, he told me he was ambivalent about organizing yet another Sonsbeek catalogue. Jan knew that I was writing a journal leading up to and during the Sonsbeek preparation. I allowed him to read it, and he proposed journal entries would be interesting for a book. Quite early in the exhibition it became evident that a catalogue was not an option, but a book on the process, which explored ideas and included conversations with other artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, etc. In this way it echoed the concept of process in the exhibition.

Details in the book’s content may have been refined over a beer at Dingo’s, but essentially, the entire book was Jan’s idea. I was happy with this solution, partially because it meant I didn’t have to write a long formal essay, yet it represented an opportunity to get my ideas out plus my reactions to what artists said and did.

Once we agreed, I didn’t look back, I just let Jan and his team deal with it. I was entirely consumed by the artists, showing them around Arnhem, facilitating their ideas and installations, promoting and fund raising for the exhibition, negotiating city politics, etc. There was little time to examine every detail of the book. I understood that Jan (who also edited the catalogue for Mike Kelley’s “The Uncanny”) would ask each artist permission to publish

Marc Quinn, 12½% Proof 02. Mixed media: Steel, Priva-lite glass, fibre glass, pump, computer, and red wine, 3.05x1.07x1.07m, 1993. A life-size, nude image of the artist in a switchable [‘smart’ or photochromic] glass enclosure spraying red wine from all orifices. Photos: Jay Jopling & Marc Quinn Studio
their correspondence with me. I didn’t control whether he did so in every case, but, of course, I take responsibility for every aspect of it. I can’t precisely respond to the artists’ reactions to the book. I tend to remember criticism rather than praise. I think it was generally very well received with the exception of Michael Asher, who was upset with the correspondence we published and wanted to sue me or Sonsbeek, although we had always been on excellent terms, and we had even realized a project together at Artists Space in New York (1988) before Sonsbeek. In the end he didn’t sue, but it cooled our relationship. We saw each other again, but never talked about it.

GF, JL: Wigger Bierma, the designer of the catalogue, reports that the original plan was to make a second book documenting the finished works. Do you remember something about it?

VS: I have a vague memory of a conversation about that but, unfortunately, it was never realized because there was no budget for it. In retrospect, regarding the editorial apparatus, I should have paid more attention to the incomprehensible maps in the small visitor’s guide printed in English, German and Dutch that accompanied the exhibition. That was my fault, it was a learning curve for me. I always considered the editorial process as Jan’s project: he made the book happen and he was really brilliant at it.

GF, JL: What would you consider to be the results and successes of “Sonsbeek 93”?

VS: The results were beautiful and moving, but, as I mentioned before, the process was more important. Maybe it was a bit indulgent to insist on the curatorial and artistic process and luxuriate in the time to do it. On the other hand, this kind of “process strategy” is risky and represents more work, more discussions. Everything about it is trial and error and results are not guaranteed: as curator, you hope that something poetic will come out and you place a lot of power and faith in the artists, because it is impossible to be on top of so many artists all the time, nor would I want to be. You must support the artists, as a facilitator in a way and make the conditions the best possible for them. There are always projects that could fail hard, which generate criticism of the curator.

It is often difficult to talk about the results from that experience, because certain memories are emotional. I remember an afternoon after the opening, when everybody had left and I went around, looking at the works taking some pictures: I almost came to tears because they were so beautiful. The whole effort was incredible, and the result were amazing. Some artists went above and beyond their initial idea. There were a few who struggled, maybe because I was not present enough for them, or they were not experienced enough. It is very hard to pinpoint exactly why something fails. It is always a combination of context and relationships. And failure is positive, because you learn from it. Most of the projects were really good, and this is an incredible reward.

GF, JL: One of the goals of “Sonsbeek 93” was to bring “publicness” into focus, proposing the exhibition as “the COMMON GROUND on which the issues of the individual, multiculturalism and public art are debated.” However, shortly after the opening, the citizens of Arnhem started to oppose the artistic interventions, resulting in an unforeseen wave of vandalism. Why was it so difficult to establish a fruitful relationship with the city?

VS: My idea of publicness was that the artwork had to reach out to citizens in Arnhem in their day-to-day activities, making the work accessible and not
somewhere in the park where they had to go to them. This interpretation of what it means to be public changed the dialogue with the audience and that was important to me.

A problem mainly for visitors, but also for the local community, was that the exhibition was spread out. Even so, I don’t think I would have changed it dramatically. It was difficult for visitors to find the projects and that is something I would have changed: improving the guide’s text and map. The exhibition was indeed very demanding.

Also, there was a certain conservativism from Arnhem citizens or the press. I believe this was combined with judgements that my exhibition was imposed on the city by a “foreigner” who didn’t understand, and, on the other hand, from a debate about what public art should be. I am thinking in particular of works like Art Orienté Objet’s project and Marc Quinn’s piece, that were confrontational and difficult for the public.

I also think about the performance of Pepe Espaliú. The Queen’s visit to “Sonsbeek 93,” when she saw his performance is a moment I will never forget. We walked into the Gemeentemuseum and stood, looking out onto the River Rhine from the big picture window in the gallery. The Queen was standing between me and Mr. Berghuis, a board member. I don’t know what she thought, I imagine she was shocked. There, through the park up on a platform that collared a tree like a nest, was Pepe. He had a lot of clothes on that he slowly shed as he walked around the collard nest-like platform. When he was entirely naked that marked the end of the performance. It was very emotional to witness, because he exposed himself in a way that nobody else had done. It was one of the most moving things I had ever seen. I am not sure many visitors understood that work, and I never knew, since I couldn’t read the reviews, what the press thought. But I didn’t care, because I knew it to be a powerful work. It was very tough to see. Even after all these years the thought of it makes me emotional, not only because he died shortly after, but because it reflected so poetically and in such a raw and real way the terrible AIDS epidemic of that time.

GF, JL: How would you describe the hierarchical distribution of roles between artist and curator in the working process?

VS: My answer is very simple: artists have all the power on every level. They are a great source of information and influence and they have inspired me enormously. I don’t believe in the issue that has come out in the last decade, the curator as artist: personally, I am just there to assist the artists to realize whatever they want.

GF, JL: The art year 1993 was marked by a series of exhibitions that addressed questions of social contexts, new forms of site-specificity and institutional critique, through works by a younger generation of artists. How do you assess this development with a temporal distance of now almost 30 years?

VS: “Sonsbeek 93” was the outcome of a direction I was already working towards at Artists Space in New York in the projects I did with Mel Ziegler and Michael Asher, and that I wanted to develop and expand in Arnhem. I didn’t know about “Project Unité” in Firminy until I was already well into “Sonsbeek 93.” Christian Philipp Müller or Stephan Dillemuth told me about it as they both participated. I am ashamed to confess that I didn’t find the time to visit either “Project Unité” or “Culture in Action” in Chicago that summer. But I did meet Mary Jane Jacob briefly when she visited “Sonsbeek 93.”
The idea of “social context” really came out of wanting the artists and their work/projects to have a direct impact on the Arnhem community, to get the citizens engaged in one way or another. To combat the idea of a foreign body beaming down for a finite time into a foreign land. I was not aware that it had become a trend. By this time, I had done so many object/thematic exhibitions at Artists Space that I wanted to move away from this. So, when I was given this opportunity in Arnhem, I just went with my interests and instincts and tried to cultivate civic relationships with a great deal of assistance from the team and Arnhem board. Sometimes I thought of the work as less site-specific as site-situational.

I was never a great fan of “institutional critique.” But, certainly, we [“Sonsbeek 93”] did produce work that was/is still considered driven by this concept. I don’t recall ever using that term, however, or being attracted to it. It wasn’t a term that was as codified then as it is now. Much of what passes for that now is of little interest to me. I think it is a very difficult thing to pull off well.

GF, JL: In retrospect, “Sonsbeek 93” is often described as a particularly “ephemeral” edition, since the exhibition left few permanent traces in the urban space of Arnhem and some temporary works were barely documented photographically in their finished state. How do you see the legacy of the exhibition?

VS: There were roughly eight projects that still physically exist in one form, or another, or were sold to a museum, or were purchased and remained in the city. Some of the project proposals in the form of designs or sketches were acquired by Evert van Straaten at the Kröller-Müller Museum. Jan Brand’s ex-wife, a photographer, took some beautiful photographs, which must be in the “Sonsbeek 93” archive [at the Gelders Archief, Arnhem] but they were not comprehensive. A video recording was made. I have a copy but have not looked at it. I took photos after all the projects were up and made some slides—some of which are lost, because I lent them to someone, and they were not returned. The ones which I do have I later digitized, but it isn’t a very extensive collection either. There was to be a supplement to the catalogue—a before and after—of the actual finished works, but we must have run out of money. It seems unthinkable in this day and age of visual overload that the exhibition was so poorly documented. It is sad to think that so much of what was said and done is gone forever, but somehow it seems fitting.

Finally, it is true that the entire exhibition was ephemeral in some way, but I am okay with that. I never believed in the exhibition as something that must be permanent. “Sonsbeek 93” was a great project for me, and I feel, and I hope—and I am pretty sure others do too—that it is still very much alive.

2. Mike Kelley, The Uncanny (Arnhem: Jan Brand Boeken, 1993). [Catalogue of the exhibition/artwork organized by Mike Kelley in the Gemeentemuseum, Arnhem; the book was published concurrently with the international art exhibition “Sonsbeek 93.”]
3. Asher had previously written to Valerie Smith and Jan Brand expressing interest in the concept of the book with its specific focus on the processes behind the exhibition but, in the case of his work, declined to include his notes. See Kirsi Peltomäki, ed. Public Knowledge: Selected Writings by Michael Asher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 21.
Among the artists who participated in “Sonsbeek 93,” Andreas Siekmann perhaps dealt with urban space in the most direct way by making it the subject of his work. For his project *Square of Permanent Reorganization* he chose a neglected square located between the station and the city center. In a state of abandonment, the postwar ensemble, consisting of a seating area surrounded by a modernist pergola and concrete windbreaks and a fountain basin with a 1960s bronze sculpture was scheduled to be demolished and replaced by the city with a commercial complex with parking garage in the near future. Siekmann decided to enclose the entire inner area of the square with a wooden construction fence, painted red to match the color of the square’s roofing, thereby giving the construction a minimalist effect resembling “something like a big Donald Judd-box in red where the lid opens”:  

An ironic reference to the generation of minimalists who played a formative role in pioneering exhibitions such as “Sonsbeek 71.” However, the sculptural form or the aesthetic reference to the site, were by no means the focus of interest. In fact, the work consisted of 159 colored watercolor drawings transferred to plastic film, which could be viewed on all four sides of the square through peepholes in the wooden walls. As if through a kaleidoscope, passers-by and exhibition visitors were able to view seven different storyboards for potential re-functioning of the square according to the needs of various parts of the population whom the artist interviewed for the project: Groups of students from nearby schools, municipal employees, and homeless people, among others.  

On the basis of these model scenarios “of what the square might look like if it were to fulfill a genuine function instead of a representative one,” Siekmann exemplifies the constitution of the (democratic) public sphere and its partial publics by showing conflicts of particular interests (resulting from the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion) and reflecting on urban image policy as well as the increasing privatization and commercialization of public space. At the same time public art itself is critically questioned: What role do large-scale exhibitions play in the cycle of city politics, urban valorization, and gentrification? How can an artistic intervention escape framing by different interests?

“For the duration of the exhibition, there will be a construction fence around this square,” as Siekmann explains in Stephan Dillemuth’s exhibition documentary. “The height of the construction fence is such that the umbrella-like concrete segments peek out at the top. [...] The whole project [...] is not about form and design, but about the question of a need. So, it’s about ‘place’ in a double sense: Whether there is room for it, whether it is possible at all, whether there is still something in common. [...] Maybe there is no need at all, but if I, as an artist now put an art work out there, I would, if I comply with the whole dirigisme of the city, just fall in line and provide some furniture. And it doesn’t make sense like that.”

As Siekmann humorously illustrates in his drawings, even the most idealistic projects and community concepts, may end in failure and conflict, and so the possible reaction of the citizens of Arnhem is already anticipated in the concept.
A Letter from Andreas Siekmann to Valerie Smith, August 1993
[Transcription from the archival document; Gelders Archief, Arnhem: 2058, 4.04, 167]

Dear Valerie,

Greetings from Düsseldorf.

I would like to once again state my position to your idea for a meeting with the persons involved in the actions with the fence. I don't want a meeting with them under these conditions for the following reasons: Sonsbeek 93 has been “victimized” by vandalism in an unprecedented way. This is true not only for my work, but also a great part of the whole exhibition. Most of the works have been damaged or destroyed without any commentary whatsoever. This is a clear sign that the integration (at least the social) of the exhibition in the city life failed.

In the closing podium discussion (that you spoke of) it would be interesting to reflect to what extent such terms as “social intervention,” “context related work” or “situational thinking” from the side of the organizers and participating artists were applied or even understood. And to what extent the provocation lies in the exhibition, in how far these terms are used without being practiced in the concrete adaptation to the city environment here. The discussion must be about a misunderstood avantgarde issue.

Vandalism here is probably due to a defense against an art-language that tries to assert itself without differentiated mediating activity. Vandalism is not the conservative cultural statement of the underprivileged, as it would like to be seen from the side of the participating artists and curators. Vandalism is a seismograph for how sensitively the political or social situation are dealt with. That vandalism occurs more often to public art as to cars or banks admittedly has to do with the legal and police regulatory instances, but still it demonstrates an atmosphere.

In the third attack on my work the residents of Arnhem used the occasion to bring up questions and to express their dissatisfaction with the exhibition and the situation directly at the square. (If you have read some of the comments, then you surely noticed that some of them were about Sonsbeek

2. The seven alternative squares are: “Self-activation Square”: a square, which is left to itself and made available for any type of intervention; “Gardner’s Square”: projected for two years following the ideas of local school children; “Winter Square,” a concept dealing with the question: What would happen if the ground consisted of gratings and heating ventilators, if blankets and sleeping bags were handed out at the square, and shopping-carts were there ready to use; “Wastage Square”; “Planning Agency Square”; and “Central Perspective Square.” For a detailed documentation of the project see: Hubertus Butin, ed., Andreas Siekmann: Platz der permanenten Neugestaltung, Square of Permanent Reorganization (Cologne: Walther König, 1998).
4. Andreas Siekmann in Stephan Dillemuth, Sonsbeek 93, video, color, 96.40 min, 1993, 24:43–26:08. The film was realized for “Project Unité,” Firminy, France. (Our translation.)
This is how the fence functions, like a valve. I also see a difference to normal vandalism because in other works apparently no relation of this kind was present, because these are perceived more as a foreign object as is the case with the fence. This is due to the fact, that these [other works], instead of concretely dealing with the present context of the city, present just loose (mostly historical) associations. We (the artists and the organizers of the exhibition) then, probably must face the questions in a tendentially private meeting between you, me and a small group surfaced. I would, of course, positively say: “Why didn’t you notice this much sooner. It is about time that you express your protest, etc.”

[...] You claim that the situation at the fence is an exception and therefore should be dealt with in a one-time-meeting. I don’t agree. The situation is only to that extent exceptional in that there for the first time it’s possible to formulate a general dissatisfaction with the exhibition. My work deals in detail with the specific problems inside the city. Due to this, it is possible to develop differentiated types of protest. Of course, in the case of this work there is a chance for such protest forms to build a connection between Arnhem and Sonsbeek 93. Furthermore, at this connection-point it is finally possible to open up a communication with the residents. However, I don’t want to take on an alibi function for a communication that is already too late and should have been planned beforehand. Incidentally, the graffiti on the fence have been, for the second time, painted over in red, although from inception on, this interaction belonged to the concept of the work. Graffities and posters were to be left on the fence because I have something against cosmetics.

I find it to be a contradiction that many articles about vandalism are published and public artworks are still made as if it doesn’t exist. The consequences that I take from this are that all destruction or painting shall be left. This means that from the point where the notes of vandalizers and myself were posterred on the fence, I don’t want anything more to be repaired. Because the square now has really started to reorder itself.

Dear Valery, I now hope that I have made my standpoint clearer than was thus far via telephone possible. Perhaps it would be nice to poster this letter on the fence like the others. This would be a constructive contribution to the transparence of the exhibition structure. Thus far my thoughts.

Call me up and tell me what you think.

Sincerely,
Andreas Siekmann
The Impossibility of Public Art
A Conversation with Andreas Siekmann

Julius Lehmann

Julius Lehmann: How did the concept for the contribution Square of Permanent Reorganization come about? And what role did the previous exhibitions "Sonsbeek 71" and "Sonsbeek 86" play in approaching the local situation in Arnhem and the theme of public space?

Andreas Siekmann: My contribution Square of Permanent Reorganization is based on experiences and discussions that have developed since the beginning of the '90s, especially among artist groups in connection with urban political issues. Always also in critical comparison with institutionalized art exhibitions and their ambivalent role as gentrification machines. As so-called 3-K-artist-subjects = kritische Kuratoren-Künstler (critical-curator-artists) the understanding of the role of the three perspectives was a permanent questioning of the self in comparison with the artistic contents.

"Sonsbeek 71" was of course known to me as a historical exhibition. Simply because there were many of the names represented there that one looked up to. In my case even before studying art. Those were the "heroes": Matta-Clark, Smithson, etc. Although my own artistic work later developed in a completely different direction, of course. In 1986, I visited the exhibition as a student. For the conceptual development of my own project, however, the prehistory of the exhibition format is not decisive. But in the European reception, "Sonsbeek" had a paradigmatic radiation, i.e. projects could also be understood as artistic statements.

In the circle of artist groups that distanced themselves from the institutionalized art world, my participation was initially viewed critically, by the way, but for me, my participation in "Sonsbeek" was primarily about the question: "Does art in public space still make sense? Or how do you get to the underlying motive?" So, for me it was not about art in public space, but about art about public space. Public space is not just there but must be manifested through partial publics.

JL: How did your contribution to "Sonsbeek 93" relate to more recent developments and connections in the 1990s artist scene?

AS: Idiosyncratic as always: it is a desire to work artistically and to have opportunities to formulate oneself in these exhibitions, and is perhaps even a privilege, but the discussions in scenes and among colleagues are nevertheless differently situated than what an "official" exhibition can achieve, which always has to seek a compromise with institutions, politics, and sometimes also with the art market.

JL: How did the collaboration with the exhibition management and the local citizens’ groups in Arnhem go?

AS: Since I lived in Düsseldorf at the time, the journey was not far, and so I made repeated flying visits. During visits with overnight stays there was also a lot of rigmarole on the part of the exhibition organization, i.e. city tours accompanied by the curatorial assistants with photographers who recorded the process as documentation of the show’s self-image. This procedure produces a kind of performance and offers itself to viewers as a model. On the one hand, this curatorial approach is a door-opener, because it gives the work official authority. On the other hand, however, it also obstructs the view of the work and one’s own time for reflection, to think things through differently on the basis of what has been experienced, or to change the project. Consequences also take time to digest, and the “professionalism” of a “new curating” cannot look itself in the face and wants to prove itself through the projects of the invited artists.

Thus, in preparation for my project, there were official appointments at the municipal planning office or in the schools, although I found it important that the groups of students whom I contacted for the elaboration of the “Square of the Teens” participate outside of class, voluntarily and out of their own interest. Completely without the teacher’s gaze. In the case of the people living outside without shelter, whose needs are also thematized in the work (in the drawings about the “Winter Square”), the organizational protocol for making contact had to be abandoned altogether, since the presence of other people, especially photographers, would have made an undisguised exchange impossible.

JL: By what means does the Square of Permanent Reorganization reflect the curatorial concept and the institutional and temporal framework of the exhibition?

AS: The project countered the curatorial propositions and ambitions of the exhibition by incorporating my requests and research enquiries to the various groups I consulted regarding the seven squares for Arnhem, and the processes
of decision-making in the case of each square and each group. It was important to me that the work always also co-thematizes the conditionality of the public space, creating a distance for the viewer to become aware of both the work itself and its conditionality, and to keep them open to criticism. For that is perhaps precisely the little that art can create in public space.

But today there are also projects that are set more in the NGO sector (i.e. outside the art sector), where the political claim is set more factually, e.g. sea rescue or activist groups, etc.

However, that doesn’t redeem or replace the task of artistic action, because the efficiency loops of NGOs (publicity) are not necessarily compatible with art, although I always support collaboration when it arises.

JL: One of the goals of “Sonsbeek 93” was to bring the “public” into focus. However, shortly after the opening, resistance to the artistic installations in urban space emerged from some of the town’s citizens and vandalism recurrently occurred. Was “Sonsbeek 93” nevertheless a successful project?

AS: An exhibition can polarize, even if this has become more of a problem today in the age of social media. That’s why an assessment is also time-dependent. However, current discourses will always flow into exhibitions (e.g. the postcolonial discourse or currently Black Lives Matter), which must propagate an update. The relationship to the public or public space has fundamentally changed; however, and imagining synonyms or equivalents for this remains the challenge of every work, not only artistic ones.

JL: The “site-specific” art of the 1970s and 1980s postulated an inseparable connection between work and site. The society- and context-based approach of the 1990s, on the other hand, had a more model-like character. How do you see this shift?

AS: You could say that authenticity has only migrated, and it has migrated into biographies and into supposed identity. And that, in my view, offers a stale rationale to the “work.” The equation “social relevance = effectiveness” is hosted with a performance and campaign that wants to measure meaning, etc.

JL: What is the significance of major exhibitions like “Sonsbeek” within the discourse around art and the public?

AS: Major exhibitions are “necessary evils” that try to pick up certain things and discourses in the “wrong”—things that are not actually situated there or can be there and yet they are set up as a thesis to become relevant—and perhaps betrayed. For me, they are a “non-site” to pick up a concept of Robert Smithson’s. Art often lags behind socio-political processes and other discourses, and exhibitions tend to act as an occasion for artists and curators to catch up with this development. In the mid-1990s, I plotted a timeline of major exhibitions in Europe that claimed site-specificity and placed this in relation to social currents and discussions of the time (Im Namen der Strassen und Plätze, 1996, ZKM, Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe).

JL: The public sphere and public space have changed since the 1990s, and you have repeatedly addressed the privatization and commercialization of urban space in your work. Moreover, in some ways, the temporal framework and the mechanism of exposure going along with the exhibition can also be at odds with the intention and sustainability of social art projects. How should art in public space be rethought as an intervention? How can public art gain new relevance today?

AS: I believe in the impossibility of public art. This has always been my point of departure.

JL: Nevertheless, the question: What about the social potential of art in public space?

AS: A big question: Cities (in most cases venues for art in public space) have become, at the latest since the financial crisis—which actually hides the ongoing economic crisis—an investment object for risk mitigation of investor funds and corporate guarantees, because the profit expectation from production is too low due to the tendential decline of the rate of profit in contrast to investors expectations of a 7-14% return. This drives up real estate prices, which is also satirized as concrete gold or rentier capitalism. These abstract forces of a systemic bailout work their way into cities and the lives of their residents through cheap credit, zero interest rates, and wage-labor rounds, along with liquidity and budget constraints. Their ability to remain in the city and their very existence is being worn down by intensified work, poor pay, and the behavior imposed by platform-driven data delivery.

Corona has dynamized these processes putting the systemic relevance of art into question, and politicians who repeatedly assert the importance of art to society can only be understood in their ambivalence or, anti-cyclically, as a threat.

In many places, attempts are made to return to the times before corona, with even greater professionalism (division of labor) ands new attention economies,
and to hallucinate a “normality.” It seems difficult to recognize the exhaustion of a system, which this form of competitive economy simply cannot afford climatically, energetically, nor humanly, animalistically, vegetatively.

Art has, as always, a foam and scum function, like the baited float of a fishing rod floating on top of the waves, and can indicate by its twitching the bite of the fish on the hook and barb, it needs the person holding the fishing rod who recognizes it and pulls. (The metaphor of overfishing is forgiveable because the picture fits so beautifully.)

A consequence of this is that the social potential in the art of scenes, connections, and collective projects must be created again; a peer-to-peer network to enter into trust and to create bonds, to want something mutually from each other, and to form audiences or partial publics again for this purpose.

JL: What is the retrospective significance of “Sonsbeek 93” for your artistic work?

AS: For me it was a beginning, a confirmation of artistic work, an acquaintance with an area as one projectively imagines it as a young person. Perhaps it was important for me to experience being able to do what one is convinced of, and it is a privilege to stay as close to this as possible in order to continue to assert it. Any professionalization or conceited behavior erodes this privilege.

While “Sonsbeek 93” has become a focus of research into exhibition history in recent years and is considered by some authors one of the most influential shows of contemporary art, its visitor reception and Arnhem’s inhabitants’ experience of the show are difficult to assess in retrospect. What was the response to the show of locals, visitors, and other actors involved in it? On the one hand, press reviews and reports in 1993 were strikingly negative and, as we have seen, the show encountered resistance in the local community. On the other hand, positive reactions in visitor evaluations and a number of letters from the public (kept at the Gelders Archief in Arnhem) reflect a more balanced picture: It is precisely this dissent, and an apparent tension between approval and rejection, that can be seen as an indicator of the problems and discursive possibilities of public art. In the following pages, an attempt is made to capture multi-vocal testimony of people’s personal experiences of “Sonsbeek 93.” Through short pen-portraits based on interviews and conversations, this section presents the individual perspectives and memories of a diverse selection of participants and witnesses. Supplemented by contemporary press reports and perspectives from members of the sonsbeek2020→2024 curatorial team, this constellation of voices, is traced in a diagram.

Mario Airò participated in “Sonsbeek 93” as well as in “Sonsbeek 9: Locus Focus” in 2001, curated by Jan Hoet. In 1993—his first international exhibition—he contributed a sound installation with several megaphones in the treetops of Sonsbeek Park, an allusion to the Roman Haruspices, cultic soothsayers who foretold the future by interpreting the flight of birds. One of the show’s group of younger participants, he describes working with Valerie Smith as both inspiring and challenging. Above all, he emphasizes the equality of interaction between the show’s curator and its artists. At the same time, however, he recalls few encounters with other artists during the preparatory phase (something that would change during his second participation in Sonsbeek) and little interaction with locals, despite the exhibition’s expansion into the urban space.

“Valerie had a strong determination to realize a show far from the official exhibition parameters at that time. She was looking for all mechanisms that would break the custom of showing art in public space. The dissemination of the exhibition all over the city, sometimes with very little visual impact, was an aspect
Wigger Bierma, a graduate of the Art Academy in Arnhem—today professor of typography at Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg (HFBK)—was commissioned to design the exhibition catalogue about a year before the opening of “Sonsbeek 93.” The book’s unconventional format was conceived and produced in close collaboration with the editors Jan Brand and Catelijne de Muynck. The distinctive cover design was co-produced by Bierma and Valerie Smith’s husband, the US-American artist Matt Mullican. Looking back, Bierma describes creating the diary-like book, full of correspondence and working sketches, that arrived at his studio in parallel with the work process, as an extraordinary experience:

“I was in the trenches doing my work and when I was doing the layout for page 20, the material for page 22 wasn’t there, and so on. It was a very dynamic process, more like working on a newspaper. Towards the end it became more and more hectic, but it was a very interesting process: “Time is up, just go now and do it with whatever you have!” I had never worked like this before. And never afterwards. I mean, it is also crazy, all these unedited faxes and conversation, and so forth. It is quite something to read all this again. Daily work was with Jan Brand. I met Valerie Smith only once in a while, because she had to concentrate on the production of the exhibition, which was a hell of a job! Managing all these people with their ideas that had to be constructed, built, dug out. So, Jan Brand deputized the production of the book to the exhibition, because there was too much work for one person. They were in close contact, however, and talked about things whenever they needed. He [Jan Brand] was—more than I, at the time—aware of the historical value of it all. In the end I was quite proud of it though, and it is a book that I still like. I show it to my students once in a while.”

Quentin Dierick, artist and musician based in Arnhem, joined the staff of “Sonsbeek 93” as a technical assistant and a supervisor at various locations during the exhibition. A 26-year-old art graduate at the time, he was working primarily in the downtown area and was responsible for maintaining various installations including a media work by British artist Keith Piper installed in an area that was—back then—the red-light district of Arnhem. In direct contact with visitors and passers-by, he has himself experienced the tensions between exhibition and public at close quarters. An active member of the local subculture, he increasingly perceived the big event as a spatial “colonization” imposed on the public, and as an overpowering competitor for sponsorship with the local music scene. In retrospect he describes the situation in the red-light district, where the art locations’ windows were sometimes smashed in anonymous protest, as symptomatic of the lack of social connection between the exhibition and the neighborhood:

“Piper’s work dealt with issues of identity and exploitation and was installed in a building that also housed an active brothel. Some people really targeted me when I was working at that location: "Who are you? You are part of this thing!" I had to apologize and explain what the hell it was about and why it was in this red-light district. I had to explain the work and the exhibition context, also the broken windows... There were also sex workers coming to this place to protest a couple of times while I was sitting there. But how do you explain it to them or the customers? Back then, this was a tough area, a big red-light district. Women in windows, SM-studios, and everywhere there was an active heroin trade... A lot of tension, yet it goes along well if you keep it that way. But if you bring something as alien as high art into it, with such powerful issues, then you must be very smart, I think. You must know where you are, and do it in the closest possible communication with everybody around you. You have to be open and direct and, well... that went wrong a couple of times. And, of course, the visitors to “Sonsbeek 93” were dramatically different from the regular visitors to this area. If you bring an art event to such an environment, it can ignite.”

Mark Dion realized his project for “Sonsbeek 93” at Bronbeek, a 19th-century estate outside the Arnhem city center. This unusual facility serves as a retirement home for Dutch army veterans and houses a museum of Dutch military and colonial history. His installation, which consisted of two museum show cases reconstructed from a historic engraving, was conceived in close collaboration with the museum curator and the residents of Bronbeek. The first show case displayed historical natural specimens and ethnographic objects from...
the collection, the second one contained personal keepsakes from the retirees' personal collections. Visitors to “Sonsbeek 93” were invited to experience an intermediate space of privacy and publicity, history and personal stories. As a participant in ‘Sonsbeek 93’ and several other site-specific or community-based exhibition projects held in the same year,

Dion remembers this show as a landmark:

“The newspaper reports were very negative in general, but mine were positive. I just did what I love and my great mission was to tell people to go out and see the works themselves. Or alternatively, I wanted them to have a happy moment by listening to something that they probably didn’t want to visit and look at. When I look back, I notice that I still remember very well several projects such as Pepe Espaliú’s work for “Sonsbeek 93.” He was suffering from AIDS and this was shown in his work. It was in the garden of the museum and you could look through a very big window into the garden and see a big tree, that is still there. Pepe had built a wooden platform in this tree and he was out there taking off his clothes. He was standing there naked, then went back down the tree. And still, when I see the tree today, I remember that man, even though he has died. It still impresses me when I walk around the museum. This is very interesting about works of art and memory. It is not only the work itself but also the place where it was: the places will never be the same.”

Irene Hohenbüchler, together with her twin sister Christine, experienced “Sonsbeek 93” as their first major project and international exhibition after graduating from Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht in 1991. As their contribution to the exhibition, they organized weekly art workshops with the prison inmates of the Arnhem Koepelgevangenis (cuspola prison). In a collaborative process extending over two and a half months prior to the exhibition opening, paintings and sculptures were created by the inmates and later displayed inside three domed pavilions outside the prison, creating a link between the world inside and outside the separating walls. Irene Hohenbüchler recalls collaboration with Valerie Smith as very close and personal. Looking back, she describes “Sonsbeek 93” as a decisive station in their career, which subsequently led to invitations to further exhibitions such as “INTEGRALe Kunstprojekte” in Berlin (1997) and to documenta 10 (1997):

“Working in collaborations is perceived much more consciously today. Back then it was quite new on the one hand, and on the other, it was seen as a relic from the ’70s. The discourse was still much more about artistic authorship and therefore often only our names were mentioned in the end, not those of the groups we worked with. In the early ’90s, it was not yet a matter of course to perceive such projects as art. Today, working with citizens has become much more normal, so that it is by now often even expected by the audience when working in public spaces. […] I remember that one of the convicts who participated in the project had served his sentence just before the exhibition started and when the Dutch Queen came to the opening, he was free and could present the project as an artist and shake the Queen’s hand. That was incredibly important to him. It
also touches on the question of the meaning of such projects: You come for a few weeks and do something with a community. But what does that mean to the people at all? Then in turn, when you saw the pride that this person had in participating in this project and to be part of society again, it made sense."

Mel Ziegler participated in “Sonsbeek 93” with Kate Ericson (1955–1995) as part of the artist duo Ericson & Ziegler. The two artists had already proposed work for “Sonsbeek 86,” which was rejected. Their 1993 project took place in the semi-public space of a local restaurant and consisted of a temporary intervention in which plates, napkins, and all catering equipment were exchanged for new sets made by the artists. The decor listed more than 800 different chemical components produced by a company based in Arnhem combined with idyllic images of Dutch landscape. As an artist who had already been active in the U.S. for years through social engagement projects, Ziegler reflects on audience perception and access to the work, which was limited by the location. In retrospect, he has doubts about the effectiveness of the social engagement implicit in the concept of the exhibition and Valerie Smith’s approach to this topic as well as her interaction with artists:

“We felt the work was integrated into the community’s life, that was the most crucial aspect for us. Unfortunately, the participation in the work was related to consuming the meal in the restaurant, but for us it was important to know that every time clients wiped their mouth with a napkin, they could see all those chemical names, asking themselves about it. [...] A lot of the artists that Valerie invited were not involved in social engagement, so they did not particularly feel comfortable with it. That’s why, even though the exhibited works were projects spread out in the city, they were not necessarily about any kind of engagement with the community around them, it was something more related to a curatorial choice than to the artists themselves. Valerie indeed had a pretty heavy curatorial presence, and the publication also seemed more about her perceptions and less about those of the artists. I remember that when Kate and I got the book we were a little shocked because during the proposal process we had quite a tense correspondence with Valerie, but we did not have any idea that those conversations were going to be published.”


4. As well as “Sonsbeek 93” Dion participated in “Culture in Action,” Chicago; “Project Unite,” Firminy; “On Taking a Normal Situation and Retranslating it into Overlapping and Multiple Readings of Conditions Past and Present,” Antwerp (in the framework of “Antwerp 93” European Culture Capital) and “Kontext Kunst: The Art of the 90s,” Graz.
Public Sphere & Public Response

Dan Cameron in *Artforum*, November 1993: Although the European art mafia closed ranks in support of the ‘Unité’ show in Firminy, France, branding “Sonsbeek 93” a fiasco, the exhibition has to be one of the most serious and uncompromised attempts to provide a context for contemporary art that I have lately come across.

Quinten Dierick: Many people I talked to during the exhibition didn’t understand conceptual art and they didn’t feel involved. You need close contact with the people, otherwise they go spread gossip.

Anonymous graffito on Andreas Siekmann’s installation: Geef ons plein terug (Give us back our Square)

Anonymous graffiti on Andreas Siekmann’s installation: Geef ons plein terug (Give us back our Square)

Quinten Dierick: “Sonsbeek 93” did cost a lot of money. Small, local initiatives like ours, on the other hand, had been able to organize great concerts, parties, and events with very little money but what we did was considered as having no cultural weight. During “Sonsbeek 93” one of us printed a protest poster: “Fuck Art—Let’s Rock!”

Clarien van Harten: The citizens of Arnhem always considered Sonsbeek elitist. With my work as a radio reporter I wanted to awaken interest and I tried to bring “Sonsbeek 93” closer to the audience.

Stephan Dillemuth: The accusation of “arrogance” was often raised. I think this has to do with the neo-conceptual coating of many works. It was different from the art of the ’80s. Postmodernism and that wave of painting were accepted quickly. You just had something to look at and to bite into, while these new works withdrew conceptually. You had to read something first, so to speak. Maybe that’s why the accusations came relatively quickly back then.

Zippora Elders, curatorial team of sonsbeek2020→2024: It is also important to consider that often artworks are archives in themselves, or facilitate new archives to grow, so the current edition’s curatorial team is honored to work with such a legacy.

Krista Jantowski, curatorial team of sonsbeek2020→2024: 1993 marks a turning point in relation to the emphasis on artistic process. Connecting to certain communities—sharing time together, talking and gaining trust—looks simple but it needs time to build relationships.

Mario Airò: The dissemination of the exhibition all over the city was very important for her concept but made it difficult for visitors... Some works were easily overlooked. Let’s say it was not made for the common viewer, and it required rather active participation.

Mark Dion: I think that in 1993 there was also a new emphasis on the importance of the audience. If we look at “Sonsbeek 71,” the works were spread throughout the country and nobody worried about how the public was getting there, maybe because no one worried about the public in a more general sense. Personally, I think that “Sonsbeek 93” was an excellent exhibition and some aspects were positive game-changers in the history of art.
Curating the Archives
Two Statements on Archiving Sonsbeek

sonsbeek2020→2024, the 12th edition of the exhibition format, will expand over a period of four years aiming at a different form of permanence and an exchange with the citizens of Arnhem. An integral part of this concept is the newly formed sonsbeek archive, which deals with the history and memories of the exhibition in the city. We asked the actors about their plans.

Dear Amal Alhaag, until now, there was no central archive available to the respective curatorial teams of past Sonsbeek exhibitions. The archival material from past iterations is now held by various archives in the Netherlands, and the artistic sketches and models for numerous projects are now part of various museum collections. Now, for the first time, the sonsbeek archive has been established. What curatorial concepts and potentials do you associate with the new archive for the upcoming exhibition “sonsbeek2020→2024,” for the public and for the future?

Amal Alhaag, curatorial team of “sonsbeek2020→2024: sonsbeek archive” will be the first constituted within the quadrennial, on the (oral) histories, presences and futures of sonsbeek, collecting, remixing, and bringing together official records with conflicts, conversations, gossip, and refusals, as well as materials such as sounds, recorded memories, and objects received from the public through an open call. An archive by the people for the people. It doesn’t aim to fill in the gaps but attempts to lay its colonial, gendered wounds open for collective and intergenerational dialogic scrutiny and manifestations. With this living archive, “sonsbeek2020→2024” wants to develop a slower archival process that embraces a transparent, chaotic, and inquisitive communal practice by questioning and dismantling the hierarchies, histories, and systems of archiving that have centralized imperialist practices of truth-making. In what ways can an archive listen? What possibilities of recording, sounding out, and culture making does the archive offer/reproduce? The first archival iterations will take the shape of an ongoing public program series, public installations, and open-calls, and an exhibition at the public library Rozet in Arnhem on July 2, 2021.

Dear Petra Smits, when you started as an archivist, the Sonsbeek Foundation had very little archival material from 70 years of exhibition history. What is your idea of the new archive and what strategies are you now working with to collect information and bring memories back to life?

Petra Smits, coordinator of the sonsbeek archive and assistant project manager “sonsbeek2020→2024.” Covering seven decades, the past eleven Sonsbeek exhibitions are a major art historical treasure. What is interesting about this treasure is the lack of a sonsbeek archive. Although there is material from all the Sonsbeek exhibitions in various archives, it is as if a treasure chest was never built, resulting in many scattered, incomplete, and unknown treasure troves. Under the auspices of Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, artistic director of “sonsbeek2020→2024,” we started building the sonsbeek archive. From the start, the participation of the public has been the cornerstone of the archiving process. As the public was never actively involved in archiving, and team-members of previous Sonsbeek exhibitions have largely decided what materials were sent to archives, the already archived material is very one-sided. Many objects from personal archives, experiences, and voices have remained hidden. Since the launch of an open call in December 2019, we have been inviting people to share physical and digital material with us. In addition to that, we have been collecting personal memories and stories (oral histories) about Sonsbeek which are being assembled in podcasts. Whenever I meet people from Arnhem, it strikes me that almost everyone has memories of Sonsbeek artworks or exhibitions—there are countless connections to Sonsbeek. Some contributors to the archive are fond of Sonsbeek, while others are very critical. It is important to include criticism, as a form of care and self-reflection, and because this is something of a blind spot in the material that was previously archived. In tandem with the open call, I have been mapping and collecting archival material by contacting people and groups who have worked for or visited Sonsbeek exhibitions. These two approaches have resulted in many surprising, often very personal, objects and stories. For example, a self-made artwork constructed from rescued parts of a “Sonsbeek 2001” artwork, and a photo album with pictures of all the sculptures from “Sonsbeek ’52.” Bit by bit, together with the public, we are connecting pieces within the existing gaps in the previously archived material. While closing some gaps, new ones appear, such as questions, rumors, and new leads to unexpected archival material. As time is catching up with us, some gaps are likely to stay; sometimes all we can do is speculate. Instead of leaving it out, speculating also becomes part of the future sonsbeek archive. As a collective endeavor, the building of the sonsbeek archive has just started. What we have collected so far feels to me like the tip of a massive iceberg. The archive will hopefully continue to grow in different ways, using multiple tools and platforms. Sonsbeek is a treasure that belongs to many generations, and so does the future archive.
BRIDGING EXHIBITIONS
Roundtable on Culture in Action, Project Unité, Sonsbeek 93, and sonsbeek20→24

Participants: Mark Dion, Zippora Elders, Krista Jantowski, Christian Philipp Müller, and Mel Ziegler

Edited by Anna Mikaela Ekstrand and Giulia Floris
A Roundtable with Mark Dion, Zippora Elders, Krista Jantowski, Christian Philipp Müller, and Mel Ziegler

Social practice emerged in the art world through several exhibitions of the 1990s, with 1993 constituting an incredibly prolific year, including “Culture in Action.” This generative context also consisted of international projects, such as “Sonsbeek 93,” “Project Unité,” and the socially oriented Whitney Biennial. This conversation brings together three artists who participated in the exhibitions in 1993—Mark Dion, Christian Philipp Müller, and Mel Ziegler, of the artist duo Ericson&Ziegler—and two curators of Sonsbeek’s current curatorial team, Zippora Elders and Krista Jantowski, who present parallel narratives of the emergence of community-based projects, reflecting on the past and present. Drawing on memories of projects in 1993, the conversation explores the roles of curatorship, documentation, and interaction with the audience in order to historicize and situate the main convergences of these exhibitions; between curatorial practice, artistic process, and the communities with which they sought to engage.

Krista Jantowski: 1993 marks a turning point for exhibitions in terms of their emphasis on the artistic process. How did you communicate that process to the audience? Was there an opportunity to open the process and expand the exhibition’s format to approach audiences before the event?

Mark Dion: One of the ways of highlighting the process was to see the projects’ participants and collaborators as part of the audience. If we think about audiences as a target, participant communities are the bullseye. For my work in “Culture in Action” I collaborated with eighteen young people, working with them intensely and over a long time. I felt that our interaction was tremendously successful; for some of them, that project was life-changing, and for me too. Maybe it has been the same for the next ring of that target, that consisted of artists and professionals—Christian [Philipp Müller] was one—he participated for a whole week, just sharing and collaborating with the group. The next ring in the target metaphor can be represented by the other organizations we interacted with, which dealt with beachside trash cleanups, prairie restoration, or building community gardens. In a conventional sense the audience is a ring further from the target center but often only this one is emphasized. At least for “Culture in Action,” the way that people came to town by buses to see the works could be problematic, in the sense of access to process, because sometimes they would be able to interact with the groups but sometimes not. I discussed this situation with the group I was collaborating with because the interaction with the visitors was an important opportunity to talk about who they were, how they felt, what they thought, and the fact that they were not a spectacle to be looked at. We always used to say that in social engagement projects, “there are no spectators, only participants.”

Giulia Floris: Mel and Mark, could you describe the situation in the 1990s, especially 1993, since you were part of “Culture in Action,” “Sonsbeek 93,” and “Project Unité”?

Mel Ziegler: In the early ’90s, there was a subtle shift in the way curators worked with artists, often asking them to create projects with a particular context. “Culture in Action,” about social engagement, had the most impact. Kate Ericson and I were young artists working with social engagement long before this event. Our participation in this exhibition was not related to receiving institutional funding to realize our projects, but rather to the specific way that Mary Jane Jacob looked to handle her role as curator. It seemed to be different from other previous experiences and mainstream practice that Kate and I had worked in. For example, four years earlier Kate and I were invited to produce a work for the Whitney Biennial, but our proposal was refused due to its social engagement component—we wanted to have a farmer grow corn, harvest it, display the equipment used out front of the Whitney Museum, and serve the corn inside at the restaurant as corn bread. They literally said: “We want you to produce an object.” This anecdote gives you a perspective on how the whole idea of having artists doing something outside of the institution had shifted on several levels in the time period from 1989 to 1993.

MD: It was a busy year because several projects proposed this new way of working on the ground, which necessitated spending a lot of time in each place. What made “Culture in Action” very meaningful was that it was new for the United States. While in Europe, there were events—Sonsbeek in Arnhem, documenta in Kassel, and the Nomadic Biennial of Manifesta (inaugurated in 1996)—that already worked with a similar methodology. Mary Jane understood how this exhibition could be a catalyst in the US. In a sense, she had already tested this practice, curating “Places with a Past” in 1991 in Charleston, for which she commissioned specifically site-specific projects.
As artists, we thought of ourselves as a sort of unified front: we were trying to shift a paradigm of how to engage with place.

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand: In the ‘90s a problem with art criticism of temporal community-based projects was that it was based on assessments relating to social impact—which is hard to quantify—or visual presentation, which is sometimes a moot point. “Sonsbeek 93” and “Project Unité” were badly received, while Mary Jane worked intensely with public relations, at times interfering with the work itself. Could you speak to the relationship between the press and your works in the exhibitions?

MD: The weather for “Sonsbeek 93”’s press event was extraordinarily bad. Every journalist was drenched and covered in mud from touring the outside projects in the rain. It was clear that the reviews would not be positive. It was hard for the exhibition to recover even though aspects of it were game-changers in the history of art. The reception of “Culture in Action” was different because the exhibition itself was a standout making it a magnet for criticism. Mary Jane did her best to convince the art system that this was the direction art was going, but many critics did not see the exhibition as art.

Christian Philipp Müller: All these exhibitions were connected by the negative press they got and the profound lack of interest from the audience. The projects and their presentation were unconventional and difficult to access, often scattered throughout the city. In the case of “Project Unité” in Firminy, the works were inside Le Corbusier’s residential building Unité d’Habitation but it was located on a hill of a peripheral town in the Loire. Critics were used to flying to a town, going to the museum, and writing the review on their way back home that same day which was logistically impossible for these exhibitions.

MZ: These exhibitions represented a challenge to the critics. With “Culture in Action” they were only getting a portion of the information since Mary Jane and Sculpture Chicago decided which information was press-worthy. Mary Jane was not happy with Kate and I: we were always challenging the way in which she handled the press. Most importantly, and unfortunately, the critics did not understand that we worked with this group in Ogden Courts for a year and a half, meeting them twice a month, and sometimes twice a week. The group decided not to allow the exhibition’s official photographer access, and, when Mary Jane wanted to bring a busload of critics and visitors from New York to Ogden Courts, we refused.

MD: The weather for “Sonsbeek 93”’s press event was extraordinarily bad. Every journalist was drenched and covered in mud from touring the outside projects in the rain. It was clear that the reviews would not be positive. It was hard for the exhibition to recover even though aspects of it were game-changers in the history of art. The reception of “Culture in Action” was different because the exhibition itself was a standout making it a magnet for criticism. Mary Jane did her best to convince the art system that this was the direction art was going, but many critics did not see the exhibition as art.

Mary Jane drove the bus through other public housing, talking there about our project. She was keen on putting all the communities involved “on display,” but some of them needed to be addressed with more sensitivity. We were all new to this exhibition methodology and, trying to figure out certain mechanisms within this framework, Kate and I were very protective of our group.

MD: When people visited our project in “Culture in Action” we asked them to take part in an activity—we put them to work. I also did that at Bronbeek Museum for “Sonsbeek 93,” which constructed an active role for the community of veterans I was collaborating with. Their participation ranged from joyful to melancholic, but they wanted their stories told. As far as “Project Unité” is concerned, there was too much tension with the residents’ community to collaborate with them.

Zippora Elders: Do you think the tension was because the Unité d’Habitation in Firminy was also the residents’ home?
CPM: The residents were not necessarily interested in the cultural commentary. However, it is essential to say that there were different social classes within the Unité d’Habitation: while on the top floors people were protesting because the apartments were not built according to the dimensions of Le Corbusier’s original plans, being reduced in size, other privileged people put some of the floors together, getting a magnificent view from the top. But unfortunately, they did not live there, and we could not stay in touch with them. Most of the less privileged people who lived in the lower floors of the Unité d’Habitation had difficulties with the apartments’ limited dimensions, their structure, and the lack of public transportation to reach their homes.

GF: The “Project Unité” catalogues were never realized, making the exhibition less accessible than “Culture in Action” or “Sonsbeek 93,” whose publications have had a crucial role in creating a legacy of and sustained interest in the shows. What do you think of these editorial projects and their role in the exhibition process?

MD: With the “Culture in Action” catalogue, part of Mary Jane’s genius was that she grasped that it was going to be more influential than the exhibition itself. She put a lot of energy into that publication and knew it was going to circulate in the world. So the “Culture in Action” catalogue became an ambassador for the methodology of the artists and curators involved in the show. As for “Sonsbeek 93,” like several artists in the show, I was shocked by the personal and candid nature of the catalogue—it included correspondence with artists and diary-like material. I ended up appreciating it because Valerie’s book, which I find experimental and risky, reveals aspects of the exhibition process that are usually invisible. Valerie allowed me to do what I wanted in the catalogue, and it was an important text which helped me clarify my research interests.

AME: Christian, you mentioned that your work is “site-specific,” and Mel, you use “social engagement” rather than the current dominant term “social practice.” Throughout this book we also use the term community-based art. What are your thoughts on terminology?

CPM: I think that with both Valerie’s and Mary Jane’s curatorial practice there was a sort of open warfare with what was then called “public art,” and it was basically war on a kind of decontextualized plop art, put into places or imposed on places without careful consideration for who might be living there, and for the social and ecological context of those places.

One of the reasons these exhibitions resonated, and continue to resonate, is that they showed ways to oppose and change that previous paradigm.

MZ: I prefer the term “social engagement” because “social practice” has become an agreed-upon definition that does not always encompass what I do. A practice is about an individual’s work. Engagement is about the greater community. Also, I think through educational institutions, its definition is often associated with or close to social work. I never do a project like I was correcting a problem in society. Our work raised questions and shed light on existing issues from a cultural perspective—engaged conversation, but we did not impose our own solution or perspective. There are various ways in which, as artists, we can function, and we can work with different kinds of communities, big and small. This idea was embedded in our practice as collaborators. Two people make the beginnings of a community. To accomplish anything, you had to have a conversation. That was, and still is, the basis to our and my practice.
FEM TRÄDGÅRDAR
(Five Gardens)
Simrishamn and Ystad, 1996
July 27–September 8

Artists: Carlos Capelán, Roland Jones, Max Liljefors, Sissel Tolaas, and Madeleine Tunbjer
Curator: Carlos Capelán
Photographer: Åke Hedström
Writers: Fernando Castro, Miguel Copón, Jonathan Friedman
Production: Alfredo Pernin, Susan Bolgar, Thomas Millroth
Assistants to the artists: Nils Davoust, Anders Malmgren, Elin Rydahl, Alfredo Pernin, Bert van Berkel

Edited by Edy Fung, Giulia Floris, and Hanna Nordell

Max Liljefors installing his work Växthuset (The Greenhouse) at Kulturhuset Valfisken, with a collaborator, 1996.
Photo: Åke Hedström/Malmö Museer
“Fem trädgårdar” (Five Gardens) emerged out of a regional cultural project celebrating the picturesque landscape and nature of the Baltic coast, including Sweden’s southernmost province of Scania. It turned into a much richer and more complex endeavor when an artist adopted the mantle of curator to turn things upside down, speaking from the periphery, cultivating collaboration, and disrupting anthropocentric assumptions. Ahead of its time and overlooked in the mainstream art discourse of the Stockholm-Malmö axis, the scope and sophistication of “Fem trädgårdar” makes it a forerunner of critical, non-extractivist, and non-monumental approaches to the realm of public art.

Through a series of conversations with the project’s key actors, this chapter proposes a reformulation of the exhibition’s legacy. It builds on myriad fragmented memories, past and current perspectives on the works exhibited, and their afterlives.

In Simrishamn, a small provincial town, artist Carlos Capelán converted an invitation for a solo show inside a white cube into a group exhibition of “Five Gardens” that would take place both inside and outside of the institution. As an artist Capelán was looking for sites of action beyond the studio, and ways to reconfigure or invade the instance of power known as “curatorship.” The exhibition, scheduled to take place at the peak of the region’s summer tourist season, opened on July 27, 1996. Responding to the regional tourist board’s invitation to enhance the landscape around the Baltic Sea, the exhibition took “gardens” more as a point of departure, a metaphor, than as a literal referent. Five artists developed their artistic visions in response to Capelán’s brief, conceiving and nurturing artworks exclusively for the occasion, and in relation to the specific time and place. The final show consisted of Sissel Tolaas’ train wagon filled with rotten apples, a meditation on our sense of smell which is generally repressed from aesthetic discourse; Max Liljefors’ indoor greenhouse presenting an image of a horrific “perfect garden”; Madeleine Tunbjer’s display of garden tools in color-saturated soil, offered to the viewer as a form of healing; Carlos Capelán’s articulation of a deeper human consciousness beyond the bipolar division of the rational and irrational; and finally, Ronald Jones’ recreation of a “cosmic garden” which originally stood in the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The exhibition problematized the idea of gardening—or “gardenizing”—the (ir)rational mind in multiple ways. It explored the interdependence of inside and outside, challenging the human colonization of the environment, the supposed neutrality of Scania in the Second World War, exploring suppressed modern and hypermodern (ab)normalities, the concept of an art in exile, and much more. The “gardens” were enriched by a broad apparatus of parallel interventions that contributed to the strength of the show. Among them, the local photographer Åke Hedström’s documentation of the exhibition’s process was presented at Kulturhuset Valfisken alongside the exhibition itself. Experimenting with new modes of representation and an expanded curatorial field, the exhibition catalogue also cultivated anthropological and philosophical writing, with original contributions from anthropologist Jonathan Friedman and critics and curators Fernando Castro and Miguel Copón.

Scientists use slime molds as a problem solver. Tracing their sticky bright-yellow trails allows them to model the interconnecting galaxies that make up the “cosmic web” and to reconstruct its history. In an analogous way, by studying these artworks and their afterlives today, we can trace how a particular networked art ecosystem evolved. How did places outside the scene—and the scenery—of mainstream art inspire and enable a kind of art exhibition not otherwise possible at that time on the Stockholm-Malmö axis? How did a small-scale art organization accommodate a more challenging approach to programming, enriching it with a diversity of locations and participants: artists, writers, and teams from the institutions that made the show happen? “Fem trädgårdar” may provide a few clues—not just to curators—as to how artist-led collaborations can develop trust and rapport, rigor of thinking, and the formal experimentation needed to work with and push beyond the difficulties that arise in collective and community processes.

At first glance, “Fem trädgårdar” does not immediately appear to have had any “legacy.” At least not if this term denotes something widely known, often referred to, and with a stable place in the art historical narrative. However, legacy can also be understood as a ripple effect, detectable only with greater distance in time, and through the afterlives of artworks. If so, through its development of new ideas and methodologies, and the lasting memories generated by temporary interventions in the public sphere, these “Five Gardens” still have a lot to teach us.
Map of the Exhibits

Node 1. Kulturhuset Valfisken
Node 3. Exhibition hall, Kulturhuset Valfisken. Carlos Capelán, Förnuftets Sömn (The Sleep of Reason/El Sueño de la Razón)
Node 4. Square outside of Valfisken. Madeleine Tunbjer, Sanatorie Trädgård (Sanatory Garden)
Node 5. Train wagon. Sissel Tolaas, Parfym eller från natur till kultur (Perfume, or from Nature to Culture)
Node 6. Ystad. Ronald Jones’ Caesar’s kosmiska trädgård (Caesar’s Cosmic Garden)
Node 7. Kulturhuset Valfisken. Åke Hedström, documentation

Simrishamn is a coastal town with around 6,000 inhabitants located in the Österlen region of Scania County, Sweden’s southernmost province.

Ystad is another coastal town in the same region with around 18,000 inhabitants.
Curatorial Ideas behind Fem Trädgårdar
Excerpt from an Interview with Carlos Capelán
Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, and Hanna Nordell

Carlos Capelán (Montevideo/Lund) is an artist, curator and teacher living in Lund, Sweden. Born in Montevideo, Capelán came to Sweden in 1973 seeking refuge from the political oppression then taking place in Latin America. Internationally, he is one of the most frequently exhibited Sweden-based artists, from biennials in Havana, Johannesburg and São Paulo to institutions such as Ikon Gallery in Birmingham and Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City. Capelán has continuously engaged with a variety of mediums beyond the canvas including letters, maps, and books, and has for many years explored ways for the artist to work outside the studio.

Giulia Floris/Edy Fung/Hanna Nordell: How do you understand curating in relation to your artistic practice?

Carlos Capelán: As an artist, I have personal motives for seeking sites of action beyond the studio. In more theoretical terms, and within what has been called the “crisis of representation,” it is interesting to invade and make reflexive that instance of power which we call ‘curatorship’ of an exhibition.

GF/EF/HN: Why did you choose to work in Simrishamn and Ystad?
What is special about the art space of Kulturhuset Valfisken in Simrishamn?

CC: Simrishamn and Ystad are peripheral to the better-known Stockholm-Malmö axis, both geographically and in terms of the art system. The relative “social mobility” of this system today makes it worth trying to set up independent projects embracing the local and the global while working outside conventional limitations. So, the idea was to produce independent projects in less mainstream places, with a very diverse set of people.

We realized very quickly that the tiny Kulturhuset Valfisken was in fact too small to produce a group show with all these artists. So, we began to think collectively about other venues for the exhibition, and to conceive the whole project as a decentered, delocalised sort of exhibition. The local context provided us with a lot of interesting connections, and the possibility to think about notions of place from very different perspectives. The idea was to curate five spaces that were very different from each other but that together would form a cultural landscape surrounding the institution.

GF/EF/HN: How did you decide to focus the exhibition on the idea of the garden?

CC: The idea of producing the gardens came kind of naturally. It was about gardening and about places: gardens are social places but at the same time they are very personal. The garden is always a metaphor for something else, for a meeting place. People go to a garden, just because they go to these places. They don’t get an invitation. It is not a formal site for discussing things. It just happens to be there, and people happen to go there. I like this idea, the possibility of an informal or spontaneous kind of situation.

There are so many different models for gardens, such as Versailles, which is about controlling nature and representing power. Then there are the Chinese and the Japanese gardens which are very much about living together with nature and helping nature to behave in a certain way. For Chinese and Japanese traditions, in order to have a nice garden, first, you have to find nice stones. I think that the artists were the stones of the project.

But in terms of gardening as an activity itself, it is generally perceived as kind of neutral; it does not always make us aware of the different positions and representations of nature and cultures. I had a few ideas, and then I let them happen, allowing each artist to interpret the situation. It was the same way with the writers we commissioned for the exhibition catalogue. What we did here was to organize knowledge. I think this is something to which one should be loyal. It’s about letting something happen. It is not a defined idea, but it is a zone, and something to work within.

When the Institution Is Porous
Excerpt from an Interview with Susan Bolgar
Node 1

Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, Hanna Nordell

Susan Bolgar was a Cultural Officer in the Municipality of Simrishamn when “Fem trädgårdar” took place, and in charge of Kulturhuset Valfisken. She is currently active as an art and cultural producer, and an adviser and project coordinator at Kivik Art Center.
Giulia Floris/Edy Fung/Hanna Nordell: Susan, it was you who invited Carlos Capelán to do something at your art institution. Kulturhuset Valfisken is a cultural house inaugurated by the Municipality of Simrishamn and located in the town center. As well as housing the town’s library it hosts diverse cultural activities including exhibitions and concerts. How did this small-scale art institution operate? And how did it position itself within the cultural landscape at that time?

Susan Bolgar: I started to work at Kulturhuset Valfisken in 1992 and it was quite fun as I was given a fairly free hand to do whatever I liked. My ambition was not to show only local artists, but to bring in the wider world in a more productive way, too. After all, Simrishamn was a rural place, and, like the whole region it was undergoing a great deal of change at the time. Lots of young people whose families had lived there for generations were leaving, while many of the people coming in to Simrishamn were creatives—actors, producers, writers, and artists. They came from all kinds of places including London, Stockholm, and Berlin. The beginning of the ‘90s was the start of a very creative period. It was a time of cultural change and, as cultural officer, I tried to be a part of that. People came to me almost every week saying, “I have to talk to you about a project I’m working on.” All I had to do was to coach them and lead them forward for a little while.

GF/EF/HN: How did you meet Carlos Capelán? Did he approach you with the project that he wanted to curate already in mind?

SB: I knew Carlos from Lund, where I used to live. He had a fantastic exhibition at Lunds konsthall. He approached me a couple of years earlier with a project about Carl von Linné (Carl Linnaeus), and I remember saying, “Oh, this is a brilliant proposal, but I don’t have the means to realize it at the moment.” Then a project came to me that seemed to be in the vicinity of what he wanted to do so I called him up saying, “do you think we could convert the Linné project to somehow fit into this?” And that’s how we started to talk about it.

GF/EF/HN: What kind of project was it that came to you?

SB: It was about gardens around the Baltic, a joint venture project between the Baltic states—Sweden, Lithuania, and northern Germany—and one in which everybody could brag about their beautiful gardens around the Baltic Sea. For this occasion, however, Carlos Capelán wanted to do a completely different project from the brief, and of course it was a bit wider than just “gardens.”

Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, and Hanna Nordell

Seeing Through the Garden Mentality
Excerpt from an Interview with Max Liljefors
Node 2

Max Liljefors (Lund) was one of the artists participating in “Fem trädgårdar.” Liljefors is now a professor at the Division of Art History and Visual Studies, Lund University.

Max Liljefors, Växthuset (The Greenhouse) at Kulturhuset Valfisken, 1996. Photo: Åke Hedström/Malmö Museer

Hanna Nordell: What was your role in the exhibition “Fem trädgårdar”?

Max Liljefors: I was part of the “Fem trädgårdar” exhibition as an artist and came into the project quite early in the process. We applied for funding from Konstnärsnämnden, the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, and got a quite substantial amount. I also remember we got additional funding when we included Ronald Jones’ Cos councillor’s kosmiska trädgård (Caesar’s Cosmic Garden) in the exhibition. Carlos Capelán
came up with the ideas for the whole exhibition, and he had the double role of artist and curator. Capelán was always very communicative about his ideas and curatorial strategies for the project. The idea was that all five artists should use the garden as a form or metaphor in some way in the exhibition.

Every artist developed his or her piece independently but tried to do so very much in dialogue with place and space in Simrishamn. I occupied a room on the second floor of the Kulturhuset Valfisken that was used for various kinds of meetings. It was a space with brick walls and a gabled ceiling. I perceived it almost as a house turned inside out, with the inner walls resembling a façade. In that space, I built a glass structure that followed the shape and proportions of the room but at a smaller scale, like a transparent replica. And within this structure, I made a video installation. Visitors could go inside the structure and around it, in between the actual walls of the room and the walls of the glass structure. The room was very dark. I worked with mirrors that created reflections between the glass walls and the screens in the installation.

Giulia Floris: Could you describe what was shown on the screens?

ML: Basically, it had two elements: The first was videotape I had shot in a gigantic industrial greenhouse. It had long rows of plants, and the video followed a machine that moved around entire sections of the space. The second was videotape capturing a very simple merger of two faces: One was my own, the other was the face of an elderly woman. The merger was done mechanically by slide projection on to my actual face. It didn't resemble the kind of digital merger you can do on a computer—the effect as it appeared in the videos was quite special.

GI: I'm curious to know more about your interpretation of the topic of the garden in your work.

ML: Back then I was interested in ideas about selfhood, selfhood as something which is constantly calibrated and recalibrated. I remember thinking about the very concept of the garden, or, in my case, the greenhouse, as a metaphor for selfhood. There must be a borderline or demarcation between the garden as a space of cultivation and anything that is outside it, let us call it “wilderness” or “nature.” My idea of using this glass house and the optical phenomenon of reflections, transparencies, and mirror images, was to make an image of this border as being permeable or penetrable. What is often understood as a border is something that you can look at from different angles. It’s about transactions, things moving from inside to outside, the exchange between things, and the interdependence of the inside and outside worlds.

I was also at that time influenced by the writings of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, especially his famous work *Modernity and the Holocaust* where he speaks about modernity as being guided by what he calls ”a garden mentality.” The main point in Bauman’s thinking about this is that the worst thing for the garden mentality is to actually succeed in producing the perfect garden—that is to create a society where all the weeds have been rooted out, and you have only beautiful flowers and wholesome vegetables. Once you get to that point, the whole rationale of gardening becomes superfluous. The essential thing about the garden mentality is to actually succeed in producing the perfect garden—that is to create a society where all the weeds have been rooted out, and you have only beautiful flowers and wholesome vegetables. Once you get to that point, the whole rationale of gardening becomes superfluous. The essential thing about the garden mentality is not eliminating weeds—it is creating them. It is about creating these undesirable, unwanted parts of the population that must then be eliminated, because that is the very foundation of the garden mentality as such. Without the weeds, the gardener cannot exist. The garden mentality leads to an increasing number of the undesirable elements of society being eliminated: the more paranoid the gardener becomes, the more new enemies are found. So, I understood the garden as a metaphor for selfhood on an individual and psychological level, but also in relation to society at large.
Streaming Thoughts and Amplifying Sounds
Excerpt from an Interview with Carlos Capelán
Node 3
Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, and Hanna Nordell

Artwork: Förnuftets Sömn (The Sleep of Reason/El Sueño de la Razón)

Giulia Floris/Edy Fung/Hanna Nordell:
As well as curating “Fem trädgårdar” you were also one of the exhibition’s artists. How did your work Förnuftets Sömn come about?

Carlos Capelán: They wanted me to produce a large site-specific installation, thinking of the garden as a metaphor for space. I studied the work of Goya who made this little piece in 1797–99, The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters. I was always amazed that this was someone’s thoughts about the mind at the time. I wanted to revisit Goya’s work, to pay homage and respect, and then to address the notion of the mind as a gardener. However, I wanted to reinterpret it in a different way. Goya said that “Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders.” I don’t believe in this binary way of thinking. The rational and irrational, the analytical and intuitive, are nothing but a bipolar description of the mind. I believe that the deep mind can be a source of intelligent perception and calm.

I do not think the irrational produces the monsters suggested by Goya. Maybe there is a contradiction between the rational and the irrational. These two things should be perceived together: the more analytical you are, the more intuitive you may eventually become. These things only become monstrous when they do not connect. So, with this piece, I wanted to connect these things. The sleep of reason in this case does not produce monsters: it may produce monsters, but it can also produce other things.

There is a description of the piece in the exhibition catalogue: a supermarket checkout counter and cash register, 100 meters of cable (which made it very, very difficult for people to walk around, they...
had to watch their feet very carefully), and then the sound of the cash register amplified by five microphones, creating this constant “zzzz” sound all the time. For me, these components represented “the stream”: a stream of impressions, a stream of consciousness, the stream of consumption, a garden stream.

In a corner, I left the mattress I’d been sleeping on while I was making the piece. It was a nice way to incorporate a personal object into the work. There was also a tiny little radio that was on, not loud. You could hardly hear it. But it was also a different kind of stream of sound after the supermarket checkout: the sound of a radio as it is commonly heard in many homes. Apart from these very basic elements, there was this wooden platform structure where the counter was placed so people could walk around it, step by step, and then finally get to the very center of the space, becoming a part of what was going on there.

About the supermarket counter, everybody knows what this object is, something familiar that people recognize. What was new were the five microphones, amplifying the sound from the cash register. In a sense it was like a rock concert. But then I wanted people to be on the very scene of the concert.

GF: You’ve painted in our minds the image of this stream of consciousness, of an impression woven around the exhibition hall, between personal space and social space within a certain mental setting. In the case of your work, was the social and personal meeting place more about the unconscious?

CC: I do not like these categories, the conscious and the unconscious, because the unconscious is very conscious as well, in a different way. The conscious, rationally perceived world is pretty irrational at the same time as it pretends to be rational. So, if we were to put these things together beyond contradiction, you might eventually get to a different place, I imagine.

As for the more inter-personal part, there was the mattress on which I was sleeping while making the work. That was a representation of myself. There was the self, a personal place for some unexplained but experienced dreams. There were also some funny little drawings and quotations that I framed and put on the walls. Then the supermarket and the radio were more the social part. Navigating all these cables and getting them up to the wooden space was very much about dealing with the presence of the audience as part of the social sphere.
Alienating Society
Excerpt from an Interview with Madeleine Tunbjer
Node 4
Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, and Hanna Nordell

Madeleine Tunbjer: We were at a certain moment in time during the ‘90s, entering the end of a post-industrial period, the end of a century, the end of a millennium. I had just become a mother for the second time and moved to Scania from Amsterdam where I studied and lived for many years. I wanted to relocate to the countryside. The region called Österlen by the Baltic Sea seemed like a good place. Simrishamn is its little center. “Fem trädgårdar” was the first site-specific artistic collaboration of significance since I had arrived. I guess it could have been done elsewhere, but it helped to use that location. The place itself had certain capacities that made the project interesting. Displacing urban-generated questions into “the periphery” can shed light.

HN: How would you describe Simrishamn and its vicinity at that time? Was this exhibition a one-off only or was it part of a wider program?

MT: This exhibition was not much in line with the existing local art scene. In fact, the event was quite singular. However, there were a number of individuals who had moved to the region from different metropolises and who felt a bit isolated, so we started to work together in different ways. I was engaged in a few other art projects: one called the “Cultural Bank,” in which I and a few other people tried to address the capacity of art in a small municipality, or “Exit,” an experimental international performance festival. “Fem trädgårdar” was just as dislocated or relocated as we were.

HN: What kind of institution was Valfisken at this time?

MT: I don’t know if someone told you, but the municipality actually closed the exhibition space in the end and converted it into a school hall. So, it immediately lost its purpose since there already was a space that focused on showing local artists. I believe in the idea that wherever you are, you are in the center of a universe; if you cannot rely on what is already there, you can bring whatever you want into that center. But you have to be gentle of course, and very perceptive about what you arrive at. When it comes to art, you have to make crossovers all the time otherwise the art scene stagnates and becomes too safe. This depends on what you want with art but to me, any art scene needs to be both local as well as undergoing necessary cracks.

Giulia Floris/Edy Fung/Hanna Nordell:
What do you remember about the time and place of the project “Fem trädgårdar”?

MT: I don’t know if someone told you, but the municipality actually closed the exhibition space in the end and converted it into a school hall. So, it immediately lost its purpose since there already was a space that focused on showing local artists. I believe in the idea that wherever you are, you are in the center of a universe; if you cannot rely on what is already there, you can bring whatever you want into that center. But you have to be gentle of course, and very perceptive about what you arrive at. When it comes to art, you have to make crossovers all the time otherwise the art scene stagnates and becomes too safe. This depends on what you want with art but to me, any art scene needs to be both local as well as undergoing necessary cracks.
GF/EF/HN: What do you think was the major motivation behind the “Fem trädgårdar” exhibition?

MT: We all had a kind of theoretical backdrop to our pieces. We did not approach “the gardens” from an organic point of view in the first place, but rather with different historical or urban references. I think we all brought with us something from where we came. The rural backdrop for me was important because I was very much aware of the extreme colonialization of the environment already in the ’90s. An acceleration of the nature-culture divide starting 10,000 years ago, but which from the ’50s onward has become recognized as the “the Anthropocene.” Also, in the ’90s, there was this extreme art scene where a few artists really made it in a world of capital. The art world was run by speculation for a while. “Fem trädgårdar” was very much somewhere else, wanting to grasp something very, very different.

GF: It is interesting that “Fem trädgårdar” addressed some of the ideas on the Anthropocene which have become so topical today. Can you tell us about your work and its setting?

MT: My Sanatory Garden project started with how to address the culture-nature divide! I wanted to portray the alienation of the risk society as discussed by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, as well as the concept of nature as something we call “nice,” but which in fact is a continuum between colonizing the world and colonizing the human mind. Exploiting both the concept of nature as well as our own existence as its dislocated species.

I used enlarged images of medicinal plants as huge sculptures installed in flowerbeds of bright pigments, in the square outside Valfisken. For me, medicinal plants had been about the very female aspect of life. I envisioned how women throughout history had been trying to grasp the relation between plants and human beings, and how they can help us in different ways—to cure diseases, agony, fear, or whatever the case might be. But, using medicinal plants from a “savage” garden as 2-dimensional consumable objects created a distance. It evoked a lost relationship with nature. I partook in that division, exploring the art of the nature-culture divide.

I also wanted to invite passers-by into my installation. Normally in a park or a sanatorium, you would see green benches made of thin wooden slats forming a comfortable curve. But I glued sponge onto each individual piece of wood and covered it carefully with the kind of green cloth used in surgical operations. It wasn’t visible from a distance but, if you
Rotten Apples and Emerging Discourse
Excerpt from an Interview with Sissel Tolaas
Node 5
Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, and Hanna Nordell

Sissel Tolaas (Stavanger/Berlin) was one of the artists participating in “Fem trädgårdar.” Tolaas is based in Berlin and has continued to work with the aspect of smell that was a central part of her piece in Simrishamn.

Hanna Nordell: Could you walk us through your project as you remember it?

Sissel Tolaas: Back then I was working a lot on the topic of the senses in both culture and nature. I had done some work in the Scania region, for instance a huge exhibition at Lunds konsthall on the topic of smell-coding and memory. This was how I met Carlos Capelán and immediately afterwards he invited me to participate in the “Fem trädgårdar” project. I visited the site and spent some time there. During my first visit, I started doing research on the various trees, plants, and other types of vegetation specific to that area of Sweden. I came across a kind of “site-specific” apple tree that has been growing in that region for generations. I am not sure if many people were or are aware of this, but that part of Scania is apparently famous for this specific apple. I investigated how these trees got there, and whether they grew naturally or if they were planted: in other words, the history of the tree. I came across a lot of drawings, illustrations, and all kinds of scientific papers on the tree and its apples. Some of these materials were then used as “wallpaper” in an old, abandoned train wagon that I found in the middle of a field—and in which I then displayed my contribution.
HN: Why did you decide to use this space for your work?

ST: The abandoned train wagon was standing in the middle of the landscape, not so far from the apple tree garden, kind of waiting to be activated. I immediately saw this as a kind of metaphor for the transition between the local and the global, or culture and nature. The core element of my installation was the real apples. I went to all the stores in the villages around Simrishamn and bought various kinds of apples—strangely enough, most of them did not come from the region. I then tracked and investigated the origin of each of the apples and accordingly placed a small flag on them that indicated their country of origin. The apples were placed in various wooden boxes as if they were about to be transferred somewhere. I was curious to see which of the apples would survive longest during that transition.

HN: You are often dealing with smells in your work. Was that a factor in this installation as well?

ST: Absolutely. When I look at these few remaining images from the installation, I remember that it was a very hot summer. The whole wagon smelled of decaying apples. The decay happened in stages and was entirely determined by how genetically modified each apple was. But for visitors there was a certain discrepancy between what they smelled and what they saw.

When you entered the wagon, they immediately saw some very fresh-looking Granny Smith type apples, red and green, but the smell was from the decaying, local naturally grown apples. So, both the natural and the synthetic were displaying their basic process of survival. The gene-manipulated fruit stayed the same throughout the entire duration of the exhibition, whereas of the naturally grown ones, only the flags remained. A very strong statement in all its meanings. I served Granny Smiths at the opening, and no one seemed to think that was abnormal in the middle of a naturally grown apple garden. Pretty surreal.

Edy Fung: You had been engaging with smell even before this project?

ST: I started working with and exploring the sense of smell at the beginning of the ’90s. In the first seven years, I used myself as a guinea pig to explore the purpose of the sense of smell and what it means to understand the world from the perspective of the nose. During these years, I was building various smell-related archives. At that time no one really understood what I was doing. In general, the sense of smell was completely ignored. Throughout, specifically during the so to speak civil phases of human
history, the sense of smell has been utterly ignored very much due to its intrinsic emotional qualities. Who cares about emotions in intellectual discourse? The way in which the academic field still ignores certain aspects of humanity is still very problematic. Since Covid-19 the whole world knows what smell is and what losing the sense of smell means.

Giulia Floris: Did you do your research independently or was there some collaboration with the other artists?

ST: We had plenty of discussion and conversation from the start. Carlos Capelán had done a lot of research on Carl von Linné and the topic of culture and nature, and he generously shared that with all of us. This Carl von Linné text somehow became a manifestation from which all the projects evolved and developed. From there, we individually developed our respective contributions.

The whole project was very much about a natural collaboration and very much about sharing and caring, not only between each other but also with nature. How to make what happens in nature accessible, and how this experience could be different when engaging with people’s emotions. Those questions are still the focus in my work. The smells of “Fem trädgårdar” still have a strong presence in my memory.
Haunted Gardens, Political Landscapes
Remembering Ronald Jones’s *Caesars kosmiska trädgård*
Node 6
Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, and Hanna Nordell

Artwork: *Caesars kosmiska trädgård* (Caesar’s Cosmic Garden)

The US-American artist Ronald Jones came to Sweden to participate in “Fem trädgårdar.” Jones passed away in 2019. Unable to access the original narrative of this piece from its creator, we invited Carlos Capelán, Thomas Millroth, Susan Bolgar and Max Liljefors to reminisce about Jones’s contribution to the exhibition and its afterlife.

Excerpt from an Interview with Carlos Capelán

Giulia Floris: Carlos, could you say a little about your collaboration with Ronald Jones?

Carlos Capelán: I remember that Ronald Jones said during the ’80s, that the notion of the avant-garde existed alongside the mainstream but in order for the mainstream to continue to exist, they needed the alternative, the “underground-ish” at the same time. When we met in the ’80s, he did not believe in the avant-garde. I do not believe in this military perspective on history, a narrative about a whole bunch of chosen people that will show the way for the rest of humanity and stuff like that.

Hanna Nordell: What was Ronald Jones’s proposal for “Fem trädgårdar”?

CC: Ronald’s father worked for military intelligence in the USA, so he was used to analyzing things together with his father. Once they looked into this aerial photo of Auschwitz-Birkenau and discovered that, very close to the crematorium, there was something that represented a “cosmic garden.” A proposal for the piece *Caesars kosmiska trädgård* (Caesar’s Cosmic Garden) was the outcome of Jones’s long-term research on how that garden was possible and how it was planted. Some local politicians realized that this...
was about WWII and concentration camps. At the time, some extreme right-wingers were living in the region of Simrishamn. Some of them were organized gangs. They wanted to pick fights with foreigners, Jews, whoever. So, the local authorities considered this project too provocative. They didn’t want to be part of a situation where skinheads would come and start destroying the garden.

Edy Fung: You have described Caesars kosmiska trädgård as an exhibit in exile. How did this idea take shape?

CC: After the local committee rejected it, we went to the art museum in Ystad, which was considered a major town with a proper art museum and its own collections. The director of the art museum, Thomas Millroth said, “Oh, you can do this here.” We were very grateful. He liked the idea of producing this work in a provocative situation.

Excerpt from an Interview with Thomas Millroth, Winter 2020

Thomas Millroth was director of Ystads konstmuseum (Ystad Art Museum) until 2009, now an art critic and writer.

Hanna Nordell: How did Ystads konstmuseum become involved with “Fem trädgårdar”?  

Thomas Millroth: Susan Bolgar, who was the manager of the Kulturhuset Valfisken, called me one day and asked

This experience led me to start talking about exile. This piece was not allowed to happen there, it had to go away. The original location where we had already started working, producing the garden, was left, just like that. It became a non-place in relation to art, no longer the original place. But then the “real” place happened, in exile, somewhere else: people had to go to another town in order to see the whole show. That was an answer to the local politicians there. “Okay, are we not allowed to do this? So, you are producing a situation of exile”—this was our answer. We live in exile as well as at home. Now, that got lots of attention. The skinheads never attacked Jones’ garden because he got too much attention and it was installed close to the art museum. It was a kind of “peaceful transition,” but then the reactions were rather strong.

If I would consider taking over Ronald Jones’ art project Caesars kosmiska trädgård I was already an admirer of Bolgar’s work because she showed that it did not matter that Simrishamn was a small town, important things could happen in such places. Simrishamn stood out during this period—wherever you compared it to! Jones had received a lot of international attention as an artist for his installations, and was also interested in garden architecture.

HN: Could you describe Caesars kosmiska trädgård in more depth?

TM: Caesars kosmiska trädgård was a very special garden project that was inspired by an aerial photograph from the Second World War. In 1944, US-American planes photographed the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. In the photographs, it was possible to distinguish barracks, crematoria, and gas chambers. But one photo from August 25, 1944, was different from the others. The intention had been to document the gas chamber and one of the crematoria in the southwest corner of the camp. The details of the images were analyzed and then labeled by various specialists who interpreted what they saw. Suspicious places and identified buildings were marked out: “gas chambers,” “changing rooms,” “possible cremation pit,” etc.

Technicians installing Ronald Jones’ Caesars kosmiska trädgårdar in Ystad, 1996. Photo: Åke Hedström/Malmö Museum
But then an unexpected note appears: “landscape.”

A deviant green area was clearly visible only a few meters from the crematorium: a traditional garden laid out according to the classic plan with the earth or the world in the middle surrounded by the four rivers of paradise. Nothing less than the Cosmic Plan, next door to the gas chamber! The classic garden had been planned and managed by the Abteilung Landwirtschaft (the Agricultural Division) at Auschwitz-Birkenau under the direction of Dr. Joachim Caesar. It consisted of prisoners given the task of looking after the camp’s green areas—insofar as such existed. Heinrich Himmler was a trained agricultural technician in the Nazi leadership, and according to Jones, he seemed to have liked the project. To begin with, the most important task was to plant tall hedges around crematoria and gas chambers. The hedges were called Grüngürtel, meaning some greenery to mask or hide what really happened in the shower rooms. The gas chambers and crematoria were not to be seen by the prisoners because of the distress it would cause, making them more difficult to handle. For sure, it sounds cynical. The Cosmic Garden in the photograph was planted only after the hedges had grown up around the gas chamber and crematorium. Everything was prepared, money was set aside for the project, and municipal councilor John Erlendsson was, according to Bolgar, in agreement. But when my phone rang in Ystad, she told me that the culture committee in Simrishamn, after much discussion, had rejected the garden. Susan Bolgar asked me if Ystads konstmuseum could take over and realize the project.

HN: And how did you react to her proposal?

TM: I was both surprised and very enthusiastic. It was not at all difficult to get the [Ystad municipal] culture committee on board, and the technical committee was happy to take care of the practicalities. City gardener Per Larsson was commissioned to carry out the project and Ystads konstmuseum thus took over the fifth garden in Simrishamn’s project “Fem trädgårdar.” Where would it be installed? Already from the beginning, it had been envisioned as quite small in scale, so there was no problem finding a suitable place for it in the green backyard of the residential building at the crossing of Oskarsgatan/Surbrunnsvägen only some blocks away from the art museum. But what would grow in the garden? In Auschwitz-Birkenau they seemed to have used plants that grew wild in the local area, and our gardener was given the task of finding out what these could have been. It turned out that most of the plants also grew in southern Scania. One or two plants had to be substituted with ones of the same species that could be obtained in the Ystad area, but generally it was possible to reconstruct not only the layout of the garden but also its flora. And just as in the original, a tree was planted in the middle of its “cosmic order.”

Day by day, the photographer Åke Hedström followed the work from excavation to planting. At first, it looked a little thin, but as the weeks went by, thistles, goose-foots, cow parsley, shrubberies, and small trees started to grow. We kept Ronald Jones informed throughout the process. Inside Ystad art museum, information in the form of text and posters presented Caesars kosmiska trädgårdar to visitors, and, on
One of the reasons I said yes to taking on Jones’ project was that I had spent several years exploring what could be described as the struggle for normality under very abnormal conditions. I had for example taken an interest in what happened in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where a jazz orchestra called the Ghetto Swingers emerged. How could all this take place? Or as in the case of Caesars kosmiska trädgård, how did a garden come to be planted in the middle of this horrible context? It somehow shows that there is no system completely capable of suppressing culture because it is such a strong factor in personal identity, so important that you are prepared to die for it. For me, all these ideas are connected—how one acts under different degrees of oppression, and how important it is to assert artistic expression. This was something I talked a lot about with Ronald Jones.

Edy Fung: Susan, what happened to Ronald Jones’ work? Why could it not be shown in Simrishamn?

Susan Bolgar: Ronald Jones’s piece was supposed to be where Sissel Tolaas’s work was, in the vicinity of the railway station. We also saw a kind of symbolic relation to the railway, referencing the Auschwitz-Birkenau railway. We thought we had found a really good place for it.

But Caesars kosmiska trädgård met very severe political resistance. The politicians and the Cultural Board did not want us to go through with the piece. They asked us, “What have we got to do with Auschwitz? What have we got to do with the Second World War? This makes no sense.” They said several times that we should not wake up sleeping bears. I thought, what kind of bears are sleeping here? This part of Scania was very much the Swedish stronghold for the Nazis during the Second World War. Everybody would have had an uncle or maybe even a father who used to march around in little brown uniforms with swastikas here. So, it was quite a taboo topic. In the end, we could not go ahead even though I had the budget for it. I remember saying, “Do you really think this is a wise decision? Because this is going to reflect badly on you; do you want to admit that you don’t want to make a memorial to the Holocaust?” They did not understand what I was talking about. But of course, it did reflect badly on them in the end. I think there were even articles in the national press talking about how the Cultural Board of Simrishamn had said no to this project, along with reflections on the reason for this censorship.

HN: Did the artist come to Ystad for the exhibition?

Yes, Jones came over from New York to see the result and was very pleased. On July 27, we officially opened the garden at the same time as Simrishamn had the opening of “Fem trädgårdar.” He thought that our planting of the garden was so successful that it should remain there permanently, and he offered this option to the art museum for a symbolic sum. The culture committee was also positive about the idea, and we all believed that it would feel strange to demolish it in September. But, as with all gardens, it needed constant care. And the technical committee could not promise that, so they regretfully advised us not to let it stand. It was demolished at the end of September 1996. I thought it was a shame at the time, but in retrospect, I have come to understand that temporary public artworks can have a great impact through the thoughts and memories they generate.

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HN: Was it because the piece was to be installed in public space? Or do you think that it was the topic in general and how it conflicts with the prevailing idea that Sweden always kept a neutral position in the Second World War, touching on the fact that Scania has this brown past?

SB: It was the topic in general. This garden by the Baltic Sea was supposed to be something nice and beautiful. And people were going there to enjoy it, not to hear about the Holocaust. I think that’s what went wrong. Yeah, of course, the history of this place as well.

Excerpt from an Interview with Max Liljefors, Participating Artist in “Fem trädgårdar”

Hanna Nordell: Do you think it would have been different if Ronald Jones’ work had been presented in the interior of the institution?

Max Liljefors: I would assume so. At that time, Ronald had developed a certain artistic strategy, where the visitor was supposed to encounter an art object
and to perceive it initially as beautiful and designed. And after a while this kind of hidden bomb would detonate with a charged political meaning. He made several such works. The idea was that they were to be presented as gardens in outdoor space and people would walk into them, relax in them, and feel at home, as one is supposed to in a garden. Then after a while, they would notice—“Oh, what does it say on this signpost here?”—and realize that they were inside this garden from Auschwitz-Birkenau. The effect of this realization would be stronger because the visitor had first been led to lower their guard. Then the political context would erupt in the awareness of the visitor. That was Ronald’s artistic strategy. I assume that this would have been experienced as less provocative if the gesture had been confined to a proper exhibition space, because you enter such a space—especially if it is contemporary art—with different expectations and a preparedness to meet provocations.

There is also an afterlife to this story that is interesting to reflect on. In the year 2000, the Swedish prime minister’s office arranged what was at that time Sweden’s largest international conference, the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust (SiFH). The organizers contacted me and asked me if I could curate an art exhibition as part of that conference. There were, I think, 47 nations represented, and a lot of politicians and diplomats were invited to the conference. They specifically asked me if I could exhibit a replica of Jones’s Caesars kosmiska trädgård at that conference. They referred to the debate around the “Fem trädgårdar” and they said that they wanted to demonstrate that they did not want to hide the past, i.e., not behave like the politicians in Simrishamn.

I contacted Ronald Jones and asked him if he would be willing to do this project. He agreed on one condition—that the exhibition would also include another garden. Since the “Fem trädgårdar” he had discovered that Albert Speer, Hitler’s favorite architect, had himself designed a garden plan—in fact a city plan that was meant to be realized in the capitals of all the countries that the Nazis had conquered. So, the idea was that once they had conquered a nation, another country’s capital, and everything had settled down, they would rebuild the city center according to Speer’s new plan. Ronald Jones wanted to make a model of this city plan, for two reasons: it was based on the same design as the Auschwitz garden—the cosmic garden. It was basically a model of paradise, which was its mythological foundation. There was also this loose project of the Nazis to erect Speer’s plan in Stockholm by the year 2000—and this was the year of the SiFH conference. There were several coincidences that made Ronald want to include that work. Now, I cannot guarantee that all the historical details that Ronald told me about were factually correct, but that was the story behind his project.

So, I got back to the prime minister’s office and told them Ronald would do the work, but on the condition that we include both the Auschwitz garden and a model of Speer’s city plan. They said: let’s do it. But after about a week, the prime minister’s office phoned me again, and said, “We are sorry, we cannot include Speer’s city plan in this exhibition, we believe it will be too controversial, too provocative, especially for the German delegation to the conference.” I said, “Well, I think you are wrong. And I am sorry to hear this. But if you omit the Speer city plan, probably Jones will not do Caesars kosmiska trädgård.” And they said: “Well, that’s a pity, but we cannot include it.” I explained to my contact that a German bank had already bought another version of Jones’ Speer city plan work, it had already been exhibited and purchased in Germany. The day after, they phoned me and said, “Have you spoken to the artist? We must absolutely include both works in the exhibition.” I thought it was interesting given his diplomatic nervousness regarding what to include or not include in the exhibition, but in the end, both works were shown in that exhibition in Stockholm in 2000.

First, it was exhibited inside the conference center, and only conference delegates could actually see the show since there was very heavy security, with four policemen for every delegate. But after the conference we exhibited the works at the gallery Enkehuset in Stockholm, so it was shown in public.

Max Liljefors dedicated part of his doctoral dissertation to Ronald Jones’ project. Completed in 2002, it Swedish title is Bilder av förintelsen: Minne, mening, kompromettering (Images of the Holocaust: Meaning, Memory, Inincrimination). It focused on contemporary cultural and social interest in the Holocaust, and its visualization in documentary, artistic, and pedagogical contexts.
Twisting Heads and Reviving Processes
Carlos Capelán on Åke Hedström’s Documentation
Node 7
Giulia Floris, Edy Fung, and Hanna Nordell

Artwork: Photographic documentation by Åke Hedström

Åke Hedström (Lund/Malmö) documented the installation of “Fem trädgårdar.” Hedström’s photographic archive was acquired by Malmö Museer (Malmö Museum) in 2004, a collection of around half a million photographs dating from the 1950s.

Hanna Nordell: You also decided to include photo documentation of the exhibition in one of the rooms at Kulturhuset Valfisken, in a way that recalls Robert Smithson and the notion of the non-site and the documentation of a specific place. Could you say something about the decision to include its documentation as part of the show?

Carlos Capelán: Åke Hedström was a local photographer, and he was around taking pictures of the installations and the process of putting the exhibition together. I liked the idea of showing these pictures and letting the documentation be part of the exhibition. It happens so often these days: not only the documentation of the piece in its final stage but all the processes involved in its making, which is of course an essential part of what an exhibition is.

I had the idea of printing the documentation in long scrolls and hanging it because that gave a sense of an ongoing process. It could be shown using small images, each one different. The whole roll of pictures hanging there to make the process look vivid as it was happening. One had to walk around and twist your head to look at the pictures and that was interesting for me. The decision to include this material came late in the process, but at a certain point, it became clear that this would make an interesting addition to the exhibition. I believe we were lucky that Åke Hedström took all those pictures.

Edy Fung: So, it looked like an exhibition about the exhibition?

CC: In a sense, yes. The mind is giving shape by itself. The mind reflects itself. The representation of something is part of this something. We are formed and shaped by language and representation.

The common assumption is that photography tends to represent “the world” “in real terms.” So we played with that.

EF: These kinds of curatorial decisions that you made about including Hedström’s photography as part of the work were quite a fluid part of the process.

CC: That is pretty much the way I usually work. I have an idea, an intuition that is at the very core, but I do not have a clear image of the result of what I am doing. I just try to add up all these ideas and impulses, making them happen—particularly when it comes to an installation. Then, I agree that “curator” is a cultural category. I also think that you know, being an artist is a cultural category. As soon as we realize this, we can start working differently with all these categories, and we can relate to these categories differently. You act as a curator, but you are not really a curator. You are something else, you’re doing something else there. Ultimately, you try to do something that sometimes does not really depend on art. I believe it comes from other sources.

Giulia Floris: In the preface to the exhibition catalogue you talk about the notion of diversity. How was this articulated in the relationships of the different actors in the project (curator, artists, institutions, individuals, public, private, etc.)?

CC: This idea of diversity was very clear from the beginning: bringing together people from different origins, even from faraway places, and producing the project together with a whole bunch of locals from the specific context of Simrishamn. The whole thing was very much based on trust and collaboration. I think that “diversity” was there all the way in this project.
LA GALERIE DES LOCATAIRES
(The Tenants’ Gallery)
Paris and Other Places, 1972–Present


Curator: Ida Biard

Edited by Marc Navarro

André Cadere, Six Pieces de Cadere, La Galerie des Locataires, 1973. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris
Communications: Ida Biard and the Question of the Public
Marc Navarro

Ida Biard defines La Galerie des Locataires (The Tenants' Gallery) as “a concept that led to practice.” Given that since its foundation in 1972 La Galerie was defined as an adaptable structure rather than a physical space, the name Biard chosen for the project purposely invited to confusion and misunderstanding. The aim of this peculiar “gallery” and its activities was precisely to offer an experimental framework in which the transactional relations enabled by commercial galleries were deactivated. Through their activities La Galerie des Locataires gave room to artists that subverted the conventional models of dissemination of art, often inserting their works in the public space and question the contract between the artist and the audience, the temporality of art and its ability to actively influence everyday life.

La Galerie des Locataires emerged in parallel to conceptual practices between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s. And with these arose the need for new spaces and structures suitable to accommodate the specific needs of an art that challenged the institutional and commercial framework of museums and galleries. While self-management was adopted by artists as the only viable method of producing their works, the emergence of alternative spaces met a fundamental need to disseminate and mediate without resorting to the traditional models. This operation enabled the appearance of new forms of relation between the work and the specific context in which it was inserted—in the case of Galerie des Locataires often appearing unexpectedly and parasitizing public space. The sense of urgency displayed by many of these artists and spaces informed the radical character of their works. In this context, what makes Biard’s project especially relevant was the rejection of a stable structure and the adoption of circulating and ephemeral exhibition models. As Biard states, Galerie des Locataires “has no walls,” “is an attitude.”

Being “an attitude” instead of an enclosed “place” defined an approach to the artistic milieu that took into consideration the impact of art on the social fabric from which, according to Biard, it cannot be separated. Attitudes describe the way we operate in the world, expose our ethics, our affinities, and our dissent. Writing in 1989 of the specific social conditions and role of art in the moment that fostered La Galerie des Locataires, Beatrice Parent explained: “art was not a factor of integration, which would provoke recognition, but on the contrary a factor of resistance, an ideological tool for a radical change.”

*“La Galerie des Locataires is an attitude. It shows up wherever it decides to be. It has no walls. No dictats. It is not impossible. Its raison d'être: to give the artist an opportunity to be.”* Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris
The convulsive sixties and their crystallization in the events of May ’68 had an indubitable impact on the practice and critical work of an important group of intellectuals whose work developed further in the seventies, one of whom was Biard. In the curator’s own words: “May ’68 was an explosion of the frustrated aspirations of a youth animated by ideas of liberation and expectations of change from a society that had not yet escaped the political system of the 19th century ruling class. The support of some intellectuals, as well as the anti-bourgeois opening up to workers, the occupation of the Sorbonne, the Théâtre de l’Odeon, and the participation of artists from all creative fields, left a deep mark on the art world for a minority, of which I was a part. The violent repression of power, as well as the hypocrisy of a bourgeoisie afraid of losing its privileges, were the reasons for this social shift.” Biard settled in Paris in 1963. Her student years at the Sorbonne coincide with the academic and artistic reception of Situationist thought and the group’s theories concerning “unitary urbanism,” “psychogeography” and public space. The idea of the city as a space in which to construct “situations” would find an echo in the activities of La Galerie des Locataires and their artist collaborators, such as the actions carried out with André Cadere in 1973 which adopted the form of a dérive through the Parisian streets.

By integrating itself into the daily life of the city and its streets, Biard’s project also appealed to interests that, through the modification of its form and the regulation of its uses, modify or restrict our possibility of action. The time span between the beginning of the activity of La Galerie des Locataires in 1971 and its interruption with the declaration of a strike in 1976, runs in parallel to the years in which the artistic ecosystem of the city was facing a major urban and artistic change culminating with the opening of the Centre Pompidou in 1977. On one hand the institution was supposed to cover artistic practices. The construction of the building was part of the great transformation of the urban centre of Paris, which saw the disappearance of Les Halles, the emblematic Parisian food market and nerve center of the city. Ida Biard remembers how this transformation changed “socially, economically and culturally a hitherto working-class neighbourhood,” and how changes started to occur even before the museum opened its doors: “The area around the site of the future Centre Georges Pompidou was opened up. And the art galleries took advantage of the low price of small spaces around 1975. So, in 1977 they were already taking part in this new cultural policy whose primary objective was to stop the supremacy of the American art market and to restore Paris’ image as the world capital of the arts.” This attempt to capitalize the arts describes a line of force contrary to those that she herself defended from La Galerie des Locataires. For example, with her ongoing project produced through the postal system, “Poste restante” (General Delivery) (1974), Biard enacted a deterritorialization of artistic practices, and a deregulation of its modes of circulation and exhibition, presenting them away from the institutional framework. “Poste restante” works as an invitation extended to artists to send their proposals to the post office box of the city where Biard is located for the duration of the call. Proposals are carried out as they arrive. Biard follows the artists’ directions for their realization, adapts the work if necessary, and documents the process. Since its first edition, this action has been carried out in cities such as Milan, Zagreb, and Dusseldorf.

However, it was in a previous project carried out together with Goran Tribuljak and titled “French Window” (1972–73), that La Galerie des Locataires explored the possibilities of postal mail as a specific medium. For “French Window,” the artists were invited to send their instructions, photographs or drawings, by mail to 14 Rue de l’Avre, Biard’s personal address at that time. Upon arrival these proposals and documents were exhibited in the “rez-de-chaussée” apartment window, facing the street and exposed to pedestrians. More than fifty artists participated in this action, with a significant number of artists from the former Yugoslavia. Biard saw in the postal mail an ideal format to disseminate the work of artists from Zagreb and Belgrade that she was familiar with and whose work could hardly find a diffusion space in the city.

With “French Window” La Galerie des Locataires established a temporary contact zone between the East and the West in which art worked as a pretext. A similar will to establish a common ground appears to have given rise to another of her projects, “Simplon Express” (1989), a project in which the train’s carriages became a nomadic exhibition space and the journey between Paris and Zagreb—a journey that Biard took several times over the years—the time frame for the realization of artistic proposals. The project, carried out after a long hiatus in La Galerie’s activity, was part of a group of projects such as “Taxis avant minuit” (Taxis Before Midnight, 1987) and “Ailleurs” (Elsewhere, 1993–94) in which travelling would play a fundamental role.

In “Taxis avant minuit” artists such as Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren or Annette Messager, long time collaborators of La Galerie and also participants in “Simplon Express,” used Parisian taxis for their contributions, intervening inside the vehicles or proposing conceptual routes. Boltanski proposed a mysterious “shadow theatre” that took place inside an apartment which the participants attended inside the taxi while Buren altered the license plates by adding red and white stripes. In “Ailleurs” Biard invited artists to send their proposals by fax to hotels in Tokyo, Kyoto and Kobe where she stayed during

LA GALERIE DES LOCATAIRES

Paris and Other Places, 1972–ongoing
a two-week trip to Japan. The only condition for the realization of their works was that they had to revolve around a very specific object: the traditional coffee pot (džezva) used in Sarajevo, which for Biard represented the daily life of the city. The choice of this object was not banal, with “Ailleurs” Biard wanted to raise awareness about the brutal siege of the city in the context of the Bosnian war, that started just a year before, in 1992. The actions carried out had to be filmed in situ and produced by Biard herself. For the realization of the proposals, a time limit of between 3 and 5 minutes was set. The video documentation resulted in a film that gives an account of the project.

The meticulous documentation of the projects carried out by La Galerie since the beginning of its activity, today allows us to trace through various documents a particularly vibrant and radical moment for art, but also to approach the idea of curating from an atypical position. Ida Biard never defined herself as the director of the project, in fact, in some of the documents issued by La Galerie, the title “Director of the Gallery” appears crossed out and the handwritten word “tenant” appears below. For some of her colleagues, Biard’s work was more related to communication than to mediation—at least not in the sense in which traditional galleries mediate between the public and the works of art they host. In the words of Marijan Susovski: Galerie des Locataires does not exhibit or present artists’ works, but rather communicates, realizes and executes them on behalf of the artist. The term communication of the work of art corresponds best to the work of Ida Biard. She was the channel that allowed the work to find the best possible communication of its content.

Situated at a time when a professional terminology for the organization and conceptualization of exhibitions and artistic events had not yet been accommodated in either institutions or official academic programs, Biard’s work as La Galerie des Locataires may be defined as that of a “proto-curator.” La Galerie was an early experiment in creating situations, providing the necessary conditions to make something happen, to meet, or to identify and make visible through communication, strategies of artistic labour that, due to their fragility and elusiveness, were being ignored by the institutional framework and conventional galleries.

Since its reactivation in 1982, La Galerie des Locataires has maintained its spirit and projects such as “Poste restante” have had successive editions, the most recent taking place at the beginning of 2021 amidst a global health crisis and restrictions on mobility. Although the original context in which many of these activities were developed has changed radically, today they take on a new significance. With the pandemic in many cases forcing institutional life to a halt, La Galerie des Locataires continues to make art circulate in alternative ways: going public without a pre-determined audience, disrupting without being noticed.
No Walls: The Poetics of Dissemination
A Conversation with Ida Biard
Marc Navarro

Marc Navarro: The story of La Galerie des Locataires, which is also your personal story, can be told through your trips back and forth between Zagreb and Paris. When and how did you come to settle in Paris?

Ida Biard: I arrived in Paris in 1963 and enrolled at the Sorbonne where I obtained a master’s degree in art history. Throughout my years as a student I earned my living as a saleswoman, au pair, or maid. Luckily, I visited the Musée d’Art Brut (Museum of Art Brut), then located in Rue de Sèvres, where a Yugoslav painter, Slavko Kopač, worked. He helped me to do things closer to my concerns: assisting in the editing process of the Fascicules de l’Art Brut.1 Throughout those years I never lost touch with Yugoslavia. I went there at least twice a year. I was raised by my father-in-law, a painter, and it was our discussions about art and the social condition of artists that brought me to Paris. At the same time, I hung out with young artists in Zagreb, Belgrade, and then Paris. That’s what gave birth to the concept that, by the end of 1971, led to praxis, the activity, of La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: Your collaboration with the Musée d’Art Brut seems significant. The institution promoted by Jean Dubuffet was born as a counter-narrative. From an institutional point of view, the Musée d’Art Brut called into question the validity of the traditional museum. Do you think that some of these ideas can be identified in La Gallerie des Locataires?

IB: We are all influenced by accumulated knowledge, the layers of adhesion or rejection in relation to its content. It is true that from adolescence I was impressed by the story, the adhesion of my artist father-in-law to the theses conveyed by Art Brut, and the posture of Jean Dubuffet, its “inventor.” His texts, especially that of 1968, Asphyxiante culture,2 reinforced some of my perspectives on the artistic world. However, I did not at all agree with his ambivalent way of using Art Brut as a basis for his own creation, going so far as to forbid painter and curator Slavko Kopač from exhibiting his own works in the Musée d’Art Brut, as well as other authoritarian injunctions that made access to his Art Brut collection highly selective.

MN: La Galerie des Locataires maintained a critical position toward the commercial art circuit. What experiences shaped this position?

IB: In material difficulties, I tried to work in galleries, thinking that art historians had a place there. I managed to get a month’s trial job as an assistant to Jacques Dupin, a poet, in charge of art book editions at Galerie Maeght—one of the most prestigious in Paris at the time. During the interview with Mrs. Maeght, owner of the gallery, I introduced myself as an art historian. She replied curtly: “To work in a gallery you would have done better to have studied economics!” During this short visit to Galerie Maeght, I met Jean Clair, responsible for the publication of the magazine “Chroniques de l’Art Vivant” who agreed to publish the announcement concerning “French Window.”3 This immediately triggered collaborations with many young artists looking for non-institutional places to express themselves. My status as an art historian is the driving force behind the activity I carry out. La Galerie des Locataires is the expression of my attitude, a mental creation allowing the realization of activities beyond the reach of the institutional system. Its specificity...
is that it does not depend on any of the constraints of the system governing the art world with its galleries, museums, and the art market.

MN: Where would you place your practice in relation to more recent definitions of the curator?

IB: In my original statement regarding La Galerie des Locataires and its activities, I stated that it is an attitude—the role I perform is primarily an expression of that attitude. From that point on the concepts of curator or later, around 1980, exhibition curator, are no longer appropriate to it. La Galerie des Locataires by its way of proposing, from the very beginning, the reception of artists’ works in the form of mailings to post offices, eliminated the possibility of a traditional exhibition with all that this implies. The artists who responded had to include instructions for the presentation, realisation, or communication of their proposals. La Galerie des Locataires did not choose the artists participating in its activity in these specific cases. Some collaborations—such as those with André Cadere, Sarkis, Daniel Buren, Annette Messager, Goran Trbuljak, Alain Fleischer—gave rise to specific realizations.

MN: We tend to identify the seventies as a transformative period for art. Do you think that La Galerie is a product of this transformation?

IB: To make a long story short, I would say that processes of transformation in the field of art are part of the global history of human activities and their economic, technical, philosophical, societal, and even biological transformation over the centuries. However, moments of rupture in the specific field of the arts correspond most often to the emergence of new scientific and technical discoveries or ethical behaviour. The latter being linked to societal facts, changes in the systems set up by power and their more or less authoritarian or even contemptuous intrusion into the lives of ordinary citizens, “the people,” let’s say. So, the period we are talking about, as far as I am concerned, does not seem to me to be a period of great transformation, because it was preceded at the beginning of the twentieth century by artistic movements which, moreover, were at the origin of the term “avant-garde.” The activity of La Galerie des Locataires corresponds to participation in the specific questions that had already appeared in the artistic field a few years earlier, and which were of two kinds. One concerned public space and the place of the artist and his production in the fabric of society. The other was closely related to the first, but it brought about a radical change in the perception of his production. The term “travail” [work] was now used instead of “oeuvre d’art.” I used the term “Galerie” to point up the difference in approach and collaboration between artists working together from what one experiences within the gallery system and its mode of operation.

MN: Was Galerie des Locataires a structure that fostered the encounter between artists and encouraged debate around artistic practices? How and where did these encounters take place?

IB: As far as the activity of La Galerie des Locataires is concerned, exchanges, as well as the realisation of the works’, have no specific place. They occur in streets, cafés, cinemas, trains, hotels, post offices,—the places where the works are realised—at the same time as meetings and discussions take place in producing the projects. Just as in the days of the ancient polis, the locus of activity is the public square. I did not set up a specific network. The participation of artists expresses, it seems to me, their support for some of my proposals. Since La Galerie des Locataire’s strike, its activities have been sporadic.
ephemeral, and correspond—for instance—to the reactivation of a way of working. I am thinking of the realisation or communication of the works received at the post office address of the place where I am currently located.

MN: The foundation of La Galerie des Locataires can be seen as a response to the rigidity and impermeability of the museum as an institution. It is however also an opportunity to imagine other forms of relationship—perhaps more participatory and open—with the public. What alternatives did La Galerie propose in comparison with conventional galleries when it was initiated?

IB: La Galerie des Locataires is first and foremost reflective, an analytical look at the system that manages, in this case, the fine arts. The museum institution is one of the players, and not the least important one. The others: the state through its ministry of culture; galleries; art centres; collectors; auction houses; foundations; art fairs—each is linked to the other and all interact closely in the functioning of this system. As an institution the museum opened up to contemporary artists—that is, to artists with a certain notoriety—after the ‘80s under pressure from galleries that needed the museum’s valorization of their protégés in relation to the art market. Representatives of state institutions, creative inspectors, and curators participated in and supported the private sector. The situation of young artists in the 1970s in relation to this system was not enviable. They did not have access to it. So, they were looking for and thinking about alternative ways in which they could become visible. There was one space not infiltrated by the system: public space and [artistic] forms not subject to conventional exhibition rules. The formula still in force of the “democratization” of art has nothing to do with the activity we were carrying out in these spaces not yet colonised by the structures of the system. The public, the citizens with whom we rubbed shoulders, took part in the events and weren’t just passive viewers. During “French Window” I organized a day during which passers-by could express their opinions about what was happening there. “I didn’t understand. It was beautiful anyway,” one of them wrote.

MN: What was the reaction of passers-by when the Buren piece was activated in Budapest?

“I didn’t understand. It was beautiful anyway.” Biard organized Journée Critique (Critical Day) as part of the project “French Window.” Passers-by were invited to write their thoughts about the “exhibition,” 1973. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris
IB: During the realization of the artists’ proposals in public places I never experienced hostile reactions from passers-by, nor from the public authorities. On the contrary, passers-by expressed curiosity, asked questions, were indifferent or, on the other hand, some helped me to carry out the work. In the specific case of Buren’s piece, the reactions were of friendly astonishment.

MN: How did you come up with the idea of using a train, the Simplon Express, as an exhibition space?

IB: I have been travelling with the Simplon Express since 1963: from Paris to Zagreb, and from Zagreb to Paris. In 1989, and again 23 years later, I shared the experience of this trip with the artists. The Simplon Express was the privileged place where East and West met, where these two civilisations rubbed shoulders smoothly. Travellers settled in this mobile space naturally engaged in conversation, curious to get to know their neighbour, or simply sharing meals during a long journey. Those, like me, who for almost half a century travelled this route observed the changes until the train’s disappearance. It is indicative of the diminishing interest of the West, preoccupied by its crises, in the East, its neighbour of little importance. Today, when I think back, I notice that I was sensitive to these exchanges, spontaneously manifested, naturally, during these journeys, between people from these two cultures that politics tries to ignore. By bringing the Simplon Express back into circulation with the “Simplon Express/ Le Retour” project, La Galerie des Locataires has, through plural artistic projects, re-established the circulation of those previously suspended human relations. To signify the resurgence, albeit temporary, of the Simplon Express with this project is the expression of a stubborn will to insist on the urgency of re-establishing spontaneous social relations between peoples and cultures free from the dictats of private or corporate interests. I would like to cite a text by Guy Tortosa by way of completing my answer:

“Did Marcel Duchamp’s Jeune-homme triste dans un train (Sad Young Man on a Train) (1911), the anti-model of modernity that he painted at the dawn of a century that began as it was to end (in Sarajevo), foresee that we would one day cease to believe as naively as he did in his time in the progress brought about by machines?

‘On ne part pas’ (One does not leave) wrote Rimbaud when he was still just a poet. Could he also have sensed, a few years before the invention of cinema, that, whatever one may say, the traveller does not buy a ticket to go from one station to another, but rather a ticket to see a film, or to access the works of a gallery which is the world, and of which we will never be more than tenants?... Titled Galerie des Locataires, the unpredictable, collectively inhabited work that is the Simplon Express, said this in its own way in 1989, and again in 2012: the train is a film, a theatre, a performance, or even a museum, and for this film or museum, which we metonymically designate by the beautiful and misleading term, ‘journey’, our thoughts constitute the subtitles and captions, if not the script.”

MN: In relation to your projects developed around means of transport such as the Simplon Express, I wonder whether the spontaneous relationships or “structures of feeling” that emerged spontaneously during the journey were similar to the relationships established in La Galerie’s other projects?

IB: After the 1980s and the changes in the art world, I made proposals to artists which took them out of their familiar environment and outside their usual way of working. Mobility, unpredictability, material constraints, among other things, as well as the media used, were my tools to bring them out of the system. At the same time these experiences moved their work into the context of a direct relationship with an uninitiated public. The experience was renewed this year [2021] with the project proposal for staging “Poste restante” in Crikvenica, which will be an index of the radical changes in the behaviour of the artists themselves in relation to a proposal that in part responds to the material constraints imposed by the global pandemic.

MN: How did the idea of documenting “Simplon Express” and “Ailleurs” in film form arise?

IB: La Galerie des Locataires has produced several video documents or filmed exhibitions. In chronological order: “Simplon Express,” “Ailleurs,” “L’air du large” (Sea Air), “Simplon Express/Le Retour.” I regret not having been able to do this during “Taxis avant minuit.” In most of the projects, La Galerie is guided first and foremost by the desire to take the artists out of the usual context of the presentation of their work, but also by the desire to shake up the very form of the work. The artists’ proposals involve a certain delegation of decision-making during the realisation of the projects, since this is most often carried out by La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: The distinction between the public and the private is essential to understanding the intention behind some of your projects. Structures such as postal mail or transport services are adopted by La Galerie as means for exhibiting and disseminating the artistic work. Artists often start
from a limitation defined by the medium itself. But at the same time this creates a more egalitarian and democratic framework. For example, in “Taxis avant minuit” the artists had to use Parisian taxis as a space for their proposals. How important is the “medium” in your proposals? Is it a poetic or a political agent?

IB: I’d like to answer: both at the same time. Political, because everything we do—even do not do—in the context of our community life is political. Poetic, because such moments arise, for example, in “Taxis avant minuit,” when the passer-by is surprised by the invitation to get into the car which offers him a route defined by the artist and thus takes him on an adventure for which he was not “prepared”; on his return he often leaves with another taxi, and so on. Thus, for the public, for the artists, these proposals open up other possibilities of expression, encounter, and collaboration. The artist leaves the safe environment most often frequented by an audience initiated in art.

MN: It seems logical that this economy of means with which many of the projects have been developed has facilitated the participation of many international artists in very different political contexts. What was the role of La Galerie in relation to the East? Do you think it has played an important role in the visibility and articulation of other artistic contexts?

IB: The use of random means for the realization or communication of the works received was, at the same time, a response to the singularity of these collaborations—nomadic and ephemeral. La Galerie des Locataires conveyed a spirit of activity which, because of its mobility, goes beyond the local and is open to the participation of artists on an international level. It is true that the majority of artists who responded to La Galerie des Locataires proposals came from Eastern European countries: Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland; but those from France, Italy, Germany, England, the Netherlands, Brazil, the United States, were not absent. I am poorly positioned to evaluate the role played at the time by La Galerie des Locataires in the visibility and articulation of other artistic contexts. Humbly, sincerely, I believe that I contributed to it, first, by offering a concept, a way of operating, that was specific and unique to La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: Self-managed initiatives often depend on private funding or on a network of partners and solidarity between different agents. A sense of community. How important have ideas such as “cooperation” or “interdependence” been for the development of your activity?

IB: The basis of these activities was the spirit of cooperation between the artists and La Galerie des Locataires, not subject to funding, which would become an assumption limiting the independence and expressive form of their collaboration. Moreover, La Galeries des Locataires’ “Strike” was an expression of its refusal of the servile attitude of artists towards the development of the art market and conventional galleries, with which they had collaborated since the installation of some of these around the construction site of the Centre Pompidou in 1975.

MN: You mentioned before the importance of language in the transformation of artistic practices in the 1970s. For example, you talk about the substitution of the word “oeuvre d’art” by “travail.” This suggests a
new way of relating the artist to the institution and society, but also a different relationship between the artist and her production, perhaps an increased professionalization?

IB: The artists of the 1970s are the heirs of the artistic movements of the early 20th century which opened up this path that swept away the mythology surrounding artistic creation. The new technologies of reproduction, including cinema and photography, offered artists a “virgin” field of investigation. Artists such as Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Kosuth, later on, were the emblematic figures whose works directly influenced this generation. The writings of Walter Benjamin concerning the reproducibility of the work of art, sociologist Raymonde Moulin’s book on the art market, *Le marché de la peinture en France*, the writings of Guy Debord and others, contributed to questioning the system governing the art world, but also its production and art’s relationship to it. Thus, the vocabulary used by the artist to name their production, the way in which they inscribed in the fabric of society, evolved with the use of words. Annette Messager’s *Les travaux de la salle de bain* (The works of the Bathroom) is an example of this. On the other hand, my collaboration with André Cadere was part of the disruption of the art system with the “illegal” presentation of his work at the opening of the Adami exhibition at Galerie Maeght in Paris. We sent out invitations for this action from La Galerie des Locataires in 1973.

MN: In the works developed with Annette Messager, La Galerie communicated by mail a set of activities, which, because of their private nature, are not considered of public interest.

IB: Annette Messager’s work in the 1970s was in part a search for other venues and ways of exhibiting than those offered by institutions and the art world. So, she was among those looking for collaborations outside conventional places, but also reflecting on their work’s form of presentation. Hence our collaboration. The form in which these three projects—*Les travaux de la salle de bain* (Work in the Bathroom), *Les courses journalières* (Daily Shopping), *La lecture journalière* (Daily Reading)—were realised was the result of a decision taken by the artist and La Galerie des Locataires; in this particular case postal mailing was preferred to other forms of exhibition. To complete my answer to this question, I would like to mention another project carried out with Alain Fleischer, first in Budapest in 1974, then in Paris in 1975. The realization of this work followed the scenario laid down by the artist and carried out by La Galerie des Locataires. The involvement of La Galerie in these
productions was, therefore, an ethical and moral challenge. It had to decide the form of exhibition and communicate the artists’ initial proposal, to realize it without betraying it.

**MN:** Some of the artists you collaborated with were simultaneously participating in a conventional circuit that included commercial galleries and institutional projects. Independent spaces allow artists to develop their work outside the constraints of the market and the institutions, but the possibility for a “return” on independent projects is very limited.

**IB:** La Galerie des Locataires is my field of investigation, of reflection. It relates to the inclusion of artistic work in the fabric of society, but also to the collaboration of artists with the institutions that host them, and how this in one way or another adds value—often in terms deriving from the world of commerce—to their initial proposals. At the same time, I remain amazed that fine artists in France, for example, still accede to being treated like craftsmen. In her books, Raymonde Moulin describes this societal attitude to visual artists which keeps them in a very fragile economic situation, and dependent on the system. Since 1981 I have been offering artists excursions out of this situation with proposals that I would today call poetic, rather than utopian or radical.

**MN:** Regarding the public, you say that it is important for the artist to leave those spaces frequented by the art-initiated public. In some of La Galerie’s proposals, the public plays a fundamental role: on one hand it often becomes “the public” involuntarily, on the other it sometimes seems important that the public actively participate in the realization of the artists’ proposals.

**IB:** Art that is locked up is already in a museum. Emerging artists often search for themselves for years. Highly professional networks offer them certain possibilities, mainly linked to funding and communication, but within a well-defined and very specific framework of place. I introduce a certain instability into the context in which artists’ projects are developed. However, I don’t believe that I am undermining the autonomy of art, which is in even less conceivable today than hitherto, since as a field art participates fully, like other human activities, in a globalized economic system.

**MN:** “Ailleurs” was a reaction to a historical event: the siege of Sarajevo. What did this project consist of and how did the journey unfold in this case?

**IB:** The war that put an end to the existence of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, from which I came, provoked in me the feeling experienced by all orphans. I was in mourning, cut off from all my friends with whom I had collaborated, with whom I had shared ideas and commitments. We were now scattered in the republics that had become our enemies. The atrocity of the genocide perpetrated in Bosnia-Herzegovina was unbearable. Taking advantage of a trip to Japan in 1993, moved by this reality that was gnawing at me, I put a coffee pot in my suitcase—the object of a daily ceremony in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also elsewhere in former Yugoslavia. Thus was born the “Ailleurs” project. Travelling between Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka, I sent faxes to artists to present their proposals for the project. So, for the first time I used an object which became the theme of the scenarios to be realized, faxed by the artists to the places where I was.
IB: During the realization of the projects, I tried to find a way to execute them following the artists’ specifications as closely as possible. In Renato Mambor’s project it was obvious that it was a question of carrying out a survey in the public space around an object that he had made for this purpose. I myself used this method to gather the testimony or reactions of passers-by during “French Window.” In 1982 La Galerie des Locataires, together with the artists Alain Fleischer, Bernard Borgeaud, and Jean Roualdès, created a “radio exhibition” for the channel France Culture. Listeners to the program reacted with comments about what they had heard. In this case it was not strictly speaking a survey. This participation or reaction of the listeners was part of the concept of the program.

MN: In 1976 you declared a strike. What triggered this decision? How did this situation affect the activities of La Galerie des Locataires?

IB: The proclamation of the strike for me involved an activity. At that time, I offered the participating artists a moral contract preceded by a questionnaire on the reasons for their cooperation with La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: The use of surveys is repeated in several of your projects, such as the project developed with Renato Mambor. Why did you use this working method?

MN: La Galerie has collaborated with André Cadere on several occasions. What was the basis of this collaboration?

IB: I met André Cadere at the beginning of La Galerie des Locataires’ activities at the end of 1972. Our mutually enriching dialogue and sharing of our points of view quickly turned into a very intense collaboration. Even then the art world feared him, because he would appear at people’s openings with his stick, which they called his “weapon,” and disrupt the ceremonial with his presence alone. He was an absolutely committed artist. His work served an attitude. He used to say to me: “It is not difficult to acquire the stick, but the most important and annoying question for buyers is what they will do with it.” After his death, curators who presented his work were simply traitors, for they answered the question he asked them—what will you do with it—by denying its content, laying the stick on the floor or leaning it against the walls of museums and galleries. It’s true that Cadere did the same thing, but he accompanied it with an action such as the one we performed at the Adami opening at Galerie Maeght in Paris.

MN: In the case of La Galerie, the strike implied not publicly communicating the work of the artists. Today
IB: Since the 1980s communication and advertising’s importance to cultural events has grown, and they are now becoming the central vehicle for their visibility. This has brought changes to the strategies of consumer society. In the field of artistic activity, it seemed to me that these communication and advertising strategies were inappropriate. They often reduce their substantive content to mere commodities. The activities of La Galerie des Locataires could not fit into this distorting and reductive framework.

MN: What was the content of the “moral contract”?

IB: At a certain point in our conversation, I noted that my activity of collaboration with artists could also fall within the semantic field of poetry, very close to utopia—a term that is often invoked to characterize the activity of La Galerie des Locataires. However, the mental work of analysis and position-taking that precedes this activity owes a great deal to ethical and philosophical adherence to the writings and positions of certain thinkers concerning the society of consumption and spectacle. Guy Débord’s *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), emphasizes that in this society everything becomes a commodity, and this [economic] form dominates all the other values of human activity. The grip of consumer society on the very lives of individuals reduces them to commodities. In the book *The Crisis in Culture* (1961), Hannah Arendt notes that action is far superior to work, and even more so to labour, in relation to the complex concepts governing life and art in contemporary societies. Being a skeptical but optimistic person, Emil Cioran’s attitude and writings stimulated me to use the reactive term “poetic” as implicit to the concept of utopia as part of an engaged criticism and disruption of the prevailing mores of the artistic field.

Quoting an aphorism by Cioran from memory: “Poetry becomes a means of translating one’s thoughts or a temporary remedy for one’s lucidity. Like life, it has the excuse of proving nothing.” In reference to my work, these few lines were necessary to justify the proposition of a moral contract for the participating artists—something which came about at the precise moment that, as galleries opened up around the gaping hole from which the Centre Pompidou would emerge, their positions in relation to the art world changed.

1. The *Fascicles de l’Art Brut* were a series of publications launched by Jean Dubuffet in 1964.
3. *Croniques de l’art vivant* (1968–1973) was a publication directed by Aimée Maeght and published in Paris. The managing editor was Jean Clair.
The Trip—Simplon Express

18H15' the train is on track 19.
18H45' the trip is announced
  - Sleeping car T2 PARIS ZAGREB at the end of the train.
18H50' Attention the train will now depart—announcement in french, english, italian, whistle.
19H18/ woods, river, fields 19H27 the river appears again /
19H30 we pass by MONETERAU station—rails/route
  the farms appear, the river, small woods, fields of wheat.
19H34 small tunnel
19H41 - quiet landscape “au bord de l’eau.”
  /the window instrument of vision/.
19H44 - sunflower fields
19H49 - railways / road
19H53 - first cows / small chateaux, plain.
20H11 - herd of cows - “typical landscape”
20H11 - shocking passage of the image—car factory, agglomeration, fields...
20H14 - I forgot to look, my mind went elsewhere—
20H14 - appearance of “scorched earth,” cows, small stream, hill and bell.
20H29 - tunnel 1.2 / nice clearings in the tunnel / outside scorched earth.
  /noises and the compartment—things are moving—small chains etc /
20H45 - railways/road / past Montbard / - feeling we are gaining height -
  small serpentine paths Côte d’Or,
21H03 tunnel 3. 21H04 exit from tunnel
21H08 the wall by the window / feeling of entering the earth/
21H13 the train starts to slow down
21H16 entering DIJON station
21H17 stop in the station— 5’ stop / platform open—large advertising signs /
21H23 departure
  - plain, contrast with the more tortuous landscape before—very tilted as a journey. Light from outside between compartment and
vice versa/
21H40  - railways/road
21H44  - Tunnel 4, train slows down
21H46  stop DOLE.
22H01  - departure from DOLE
22H22  - station tilt—you can feel the climb

the feeling of the journey is well established.
The landscape becomes shadowy / shadows of forests, mountains
22H31  - very narrow passage.

Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan’s intervention on the platform of Milan station. Film stills from Simplon Express, 1989.
INSITE
San Diego–Tijuana and Mexico City
1992–Present

Executive Directors: Carmen Cuenca and Michael Krichman

Various curatorial teams

“IN/SITE 92”
September 18–October 1, 1992


Artistic Directors: The Arts Advisory Board of Installation Gallery, spearheaded by Mark Quint and Ernest Silva

“inSITE94”
September 23–October 30, 1994

Artists: Carlos Aguirre, Terry Allen, José Bedia, Carol Bing, Álvaro Blancarte, Border Art Workshop, Lee Boroson, Sheldon Brown, David Beck Brown, Chris Burden, Rimer Cardillo, Carmela Castrejón Diego, Albert Chong, Johnny Coleman, Cooperativa Mexicalli, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Joyce Cutler-Shaw, Mark Alice Durant, Felipe

Javier Téllez, One Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida), 2005. Photo: Alfredo De Stéfano. Courtesy of INSITE
Ehrenberg, En-Con-String, Helen Escobedo, Anya Gallaccio, Andy Goldsworthy, José Miguel González Casanova, Mathieu Gregoire, Silvia Gruner, Diego Gutiérrez Coppe, Yolanda Gutiérrez, Mildred Howard, Estela Hussong, Enrique Žejk, Rolf Julius, David Jurist, Allan Kaprow, Nina Karavasiles, Nina Katchadourian, Steve Matheson, Nina Katchadourian & Mark Tribe, Janet Koenig & Greg Sholette, Mario Lara & Barbara Sexton, Gabriela López Portillo, John Lowe, Kim MacConnel, Luis Moret, Anne Mudge, Ming Mur-Ray, Dennis Oppenheim, Oscar Ortega, Pepón Osorio, John Outterbridge, Graciela Ovejero, Marta Palau, Patricia Patterson, Marcos Ramírez ERRE, Ulf Rolfy, Nancy Rubins, Roberto Salas, Roman de Salvo, Michael Schnorr, Ernest Silva, Jim Skalman, Deborah Small, Melissa Smedley & Nanette Yannuzzi, Olav Westphalen, Susan Yamagata, and Yukinori Yanagi

Curators: Lynda Forsha, Installation Gallery (Artistic Director), and partner institution representatives of Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and Centro Cultural Tijuana

“INSITE97”
September 26–November 30, 1997

Artists: Eduardo Abaroa, Acconci Studio, Kim Adams, Francis Alÿs, Fernando Arias, David Avalos, Judith Barry, Rebecca Belmore, Miguel Calderón, Tony Capellán, Chicano Park Artists Task Force, Einar & Jarnex de la Torre, Gonzalo Díaz, Helen Escobedo, Manolo Escutia, Iran do Espiritu Santo, Christina Fernández, Andrea Fraser, Thomas Glassford, Quisquerna Erriquique, José Antonio Hernández-Diez, Louis Hock, Spring Hurlbut, Doug Ischar, David Lamelas, Ken Lum, Liz Magor, Anna Maria Maiolino, Ruben Ortiz Torres, Patricia Patterson, Marcos Ramírez ERRE, Rosángela Rennó, Miguel Rio Branco, Betsabeé Romero, Daniela Rossell, Allan Sekula, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Deborah Small, Melanie Smith, Pablo Vargas Lugo, and Nani Ward


Curators: Jessica Bradley, Olivier Debroise, Ivo Mesquita, and Sally Yard

“inSITE2000”
October 13, 2000–February 25, 2001


Curators: Susan Buck-Morss, Ivo Mesquita, Osvaldo Sánchez, and Sally Yard

“inSite_05”
August 26–November 13, 2005

Artists: Allora & Calzadilla, Barbosa & Ricalde, Mark Bradford, BULBO, Teddy Cruz, Christopher Ferreria, Thomas Glassford/José Parral, Maurycy Gomulicki, Gonzalo Lebría, João Louro, Rubens Mano, Josep-Maria Martín, Itzel Martínez del Carhizo, Aernout Mik, Antoni Muntadas, R Tj-SD Workshop, Paul Ramírez Jonas, SIMPARCH, Javier Téllez, Althea Thauberger, Torolab, Judi Werthein, and Måns Wrange

Curators: Osvaldo Sánchez, Donna Conwell, and Tania Ragasol

“inSite/Casa Gallina”
Mexico City, June 1, 2013–December 31, 2018

Co-participating artists: Edgardo Aragón, CADU, Marianna Dellekamp, Omar Gámez, Cynthia Gutiérrez, Iconoclastas, Mauricio Limón, Itzel Martinez del Calhizo, Erick Meyenberg, Ana María Millán, Eduardo Navarro, Damián Ontiveros, Osvaldo Ruiz, Rafiki Sánchez, and Tercerunquinto

Artists at the Geology Museum: Fernando Bryce, Alex Dorfsman/Elías Cattan, Miguel Fernández de Castro, Ulises Figueroa, and Mariana Magdaleno/Estanquillo El 32

Edited by Anna Mikaela Ekstrand and Julius Lehmann
Beyond the Borders
Anna Mikaela Ekstrand and Julius Lehmann

Since its first edition in 1992, the bi-national exhibition INSITE held simultaneously in the neighboring cities of San Diego in the United States and Tijuana in Mexico has contributed in a wide range of ways to mutual understanding, while focusing on cultural interaction as well as social and political issues related to the border: specifically, the constant exchange between the two sides, immigration, and the shifting of labor forces back and forth. As a multicultural transborder agglomeration San Diego–Tijuana is characterized both by diversity and the permanent tension between economic symbiosis and inequality. The border produces an ambivalent situation finding its symbolic manifestation in the form of the border fence, the physical demarcation separating the two cities from each other.

INSITE was initiated by gallerist Mark Quint and artist Ernest Silva, who at the time was teaching at University of California San Diego (UCSD)’s graduate art school. Starting as a biennial, it has continued at varying intervals and steadily evolved an extensive network both in the United States and Mexico. The first two editions in 1992 and 1994 came about as a collaboration between several institutions in both cities under the auspices of San Diego’s Installation Gallery. Quint ran a residency program with Michael Krichman, who became president of the board in 1993 and has been executive director of INSITE together with Carmen Cuenca since its third edition. What began as a loose assemblage of coordinated parallel exhibitions aiming “to ambush the unexpected viewer” was, from “INSITE97”—curated by Jessica Bradley (Canada), Olivier Debroise (Mexico), Ivo Mesquita (Brazil), and Sally Yard (USA)—onward, organized around a central unifying concept. INSITE became a curatorially driven project embedded within responsivity to the changing region. With each new iteration a new curatorial team was formed to coordinate the exhibitions’ numerous artist projects.

In this more dynamic form, community engagement projects grew to become a key feature of the project as a whole, and a second field of activity alongside the commissioning of site-specific and context-related installation art. During the same period, the exhibition, which in its early days had a strong focus on showcasing San Diego artists, developed a more international profile while retaining its regional character and bi-national quality. In addition to artists from the North, Central, and South Americas, including the Chicano artist scene, there were always European artists in the mix. To support this a well-planned residency program, interlocking with collaborations with local universities and a wide variety of other institutions, was central. The residency facilitated participating artists’ full immersion in the region with up to two years of preparation time. Reflecting the realities of the border terrain, unlike other biennials and major outdoor exhibitions, INSITE did not intend to be accessible to every member of the public. Each edition navigated inaccessibility, publicness, localities, and site-specific artistic practice in an institutional framework and a location that are both in constant flux.

Over time, a great number of iconic works have been created that have made a lasting contribution to INSITE’s image and achieved widespread presence via publications or further exhibition. Signal works include: Javier Téllez’s One Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida) (2009), a live performance documented on video, which included a procession of residents from the Centro de Salud Mental del Estado de Baja California (Mental Health Center for the State of Baja California), and climaxed with the firing of a human cannonball across the border between Mexico and the United States, exploring the idea of spatial and mental borders; Andrea Fraser’s Inaugural Speech (1997), which used ironic humor to turn the gaze of public art onto the strategies and interests of various actors in institutional positions of power within the art world; and Francis Alÿs’ The Loop (1997), in which the artist traveled from Tijuana to San Diego without crossing the border by circumnavigating the globe with a string of scheduled flights. Importantly, these artworks highlighted the multi-layered and shifting relationship between Mexico–United States people, capital, and policy, using art in public space to explore the border’s nature, possibilities, and obstructions. Following its curatorial structure, the artists who participated in INSITE responded to the site through practices they had developed in other contexts. Yet investigating INSITE clearly shows how both the institutionalized art world and public policy can serve simultaneously to facilitate and impede public art, and how art can invigorate both private and public cross border relations.

While the development of INSITE was initially aided by the warmer political climate in the wake of the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and Tijuana’s rapid economic growth, tension continued to increase for Mexicans in California as a citizenship screening system was put in place to prohibit undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency health care, public education, and other services in the state through Proposition 187. The exhibition concept eventually caught up with changing realities. Due to increasingly restrictive border policies and the declining public safety situation in Tijuana, “InSite_05” was followed first by a lengthy intermission and eventually a change of venue. After five exhibitions conducted on a “biennial model”
(‘IN/SITE92,’ ‘IN/SITE94,’ ‘IN/SITE97,’ ‘IN/SITE2000,’ and ‘inSite_05’), the next iteration, ‘inSite/Casa Gallina,’ a community-based project realized in Mexico City between 2013 and 2018, departed from a very different conceptual basis. “Withdrawning from the economy of visibility of an international festival.” it aimed to establish “alternative infrastructures” and sustainable civic engagement by focusing on one specific house, its inhabitants, and the surrounding neighborhood in Mexico City over a prolonged period of time.

In this chapter a conversation with executive directors Carmen Cuenca and Michael Krichman gives insight into the genesis and transformation of the exhibition format. It also looks at the development and processing of the archive, and the planning of the upcoming edition. An interview with Andrea Fraser highlights a counter-narrative, placing INSITE within a larger framework of growing global exhibitions. Art, capital, and power are often linked in Fraser’s work, and to prepare for Inaugural Speech, which she performed at the 1997 edition, she researched the history of the site and the organization. Enacting the structure of relations between different positions within the art field, Fraser positions INSITE and San Diego–Tijuana as the locus of high-level geopolitics in the form of cross-border relationship-building between board members and patrons. Talking to Sally Yard on the other hand, who has been involved in developing the exhibition’s format as curator and editor of parallel publications, clarified how the bi-lateral politics of the two countries and the shifts of Latin American migration influenced curatorial and artistic decision-making. Finally, our conversations with Betsabeé Romero and Aernout Mik look back at their respective projects in 1997 and 2005, which dealt with processes of exchange in the border region in completely different ways, adopting distinct perspectives on migration, commerce, and the osmotic flows of goods.

What is visionary about INSITE is its malleability, as each edition has been slightly different, the format allowing not only artists and curators but the institution itself to act as a timely response to trends in the art world, politics, and curatorial practice. The two cities host a plurality of publics and INSITE encouraged artists to engage with local communities and neighborhoods. Most large-scale site-specific exhibitions make visible the gap between the elite art world and the wider community. INSITE’s specific format, however, by keeping this inequality in mind as its participants imagined their publics, served as a mechanism to avoid paternalism. INSITE’s border editions were situated in a region in which millions of people commute to work and live, a zone marked by constant cultural and economic exchange. At the same time Tijuana as a city was rapidly growing and changing, and relationships between Mexico and the US were becoming increasingly tense on a federal level, coming to obstruct inter-city connection. In this context, the project emerged between 1997 and 2005 as one in which multiple aspects of publicness and public art, service, interconnectedness, and (im-) permanence, could be considered anew with each edition.

3. Ibid. 239.
Pushing Boundaries
A Conversation with Carmen Cuenca and Michael Krichman
Anna Mikaela Ekstrand and Julius Lehmann

Julius Lehmann: When we arranged this conversation, you mentioned several exhibitions of the 1980s and ‘90s that were instrumental for your thinking during the early editions of INSITE. Could you tell us about these references and the genesis of the project?

Michael Krichman: INSITE was a modest but ambitious effort at the beginning. It certainly did not grow out of a desire to establish a biennial in our cities. The founders of INSITE were Mark Quint, who started a commercial gallery in San Diego in 1981, and Ernest Silva, an artist then teaching at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). INSITE emerged from Installation Gallery, a non-profit founded in 1982 as an artist-run organization. By the early ‘90s it was faltering economically. Mark and Ernie were part of an advisory group trying to find a new direction for Installation Gallery, and from that effort the concept for INSITE was born.

The original notion was to convince as many non-profit cultural and educational institutions in both San Diego and Tijuana as possible to program “site-specific” art for six weeks. It was a simple idea, but very difficult to pull off. For the first edition, there were thirty-six institutions participating under the umbrella of “IN/SITE 92,” from the largest museums to small cultural centers to universities to community colleges. The brilliance of Mark and Ernie was their ability to convince virtually every institution in the region, particularly San Diego, to participate. The fact that prominent figures in the region went along with their idea—from Hugh Davies, then Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, to Sally Yard, Professor in the Art History Department at the University of San Diego (USD), whose work and thinking was absolutely critical as INSITE evolved over the years to Pedro Ochoa, Director of the Centro Cultural Tijuana—was really key.

Mark Quint and I were partners for several years in a private residency program that invited artists from Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the United States to San Diego to realize new work. We began visiting Poland in 1989, and in a small way, supported Ryszard Waśko as he and his team were planning “Construction in Process” in Łódź in 1990, a project that is still not really well
known in the US. It certainly had an influence on our residency program and on the first version of INSITE. Other inspirational projects were Skulptur Projekte Münster, as well as Mary Jane Jacobs’ “Places with a Past” in Charleston in 1991 and “Culture in Action” in Chicago in 1993. In the early years, INSITE was a hybrid of many different initiatives, not necessarily marking new territory in terms of practice. But its situation at the border, working simultaneously in two cities of roughly equal size, but with very different realities, was unique. And so was the incredible growth of Tijuana during the early 1990s and the extraordinary confluence of incongruent forces—from the construction of the border fence into the Pacific Ocean to Operation Gatekeeper to NAFTA. So, the cities and the region became fertile territory for artists and others to work. It may sound trite, but I think there was also a spirit of hospitality—inviting artists to stay in the region during multiple visits for relatively long periods of time to research and delve into a situation. Affording time for artists to work became very important to us.

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand: Initially you relied on the participating institutions, who hosted parts of the exhibition to fund them, and later you worked with guest curators to create works beyond these institutions. How did you change INSITE’s organizational structure in order to facilitate fundraising?

MK: In 1992 and 1994 the institutions were funding their own contributions to the project. Lynda Forsha was the Artistic Director of Installation Gallery, and she curated sixteen of the seventy-six projects for “InSITE94.” This form of organization was ultimately unsustainable: INSITE was tapping into and straining the resources of institutions with very different budgets and sets of priorities; we did not want INSITE to become a burden, but rather an opportunity for them to expand their programs. So, we substantially changed the organizational/curatorial structure of INSITE for the editions that took place in 1997 and beyond.

Carmen Cuenca: In Mexico the situation is very different—most cultural institutions are funded by the federal government, and only a few are funded by the states or cities. We have very few strong private institutions like in the US, nor did we have curators in Tijuana at the time. Back then I was perhaps the only art historian living there. When I arrived from Mexico City, INSITE, with its focus on residencies and site-specific art, presented a very interesting new approach to working for me. The importance INSITE placed on collaboration among many institutions was also novel. In Mexico, that was an unusual proposition, because cultural organizations are controlled by different levels of government—federal, state, or municipal—that are, in turn, often controlled by competing political parties. In terms of funding, there was a comparatively small amount of money to work with, but many possibilities for in-kind donations from individuals, corporations, and other organizations. In the end, as with most cultural projects in Mexico at that time, we counted on support from federal sources, particularly the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA). INBA’s Director at the time, Gerardo Estrada, was particularly interested in INSITE as a model bi-national initiative, and he was able to find resources from various federal departments. Likewise, the Centro Cultural Tijuana, a large federal institution, became the base of INSITE’s operations in Mexico.

JL: By now, we are looking back twenty to thirty years at five different editions of INSITE. We can see changes in the curatorial approach and in conceptions of artistic work. How did the public...
reception in San Diego and Tijuana develop over the time?

MK: In the earlier editions we were still operating with an exhibition or biennial/festival model. In that way, the point of entry for audiences—various mechanisms for touring the region to view works—was similar to Munster, but obviously spread out over a much larger geographic area. The processes of participation in the majority of those early projects were not paramount.

The experience of realizing “inSITE2000” dramatically changed our perspective—artists’ practices had evolved, and in many ways we had not. Another way of looking at it is that artists had taken seriously the “inSITE2000” curatorial team’s rhetoric about privileging process over product. As a result, there was not much to see or tour in a conventional sense. The biennial model did not work anymore, but frankly our organization only figured that out at the last minute. We produced a T-shirt at the time with “inSITE2000” on the front, and “It’s A Mess” on the back. That is what it was, it was a pivotal mess.

For “inSITE2000,” and certainly “inSITE.05,” there was an emphasis not only on process but on the participation of various communities or groups in the conception of many of the projects themselves. Each of the projects had its own network of participants that grew as it developed. For example, Javier Téllez’s Onelew over the Void (bola perdida), the project with David Smith, the human cannonball, in which a community of patients from a psychiatric facility was involved. When the project was revealed, there was a large audience from both cities for the day of the spectacle/performance, but the heart of the work rested in the process that Javier had instigated over two years working with the patients. With “inSite/Casa Gallina,” which took place in Mexico City from 2013 through 2018, we moved completely away from an exhibition model. It was a long-term project immersed in a specific neighborhood and, by design, out of sight for traditional art audiences. The artists’ projects were based on various levels of “co-participation,” but in terms of display of completed works or the processes behind them, “inSite/Casa Gallina” did not invite a general public to view or interact with activities as they were unfolding.1

AME: How did this internal conceptual shift in curation come about?

MK: The concept for “inSite/Casa Gallina” was driven, in large part, by discussions with Osvaldo Sánchez that began in early 2012. He had been a member of the curatorial team for “inSITE2000” and was Artistic Director of “inSite.05.” Simply put, Osvaldo’s idea was to work at and test the intersection of culture and daily life. There were fewer commissions, and it took place over a longer period of time. There were many activities taking place in the community of Santa María La Ribera, but they were not announced outside of the neighborhood. INSITE, as the name of the project, or as the institution that organized, managed, and funded it, was in many ways invisible during these six years; the project became known as simply Casa Gallina, and was focused on activities taking place in the house that had been renovated for the project, and throughout the neighborhood.

I would add that although INSITE has tested many institutional and curatorial frameworks, one thing has been consistent: after each version there has been a period of seriously questioning whether there is a compelling reason to move forward. With INSITE, there has never been an institutional imperative to undertake the next version or chapter or program.

CC: Exactly. It is very different from a traditional institution or, as they are understood in Mexico, a house of culture. In late 2018, as “inSite/Casa Gallina” was concluding, we began working with Andrea Torreblanca and our board on the question of what, if anything, might be next, given the exigencies of the moment and INSITE’s trajectory. Together with Andrea Torreblanca, who now serves as INSITE’s Director of Curatorial Projects, we decided to begin the process of imagining the future by reflecting on the past, and so began developing the INSITE Archive as an online, publicly available resource.
JL: The development of archive concepts and the indexing of holdings has also become a priority for other exhibition formats in recent years. What role does the INSITE Archive play for you on a curatorial level and for artistic practice?

MK: After “InSite_05” we received a grant to organize and digitize INSITE’s archive, and we spent almost two years completing that work. An exhibition of the archive curated by Donna Conwell was organized by the Museo Universitario Artes Contemporáneas (MUAC). INSITE donated the digital archive to MUAC and the original material is housed in the Special Collections Library at UCSD. But the archive was never available or searchable, so our team spent nearly two years, 2019 and 2020, designing and engineering the archive on an online platform. In addition, Andrea proposed the INSITE Journal as an online publication. Four issues have been published so far, “Performing Resilience,” “Social Beings,” ”Vital Forms,” and ”After History,” with one more planned for 2021. From a curatorial perspective, the archive will be a source for future projects, driver for artists, editor of Spanish texts, and most importantly, sounding board and critic. And it is great to finally have the INSITE Archive. It is not only a source of information about all the projects by artists from all over the world realized in both cities over the years, it is also a starting point for new research and new projects. And of course, technology allows access far beyond the local contexts of San Diego/Tijuana or Mexico City.

MK: Apart from our work on the archive, we have also decided to move forward with a new initiative, “Commonplaces.” For its first cycle we are working with editor-curators Miguel A. López, Gabi Ngoboco, and Andrea Torreblanca. It will include three projects, one based in Johannesburg, one in Lima, and one in Baja California and Southern California. A model that we are interested in exploring is the collaboration between just one editor-curator working with just one artist, or collective, on just one project over a relatively sustained period of time in their own places of origin or residence. We are asking the editor-curators to use the structure of the INSITE Journal as a framework—conceiving a context-specific subject, engaging artists, writers, scholars, and fellow curators. In a shift from “inSite/Casa Gallina,” the editor-curators are particularly interested in finding ways to make visible aspects of the processes in each of the three projects as they unfold.

JL: Many of the works realized for INSITE are of temporary or collaborative nature. What kind of permanence do the projects have in both cities?

MK: Well, almost none in terms of physical manifestation. There were projects that took the form of parks or playgrounds that still exist in one form or another. There are objects or components of projects that exist, but not in their original sites. Perhaps the best-known example is Robert Therrien’s Under the Table from “inSITE94” that is now in the Broad Collection in Los Angeles. Over time, more artists have incorporated videos or films, either as part of their work or as documentation. These may become the basis for separate works that are exhibited in various venues and may also enter the commercial market. Although how these works are presented outside of the context of INSITE is not our foremost concern as a commissioning institution.

AME: Within INSITE, there has been a lot of conversations about the role of the curator. How you choose curators, and how they operate. In what way did your concepts of approaching the different publics change over time?

CC: I think one interesting thing about the public are the educational programs that INSITE presented from the beginning. Especially in the early period, it was very important to create wide interest. I am probably talking more about Tijuana, and from the Mexican perspective, now. We really needed to convey what site-specific work might be and so, for example, we invited Christo and Jeanne-Claude who very generously agreed to give a talk at the Centro Cultural Tijuana in 1993. It was an important event in the city, and helped lay the foundation and
create an awareness of a genre that was, for the most part, new for Tijuana audiences. Artists were asked to speak in different forums, on the university level or in public events. We also invited curators, art historians, and critics, and then started to be interested in more interdisciplinary dialog with scholars not only from within the art world, but also from sociology, economics, demography, geography, and immigration. This was an approach that we pursued through a close collaboration with Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, and these cross-disciplinary encounters between the art world and different fields of research also created new publics for the project. Some of the events are documented in audio recordings, some on video, but back then we were, unfortunately, not able to document every moment we would love to now have as part of the INSITE Archive.

AME: What are your thoughts and strategies on the topic of access? How could people visit the exhibition in view of the legal situation in the border area?

CC: Well, one of the things that we tried to make accessible are the conversations and educational programs, with which we tried to have an equilibrium, one on the US side, one on the Mexican side. Another is our effort to make all events and publications accessible bilingually. On the other hand, only thirty percent of the population of Mexico have passports and speak English. So, it is impossible for everyone to go back and forth. And compared to the ’90s or early 2000s, it has become even more difficult to cross the border now. Even with papers, crossing the border can take hours. That was clear since the beginning, and so, to facilitate the border crossing, we organized bus tours that operated in both directions. And there was always an event included—a conversation or a seminar or an artist talk. Strangely, it was probably more important to create the experience for people from the US that rarely cross the border to Mexico than it was for Mexicans with visas who cross regularly. And in 2005 it became very difficult, touring was not possible, because there were no objects, but events. So, we structured weekends of activities with different performances and other ways to experience some of the projects.

MK: But at the end of the day, all of those things put together do not provide access if you cannot easily cross that border or if you do not have the luxury of time to spend a day or more experiencing the works. That has always been a serious issue below the surface of INSITE, and in light of the situation at the border it is likely to be even more of an issue now. And that’s why we are interested in exploring new mechanisms available to facilitate dialog around the project—even if it is not all in-person.

Another complicated, mostly invisible aspect of INSITE is in obtaining permission to produce these projects—particularly those located near the border where there are multiple legal jurisdictions. For example, shooting a human cannonball across an international border required the tacit acquiescence of forty-seven different state, federal, and local agencies on both sides. Inside many of the most impactful projects INSITE has commissioned is a story of artists and curators pushing, and asking our organization to push the boundaries of authority.  


Damn, I Should Have Done a Commencement Speech
A Conversation with Andrea Fraser
Anna Mikaela Ekstrand

Using quotations from institutional discourse, Andrea Fraser humorously highlights the structure of the art field in *Inaugural Speech* performed at “INSITE97.” Photo: INSITE

When here and throughout the Americas all aspects of the public sphere are under attack. When the public sector is being down-sized, public services privatized, public space enclosed, public speech controlled, and public goods of all kinds exchanged for the currency of private goals, be they prestige, privilege, power, or profit. Public art cannot forestall the forces foreclosing on our public lives, but it can remind us of what we are losing—like the casual democracy of everyday encounters when we find ourselves equal between places and things that needn’t be paid for and can’t be purchased. Or the practical democracy of forms of public speech where differences and status do not define our place at a podium.


Engaging with the emergence of global exhibitions as geopolitical social sites, Andrea Fraser performed *Inaugural Speech* as part of the opening of “INSITE97.” Using ironic mimicry and quotations from various sources, she slipped into different roles one after the other—artist, curator, board member, politician, and corporate sponsor—and thus exposed economic entanglements, the hierarchical pyramid, and the exclusivity of the art world. At the same time, her performance raised questions about the relationship between art and the public.

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand: One of the terms you have been using is “service.” Artist Suzanne Lacy uses the term to denote socially engaged art and work in support of others, what did “service” mean in your work?

Andrea Fraser: I started using the term “service” in 1993 in the context of thinking through, in economic terms, the relations emerging with site-specific, community-based, and other project-based art making. Services was a way of imagining economic sustainability for artists who were not producing artistic ‘goods’ to sell through galleries. That was my focus in 1993-94.

AME: *Inaugural Speech* at INSITE was born out of these projects but also investigating globalization, a growing reality in the art world in the 1990s.

Andrea Fraser: Yes, by the time I got to INSITE a whole different set of issues had started to emerge, primarily around globalization. I started thinking about the term in 1992 when I developed a project in for the Austrian pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1993—the original global art exhibition. I approached “INSITE97” from that framework and continued to explore globalization at the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1998.

AME: Carmen Cuenca and Michael Krichman speak about INSITE as an atypical organization and not an institution. The editions shifted and so did INSITE’s mission statement. However, every exhibition operates within a hegemony of the art world, and especially INSITE with its complex financials and transborder ambitions. How would you place INSITE?

Andrea Fraser: In a US context INSITE is an institution, as an unincorporated nonprofit organization with a voluntary board that played a central role in the financial support of the project. I tend to use the term organization more these days and try to reserve the term institution for the field of art more broadly, particularly when speaking about institutional critique. One of the misunderstandings of institutional critique is that it is focused
on organizations like museums or other specific discrete institutions, rather than the field of art more broadly.

**AME:** From what directions did you approach the commission with INSITE?

**AF:** I looked at how INSITE was conceived and positioned itself within different fields of organizations. Carmen and Michael were trying to conceptualize INSITE as an organization that was different from other models of the time. Part of that was trying to be more flexible, open, and responsive—and I think this included the political context of border politics in the 1990s and US-Mexico relations. I was also thinking about INSITE within the context of economic shifts in the field of power in Southern California. There was a historic, social, political, and economic shift happening in in the region, in San Diego County and Orange County, which is where Ronald Reagan came from. Southern California had been a base for conservative Republican politics in the United States. The wealth of San Diego elites was rooted in the military industrial complex because of the naval base and military presence there. So, of course, the philanthropists and patrons that historically supported cultural institutions in San Diego were also conservative. Their wealth was from those industries.

**AME:** How did INSITE’s board fit into this economic ecology?

**AF:** Part of the context of INSITE was the transformation in the economic base in San Diego, away from traditionally conservative manufacturing and defense-related industries to more liberal high tech and health industries. INSITE’s board members were part of the new wealth associated with globally-oriented and information-based industries. I researched the connection between board members and corporate and private patrons to understand what INSITE represented in the globalizing field of art. INSITE, as a global exhibition, was linked to those developing economic and social conditions through its board. Most importantly, as a bi-national board, it was forging connections between Southern California and Mexican elites who shared an economic interest in economic globalization as well as a cultural interest in art. In Mexico there is a long history of highly nationalistic public support for culture rooted in the one-party-state of the PRI, but that was starting to change in the 1990s. When did the PRI lose power in Mexico?

**AME:** In 2000.

**AF:** The shift from a one-party state in Mexico affected the politics of patronage, from public to private, in the Mexican cultural field. INSITE positioned itself to enter that field at this moment of shift, offering wealthy patrons an opportunity to connect. The third piece was the anti-immigration politics in California. Proposition 187, which barred undocumented immigrants from getting a driver’s license and social services, was passed in 1994. It created a huge backlash, basically the nail in the coffin of Republican dominance in California. That was the political context that I was preoccupied with.

**AME:** Where were you when you developed this research and your thesis? Did you spend time in San Diego, or did you carry out the research from afar?

**AF:** I lived in New York at the time. I grew up in the Bay Area in Northern California, so I had a sense of it. In San Diego, I accessed INSITE’s archive, but the main influence from my time in San Diego on the script were really the culture of the organization. It was the early days of the internet and it was the first project that I researched partially on the internet, communicating over email. That was a huge shift, until then, in the ’90s, we had communicated through faxes or on the phone.

**AME:** Did the internet give you access to the speech excerpts from which you based your speech?

**AF:** Some of them. By that time the White House had its website up with speeches given by the President, Vice President, First Lady, and Second Lady available. Corporations were starting to put annual reports on their websites. Funny story. Toward the end of the process Michael told me that there was going to be a politician of some sort reading a letter from President Clinton and that the White House had asked him to write the draft. He asked me if I wanted to write it. At first, I loved the idea of ghostwriting the speech, but decided that it would undermine the context. It was a brilliant moment that illustrated the extent of institutional ventriloquism, begging the question who speaks for who and why?

**AME:** Did you engage with other artists?

**AF:** There were a lot of social events for artists, for the board, and events that brought the two groups together. The project was not only supporting itself by putting together this board and their friends who would support it financially, but it also created a social network. I had not seen anything like it. In other exhibitions I had been in, there would be just one dinner around the opening where they brought together lenders, patrons, curators, and artists.
organizations, mainly museums, and art organizations as hosts for social events to raise money from publics who might not ever participate in other programming. INSITE was ahead of their time in creating social networks for patrons, untethered to art.

AF: I am not sure how prevalent it was beyond my own experience at the time, but it is central to the board section of the piece. It is one of my favorite pieces and that is my favorite part. It is hilarious. I starts with "I am privileged." That’s a joke on speeches that start with "I am privileged to be here." Later on, I say: "We realized that we had more in common than art, golf, and horsemanship. There are also political and economic interests that we share." "Art, golf, and horsemanship" was quite specific to that board.

AME: A key point in the book is that these global and public art exhibitions provided an important venue for curatorial practice to develop, but that artistic practice did not necessarily evolve in conversation with these curators, sometimes they were contrarian to them.

AF: That view reflects the way that curatorial practice developed to center curators and curatorial discourse, which artists were already objecting to in the 1990s. Much of the Services project I co-organized in 1994 focused on the conflicts arising from projects in which curators were basically contracting artist to execute their curatorial concepts.

AME: The speech itself is a critique, or deconstruction, of the format of global exhibitions. Were you also critical to INSITE as an organization?

AF: Yes, of course. It was part of neoliberal globalization driven by corporate interests and translational elites. But it was also contesting conservative ethno-nationalism in the Southern California context. One of the more specific things I was critical of was that they closed off public space and charged admission for the opening events, which included political speeches, my performance, and then a concert by Laurie Anderson. So that was a direct example of a neoliberal privatization of public space. Most of the 2000 people there had paid a lot to see Laurie Anderson. They did not know who I was and they certainly did not care about the politicians. The audience itself was physically stratified, with patrons and board members in front, paying guests in the middle, and artist in the back, which I mention in my performance. I remember getting very different responses from these different parts of the audience.

Julius Lehmann: Most exhibitions in public space claim to be democratic, however, often the audience come from various layers of privileged classes. How can publicness and accessibility be achieved?

AF: I believe that rather than escaping the field of art and its institutions, as is often claimed, most public art just expands the field of art and institutions to incorporate public space. What defines the institution of art and art itself are not the architectural spaces and places of museums but the discourses, dispositions, and competencies that frame some phenomenon as art and demand that it be perceived as such. This is what makes Michael Asher’s project for Skulptur Projekte Münster such a brilliant correction to Duchamp's readymade. It is a trailer parked around the city. What makes it art is not that it is in a museum, physically framed as art, but that it is discursively framed as art to be perceived as art by those who approach it with that framework. The frame is in the mind, not in space.

INSITE had a robust residency program for artists but also provided opportunities for patrons to convene. As a result, it became an important site for the formation of trans-border relationships. At an “INSITE97” group art residency Kim Adams and Louis Hock speak with Gonzalo Díaz; Nari Ward is seated in front of Adams. Photo: INSITE Archive
Another argument that I had with a lot of the discourse about public art in the ‘90s is that it ignored the distinction between public, nonprofit, and private organizations. We should be making a demand on public and nonprofit art organizations to be more public. Defining public art as art in public space relieves art organizations of important political demands that they be public and address the public. That was not a central critique in the speech, but it was there.

AME: Today public institutions often borrow language from community-based or activist practices to describe how they cater to the public—sometimes as lip service and sometimes in reflection of their programming.

AF: I think of community-based art and public art as two difference frameworks. INSITE was a more traditional public art project.

JL: Do you see a difference in the exhibitions of public art in the US in comparison to those in Europe? Is there a difference in approaching public space?

AF: Compared to much of Europe, both public space and the public sector are very limited in the United States. Most public institutions and almost all cultural institutions and civic space in the US developed as through private initiatives or public-private partnerships, mostly through the model of philanthropic organizations structured as corporate entities. The historian Peter Dobkin Hall describes this as ‘civic privatism’. Basically, the only parts of the US public sphere that are not privatized in this way are punitive—policing, prisons, psychiatric facilities, or public schools which are often pipelines to prisons. So, to the extent that culture exists in the public sphere it is within a privatized public sector. For me, one of the contradicitions of community-based practice or social practice in the United States is that it almost invariably is functioning in the nonprofit, voluntary, or philanthropic sector, which basically developed a private alternative to the public sector.

AME: How was Inaugural Speech different from your previous work engaging with organizations?

AF: INSITE was my return to live performance after a period of some six years of project-based work with organizations based on my Prospectuses, which defined my work as an artistic service. A lot of it was pretty dry and humorless. I decided to develop the performance after hearing that the opening events would include speeches by politicians.

AME: Your INSITE commission fuses many aspects that characterize your practice: archival research, performance, an engagement with psychoanalysis, and a generous helping of humor to examine the socio-economic structures of the art world. How do you perceive the role of your own body within this context?

AF: The body is always there. My approach to performance was always rooted in appropriating positions and functions, which I also was doing with my Prospectus projects, just not necessarily in front of an audience. Around the same time, I was developing a Prospectus-based project at an art school in Philadelphia in which I, in effect, took up the role of a curator and created an exhibition of a motley collection that they had amassed over 150 years of things that have been left behind by students. When I was almost finished with that project, I thought, “Damn, I should have done a commencement speech.”
Migrating Cultures
A Conversation with Betsabeé Romero
Julius Lehmann

Julius Lehmann: The literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt introduced the term “contact zone” to describe “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” How do you, as a Mexican artist, experience the cultural exchange and political and social tensions in the Mexico-US border region?

Betsabeé Romero: I was born in a permanent contact zone. Mexican history is marked by colonization. The peaceful and non-peaceful encounter of cultures, religions, value systems, and the asymmetry that comes with this, have been an unfortunate constant in every period of our history. Borders are in my opinion epigeographic; they are real and symbolic systems of rejection and classification. Often tacit rules are installed permanently in society, separating, excluding, and dividing us from each other. This polarization is a huge problem in the contemporary world.

I have been living all my life amid the multiple boundaries of a highly stratified Mexican society. The Tijuana border is situated on many kinds of boundaries and has characteristics so visible and obscene that, apart from being the geographical frontier most crossed every day, it is one of the most iconic borders on the planet.

Cultural exchange, the political complicity of both governments, as well as the daily life and identity of migrants, are all part of a mixed conception of the border. The exhibition dealt with working in the white cube and in public space, while, in the case of my work Ayate Car, it was also about working collaboratively with the migrant community.

JL: How did the idea for Ayate Car come about and how did the work relate to the local and social environment of Colonia Libertad?

BR: I was thinking about a car, in an ironic way. I had the idea of an apparition of the Virgen de Guadalupe, the Virgin of Guadalupe, in a critical situation where the politicians, the economy, and authorities will never really do anything about the misery and misfortune of migrants. The car would be the symbolic vehicle for all aspects of the life of the Mexican immigrants who are rejected from the USA: their hopes, their culture, their energy, their willingness to work in order to achieve better living conditions. A vehicle to visibility for the dignity and richness that Mexican people give to the USA.

To find a context or location for the work, I was in dialogue with José Manuel Valenzuela, an important expert on border issues at Colegio de la Frontera Norte. He told me about the history of the popular resistance movements in Tijuana. Colonia Libertad, the oldest neighborhood in Tijuana and the one closest to the wall, was the area where these social protests began in the 1950s. This was also the place where the very first low-rider car clubs emerged, and when I went there for the first time, these custom cars were very present. Cars play an immense role in the male Mexican culture. They offer the opportunity to make an appearance. The culture of car tuning has been brought to the US by Mexican immigrants. A migrating culture. And, because of the
A special memory for me is how I drove that car to Tijuana, when it was covered in canvas and painted with flowers: A reference to the Marian apparition to the indigenous Mexican Juan Diego in 1531. I, as a woman, am sitting at the wheel and all the men in the streets look at this car and shout “gay car!” or “maricón!” Later at the site, when the car was filled with 10,000 dried roses, the masculine machismo connotation of the car turned into something feminine, a maternal identity.

JL: How did you approach the local community?

BR: First, I went there many times over a period of time. I studied anthropology and social psychology when I did my bachelor’s degree on communication. I wanted to be respectful with the community. I needed to know if they would agree to have the work there. I explained to the group of locals, who themselves know nothing about art and museums, that my project was about a new meaning of a car. That is something they know and something they can relate to. They know everything about car culture and the “democratic” aesthetics of cars. It would have been disrespectful to arrive with something out of their world.

I feel very grateful for the help and commitment of the local community. They agreed not only to receive the installation but to help me to install it and they proposed the exact place for the car in order to be able to watch it from their windows. In other terms, they did the “scenography” of the piece. And, typical for the transitory border dynamic, they asked me for the exact date when I will take the car away again, because they would not be there for the long term: They wanted to cross the border as soon as possible.

I decided to give the car keys to the locals and with them, the responsibility for the piece. The organizers of INSITE wanted to document the piece immediately because they thought that it was going to be the first work to be vandalized. Instead, the locals maintained and cleaned it, and they even told the visitors their own explanations. They used to say that the car was like them, who came to cross the border to get a better life, offering their culture, their flowers as a symbol of all what is good on them, their energy in terms of work, and that the US-Americans still rejected them.

JL: Are the personal experiences of those involved important to you as part of the project?

BR: If my project has consequences on the ground and experiences are created, that is the greatest success for me. When I picked the car back up, I talked to the people and got into a lot of conversations. It was very important to them that journalists showed interest in their community and conducted interviews. It was chance for them to get visibility and a voice, because the newspapers seldom write positive things about areas like these. I heard many stories of the project. There were even some people who made love in the car. After all, as I just said, I gave them the keys.

JL: In what way did your installation offer a change of perspective?

BR: Contemporary art is not in the powerful position to change tensions or social situations. But it can produce long term changes in small groups, in some cultural practices or in particular ways of understanding by trying to break symbolic but important boundaries. Ironically, I was asking the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, for a miracle—to change the terrible living conditions of the migrants. It never happened and the situation is even worse now. Especially under the Trump
Ayate Car installed at the border line in Colonia Libertad, 1997. Photo: Bethsabeé Romero, courtesy of INSITE

administration, but even before as technological surveillance of the border greatly intensified. Beginning at the end of the twentieth century migration has become more and more important; I would say it is the most important human phenomenon.

JL: Your piece can be understood as a “transcultural” object in its hybrid use of cultural motives. Did it offer different readings depending on the cultural and social background of the viewer?

BR: Ayate Car had different meanings for me and for the community of Colonia Libertad. Both explanations are consistent with my idea of cultural codes and visual cultures. But when the work later moved to different contexts, it has been interesting to see how these displacements make it gain other meanings. For example, in a parade in Houston: I asked for it to be pulled by a border patrol tow truck—it won the first price for political statement. Or in Spain, where in colonial times the religious devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe originated: it was always an alien, a cultural migrant.³

JL: Did the exhibition succeed in addressing the differences between the living environments? What effects did INSITE have for the region and art scenes of Central and South America?

BR: The biggest differences are inside the art world: How groups of artists, curators, collectors, and art critics confronted the complex reality of Tijuana-San Diego. Many visited the place like another planet, not breaking the “visitor border.” I think these were the first tensions and borders that the biennial was trying to break, pushing the art circle to cross the border by walking, opening relationships between Mexican academics, international artists and curators from all the continent, offering an unforgettable residency experience to the artists on both sides of the border. Everything had two sides, you had to break this wall to understand the deep and intensive historical relationship between the two countries.

INSITE has been an important catalyst in the area and has favored new expressions of art and culture in Tijuana, not only in visual arts but also in music, cinema, literature, and gastronomy. After my participation in 1997, I visited every subsequent edition and I learned a lot about working with and on the border. Twenty years later I came back to Tijuana with a project on my own, Tu huella (2017), and felt that I would have received more help if INSITE had continued to work in the area. I will always be grateful for everything I’ve learned through INSITE.

1. Pratt specifically refers to “highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.” Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Profession (1991): 37-40.
2. A video accompanying the work was shown at a library in San Diego during “INSITE97.”
3. Today Ayate Car is part of Daros Latinamerica Collection, in Zurich.
As a curatorial endeavor, INSITE situates itself amongst the proliferation of collaborative curatorial practices that have emerged in academic, professional, and even in institutional leadership settings. Sally Yard, an art history professor at USD, co-curated “INSITE97” and “inSITE2000,” two projects of critical thinking through the curatorial form. Having begun to develop collaborative curatorial practice in 1997, INSITE, however, is a forerunner. Furthermore, setting INSITE apart from other large-scale site-specific exhibitions is its disregard for broad public accessibility, as curators took into consideration that most works would not be accessible by people on both sides of the border. INSITE resigns itself to, or sits comfortably within, navigating tensions of inequity. For readers, as Yard discusses her curatorial process, an anchoring question to relate to is: How do the curatorial and artistic practices of INSITE enhance, disrupt, respond to, or negate public space, and vice versa?

In Lorna Simpson’s two-channel video installation, *Duet*, 2000, narrative moments and images filmed in Tijuana and San Diego were at once delineated and conjoined across a single screen. Photo: INSITE

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand: Throughout its history in the region, INSITE is marked by responsiveness: first, working with organizations on both sides of the border of the US and Mexico; then by shifting to a format of collaborative curating, beyond the walls of institutions. You co-curated “INSITE97” and “inSITE2000,” how did this unfold?

Sally Yard: Unlike most other projects, INSITE had no obligations—it was not an institution, it could come, it could go, it could exist or not exist. As curators we were able to question all its assumptions, we had the luxury of freedom. We did not start planning another edition unless we could articulate a good reason to do it.

Julius Lehmann: What role did the border and the related fields of political and social tension play in the curatorial concepts? How were the concepts of hegemony and territory negotiated or subverted?

SY: The political, economic, social, and cultural tensions that are inherent in the border terrain of San Diego–Tijuana were fundamental. In our discussions, it was clear that this terrain was the context for INSITE. The scale of the two cities—at this conjunction not just of Mexico and the US, but really of Latin America and North America—dramatizes the collisions and confluences that play out along the US-Mexico border across the continent. Artists navigated this each in their own way.

AME: Let us move to the first curatorially driven edition, “INSITE97,” which you co-curated together with Jessica Bradley, Olivier Debroise, and Ivo Mesquita between 1995 and 1997. San Diego–Tijuana were interconnected by people and labor, but divided by wealth, language, and culture—a situation at once reinforced and contested by the federal state.

SY: We were thorough and thoughtful in choosing who would be on the team in ’97 and going forward. The differences in perspective were exhilarating and productive. For 2000, Ivo and I continued, with Osvaldo Sanchez and Susan Buck-Morss joining the curatorial team. I enjoyed working with Ivo—he is brilliant and wry. Susan had written a compelling essay, “What is Political Art?”, for the catalogue in ’97. She brought rigor—and verve—to our thinking about the charged terrain of San Diego-Tijuana. Olivier remained involved in crucial ways and, together with Teddy Cruz and Steve Fagin, was central in the planning of the Conversations program of talks and discussions for “inSite_05.” Conversations played out over a couple of years and really delved into the complexity of San Diego-Tijuana from the respective vantage point of geographers, literary scholars,
INSITE's curatorial framework is regenerated each year by its curatorial team on the basis of months of collective work. From left to right: Ivo Mesquita, Sally Yard, Olivier Debroise, and Jessica Bradley pose in front of a tunnel underpass during the 1997 curatorial residency. Photo: INSITE

political scientists, philosophers, artists, architects, anthropologists, urban planners, curators, and art historians.

AME: How did you select artists? Did you decide together or were you each responsible for certain projects?

SY: For 1997 and 2000, we chose the artists together and as projects would unfold curators would end up working more closely with certain artists, but the artists were chosen within the frame of how they would resonate together. The whole shape of "INSITE97" and "inSITE2000," as well as the specific artists, were decided by the four of us together.

JL: How did you familiarize visiting artists with the local situation of San Diego and Tijuana? Because I can imagine that most of them, who may have come from outside or even from Europe had to gain insight before they could develop their artistic concepts.

SY: There was a "curatorial framework" for each INSITE. For "INSITE97," a large number of the artists arrived together, and we spent several days driving and walking through parts of San Diego and Tijuana. At other points, artists would make initial visits to the region in smaller groups. This was a way of getting the lay of the land. We would organize talks and panel discussions related to the area and the project. But most of all, members of the INSITE team would follow the interests of artists—traveling with them to possible sites, tracking down leads. Most artists spent a considerable amount of time in San Diego–Tijuana, forging connections and coming to know the place or neighborhood where they planned to make their work.

By 2000 or so, Teddy Cruz, an architect who has focused his attention on the urban expanse of San Diego–Tijuana, joined us in introducing artists and curators and scholars to this contentious territory. For the publication of the 2005 Conversations, Teddy stitched together a photo “field trip” which intimates the near-revelatory feel of the actual field trips.

AME: Bringing artists to this politically charged, but also, for many everyday, place—the border—seems to breed playful moments. How did artists transgress the border in imagined or seemingly impossible ways?

SY: A number of projects addressed the border directly. Surely there was an implicit impulse to subvert the incivility of the border and to transgress the affront of the barricade; the first corrugated fence was installed as artists were at work on their projects for "inSITE94." From Terry Allen’s Cross the Razor/Cruzar la navaja at Playas de Tijuana and Border Field State Park in ’94, to Javier Téllez’ One Flew over the Void (Bala Perdida) in 2005, which culminated in the launching of a "human...
cannonball” from Playas de Tijuana to Border Field State Park, artists literally overrode the border.

JL: How can a public art project reflect or do justice to the different social realities of people’s lives in a metropolitan region like San Diego–Tijuana? Could you talk about certain projects that established strong engagement or exchange?

SY: I think in a variety of ways. In Maleteros (Porters), 2005, Mark Bradford worked together with unofficial porters at the San Ysidro/Tijuana border crossing to establish a visible professional identity. If this recognized the work of these mostly unnoticed protagonists of life in the border region, then it also countered the imagery of their workplaces. Over the course of two evenings, the women, who had worked together with two organizations that support female workers—Grupo Factor X and Yeuani—told their stories on the plaza of the Centro Cultural Tijuana, projected onto the concrete Omnivax Theater. It was harrowing, and I hope it was also healing or empowering.

AME: Ranging from long-term community-engagements to aesthetic displays based on deep research, Mark Dion was part of “Culture in Action,” “Sonsbeek 93,” and “Project Unité,” Firminy, in 1993. Could you tell us about his project for “inSITE2000”?

SY: Dion’s project, Blind/Hide, 2000, was remarkable. It was a bird blind setup, in the Tijuana River Estuary Reserve in Imperial Beach. The Reserve continues south to the border, which was in plain view from Dion’s small, camouflaged structure, where binoculars, books, charts, and photographs were housed. People interested in nature and bird watching visit the site that is home to some 370 species of native and migrating birds, so it has a regular and serious audience. Blind/Hide made evident the fact that the ecologies of Tijuana and San Diego are of course a continuum that cannot be stopped by a wall. The two cities are dramatically dissimilar in appearance—in the ways they have been shaped by human habitation. Much of the landscape north of the border is lush and irrigation-driven, a condition made vivid in Tommy Glassord’s City of Greens (1997), while much of the land south of the border remains chaparral. Importantly, Blind/Hide made a nod to what goes on all along the border, with people hiding, seeing other people and trying not to be seen seeing them.

AME: What conversations did you have about permanence and impermanence within INSITE?

SY: The possibilities were most interesting in temporary works. It would have been entirely different had we been planning for permanent works: we surely could not have secured most of the sites. In projects that had a finite duration, even if it went over a long time, artists could be unfettered and daring. The scale and the resonance of the projects with each other was incredibly important. There is much to be said for things that are temporary, you learn from them, and then they live on in your imagination, in your being.

AME: Memory and imagination is a good access point to understanding the impact of INSITE and many other projects in this book that sought civic forms of participation.

SY: The terrain of San Diego and Tijuana was in flux, and the artists were sensitive to what was happening at the moment. It doesn’t mean that they addressed it directly, but they were very attuned to the place and the context. Immediacy was very important to the projects.

JL: Exhibitions like Sonsbeek in Arnhem and Skulptur Projekte Münster that engage with public space in a similar way are held in comparatively small cities. Likewise, the documenta city of Kassel is a small town compared to the metropolises of San Diego and Tijuana. The size of the city makes a difference to the visibility or invisibility of the project, and of course, also the process of finding locations.

SY: It was a journey for those who wanted to see INSITE, and a lot of people allocated several weekends to make their way to the projects. For many, including myself, it served as a way of mapping a place in an unforeseen way. There was a sense of adventure and discovery. Many people participated energetically but undoubtedly did not see all the things that they wanted to see. To reiterate, we did not want to be another one of those great projects we admired—that did not make sense. Our basis was this place that was an occasion—or condition—unlike anywhere in the world, as far as we could tell, because of the particulars of how it converged and the scale of both cities.
JL: To what extent does INSITE itself generate publicness, opportunities for interaction and participation or what Hannah Arendt called “spaces of appearance”? In what ways have the curatorial and artistic foci and the concepts of public space and public sphere shifted since the first iteration?

SY: Many of the artists took action to forge places where for a time people would gather, focused on matters that were public more than private. And so, I think, artists were creating possible “spaces of appearance.” And yet, the unevenness of San Diego–Tijuana, with its differences of government, economy, opportunity, and citizenship, perhaps complicates the terms of a public sphere. But public space and urban processes, the flows of people, capital and goods across national borders, are everywhere present at this juncture of Mexico and the United States.

In ’97, we laid out a curatorial framework with the ambition that artists would each locate a site and those “publics” who would encounter the work in the course of their daily routines. Spaces might range from an urban plaza or a dusty lot to a ruined building or the internet. Our idea was that these would become places of meeting, collectively pointing new routes through San Diego–Tijuana. By 2000, Susan, Ivo, Osvaldo and I had crafted a framework that emphasized process and sought to engage the projects’ distinct publics as “co-investigators.” We hoped projects would intervene in the “syntax,” as we put it, of San Diego–Tijuana, to instead map its dynamics. Osvaldo set the curatorial framework for “inSite_05,” viewing San Diego–Tijuana in terms of its “flows.”

AME: Can you describe a work that reflects this “flow?”

SY: Gustavo Artigas’s The Rules of the Game/Las reglas del juego in 2000 is for me a compelling embodiment of the complexities of public space and public sphere in San Diego–Tijuana. There were two parts. A fronton ball court backed up nearly to the border fence in Colonia Libertad, rethinking the eyesore that ran through people’s backyards as, instead, an area for impromptu neighborhood play. And an athletic event at Lazaro Cardenas high school in Tijuana consisted of two high school basketball teams from San Diego, and two high school soccer teams from Tijuana playing their games simultaneously on the same gymnasium basketball court. Both groups maneuvered deftly, humorously, and gracefully around each other, in an elegant demonstration of camaraderie.

AME: We are discussing a long time period during which the city has grown immensely, and US-Mexico relations and policy have shifted leading to increased border control and difficulties in crossing compared to when INSITE first began.

SY: Yes, I hope that once we are on the other side of COVID-19, it might make sense for INSITE to work across the border as it did during those first fifteen years. Emerging from the past four years of xenophobic rhetoric and policies focused on the border and immigration, there is much to be done here.

JL: Was there a connection between your teaching at the USD and INSITE? And how much of INSITE did you bring to the university?

SY: In the mid-nineties, we established a concentration on art and public space within the art history major at USD, and the students were ardent in following INSITE. Over time, this evolved towards the major in architecture, which has a strong architecture history and theory component.

JL: The architect’s perspective not only on urban space but on public space is a very exciting aspect. You do not find the same tensions in the aforementioned European cities.

SY: That is exactly the right word. San Diego–Tijuana is charged by tensions interwoven with continuum. This has been quite a ride.
Osmosis and Excess
A Conversation with Aernout Mik
Julius Lehmann

Aernout Mik during filming on the outskirts of Tijuana, 2005. Photo: Florian Braun, courtesy of INSITE

Julius Lehmann: In 2005, you participated in the last edition of INSITE, which focused mainly on San Diego and Tijuana. How did you experience working in the border area along the fence?

Aernout Mik: It was an interesting and crazy experience. In fact, the border fence is totally crazy. One end runs into the sea, where it stops somewhere in the water, and, if you walk inland, it goes into the country, goes into the desert, and disappears. It just stops, there is nothing, and a bit further stands another small piece, and another, and then it’s over. So, it’s a border, a fence, but it’s also theater. It is a fence, and it is not a fence. And its paradoxical character also has a kind of symbolic meaning, because there is an incredible amount of commuting between Tijuana and San Diego.

Thousands of people from Tijuana and its environs cross the border every morning to go to work in San Diego. Often they work as housekeepers or gardeners. The border is at once hard and totally porous. For an outsider, it is strange to experience this on the ground.

If you want to enter the USA from the Mexican side as a white European, there are almost no controls. You may have to stand in line a bit, but you can cross the border without any problems. For Mexicans, of course, the rules are different. The procedures are racist.

Conversely, there are many people from the US-American side who go to Tijuana for the day. They might go to buy cheaper medicine, drink alcohol if they are under 21, gamble, or visit prostitutes. The economic exchange is constant, there is a substantial flow of legal and illegal commodities from both sides.

JL: This exchange is also the subject of your video installation Osmosis and Excess, which you later also showed in your exhibition at MoMA (2009). In the video you show pharmacies in Tijuana, on the one hand, and a car graveyard in the mountains, on the other.

AM: I tried to push different micro and macro levels into each other. There is a certain visual similarity between these pharmacies with the display of stacked boxes of medicine, and the parked cars in the mountains. Both are a kind of phantasmagoric panorama. There is a whole street full of pharmacies in Tijuana selling cheap medicine or copies of medicine that do not have approval in the US. Anti-aging products, sexual enhancers—a plethora of products ready to cross the border with their US-American consumers. To some extent, these places have a theatrical and fantastic presence. The boxes are stacked into complex towers and structures, and pseudo-pharmacists in white coats stand outside the door trying to get the American customers inside. Many of the cars in the mountains were abandoned by their US owners, dumping them in Mexico to defraud their insurance companies. Others are simply old cars that have been left to rot. The law stipulates that cars there can only be removed after two years, and that’s how this enormous, ever-growing, accumulation came about, which, when viewed from a distance, has resulted in an organic structure, melting into the landscape. At the same time, cars are also used to smuggle arms. The piece is about the excessive production and waste of commodities, of stimulants, of sexuality, and violence. The title refers to the fusion of these two economies, which on the one hand are fundamentally unequal, but at the same time closely interdependent, a symbiotic and cyclical exchange.
There are certain osmotic shifts and blends in the work in terms of content and size: it moves from medicines to sweets and piñatas for children, from wagons to toy cars to herds of animals—cows, sheep, and goats. It’s about transitions and mergers, fluid juxtapositions.

JL: Did you stage certain scenarios at these sites?

AM: Yes, partially. It was the first work where I mixed “documentary” and “fiction” (although I hesitate to use these words) and combined them in different layers like a collage. It was an important, larger work for me that was different from the purely staged works I had done before. I recreated a pharmacy in the middle of the mud to connect the dystopian landscape with the interior of the pharmacy, and to pick up on the mud slides that occasionally occur in Tijuana. We shot that in an indoor studio in Rosarito, on the coast, where there is a huge pool that was constructed for the movie Titanic. Hollywood movies are shot there, the water is filtered and purified with gigantic filtration systems, otherwise insurance regulations would not allow it. We shot in one of the indoor studios there.

JL: During “inSite_05” you created a pointed display situation. You turned a parking garage into a drive-in movie theater, extending the film space into reality vice versa. Were the random passersby and users of the parking lot your primary audience?

AM: That’s exactly what it was, a parking garage in the middle of San Diego with really fat American cars. And there, of course, this superimposition with the junk cars in the hills of Tijuana was a total contrast. But it also made a mockery of the environment and the abundance, the valuable and the worthless was addressed in its interchangeability. The pompous SUVs around us will also end up like the ones on the screen, in entropy.

And for that reason, the work could really only be presented in San Diego. It confronts the American side, its construction, and its implicit exploitation. The city is a fantasy world. Everything is green and pleasant and super. When you go to the border, everything is green, and then comes the fence. After that, it is just dust, rocks, and desert. That’s why it was more logical to show the work in San Diego, to complete the full cycle.

The installation attracted a variety of viewers. The most interesting public was the “passerby,” the people who parked their cars and were unprepared for what they would see. It was important that the piece worked on different levels for different people. It created both an immediate confrontation but also the possibility of a reflexive space.

JL: How do you see the exhibition concept as a whole? It is an exciting endeavor to realize such an exhibition in two neighboring cities with millions of inhabitants, with these economic dependencies, the political differences, and an unmistakable social divide. The entire exhibition format seems to approach this mixed and asymmetrical situation with great idealism and caution. Is there nevertheless a gap between aspiration and reality?

AM: There was something very special about the collaboration. I had two years to research and develop something and was excellently supplied with information. There was a real program with tours and talks, I came into contact with researchers from the different fields, for example with urbanists and sociologists, and with other artists and communities on site. The organizers and curators are incredibly well connected throughout the region. Carmen and Michael themselves embody this. You have the time and the ideal conditions to develop something over a longer period and to dive deep into the contexts. The whole project entailed many different ways of cultural production, from clearly identifiable art pieces to events, to social projects within the urban structure. It was really great to be part of this, especially working with the curator Osvaldo Sánchez.

Yet, there is always this problem of connection in the art world. International artists fly into a problematic area, do a project, and then disappear again. For me, this is both a complicated and complex issue. But I have to say that INSITE makes a real effort to counterbalance these tensions. By taking so much time to letting it all develop, by establishing enduring contacts with the artists and the people in the area, both locals and researchers. By initiating works and projects that go much deeper into the actual social fabric and follow different temporalities. By their ongoing engagement and the transformation of the INSITE project over the years. And yes, I also left after finishing my work, and the piece had another life after this show.

JL: What shift in content comes from presenting your site-specific work in a different context, such as MoMA?

AM: The local is not something isolated, it is part of broader processes. This work also functions on an imaginary and metaphorical level. Osmosis and Excess is not a work that functions only within the local context. It connects itself with collective images and structures, it shifts.
Contributors

Mario Airò (Milan) is an Italian artist. Airò attended the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied under the direction of Luciano Fabro. In 1989 he launched the magazine Tiracorrendo and got his first solo show in the self-managed exhibition space Via Lazzaro Palazzi, co-founded the same year with other artists including Stefano Dugnani, Liliana Moro, Bernhard Rüdiger, and Adriano Trovato. Airò participated in the Venice Biennale (1997), the Valencia Biennial (2001), the Gwangju Biennale (2004), and the Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art (2005). He participated in "Sonsbeek 93" as well as in "Sonsbeek 9: Locus Focus," in 2001.

Sarah Alberti (Leipzig) is a journalist, curator and art historian. She studied communication and media studies, art history, and cultures of the curatorial in Leipzig and France. Together with the artist Hans Haacke, she realized the hanging of his "documenta 14" banner We (all) are the people / Wir (alle) sind das Volk in the new German federal states in 2018–19. At the University of Leipzig, she was involved in the research project Westkunst/Ostkunst, and from 2016 to 2019 was a research assistant at the Bahaus University Weimar in the graduate program, Identity & Heritage. The subject of her doctoral dissertation is the exhibition project "Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit" (1990).

Naomi Beckwith (New York) is the Deputy Director and Jennifer and David Stockman chief curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Previously, she was the Manilow senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where her exhibition and book projects focused on the impact of identity and multi-disciplinary practices for shaping contemporary art. Prior to the MCA, Beckwith held positions at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Beckwith has contributed to numerous publications and served on the jury of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. She holds a BA in history from Northwestern University and an MA with distinction from the Courtauld Institute in London.

Ida Biard (Paris/Zagreb) was born in the former Yugoslavia and studied art history at the Sorbonne in Paris. Since the 1960s her activity has been divided between Zagreb and the French capital. In 1973 she founded La Galerie des Locataires, a project far removed from the commercial logic of galleries and art institutions. The nomadic character of La Galerie des Locataires manifested itself in a series of projects that adopted the postal system, the means of transport, and the public space of different cities as a place of action. Artists such as Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren, André Cadere, Annette Messager, and Goran Tribuljak are regular collaborators with La Galerie des Locataires, participating in many of its projects since the "70s. In 2010, Ida Biard’s work at the head of this counter-institution was reviewed in the context of the exhibition "Les promesses du passé—Une histoire discontinue de l’art dans l’ex-Europe de l’Est," at Centre Pompidou, Paris (2010).

Wigger Bierma (Hamburg) is a graphic designer and has been professor of typography at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts since 2006. In 1998, he founded Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem together with his colleague Karel Martens. Since he started his own business as a designer in 1985, he has won the "Most Beautiful Books in the Netherlands" award 16 times. The exhibition book for “Sonsbeek 93” was one of his winning designs.

Barbara Bloom (Los Angeles) is an artist. Her work analyses the changing relation between objects and their meanings through the process of collecting and displaying them. Her projects take the form of installations, photography, films, and books. Her work has been the subject of individual exhibitions in institutions such as MoMA, New York; The Jewish Museum, New York; Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, and Serpentine Gallery, London.

Susan Bolgar (Simrishamn) is a freelance curator and arts consultant with many years experience in both public and private arts and culture organizations.

Jonna Bornemark (Stockholm) is a professor in philosophy, teacher, and researcher at the Center for Studies in Practical Knowledge, Södertörn.
University. Her latest book is Horisonten tar aldrig slut: om det bortglömda professionella omdömet (Volante, 2020). She is the editor of 13 anthologies and author of over 50 articles. She is also a frequent guest on several Swedish radio shows and in the daily press.

Carlos Capelán (Montevideo/Lund) is an artist resident in multiple countries (Sweden, Costa Rica, Norway, Spain, and Uruguay). Capelán’s practice is an instance of what has been termed the “post-conceptual” artistic condition, working with idea structures while insisting on materiality and formal diversity. Workshops, conferences, talks, and teaching are all a significant part of his artistic practice, as (equally) are drawing, installation, painting, performance, objects, and writing.

Carmen Cuenca (San Diego) is a cultural manager who, together with Michael Krichman, serves as Executive Director ofINSITE. From 2011 to 2014 she was Director of the Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City. She also served as the Subdirector for Visual Arts at the Tijuana Cultural Center, CECUT, from 2006–2009. From 1982–1989, she worked in the department of investigation at the San Carlos Museum, CA and from 1994 to 1997, she served as Cultural and Executive Director of the Mexican Cultural Institute in San Diego. She has participated in the different editions of INSITE in Tijuana/San Diego as Coordinator for Mexico and Executive Co-Director.

Quinten Dierick (Arnhem) is an artist working in the fields of visual arts, performance, writing, sound art, and art–education. He is active under various monikers as a composer of electro-acoustic sound works. He graduated from Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Arnhem (now ArtEZ University of the Arts) where he works as technical instructor for the graphic workshop. He has had solo shows at Kunstenlab, Deventer (2019) and at ACEC, Apeldoorn (2018/2019).

Mark Dion (Copake, New York) is a US American conceptual artist best known for his use of scientific presentations in his installations. His work examines the way in which prevalent ideologies and institutions influence our understanding of history, knowledge, and the natural world. He participated in “Culture in Action” with the project Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group. The same year, he also participated in several European projects related to site specificity and social engagement, such as “Sonsbeek 93” in Arnhem, “Project Unité” in Firminy, “On taking a normal situation and retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present,” within the framework of ANTWERP 93: Cultural Capital of Europe, at Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (MHKA), and “Kontext Kunst. The Art of the 90s” at Neue Galerie im Künstlerhaus, Graz.

Stephan Dillemuth (Bad Wiessee) is an artist. His work includes installations, video, performances, painting, documentaries, and publications. He taught as a professor in the department of art education at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich. Dillemuth sees art and its distinct qualities as a tool for research and critical reflection on the circumstances of contemporary life. His inquiry into recent changes in the idea of the public sphere takes place against the backdrop of our globalized, localized, and fragmented publics. Considering the impact of “lifestyle” as a new ideology of self-fulfillment and liberation, Dillemuth examines historical trajectories of liberation, for example, those of bohemia, lebensreform, and self-expression, as they intersect with new technologies of surveillance and control, in order to establish a new ideology of “freedom” as a totalitarian rule. Recent solo exhibitions include Le Bourgeois, London (2019), Lenbachhaus, Munich (2018), and at Künstlerhaus, Halle für Kunst und Medien, Graz (2017).

Zippora Elders (Amsterdam/Berlin) is part of the “sonsbeek20+24” curatorial team. Based between the Netherlands and Berlin, she has extensive institutional experience. Since 2016 she has been Director of Kunstfort bij Vijfhuizen, Island for Art and Heritage in the Netherlands. She has worked at Foam, Sandberg Institute, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and as a freelancer for various courses, magazines, and funds. As an art historian, her practice ranges from modern art and the avant-gardes to photography, moving images, and digital media.

Andrea Fraser (Los Angeles) is an artist working in the area of institutional critique. From observing the male gaze in the construction of museum buildings to the language of business in art, her work examines the role of the artist and the power structures, economy, hierarchies, and mechanisms of control in the art field. Fraser participated in “INSITE97” with the work Inaugural Speech.

Clarien van Harten (Arnhem) studied literature and art history at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She has been involved with Arnhem’s local radio station since 1990, where she has produced and presented cultural programs. She volunteered during “Sonsbeek 16” and is active as an artist.

Wulf Herzogenrath (Cologne) is an art historian and curator. His exhibitions and publications range from classical
modern painting and the Bauhaus to video art and photography. Since 2012 he has been honorary director of the visual arts section of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Important stages of his career include Museum Folkwang, Essen (1971–72), Kölnischer Kunstverein (1973–1989), Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (1989–94), and Kunsthalle Bremen (1994–2011). From 1995 until 2011 he taught as honorary professor at the Hochschule für Künste, Bremen. He curated the video section of “documenta 6” (1977) and was part of the curatorial team of “documenta 8” (1987). Recently the Akademie der Künste dedicated the exhibition “Magic Media—Media Magic” (2019) to video art and documentation from Herzogenrath’s personal archive.

Irene Hohenbüchler (Eichgraben) began to undertake cooperative projects with marginalized groups in society together with her sister Christine after graduating from the University of Applied Arts Vienna (1989) and the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht (1991). Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler participated in “documenta X” (1997) and were represented with works in the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (1999) and at “Periferic 7 / Focusing Iasi” (2005), and other international exhibitions. Since 2011 Irene Hohenbüchler has held a professorship for cooperative strategies at the University of Fine Arts Münster, Christine Hohenbüchler holds a professorship for drawing and visual languages at the Technical University, Vienna.

Mary Jane Jacob (Chicago) is a US American curator, writer, and educator from Chicago, Illinois. She is a professor and Executive Director of Exhibitions and Exhibition Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has held curatorial posts at the Detroit Art Institute, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Since 1990, Jacob has been a pioneer in the areas of public, site-specific, and socially engaged art, and curated “Culture in Action” in 1993.

Krista Jantowski (Arnhem) is assistant curator and program coordinator at “sonsbeek20→24.” With a background in film studies, she worked for several institutions as an organizer of public programs. In 2016 she decided to commit herself to books, turned away from institutions, moved to Arnhem, and founded WALTER books. In 2017, WALTER books partnered with the Dutch Art Institute (DAI). The affiliation entails close collaboration between WALTER and DAI on a variety of levels, from the very practical to the conceptual.

Viola Krajewska (Wrocław) is a curator, writer, program director and co-founder of the WRO Media Art Biennale and director of the WRO Art Center in Wrocław. In the 1990s, she produced programs on visual arts for Polish Television. She works as an expert in the field of media culture and information society.

Michael Krichman (San Diego) has served as Executive Director of INSITE since 1995. Previously, he was President of the Board of INSITE from 1993–1994. From 1989–1992, he was a partner at Quint Krichman Projects, a residency program for artists from Europe and the US in San Diego. Krichman has also been commission advisor for numerous urban projects and public art, as well as a board member of organizations such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, the Children’s Museum of San Diego, and Orange County Museum of Art.

Suzanne Lacy (Los Angeles) is a socially engaged and public performance artist. Her installations, videos, and performances deal with sexual violence, rural and urban poverty, incarceration, labor, and aging. She participated in “Culture in Action” with the artwork Full Circle. By 1993, Lacy had been working with community-based artistic practice for two decades mostly untethered to institutional practice alongside an international group of artists and curators.

Max Liljefors (Lund) is Professor of Art History and Visual Studies at Lund University, and previously an artist. His artistic media are mainly painting and projected light-image installations. As an art historian, his research interests include visual historiography, the visual culture of medicine and biology, and ideas about spirituality and art.

Rune Mields (Cologne) has been active as an artist since the 1960s. Mields was a founding member of the Zentrum für aktuelle Kunst—Gegenverkehr in Aachen. Her work was exhibited in “documenta 6” in 1977 and at the Venice Biennale in 2001. In 1984 she was visiting professor at Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. Her work is represented in private and public collections such as Museum Ludwig, Cologne; ZKM, Karlsruhe; Muzeum Sztuki Łódź; and Kunsthalle Bremen.

Aernout Mik (Amsterdam) is a Dutch artist. He creates spatial video installations that combine film, video, performance, sculpture, and architecture, often referencing current political and social situations and their reflection in the media. Solo exhibitions at: Art Sonje Center, Seoul; MoMA New York; BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Jeu de Paume, Paris; Museum Folkwang, Essen; and CA2M Centro de Arte Dos...
de Mayo, Madrid, among others. He has participated in numerous international biennials, such as the Venice Biennial, São Paulo Biennial, Tirana Biennial, Art Focus—Israel Biennial, Istanbul Biennial, Berlin Biennial, Gwangju Biennial, and Kochi-Muziris Biennial. Since 2011 he has held a professorship in sculpture at the University of Fine Arts Münster.

Thomas Millroth (Malmö) is an art historian, writer, critic, and curator with around 40 books and even more essays in his bibliography. His main interest has been constructive art, underground in the GDR, artists’ books, concrete poetry, improvisational music and jazz. Between 1995 and 2008 he was the director of Ystad konstmuseum. He has curated exhibitions at Kulturhuset Stockholm, and Lunds konsthall, among other institutions. His recent work includes the publication Artists books from a Swedish Point of view with special attention paid to the contributions of Denmark and GDR (Malmö: Ellerströms/Tagus, 2021).

Christian Philipp Müller (Berlin) is a Swiss artist. He studied at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf with Fritz Schweiger and was assistant to Kasper König. His practice is based on analyses of the context in which he is working and its integration into the project through different media. He gained international recognition with his participation in the 45th Biennale di Venezia (1993, Austrian Pavilion), and “documenta X” (1997). He has been active in both the U.S. and Europe since the 1990s and was invited by Mark Dion to collaborate briefly on his “Culture in Action” project.

Marielle Nitoslawska (Montreal) moved to Łódź in the late 1970s to study at the Polish National Film School and remained in Poland during the following decade of social and cultural upheaval. There, she made numerous exploratory ethnographic films and was active in the underground art movement in Łódź with friends and mentors from the Workshop of Film Form. Back in Canada, she began teaching cinema at Concordia University where she is Research Chair in experimental non-fiction practices in the arts. Her prolific filmography has been critically acclaimed and widely exhibited internationally.

Betsabeé Romero (Mexico City) is an artist. Her work includes sculptures, installations, printmaking, collages, photography, and video. For more than 20 years she has specialized in the elaboration of a critical discourse on themes such as migration, mixed cultures, and mobility, through the resignification of everyday symbols and rituals of global consumer culture, such as automobiles, tattoos, and urban signage.

Sissel Tolaas (Stavanger/Berlin) has been researching and experimenting intensively with the topic of smell since 1990. She is a world pioneer and utterly unique in her committed approach to the multiple levels of the topic of smell and sensing. She has developed a wide range of revolutionary projects worldwide based upon her knowledge of organic forensic chemistry, linguistics, and art. Tolaas established the Smell Research Lab Berlin in January 2004, supported by IFF Inc. Tolaas’ collections of smell molecules and complex smell structures from 1990 to 2020 include more than 15,000 samples. Tolaas actively participates in various new initiatives and start-ups, for example in the fields of emotional intelligence, the senses and education, the senses and technology, and the senses and the future.

Madeleine Tunbjer (Lund/Simrishamn) is the Program Director/Principal at Österlenskolan for Art & Design at the University of Applied Sciences, Sweden. She is a trained artist from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam and the department of Social Sciences at the University of Lund. She is also certified in permaculture. In her artistic practice she focuses on radical shifts in notions of human autonomy using hacking, social sculpture, and borderland farming as methodologies.

Ryszard Waśko (Berlin) is an artist, curator, and organizer, and works in multimedia, including photography, film, video, installation, painting, and drawing. He was a member of the Workshop of the Film Form, an avant-garde collective of artists and filmmakers associated with Łódź Film School, working with experimental film and multimedia. From 1981 in Łódź, Wasko initiated and organized Construction in Process, a series of exhibitions featuring works of art created on site that has taken place in several countries, including Poland, Germany, and Israel. In 1989 he founded The International Artists’ Museum in Łódź.

Sofia Wiberg (Stockholm) is a researcher and teacher at The School of Architecture and the built environment at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm. Her research deals with participatory processes in public art and urban planning in relation to asymmetric power relations, democracy and practice-based knowledge. In her thesis, Lyssnandets praktik—mehordiargadialoj, ickvevetande och förskyutningar (The practice of listening—citizen dialogue, unknowing, and dislocation) she explores listening as an embodied, political and critical activity.

Måns Wrange (Stockholm) is an artist. His works have been included in over 200 exhibitions including “Manifesta 4,” Frankfurt; ICA, London; Kunsthal Wien; MoMA PS1, New York; Prospect/ Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; "iSitE_05," San Diego/Tijuana; Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles; De Appel, Amsterdam; Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, Tensta konsthall, Stockholm; GIBCA—Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art; Luleå Biennial; "The Baltic Biennale of Contemporary Art," Szczecin, and “Momentum 04: Nordic Biennale of Contemporary Art,” Moss. Wrange has also co-curated several exhibitions such as "Public Service" and "The Aerial Kit" at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the art section of the Stockholm Film Festival, "The Stockholm Syndrome" for Stockholm Cultural Capital, and "Hot Deskig," one of the special projects for "Manifesta 7," Bolzano. Wrange has been professor at Konstfack where he founded CuratorLab, and rector of The Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm and the Oslo National Academy of the Arts.

Mel Ziegler (Nashville) is a US American artist, a farmer, and professor and chair of the Art Department at Vanderbilt University. He gained international recognition as part of the artist duo Ericson & Ziegler, with Kate Ericson (1955–1995), active from 1978 to 1995. Synthesizing conceptual, land art, and interventionist strategies, Ericson & Ziegler developed a distinctly American community-based art practice outside the orbit of New York City. The duo participated in "Culture in Action" with the artwork Eminent Domain. In the same months, Ericson and Ziegler also took part in "Sonsbeek 93" in Arnhem and "Project Unité" in Firminy.
CuratorLab

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand (New York/Stockholm) is an art and design curator and writer interested in feminisms, decolonialism, and social movements. In 2015, she founded Cultbytes, an art and culture publication, and serves as its editor-in-chief. Currently she is co-curating The Immigrant Artist Biennial.

Giulia Floris (Rome) is an art historian and researcher. She is currently collaborating with Instituto Villa Adriana and Villa d’Esté—VILLAÉ in Tivoli as exhibition coordinator, with CASTRO Projects in Rome as grants and public program manager and with ArtVerona art fair as appointed curator for LABI, the section dedicated to non-profit experimental realities.

Vasco Forconi (Rome/Stockholm) is an independent curator, researcher, and editor. Since 2019 he has been Curatorial Assistant at CuratorLab.

Edy Fung (Stockholm/Derry) is an artist and curator from Hong Kong. Her work focuses on the intersection of visual art, sound, and technology.

Julius Lehmann (Kassel) studied art history and history at the Humboldt University of Berlin, UvA Amsterdam and the University of Jena. From 2017 to 2020, he worked as research assistant at the Skulptur Projekte Archives (LWL-Museum for Art and Culture, Münster).

Maria Lind (Stockholm/Moscow) is a curator, writer and educator currently serving as the counsellor of culture at the Embassy of Sweden in Russia. Since 2014 she has been a guest lecturer at CuratorLab.

Marc Navarro (Berlin/Barcelona) is a curator and writer. He is currently curating the exhibition series “Gira tot gira” (Turn it all turns) at Fundación Joan Miró (Barcelona).

Simina Neagu (Bucharest/London) is a cultural worker, curator, and writer. She works at Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) on public programs, exhibitions, publishing projects and residencies.

Hanna Nordell (Uppsala/Stockholm) is a curator, art historian, and cultural worker with a special interest in collaborative practices and transdisciplinary research, combining contemporary art, text, and academic research.

Tomek Pawłowski Jarmołajew (Białystok/Poznań) are a cook, performer, and curator of performance and exhibitions based in the rural region of Podlasie. Recently they were a member of the curatorial team for the inaugural edition of 2020 Zielona Góra Biennale.

Marja Rautaharju (Helsinki) is a cultural worker and architect based in Helsinki, currently working in the Museum of Finnish Architecture.

Erik Sandberg (Stockholm) is an art historian, curator, and editor for the poetry and art magazine Tydningen.

Joanna Warsza (Berlin/Warsaw/Stockholm) is the program Director of CuratorLab at Konstfack and an interdependent curator, editor, and writer.
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Assuming Asymmetries
Conversations on Curating Public Art in the 1980s and 1990s

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CuratorLab is a one-year international curatorial course at Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts, and Design in Stockholm under the direction of Joanna Warsza and guest lecturer Maria Lind. The course explores radical approaches to engagement and to the practice of curating beyond exhibition making, examining our interdependence in relation to individual power and creativity. An accompanying publication results from the same research and course: Curating beyond the Mainstream: The Practices of Carlos Capelán, Elisabet Haglund, Gunilla Lundahl, and Jan-Erik Lundström, also published by Konstfack Collection and Sternberg Press (ISBN 978-3-95679-613-5).

www.curatorlab.se