

THE EXHIBITIONIST
NO. 12 / JOURNAL ON EXHIBITION MAKING / JUNE 2016

REFLECTION
RESPONSE
LA CRITIQUE

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Cover of *Cahiers du Cinéma* 126
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CONTENTS

Reflection

Jens Hoffmann, Julian Myers-Szupinska, and Liz Glass.....2

Response I: Artists and Curators

Fia Backström and Anthony Huberman

Re: family dynamics6

Anne Ellegood and Kerry Tribe

Long Term Relationship.....15

Claire Fontaine and Jens Hoffmann

Artistic Bitches and Curatorial Bastards.....22

Inés Katzenstein and Juan José Cambre

Agreement.....27

Response II: Archival

Introduced by Liz Glass

Dear King Harry.....41

James Lee Byars: Correspondence with Harald Szeemann (1988).....43

La Critique

Triple Candie: Let the Artists Die.....53

Emiliano Valdés: Who Has the Power?.....55

Nontobeko Ntombela: Remastered.....56

Daniel Birnbaum: Hijacking the Situationists.....58

Slavs and Tatars: The Splits of the Mind, If Not the Legs.....59

Rachel Rose: Artist, Curator, Meaning61

An Illustrated Bibliography of *The Exhibitionist*, Issues IX–XII.....29–36



REFLECTION

★

Jens Hoffmann, Julian Myers-Szupinska, and Liz Glass

Exhibitions are a social and collective form. Whether the products of a single artist or of a group, they gather together artworks (or objects, projects, residues) and construct from them an image of a social field. Just as understanding an exhibition involves thinking about the relations that exist among, and engender the possibility of imagining, that field, no less are exhibitions *produced by* a group. Beyond the artists and the exhibition maker(s) involved, an exhibition radiates from an expansive network: conservators, shippers, installers, writers, editors, designers, administrative types of all sorts, interns, guards, funders, promoters, and so on. Exhibitions are, furthermore, *perceived by* an audience or a public—another group—who are themselves internally divided and classed, cohesive or cacophonous.

Try to imagine an exhibition otherwise, and you find yourself at an absurd conceptual limit: a show made by no one or for no one, some version of the sound of one hand clapping, or a tree falling in the forest. Or one arrives at the utopian Gesamtkunstwerk, the obsessive invention of a private mind set on solving the world's problems—though these are secretly composites too, “constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now,”¹ and elaborately concerned with picturing the very collectivity they practically disavow. To acknowledge that there exists a whole thread of exhibitions that pressure or question the idea that exhibitions are indeed a collective and social form—extending perhaps from Marcel Duchamp's tangled and dystopic installation of *First Papers of Surrealism* (1942)—does nothing to unravel the basic law. The exceptions prove the rule.

Over the course of the prior eleven issues, *The*

Exhibitionist has operated according to two more or less connected ideas. The first impulse was to document an intensified curatorial debate that in 2010, at the time of its founding, we saw as happening in inadequate ways—conversations and conference presentations, more or less among the anointed—and to do so through an insistence on the form of the essay. We saw writing, alongside exhibition making, as a crucial venue for curatorial thought. Beyond the clearly useful tasks of narration, description, and classification, we prized argument and self-reflection. We encouraged curators to come onto the stage as *subjects*, separable from the institutions or artists on whose behalf they often spoke.

The second idea followed on from the first. Just as we asked curators to be *authors*—to write—our journal also argued, somewhat more contentiously, for exhibitions as an authored form. Referring in both design and argument to the “yellow years” of the French ciné-journal *Cahiers du cinéma*, we argued that its *politique des auteurs* (meaning something like “author policy,” a phrase later translated into English by the film critic Andrew Sarris, somewhat infelicitously, as “auteur theory”) might be applied to exhibition making.

But if exhibitions are group productions, can they also be “authored”? *La politique des auteurs* itself offers one possible answer. In its original formulation in François Truffaut's 1954 essay “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema,” *la politique des auteurs* was a critical wedge against a then-dominant French “cinema of quality” that Truffaut argued was tiresome and overly indebted to literature. By contrast he and the fractious *Cahiers* group discerned among the standardized products of the Hollywood machine—the mass production line *par excellence*—

thrilling moments when an individual style declared itself on screen.

La politique des auteurs thus operated at a fulcrum point between mass production and the tenuous threads of individuality that might, through accident or force of will, give those products a distinctive and exciting shape. Indeed, collectivity and standardization—and the repetitions of the global exhibitionary complex are nothing if not standardized, with the same artists seen in the same ways, the same sorts of clichéd framing, the same overinflated claims—are the very conditions in which “authorship” might be worth noticing. Don't we all wish for a wedge against boredom?

How exhibitions can emerge *both* from a sprawling web of social relationships within an increasingly standardized global mode of production, *and* from individual voices: this is the central contradiction that has driven the journal for six years and now twelve issues.

In our original moment, we imagined ourselves as a journal “by curators, for curators.” Then, this circuit of self-reflection and specialization was productive and necessary. It enabled a diverse critical conversation that in other venues might have been swamped by curators' strategic deference to artists' voices and practices. Yet one effect of our founding premises has been a certain siloing-off of curatorial thinking and writing. By decanting curatorial discourse from the sprawling social field it inhabits, we risked producing a distorted picture of that field.

To that end we have compiled a thematic issue that intends to investigate the real social texture between curators and artists—and therefore the social structure of authorship itself. In the **Response** section, we include conversations between curators and artists who have worked together over long periods. We encouraged these pairs to move past caricatures of their relationship as a zero-sum game, in which *either* the artist is the autonomous genius whose practice can only be presented in a transparent way, *or* the curator is the overwhelming performer stealing the artist's thunder. We rejected as well the whole consideration of “artist-as-curator/curator-as-artist” as hopelessly circular. Instead we focus on exchanges of ideas, points of mutual influence, connections, conflicts, struggles, and sociality.

Centering on a project commissioned for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis in 2008, the artist Fia Backström and the curator Anthony Huberman discuss the onus of decision making,

leadership, and acquiescing control. Through the frame of *Studies in Leadership - a family affair*, they analyze the territory between manipulation and collaboration and explore how, in the era of the metanarrative, the roles of artist and curator have become fodder for artistic practice and institutional critique. In another conversation, the curator Inés Katzenstein speaks with the Argentine painter Juan José Cambre about the shifting identities of artists and curators. Whether one plays the role of the anchor, muse, or administrator, both artists and curators are understood here to embody the same mental geography, the “continuous way of working,” the all-encompassing “*cosa mentale*.”

Hammer Museum curator Anne Ellegood and the Los Angeles-based artist Kerry Tribe explore the give-and-take that they have shared for close to fifteen years. The concept of mutual influence comes to the fore as they recall moments in their individual practices when the other's work inspired a new conceptualization. Finally, *The Exhibitionist's* founding editor Jens Hoffmann speaks with the artist collective Claire Fontaine in an exchange acerbically titled “Artistic Bitches and Curatorial Bastards.” They reflect on years of collaboration in which “sublimated aggression, humor, and a slight insanity on both sides play important roles.”

Rounding out the Response section is “Dear King Harry,” a historical missive surfaced from the Harald Szeemann Archive and Library at the Getty Research Institute. Written by the conceptual artist-savant James Lee Byars, this stylized letter reflects a moment in his decades-long “push-me/pull-me” relationship with the legendary curator Harald Szeemann. Sent by Byars at a moment when their once-convivial relationship had passed its prime, it is flush with affection, antagonism, and symbolism, as the artist proposes to embody the curator in a performance of the latter's death. It is presented with an introduction by Liz Glass sharing more about its context.

In the final section of this issue, we invited a diverse group of artists and curators to respond to *The Exhibitionist's* archive—whether through agreement, outrage, rebuttal, or critique. Our first **La Critique** comes from the curatorial entity Triple Candie, who notoriously have exhibited artworks—and at times entire oeuvres—in unusual and sometimes unauthorized contexts, working without the artists' permission or consent, showing stand-ins and reproductions in place of the real thing. In

“Let the Artists Die,” they explore the slippery lines between curatorial practice and artistic action, citing and working against Massimiliano Gioni’s assertion that the curator must not over-interpret, or use, the artwork at hand, as that would lead to “the distortion or misappropriation of an artwork’s meaning.”²

Curator Emiliano Valdés echoes something of Triple Candie’s open-ended probe in his contribution, “Who Has the Power?” “In the contest between artist and curator,” he writes, “we miss the fact that the issue is not about who has power but about what that power is for.” Valdés moves away from the question of artist-curator power dynamics and into the realm of artwork-audience engagement, which his work as a curator is meant to foster.

Contributions by the curators Daniel Birnbaum and Nontobeko Ntombela engage with content from previous issues of *The Exhibitionist*. Birnbaum, current director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, points to a set of experimental exhibitions at the Moderna Museet and the Stedelijk in Amsterdam in the 1960s—including *Poetry Must Be Made By All! Transform the World!* (1969), *SHE—A Cathedral* (1966), and *Dylaby* (1962)—and charts the institutional cooptation of aesthetics and attitudes from the Situationist International. He illuminates the subtle morphing of artistic radicality into curatorial acceptability in Europe’s esteemed centers for experimental art.

Nontobeko Ntombela, the Johannesburg-based curator and curatorial practice faculty member at Wits School of Arts, takes the contentious term “curator” as a point of departure. Beginning with João Ribas’s issue 11 essay “Curating as Spatial Resistance,” Ntombela interrogates the term, which has moved away from any specialized meaning and become “a buzzword linking cultural producers, activists, catalysts, and socialites.” Looking at this diffusion of meaning from the particular point of view of South Africa, Ntombela points to close associations between the idea of the curator and that of the art market—a misapprehension that has impacted how South African art is perceived and considered globally.

We close *La Critique* with two perspectives from artists’ points of view. Slavs and Tatars began as a reading group and publishing body in 2006, and has since produced books, lecture-performances, and exhibitions. Writing from the opposite stance of Triple Candie—whose curatorial work is sometimes mistaken for art—they emphatically distance

themselves from the curatorial role. Yet they speak of the work of both artist and curator in semi-mystical terms, as working at conjoined points on the spectrum of articulation and disarticulation. What emerges is a poetic and nuanced vision of the curator as one who “suspend[s] the laws of non-contradiction and balance[s] the brass tacks of budgets with the digestif of discourse.”

Finally, the New York-based artist Rachel Rose meditates on the social practice of making an exhibition. Through artworks, exhibitions, and even seeing shapes on the ceiling, Rose ventures that our shared impulse is to constantly transform the unknown and chaotic into the understandable—into meaning. Though its concrete form may elude us, Rose writes, “it’s tragic to try to produce meaning [in an exhibition]. And that’s because in art, you never quite get there. At the same time, the act of trying is raw and important. And it’s what makes the exhibition a potential home that encloses a rare relationship based on what is real and true.”

The Exhibitionist, too, is enmeshed in processes of change and redefinition. This issue marks both a culmination and transition of our project. In 2017 we will compile the run of the print journal into an omnibus edition with new essays and discussions, and thereafter shift our continued activity to an online platform. While there is a certain melancholy to this move away from the artifactual nature of print, we take comfort in the essence of the project itself as a continuous way of working, thinking, and writing about exhibitions. A magazine, no less than art itself, is *una cosa mentale*.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), xiii.

2. Massimiliano Gioni, “The Limits of Interpretation,” *The Exhibitionist* 4 (June 2011): 17.

RESPONSE I



ARTISTS AND CURATORS

Fia Backström and Anthony Huberman
Re: Family Dynamics

Anne Ellegood and Kerry Tribe
Long Term Relationship

Claire Fontaine and Jens Hoffmann
Artistic Bitches and Curatorial Bastards

Inés Katzenstein and Juan José Cambre
Agreement

RE: FAMILY DYNAMICS

Fia Backström and Anthony Huberman

Fia Backström: In 2008 you invited me to do a show at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. It took place in early 2009 in The Front Room, an experimental laboratory space in the museum.

Anthony Huberman: Right. I thought of that room as a curatorial sketchbook.

FB: At the time I was thinking about forms of leadership, and how artists lead in exhibition making. This is usually an autocratic working relationship where the artist tells the installers, “We are going to paint this wall green,” and they do it. In response I set out to do a “cover version” of a 1968 experimental film called *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*. William Greaves, the director of the movie, questioned his own autocratic role and the hierarchical structure of the film set by embodying the role of a dysfunctional director. His film took place in Central Park in 1968, and implicated identity politics in a way I could not repeat, but for the show in St. Louis, I decided to adopt his strategy of the director who is incapable of giving clear direction. I titled it *Studies in Leadership - a family affair*. I had no idea what would happen as a result.

AH: Was it also an experiment for Greaves? Did he not know how people would react?

FB: I assume he didn't. There are shots in the movie where he seems very vulnerable. As the film's director, he was meant to lead, but didn't. Greaves also had assigned to three cameramen the role of documenting the set, including himself. I did the same: I gave Laura Fried, the assistant curator of CAM St. Louis, as well as one other person in the office, the task of filming with me. But in contrast to Greaves, the main record of my process was not a film but a diary-text that I published the day of the opening. I chose the diaristic format, which is a trope often used to imply an “authentic” form of personal address, as a way to reintroduce an interiorized classic artistic

subject, since throughout the process I had displaced my decision making to the institution.

AH: I remember the text arriving without us having seen it. We let you go to print not really knowing what it was.

FB: I have been asked how you could allow this project to happen. I think it goes back to the fact that you had a lot of trust in me. You weren't policing me or checking every move I made. It was a contract we established before we started working together.

AH: We had a relationship that had been established over time, through conversation and friendship. For this project, having that trust was key. Once it's there, it's much easier to loosen some of the control mechanisms that institutions usually maintain and let things happen.

FB: As a curator, what is your relationship to control?

AH: Well, control is obviously not only about placing restrictions, or somehow the opposite of freedom. So-called freeform or improvised music, for example, is also about control. And as a curator, I make different types of shows: exhibitions of new work, archival shows, projects that focus on specific bodies of work, et cetera, all of which involve a different balance of control.

Since *Studies in Leadership* was a commission of new work, I can use that as an example. In the context of a commission, I first try to articulate to an artist the nature of my interest in their work. Why am I inviting you to do an exhibition? What perspective am I bringing to your work? I articulate the aspects of the work that I'm drawn to. Then I give some parameters: the footage, the timeframe, the budget, and so on. Then a conversation begins and a project gradually starts to form. It grows and evolves over the course of many studio visits and much time spent together. For me, it's about how that dialogue adds texture to an artist's decision-making process. I am there for that process, asking questions that I hope will be productive, witnessing an artist's thought process, learning more about their work, encouraging them to take their practice to a new place—and, ultimately, helping them produce new work.

FB: In The Front Room, you had set up a platform that allowed for new work to take place. New work can be risky, though.

AH: It certainly can, because—who knows?—you might end up with

nothing at all. But that risk, and the tension associated with it, is part of what makes the experience worthwhile. For me, commissioning new work is not about proving to the world how much I know about an artist, but about showing the world what an artist is making and where they are headed next. I commission an artist because I believe in their work and in their way of thinking, and I want to be surprised by it.

FB: So, going back to *Studies in Leadership - a family affair*: our initial conversation for the project was at the restaurant Les Enfants Terribles in New York. *Les Enfants Terribles* is also a 1929 novel by Jean Cocteau about a sister and brother in a complex family dynamic, who live in a space they call The Room, much like a white cube. They interact via “The Game,” which recalls our positioned roles within the institution. That coincidence—it could have been any restaurant—generated the subtitle for the work, “a family affair.” With *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, Greaves used the same snippet of script over and over like a refrain, to enhance frustration and also to have something to do on the set. Like Greaves, I needed a script, so I used Cocteau’s book as a MacGuffin so that I wouldn’t have to add any external content to the framework of the process. I repeatedly referred to this script over the two weeks I was at the museum. I told the installers that we were going to make a structure, and suggested the form of a moonlit bungalow, which I took from the novel.

AH: Without telling them you were following a script?

FB: I told them we were following this script, but not why. I didn’t tell anyone that the premise of the project was for me *not* to direct. When we met at Les Enfants Terribles, we discussed authorship, leadership, 1970s soft pedagogical techniques, and different ways artists make decisions. Without you realizing it, that was the start of the project. At the end of the conversation you asked me what I was going to do. I went into character and said, “Well, I don’t know . . .”

AH: A series of deferrals then began to take place. As we got closer to the date of the exhibition, institutional deadlines began to kick in. We needed to draft the press release, for example, and I remember sending and resending drafts, asking for your feedback. By not answering these questions, you were causing the institutional machine to essentially do this work for you. And that’s what happened. We asked you which image we should use for press purposes, and suggested a few options—no answer. So we chose it ourselves. We started to produce the show for you.

FB: Exactly, that was perfect! In the diary I wrote, “Will a continuous withdrawal enable me to follow through?” You did not demand for me to be

specific, but we did speak about the questions that I was thinking about in parallel to the exhibition—so our conversation was also not *not* about it.

AH: This conversation continued while you were in St. Louis installing, although it never included precise details about what your project was.

FB: When you asked why certain hooks had been left in the wall, or why swatches from testing different paint colors had been left as they were, I side-stepped by obliquely referring to *Les Enfants Terribles*, or asked, “What do you think?” Did my behavior cause you any frustration?

AH: I understood that the nature of extending an invitation to Fia Backström meant working with an artist who aims to complicate the very relationship into which she is being invited. The nature of the project just meant that our conversations never included precise details about what those complications were.

FB: There’s a funny passage in the diary. You wanted to give the staff a “heads up.” So I provided a synopsis in the tone of a motivational leader, combined with self-important word choices: “What is important is that from this brief engagement we surface with a valuable and exciting experience, that, as a result, what comes out is a challenging and curious installation for the audience.” Then I wrote, “I needed to give while not giving; I needed to make it clear that I was not producing a humiliating reality show, but that we were already in our roles.”

AH: When the installation began, the installers were waiting for you to tell them what to do, for example what color to paint the wall. You made them choose.

FB: The premise was that we could use basic exhibition techniques—painting the walls, making a structure, inserting video projectors—but without a film, though, as there was no actual content other than the process itself. Every decision was delegated. The installers were very uncomfortable with this and constantly responded: “No, it’s *your* vision, we want *you* to be happy.”

AH: I was new in my position as well, and this was the first time in my career that I was playing a leadership role and overseeing staff. How do you tell someone what to do? It’s not as simple as saying, “Do this.” There are techniques.

FB: Soft corporate techniques. You delegate so that everyone feels they are participating, and to unleash their creative energies. For the project, I filmed

Paul Ha, the director of the museum, who agreed and said he gave relatively free rein to his staff.

AH: After it opened, Paul brought up some issues. You said during and after the process that your intention was not to manipulate. But—and this is just my impression, years after the fact—Paul felt that for his staff, it *was* manipulative. He made the point that people had been required to perform a series of tasks without being aware of the way their labor was being used or engineered. He saw problems with the ethics of that.

FB: I can see his point, but the experiment hinged on the fact that no one knew the premise of the un-directing artist, so as to produce reactions against a hierarchical system. I was also implicated as deeply as everyone else, with the risk of not knowing the outcome. I don't think anyone was humiliated. I didn't make fun of anyone.

AH: That's one way to respond to Paul's critique. You weren't asking the crew to choose colors and then saying, "Look what a poor decision this installer made."

FB: It was not about the quality of the choices, but about *how* we were making choices. For the color choice, the installer painted several swatches until he said he liked one. So I said, "Let's take that one, then." Incidentally, that color was leftover paint from John Armleder's exhibition that just had closed, which added another layer of authoring and decision making. Armleder claims he is an artist without opinions. The installer started to paint the big wall but I stopped him, because the point was not for us to get a finished, painted room, but that the decision making had been transferred.

AH: But that resulted in him going off to lunch feeling anxious that he might not have enough time to finish painting, or worrying that it might seem like he wasn't doing his job well. He might even have felt that his own job security was at risk.

FB: It comes back to the institutional structure and accountability. As in Greaves's film, there was frustration and friction during our installation. His idea was that this frustration would cause upheaval among the crew, against the director-leader and the hierarchical film set. This was a secret wish of mine, too. The more frustration I could generate, the better the project would become. For me those feelings were useful material that could potentially generate discussion within the structure.

AH: In this case, however, some of those institutional expectations were

not there. The idea for The Front Room space was that it gave an artist room to do something that was more spontaneous, something figured out in real time. So there may have been a certain *lack* of friction in this setup—maybe less than you wanted?

FB: You were permissive because of the nature of that space. If there had been more friction, though, I don't know if I would have been able to proceed. For example, I had told everyone to not touch anything in the room, since anything that was the result of decision-making processes would become part of the show. One morning there was a leak and the crew had moved stuff to put in a ladder to reach that spot. When I arrived I got annoyed and reproached the head installer, Cole Root. Then he complained to the assistant curator that I didn't know what I wanted, and that they couldn't work like this. He really tried to do a good job, but in this situation it wasn't possible; he didn't have all the information. He was actually doing a *perfect* job for the project. His complaint set off an institutional anxiety. The assistant curator started coming down every hour asking how I was doing.

AH: Your project was, in a way, about triggering those institutional reflexes.

FB: Did you at any point feel that you needed to intervene?

AH: I don't think so, but probably because I was unaware of many of the complaints and frustrations, since Laura, the assistant curator, was in charge of the actual production, the one in regular contact with the installation team. In fact I suspect Laura struggled with deciding how much to tell me, because she probably didn't want me to think she was mismanaging the show. And you? Did you ever find yourself second-guessing the project?

FB: Oh yes, throughout the process. I wrote about the ambivalences and struggles in the diary. It was difficult to stay in character. It's hard not to take over and make decisions. That's what an artist does: makes aesthetic decisions. Here those decisions had been delegated to places where they usually don't happen in the institution, which would have been a good corporate strategy. But in the relationship between artist and institution, it's taboo for an artist to work in this way.

AH: There is a demand on artists to own the position of the author. That brings to mind another question. While you sometimes include other artists' works in your exhibitions, you stick to preexisting works. Have you never asked an artist to make something new? It's curious,

because you have asked curators to make something! There was your project for the 2008 Whitney Biennial.

FB: At a biennial you're asked to fill a slot with content, so I turned the institution into a content producer by inviting the curators, Shamim Momin and Henriette Huldish, to be part of a clay workshop. They were given a list of keywords from Getty Images, from a search for the word *happiness*, and asked to make words of clay from them. But no—I haven't put an artist in the position of producing for a platform I set up. That seems like a literal curatorial move or an illustrational gesture, rather than an investigation into collective formations through objects and images and labor and authorship. Lately, though, I have become more interested in exploring trans-subjective connections through the material ontology of objects and deeper forms of collaboration.

How about you? Have you extended very specific invitations to artists?

AH: Yes. For example, I am currently preparing a show with the Chinese filmmaker Wang Bing at the CCA Wattis Institute. I invited him to show three specific films made between 2007 and 2009. That was the invitation, and I have specific reasons for it.

FB: An invitation where the curator comes with specific parameters, such as a very specific topic that leaves very little latitude for the artist, can be an interesting challenge for me as an artist, but it wouldn't necessarily be part of my investigation. When the invitation is too narrow, though, it can feel as if I'm being instrumentalized.

AH: With those kinds of exhibitions, I often find that I am being told more about the curator than about the artist. It emphasizes the structure the curator put in place rather than the art that's actually in the room. And I'm much less interested in what a curator's ideas are than what an artist's ideas are.

FB: Why?

AH: Because I always find myself more surprised by an artist's ideas! To me, an artwork is more disorienting, disruptive, and profound than any curatorial premise. In front of an artwork, I often find myself considering a perspective, a possibility, or a problem that is challenging and generative. Not to say that I don't find many exhibitions inspiring because of how a curator has framed or installed them, because I certainly do, but I think that in many cases, an artist's way of thinking can better accommodate things like contradiction, association, or incoherence. Both artist and curator create and produce culture, but I think the roles are

very distinct. In your case, your work as an artist seems to be to make those roles less distinct.

FB: They are not always that clear to begin with, and there is often a level of confusion or a dance that happens. What constitutes those differences is the interesting question. There is a gradual shift between the things we produce in terms of authorship and the position of these objects within society. Your work as a curator could be what I study, but as an artist, what I produce is your object in a more direct sense. I get inspired interpreting the meta-narrative of a show, trying to understand the connection the curator has made between objects. And we are both interested in display mechanisms and exhibition making. But as an artist I have no responsibility to make things legible, as with the pedagogical responsibilities of the curator. I can have perverse or reverse pedagogical impulses.

AH: Did the diary work on those terms, as a reverse pedagogy?

FB: The diary helped make the moves legible by introducing a seeming transparency through the staged authenticity of a diaristic voice. Part of a curator's accountability—especially at institutions where everything has to be made clear in a certain way—is mediation. During the preview of the St. Louis show, for example, there was a guided tour for the museum's members and patrons. I deferred all of the talking to you, so I wouldn't have to make decisions about meaning. You fumbled a bit, but said I was going to engage with the community of the institution to think about how we put together an art exhibition in our respective roles, whether it is preparing the wall text or preparing the wall itself. Even if you weren't aware of the non-directing premise and weren't clear about what in fact constituted the show, your mediation brought up the general questions.

AH: Some people would describe the curator that way, as someone who makes legible a series of decisions made in an abstract language. In my work as a curator within a public institution, I try to perform two roles. On the one hand, I want to protect an artist's ability to be as illegible, opaque, and difficult as they want to be—because those aspects of their work might be an important reason why I've invited them. On the other hand, there's a responsibility to the audience. I want to build some kind of bridge, to mediate, to give the audience some sense of what might be meaningful about an artist's way of thinking, which can sometimes involve their interest in a particular kind of opacity or difficulty.

But your work seems really specific when it comes to the artist-curator relationship. Do you see it as a matter of competing agendas, between the demands of the institution and those internal to your own work? To me, it seems you're actually interested in making this

relationship itself the content of the work: the nature of the invitation, the nature of your relationship to that particular person, and that person's agenda. It's not two agendas finding a way to meet in the middle.

FB: I used to think of it as a form of entanglement, or co-labor, where terms of engagement are negotiated. The outreach of press release and website, the brand marketing of logos, and the display of hanging and wall labels—these are some of the platforms of the institution where the borders of our overlapping subject positions get contested and our agencies can be produced.

In a different phase of this project, I did a seminar at Columbia titled *Studies in Leadership - personas abound*, where a number of artistic subject positions were delineated: the Dandy, the Hysterical One, the Trickster, the Corporate Leader, and so on. At the time I leaned toward the Community Organizer, with my “rising sign”—to use a horoscope metaphor—in the Moving Target, because forms of resistance continuously need to be reinvented to be operative. However, the strategy of a moving target is difficult to maintain because “going against” becomes the expected move. Over the last few years I have moved away from those more predictable, reactive moves toward a more ecological way. The previous entanglements with the institution are morphing into forms of institutional therapy involving long-term affective and material processes. Looking back at *Studies in Leadership - a family affair*, I think it was a proto-form of institutional therapy.

AH: That's a great way to describe it.

FB: Recalling Paul Ha's point: at the end of Greaves's film, the director holds a meeting in Central Park with the crew, explaining his actions with his hopes for their emancipation. I could have had a similar meeting on the day after the opening to give everybody a chance to share in what just happened. So in some sense this work is not complete.

AH: Maybe you did it by publishing the diary?

FB: I didn't take responsibility for the relationships. Perhaps that's what we're doing right now. It's easy to claim criticality and much more difficult to propose. I'm interested in both diagnosis and proposal. Not just being a teenager, saying, “This is wrong, you're ruining my life!” As this form of resistance has become normalized, maybe art doesn't live there any more.

AH: Right. Opacity, as a move, has become the most legible move of all.

FB: There's a way to generate force by being with, rather than against—like in judo, where you go with the force of the opponent. Therefore, let's follow the given structures and be rigorous about it.

LONG TERM RELATIONSHIP

Anne Ellegood and Kerry Tribe

Anne Ellegood: I find it interesting that *The Exhibitionist* would approach the subject of the relationship between an artist and a curator through the idea of mutual influence, because typically our respective roles are understood to be clearly delineated from one another. So the notion of mutual influence is really intriguing, even if we don't think of it as influence per se. The effect we have had on one another may even be a bit unconscious—small gestures growing out of an ongoing awareness of each other's practices, or shared thoughts over time.

Kerry Tribe: And it might be recognizable only after the fact, where you look back and say, “Oh, *that's* what that was!” We've known each other for a long time. You first came to my studio in 2001, when I was a grad student at UCLA. I was working on a video project called *Double*, which you later included in two exhibitions: *Videodrome II* at the New Museum in 2002, and in your show *Realisms* at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2008.

AE: Here's a point of influence: When I started developing the idea for *Realisms* with my co-curator, Kristen Hileman, we planned to gather together a group of video artists who were collapsing the distinctions between reality and fiction. For me the show was built up around a couple of key pieces, one of them being *Double*. I'd known the work for several years, and it was a beginning point for me to think through the idea of self-representation and shifting notions of subjectivity through the influence of media (which ended up being the subject of my essay for that catalogue). In *Double* you hired a group of five different actors to play you. That work was instrumental in the development of the whole exhibition, along with—interestingly, and maybe you'll like this—Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* (2000).

KT: I love that piece.

AE: This speaks to how your work has figured in my practice over time—the fact that I saw one of your works in 2001, which generated an idea for an exhibition several years later.

KT: I remember that initial studio visit with you. It was a moment in my practice when a number of projects were percolating and influencing one another. You came in with a notebook and a pen, and you took detailed notes and asked great questions. You had a very open and curious approach that was quite unusual in the environment of the UCLA grad studios in the early 2000s. Lots of people who came through in those days were, how to put this, “fishing”? Strangers rushing around the studios, trying to see what they could get out of it, who they might “discover.” And your approach was the opposite, just open and curious.

The kind of dialogue that springs from that curious, open approach undercuts a standard power dynamic, in which the artist is expected to perform themselves for the visitor. How appropriate, then, that before you even knew me, you found yourself watching other people—hired actors—perform as me, talking into the camera about “my” work, doing their best to sound like what they thought a video artist was supposed to sound like.

AE: What is powerful about that work is how you explore the ways that we play roles within our lives, and how we often judge one another on very superficial characteristics.

KT: So that initiated a relationship in which we find ourselves performing our roles with varying degrees of fidelity to expectation.

AE: A studio visit is a very particular thing, even while each one is of course distinct based on the people involved. I had a mentor in this regard, Marcia Tucker, the founder of the New Museum. When I was in grad school at Bard, we didn’t really talk about studio visits, this necessary and special part of all contemporary art curators’ practices. I only started with studio visits later, when I was doing my internship at the New Museum with Marcia, and then after I’d gotten out of grad school and was working there. She was in the middle of researching a show and she took me along on her studio visits. It was wonderful.

I remember driving to a visit one day—we were running a bit late, like ten minutes. This was before most people had a cell phone, so we found a pay phone and she called the artist to explain that we were going to be late. When she got back in the car she said, “Always remember that a studio is a sacred space. We are outsiders, and it’s extremely important to be respectful. So even

if you’re only going to be a little bit late, you have to call.” Marcia taught me to enter the studio space with a level of openness, as you described, and she gave me ethical guidelines for studio visits that really sank in. I saw her behave in studios in this incredibly respectful way, and I’ve always held that with me. Even today I will always text somebody if I’m running late—even in Los Angeles, where everyone expects you to be late!

KT: To call a studio a sacred space sounds a little romantic, but I think there’s an important point here. You’re not going into someone’s home, but their place of work, so often visitors can be very business minded. But for the artist the studio is also a place for leaps of faith and speculation.

AE: Underlying that business-minded approach is the idea that there’s a transaction that’s going to happen. Maybe they get something out of it, and maybe you do. It might be mutual, and yet there’s an end product in mind—rather than someone coming in just to talk about ideas and what you’re working on. Unlike gallerists, curators obviously aren’t coming in to decide if the work is sellable. Whether we’re working on something specific or not, we are there to look and listen and think about what you’re doing. This is a really privileged position.

Reflecting on it now, I’m not sure if Marcia would have used the term “sacred space.” But I took from her gesture the understanding that the artist is going to feel vulnerable when revealing what they’ve been working on, work that even they might not yet know what to think of.

KT: Personally I enjoy sharing work in progress. It can produce anxiety, but the feedback can also be generative. In a studio visit a couple of years ago, I showed a work in progress to a group of maybe five curators—serious people. And it pretty much bombed. What they saw was not what I was hoping they’d see. But I didn’t feel unsupported. The studio visit was for a grant, and I got the grant; it was fine. But it took a couple of months for me to come to grips with the fact that their response to the work was legitimate. It was just a hard truth.

AE: Those conversations in the studio can be generative for curators, too. The way I’ve tended to work with group shows—in particular *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas*, a 2006 sculpture show at the Hirshhorn that you weren’t in, and *All of this and nothing* at the Hammer Museum in 2011, which you were—is to start with a small group of artists I’m drawn to and build from there. In the early stages of development, I’m going more on intuition than an idea I can explain. The more I look, the more I become able to express what I’m interested in, what I want to explore further. It’s in that moment of

process—pre-articulation in some sense—that having conversations with artists is most generative. It helps shape the exhibition.

For example, you and I did a studio visit when I was working on *All of this and nothing*. I was still grappling with the show—it was an idea revolving around large philosophical questions about the role of art in perception and cognition, in how we understand the world—and I was worried that it was too broad. But the artists I was drawn to were dealing with these broad subjects through particular, precise, and in fact simple gestures. Anyway, when you and I were talking about that exhibition, I realized that your work was going to bring something to the context that would both complicate the exhibition's subject in a productive way and—how do I describe this?—somehow complete the circle of my thinking. I hadn't thought about this until we're talking now, but because I knew your work so well and trusted you so much, I realized that I could use your project to round out my thinking and push the exhibition in a meaningful direction.

There were a number of works in the show that explored ephemerality, disappearance, reemergence, and invisibility in ways aligned with how art can enter the realm of the mysterious or even the magical. There was a fragility to much of the work. Your film, video, and sound works shared this sensibility, but also brought the ideas into very specific moments in history, which allowed for a back and forth between broad concepts and real events, and allowed for a curatorial argument that pushed the idea of close analysis and quiet contemplation beyond the individual object into questions of how memory operates.

KT: I'm very flattered to hear that, and I loved the inclusion of my work in that show. But I imagine people asked you, "What is Kerry doing here?" It was kind of anomalous.

AE: It did stand out, if only because the visual language was less abstract, and the content more rooted in particular histories, events, and figures than other works in the exhibition.

KT: My works were also located outside the main galleries, in a dark screening room on the periphery. You'd written about the works before the Hammer show, for a series of exhibitions in England.

AE: Exactly. I'd been thinking about that body of work so much because of the writing, and realized at a certain point that it fit into *All of this and nothing*. Even though, as you say, it was a bit "outside" what Douglas Fogle and I had selected up to that point. Though Paul Sietsema also had a film—

KT: But it was so spare.

AE: Sietsema's film is very formal and textural in some sense. But *Parnassius mnemosyne*, your 2010 film of a butterfly wing, was very formal in its way, too. And it felt ephemeral, as films sometimes can because of their particular materiality. Perhaps *The Last Soviet* (2010) was more of an outlier. But for me, it wasn't. I don't know if I can articulate this well even now, but the notion of memory felt crucial to that show, because memory is inscribed in everything. *The Last Soviet* grapples with memory as it informs history and narrative, and calls into question all the things we take for granted in those contexts—in particular the authority of those voices. Your work brought the more ephemeral, slight, gestural elements of the other works back to the context of history and politics—the real spaces in which philosophical inquiries are enacted.

KT: That reminds me of another instance of us working together: you basically made possible the performance *Critical Mass* during the run of *All of this and nothing*. There is this oversimplified idea that artists make things, and curators pick them, and it's the curator's job to figure out how to deliver the things to an audience in the most sensitive and appropriate way. We often miss the fact that—especially for an artist like me—so much of the work gets made in response to an opportunity to encounter a particular audience in a particular space and time. Especially when they commission something, curators provide a framework within which a new thing can exist in the world. There's this idea that an artist's practice happens prior to that moment—they have their practice, and they're going to do what they're going to do. But in a way I'm less interested in what goes on in the studio than in what happens when a work encounters an audience. That moment of encounter with the audience relies on both parties.

AE: Sure.

KT: And there's often a lot of compromise and conflict around that. But in the case of a live performance such as *Critical Mass*, my sense was that you trusted there was something in my unrealized idea that would contribute to the understanding of this exhibition in a more expansive, historically embedded way. And, pragmatically, you found funding to support a couple of actors memorizing and rehearsing an impossible script for about six months. [laughs] That project was such a ridiculous undertaking. Frankly it would never have happened without your belief that it could.

AE: You described the performance to me, and although you hadn't yet worked with live performance, it sounded amazing. I trusted you and your work enough to know that—

KT: —I wasn't going to fuck it up?

AE: From my perspective, you had to do this. It had to happen. And you needed support. It's wonderful when you're at an institution where you can actually find that support and offer a context for the work. I wanted to give you an opportunity to push your work in a new direction.

KT: I had never done anything live before *Critical Mass*. What curators can do is provide these opportunities to think outside of one's comfort zone. And trust is important and critical to that. When you work with someone again and again over the years, you can take more risks. Because I know that you'll stop me if I'm about to do something really dumb. And I also know that if there is some pragmatic constraint, I can trust your judgment. You know best what will and won't work in the institution you deal with every day.

AE: As you're saying this, I realize that this sort of relationship is not common. It's actually extremely rare. As a curator of contemporary art there's pressure around the new: finding a new artist, showing their work for the first time, working with new people and not repeating yourself.

KT: But you've never been beholden to showing the newest market darlings! That makes room for you to do other things. You consistently work with people of color, with women, with artists who work in less marketable media, or with artists over 70.

AE: I came into the curatorial field with the impression that you weren't supposed to show the same artists repeatedly—that the field is global, and new artists are emerging all the time. Everyone needs opportunities, and you can't play favorites. You can look at certain curators who have long-term relationships with particular artists and feel kind of annoyed by that, like, "Why is that curator always working with that same artist or always curating that same artist into so many biennials?" But now that I've been doing this a while, and have had relationships like I have with you and a handful of other artists, I see how valuable longer-term relationships are. They operate in different ways, whether we're working on something specific or just talking about ideas.

KT: Do you still feel pressure to conform to expectations around the "new"?

AE: Oh, I don't know—not necessarily, any more. But I'm also becoming aware, as we are talking, that there are few other artists I could have this same conversation with. Of course I think you are an incredible artist or I wouldn't

keep coming back to you! But there's also something about the way that you work that resonates with my practice. Again, this might be largely unconscious on my part. But while every exhibition is its own undertaking, there's nevertheless a way in which I return to certain core ideas, which manifest in a different way in each exhibition. And you do the same. The ideas you explore and the questions you pose are interesting to me, but I also feel an affinity with your *way* of working, of returning to key ideas manifested in distinct ways. We have that in common, even if it is more abstract or harder to recognize in my case.

I have another line of thought: when you were talking about *Realisms* and *All of this and nothing*, it got me thinking about the artist's experience of a group show. In some cases—especially exhibitions that are not historically but conceptually driven—it may not be until the show is up and you can experience it in its ensemble, that you can decide whether your work really belonged in that show. As a curator, you're always curious whether the artists feel like it was a good context for their work. It can be tricky to avoid over-literalizing an artist's practice within a certain idea, or asking the work to serve a particular function. There is a delicate balance between allowing the work to "speak for itself" while still being precise about its belonging to its group.

KT: Your exhibitions never over-literalize. That's key, and part of what makes seeing my work in your group shows a pleasure. Unexpected connections between artists emerge. There's lots of great art in the world that I nevertheless find personally uninspiring or uninteresting. So it means a lot to me that I can count on seeing things in your exhibitions that I may think I already know, that suddenly resonate in a new way.

AE: That's the beauty of a group show. You put artists next to each other and, ideally, something new happens. That effect can be totally unexpected or absolutely deliberate.

KT: It strikes me that this is something else we have in common. Ultimately, we both make exhibitions. You probably share with me the thrill of finally seeing the work installed after everything's been going terribly. Suddenly the lighting is done and you go, "Oh my God, I might have made a great show!"

AE: Absolutely! Because of the precise structure of your work, you never know what it's going to look like until it's finally installed.

KT: All exhibitions are like that, to some extent. We never really know what we've made until it's done.

ARTISTIC BITCHES AND CURATORIAL BASTARDS

Claire Fontaine and Jens Hoffmann

Jens Hoffmann: Do you see a difference between working with a curator for the first time and working with a curator you have already worked with on a number of occasions?

Claire Fontaine: First times can be strange in every domain of life. When a relationship with a curator intensifies and we work together on several projects, there is obviously a precious dialogue that takes place. If an exhibition requires the production of new works or the curation and association of old pieces, there is always a very fertile and specific exchange that can only take place with a curator, because of his or her cultural background and his or her passion for what the artist does. The artist and the curator are working together—they are complementary and somehow necessary to each other.

JH: We have worked together at least a dozen times. I have written about your work, commissioned new pieces, purchased it for foundations and museums, and have been on panels with you. Do you think we have a traditional artist-curator relationship?

CF: No. But we don't know what such a traditional relationship might actually be. Relationships between artists and curators are all singular and all different. In our specific relationship with you, sublimated aggression, humor, and a slight insanity on both sides play important roles. There are also discussions we have never finished about artists' theoretical ambitions and the monopoly of logos by curators, which should be pursued. Generally speaking, though, it is essential for us to be complicit with the people we work with. We have noticed that if this doesn't happen, that is, if there isn't a strong sense of reciprocal recognition and an explicit feeling of wanting to go in the same direction, things inevitably go wrong.

JH: What do you think is the advantage and the disadvantage of working together with a curator for a longer period of time on various types of exhibitions?

CF: There is no disadvantage at all. When relationships are satisfactory they should last as long as possible. Every project and every exhibition is a different adventure; it is impossible to repeat oneself if one works rigorously. Also, we don't believe in existential liberalism; we think that only in long-lasting relationships (human and professional) can people truly engage with each other, disagree in meaningful ways, and transform each other.

JH: I recently spoke with a curator of a major museum in New York about my desire to work with artists over longer periods of time and to create the complicity that you have described. That curator told me that this sort of ongoing partnership was something she was not comfortable with, because as someone working in a public institution she had the obligation and responsibility to show many different artists. She felt that a strong connection to a group of artists would make her biased toward certain careers that she could be suspected of "pushing" and promoting. I was surprised by her position, as it has always been important for me to form deeper relationships with artists in order to understand their work better. There are only so many artists I am interested in as a curator and I do not lose interest in them after working with them once.

CF: Here we have to tackle the notion that institutions are service providers that must diversify their offerings for a public that is imagined to be this neutral bulimic subject that must be fed a little bit of everything all the time. On the other hand, from the institution's point of view, it is understandable that a museum doesn't want to become the backyard of a curator and his friends—except that the cultural world has *always* been based on affinity groups, and on the energy that comes from those relationships.

If the affinities aren't there, the exhibitions will be hollow, gratuitous, not well cared for, and not carefully *curated*. In the origin of the term of "curator," there is a notion of care that is one of the blind spots of capitalism: there is no care without love, it's impossible! People can be paid to care for strangers, but they won't be able to do a good job if they don't make an affective connection with them. That is most true in the curator's relationship with the artworks, if perhaps less so in the relationship with artists, as there is a professional distance that should be kept. But there has to be a profound affinity between an artist and a curator if they

have the ambition of doing something good. Of course that isn't necessary if all we want is to keep a mediocre museum open, and pay people a salary for their boring job—nobody will complain about that.

JH: A few years ago you contributed a text to the *Texte zur Kunst* issue about curators.¹ I was surprised by how much you generalized in this article. You said, for example, that curators do not do studio visits because artists do not work in studios any more. I am actually in studios looking at artworks with artists every week. Do you feel working in a studio is an outdated and romantic idea of being an artist in a so-called post-studio era?

CF: No. Of course everybody would love to have a studio, but not everybody can. Some practices need it less than others, but one benefits from having a room to oneself. We generalized in that text because it was supposed to be humorous and light. It joked about the liberal lifestyle that curators must have, and about curators' volatility, mobility, and unreliability in the long run—which isn't even frustrating, as we all have casual professional relationships with lots of people and we tend to forget them. But we are generalizing here too, aren't we? We are not so close with very many curators, and they are all very different, after all.

JH: For a while many artists seemed afraid that curators might take up too much space in the conversation around art and steal a bit of their spotlight. What is your take on this?

CF: We didn't know about that fear. If artists are afraid that someone else will steal the spotlight maybe they haven't chosen the right life for themselves. Curators, for how we see them, are supposed to provide visibility for artists, to frame their work within an interesting context. We really don't see the problem that this relationship can pose. If artists don't want to work with a curator they can always decline the invitation and only exhibit in private galleries and artist-run spaces. But a curator of contemporary art cannot make an exhibition without artists, so he or she depends on their contribution.

But let us ask you: What excites you about the artists that you choose? Artists never choose curators—it is always the other way around. And sometimes it is hard to tell why one is chosen and what one has in common with the other artists that are taking part in the same exhibitions.

JH: It is not true that artists do not choose curators. You choose to work with

¹ See Claire Fontaine, "Invisible Curators," as part of the survey "Values and Interests: Survey among artists on the relationship to curators, with contributions by Monica Bonvicini, Claire Fontaine, Mariechen Danz, Olaf Nicolai, Adrian Piper, Thomas Scheibitz," *Texte zur Kunst* 86 (June 2012): 126-30.

me. You could also not work with me since you have many other opportunities. In my case, though, there is a group of artists that I like to work with, and whom I have worked with continuously over several years. Most of these artists are also personal friends with whom I share ideas about art, politics, and the world. I share my ideas about exhibition making with them the same way they share their ideas about making art with me. Along with Claire Fontaine, that close circle might include Allora & Calzadilla, Simon Fuijwara, Jamian Juliano-Villiani, Harrell Fletcher, Tino Sehgal, Tim Lee, Renata Lucas, Ryan Gander, Elmgreen & Dragset, Walead Beshty, Rachel Rose, Alexandre da Cunha, Adrián Villar Rojas, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Luisa Lambri, Mario Garcia Torres, Roman Ondák, Kris Martin, Annette Kelm, Juan Capistrán, Rivane Neuenschwander, and others.

These are mostly artists of my generation, whom I worked with early on in their careers, and early in mine. They influenced me as an exhibition maker. I do continue to research and meet lots of other artists too; someone from the close circle might move on, and someone else will arrive. Working with artists over a longer period of time gets me closer to their work. I only do a show with an artist that I understand and appreciate, and after one solo show goes well I do another; most of the time I like their next show even more, and so it continues.

CF: The economy of the art world is commonly defined as informal, and dependent on human relationships and tribal groupings. How much truth do you think there is in this idea? Do you think that you have a "family," an affiliation, yourself?

JH: There are artists to whom I feel close, and curators too. It could be a bit of a family scenario. I am however a private person and I do not socialize all that much. I like small, more intimate meetings and conversations. I do not have a super large social circuit.

CF: How do you find the time to work so much? What kind of insane life do contemporary curators live? Do you still have time to read and study, or is intuition a good enough navigating tool most of the time?

JH: I hate this myth of insane curators traveling all over the world and never sleeping. I think that is mostly to do with Hans Ulrich Obrist's image, which doesn't ring true for everyone. He does travel a lot and apparently only needs three hours of sleep each night. But I am not like this. I have a perfectly normal life. I sleep seven or eight hours a night, I have a mortgage on my apartment, I have car payments, two dachshunds, a daughter, and a nice girlfriend. Most days I go to work at 9 a.m. and return at 7 p.m.; I talk to my parents once a week and visit them on holidays. It is all pretty straightforward. I do

travel a lot—that is perhaps the only unusual aspect of my life. As for work, I think we all work a lot.

I am fortunate my work affords a lot of time to read and research. Intuition and curiosity are important qualities to have as a curator but they are not enough if one wants to investigate subjects in a more serious way. Reading helps you reflect on the issues you are examining. A lot of the reading I do is not about art—it is a lot of contemporary theory, film studies, theater, or anthropology. I do not get to read much fiction, though.

AGREEMENT

Inés Katzenstein and Juan José Cambre

When I was called on to have a conversation about the nature of exchanges between curators and artists, I realized that each project and each person proposes a different model of relation, and that choosing one would have led to too restricted a perspective on the matter. So I asked myself: In my life as a curator, hasn't friendship with artists been the most enduring, the most discussed, and moreover the most transformative and most fortifying model of exchange? In addition to art, aren't the artists I befriended while working, and the artist friends with whom I ended up working, the most important stimuli for staying active in this profession?

When I speak of friendship I am not referring to artist-curator duos who work together as partners—the paradigmatic example in Latin America being Francis Alÿs and Cuauhtémoc Medina. Rather I am referring simply to friendship: to chatting, having fun, sharing secrets. So I opted to chat about the subject with the artist Juan José Cambre, a painter twenty years my senior whose work looks at problems of painting, light, and color, and with whom I have been friends since the mid-1990s, when I was just beginning my career and he was already a full-fledged painter.

Cambre and I have collaborated on some one-off projects: I've written a few texts about his work, and we worked together on a retrospective exhibition that I ghost curated. But my idea here is precisely not to talk about one-off projects—nor to talk about private matters in public—but to attempt to think the relationship between an artist and a curator theoretically, taking mutual trust, disinterestedness, and the total lack of suspicion as fundamental elements of that relationship—elements fostered by years of sharing meals together, studio visits, telephone calls, and calls for help, of confessions and advice, all of which have made our relationship both personal and professional.

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Juan José Cambre: To begin, I'd say that an important point in discussing the relationship between artists and curators is that thought gets stagnant—it gets corrupted. As Wallace Stevens wrote, “Thought tends to collect in pools.” For me, as an artist, the possibility of having a dialogue with an insightful person who has some experience, a curator, can cut that stagnation short. There the curator's freedom is indispensable to the artist—as when, in my retrospective show at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in 2010, you came and “pruned” the paintings. You alleviated a crisis situation.

Inés Katzenstein: So for you that kind of curatorial intervention is indispensable?

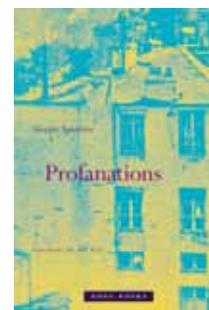
JJC: Let me see if I can explain it better. An important matter in this question of relationship is how we think about the distinction between technique and inspiration. Because it would seem to be the case that curatorship represents the place of technique (structure), and that inspiration lies with the artist. But actually my experience has been that you never know, and in fact the curator's co-participation can “improve” an artwork. In that relationship, as in all relationships, really, ideas float around. They participate in a structure that doesn't have anything to do with property or possession.

IK: Have you always thought of it that way? Or is that something you discovered insofar as, in recent decades, the figure of the curator has taken on greater visibility in the field of art?

JJC: It's a fairly new way of thinking about it. I believe that the rise of curatorship emerged at a moment in art when artists were faced with two new problems: on the one hand “large-scale production,” meaning, the temptation to overproduce in terms of quantity, and on the other, contemporary art's tendency to permanently conquer new territories. Within this frame of expansion, in the thought process of an artwork, for us artists, doubt has grown dramatically. And that's precisely where I think that conversation with a curator can function as an anchor. To think, restructure, select, cross out, add—all that work can be done much more easily in dialogue with a curator.

IK: What would the nature of that anchorage be?

JJC: A good curator helps you bring the problem into focus and even eliminate doubt in a really interesting way. And that new focus gets transformed into inspiration. I mean that place—that sharpness of the work to which you can gain access through dialogue with a curator, before it was thought to belong exclusively to the space of inspiration; now it can be the fruit of dialogue.



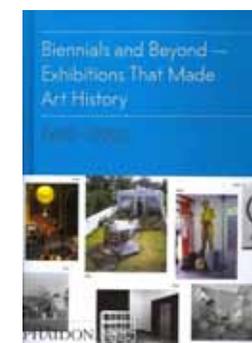
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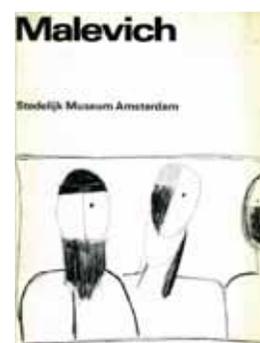
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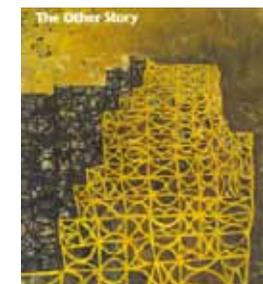
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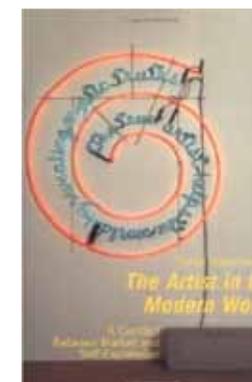
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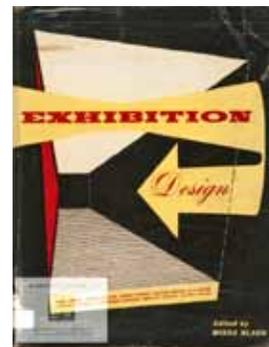
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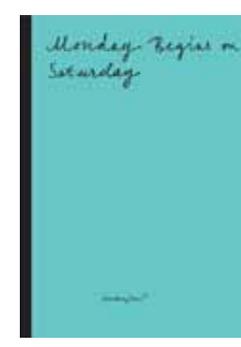
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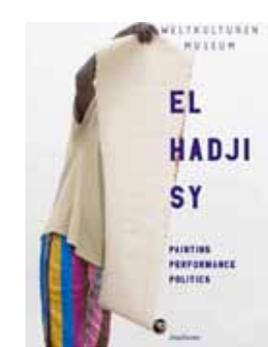
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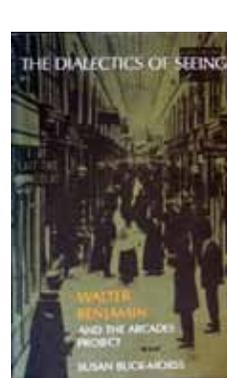
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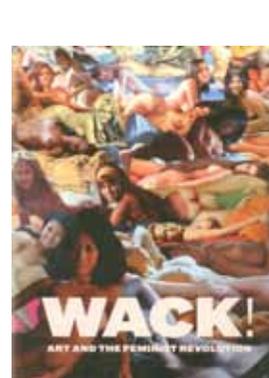
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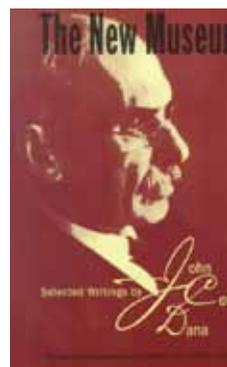
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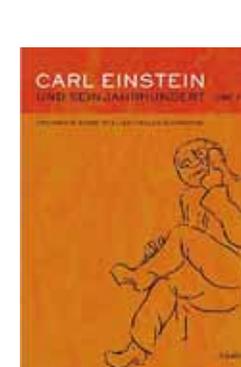
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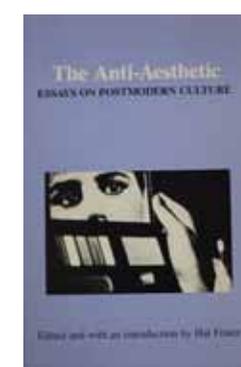
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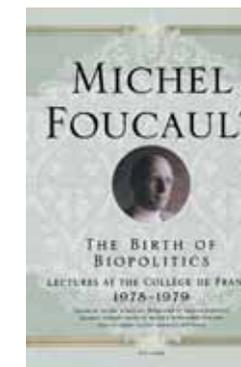
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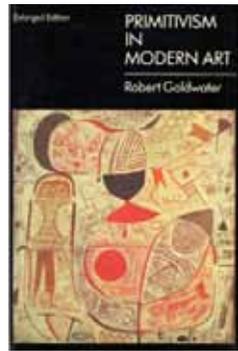
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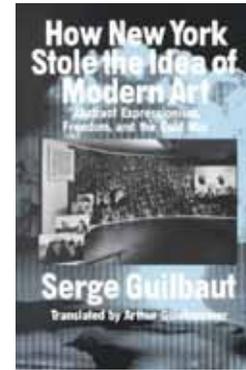
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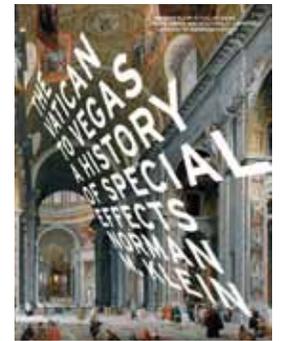
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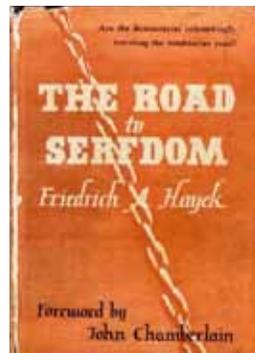
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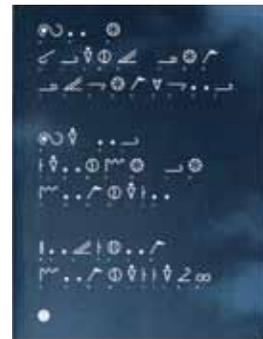
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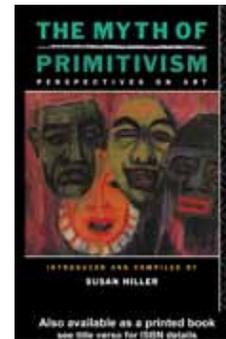
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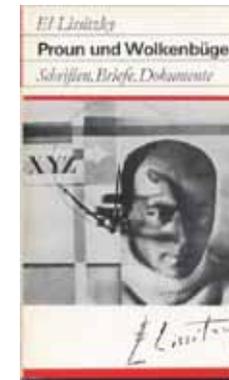
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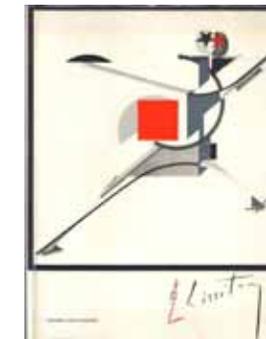
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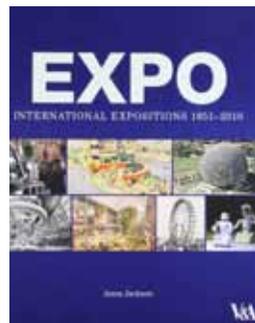
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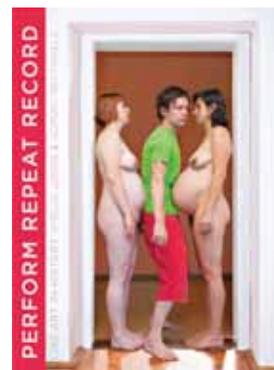
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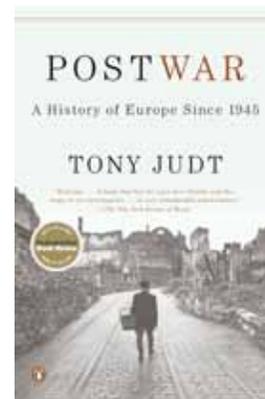
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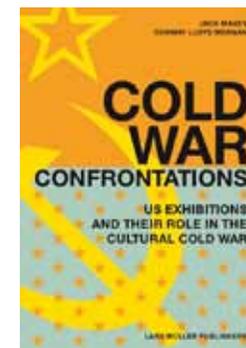
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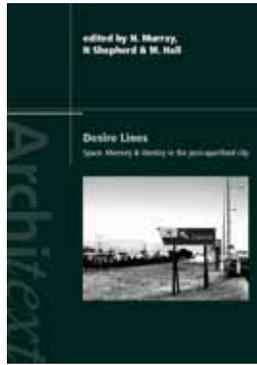
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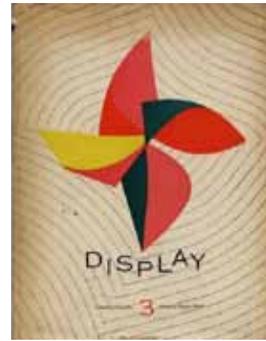
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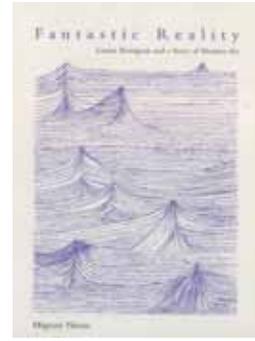
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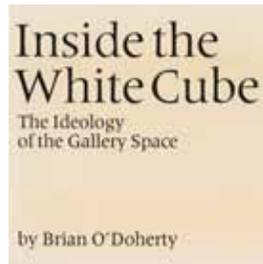
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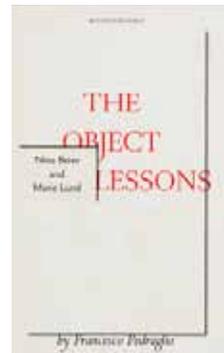
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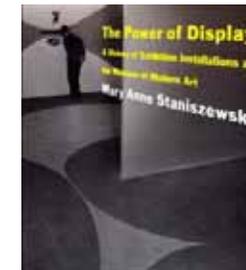
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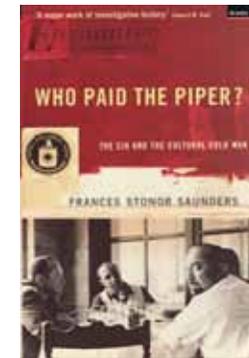
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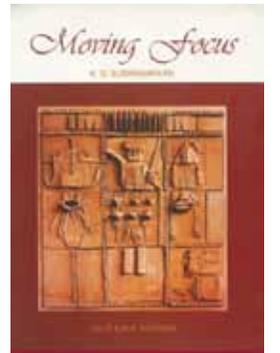
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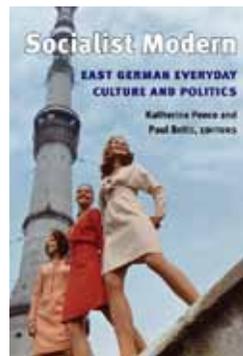
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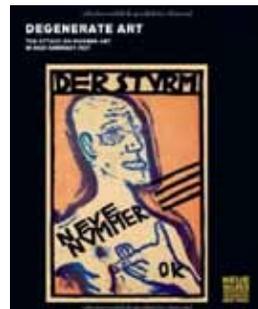
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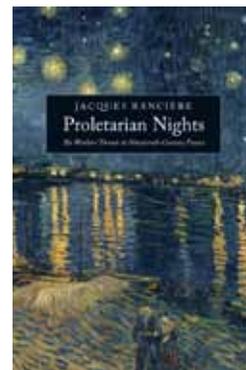
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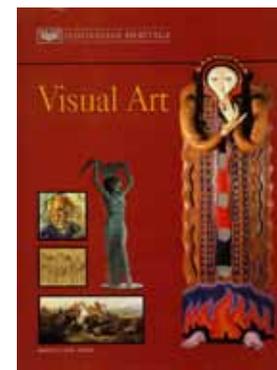
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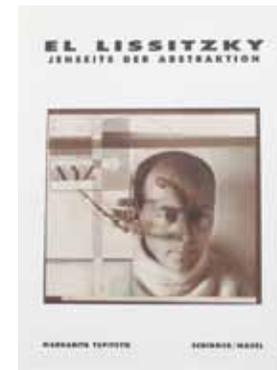
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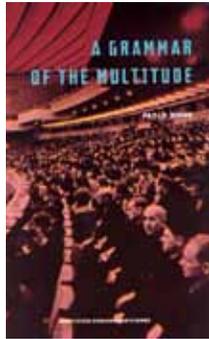
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IK: Many artists from your generation are resistant to making themselves available to that kind of dialogue, or at least to recognizing it as part of the work of art. Why do you think you're so open in that sense?

JJC: I originally trained as an architect. When I was young I worked a lot in architecture offices, where the jobs of drawing or documenting were not only that: they were "hierarchized" by a previous dialogue about the project. In those dialogues, ideas weren't anybody's property. Ultimately they were the property of the work, not of an author. Perhaps that is why.

IK: Do you think that this kind of relationship of exchange, in which inspiration can be mediated through a dialogue, applies to every kind of artwork?

JJC: If art *è cosa mentale* it applies to everything. In any case, even though we might be in an age when the artist can act as a selector within his or her work, that is, in the same way that a curator acts, I have the sense that the curator doesn't have the "magic power" of converting the non-artistic into the artistic. The curator can guarantee the auratic dimension of a work, but it's the artist who gets there.

IK: I'm not sure. One could reply that the field of art is organized around an agreement that sustains that myth of the artist as an empowered figure, the only one authorized to produce that aura.

JJC: That's true, but let's think about weaving. Weaving begins with a trick: "you deceive the knot." But the important thing isn't that it is just a trick, but rather what comes together around that mystification.

IK: One aspect in which my way of working differs from yours is that as a curator, I work with artworks, ideas, and contexts, the same as you, but I'm constantly grappling on the one hand with production and bureaucracy, and on the other, like it or not, with strategy, with the politics of the field of art—a strategy that mutates, of course, and that demands innovation and intuition, but which remains an instrumental way of thinking. Exaggerating a bit, I tend to imagine you painting in your studio, listening to music, reading. It's not that I believe that the "real," the instrumental, doesn't get filtered into that (image of the) studio, but sometimes I feel a sort of envy for that kind of concentration.

JJC: The thing is that what is going to improve what I do is whether I manage to get out from under all those elements that you mentioned: the gaze of the spectator, the contextual and strategic dimensions. If they became a part of

my process they'd ruin the work. The curator helps me with those elements, but she can keep them!

IK: OK, all the same, let's not exaggerate. Even though curatorial work includes a lot of "administration," it also includes a high percentage of pleasure, and the possibility of friendship being within the universe of work. In that sense the continuous way of working is quite similar to the artist's lifestyle. What I mean to say is that for me the possibility of sharing the world and introspection with you and with other artists—that's enormously stimulating.

JJC: And you, as a curator, how do you situate yourself with respect to dialogue? For example, in the Marcelo Pombo retrospective that you curated last year at Colección de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, I gather that if his ideas had predominated, the show would've been completely different.

IK: I always have to exercise my capacity to adapt to the artists with whom I'm working, case by case. In Pombo's case, he brought me in to work on the project, and in that same act, he quite explicitly "authorized" me to have an enormous amount of autonomy in making decisions. He did not want to butt in. But in spite of his initial authorization, I had to keep winning that permission over the course of the process. And in that case my attitude was to try to harmonize with his ideas in order then to be able to go away, retreat, and think through them on my own terms, putting them in relation to contextual, historical, and theoretical questions that interested me as an accompaniment to his work.

In those processes of working with the complete oeuvre of a living artist, it is important for me to maintain a certain distance in order to be able to achieve a way of thinking with a certain degree of independence with respect to the artist's storyline—but at the same time to continue listening to him or her, in order to generate a proposal that the artist is prepared to accept.

But as I was saying, in the end it all depends on the case. I'll give you two extreme, opposite examples of artists with whom I worked on different exhibitions. David Lamelas gives you absolute freedom to do whatever show you want, not only out of a matter of trust, I believe, but because he really believes in a division of labor between artist and curator. He doesn't give too much importance to curatorial labor because he believes in what his works do by themselves. The contrary example would be Guillermo Kuitca, who tends to blur the boundaries between artistic and curatorial practice. Not only does he propose a very close, detail-oriented dialogue about his works—he wants you to get inside the painting—but also he participates actively in all aspects of the curatorial

process. In that exchange his intervention into the curatorial side and my intervention into the artistic side both become invisible.

JJC: Isn't that something to be desired, that those decisions be made invisible?

IK: I don't have a general answer. In the Pombo retrospective that I curated earlier this year, I wanted to propose a new perspective on his work. I tried to frame his works within ideas that functioned in an almost opposite direction from the concepts of decorative art that previously had been used to understand him. Citing Gilles Deleuze in his famous text about minor literature (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 1975), I called the show *Marcelo Pombo, un artista del pueblo* (Marcelo Pombo, an Artist of the People), and I organized his oeuvre into sections that represented the different "adoptive" communities that the artist cited over the course of his career: women *bricoleurs*, gay activists, adolescents obsessed with fame and consumerism, the poor, the dumb, craftspeople. But in the show, that perspective got mixed up with his work in such a way that, for the public, it ended up being totally obvious, and to a certain extent invisible as an argument.

Was it a success in that sense? I don't know. Today I feel that I should have laid out the curatorial argument more forcefully, because I think that if the intervention is more visible as such, it has a greater capacity to produce a discussion, and thus to keep moving.

JJC: In that responsiveness or adaptability to the other, and in your acceptance of invisibility, do you feel like your work is a sort of service?

IK: No. Because luckily I've always been able to work with artists with whom I have an aesthetic and political empathy, artists with whom I feel like my work can be, in some way, an expressive labor (and not a service), and with whom I intuit that I can learn, in the sense of broadening my sensitivity and my understanding of the world.

On the other hand, perhaps that adaptability to the other, that sort of responsiveness that I adopt, might not be a real emptiness, but rather a tactic so that I can listen to the artist and look at him or her.

JJC: Do you think, then, that the artist "knows"?

IK: I think that the artist can be thought of as one of the artwork's masks—*máscaras*. Sometimes I try to understand something of the work through that strange, deformed shell—*cáscara*—that is the artist.

Translated from Spanish by Christopher Fraga

RESPONSE II

**ARCHIVAL**

Liz Glass
Dear King Harry

James Lee Byars
Correspondence with Harald Szeemann (1988)

DEAR KING HARRY

Liz Glass

The twentieth century was witness not only to the rise of the curator as a central figure in the story of contemporary art, but also, consequently, to a fundamental shift in the relationships between curators and artists. Over the course of his lauded career, the Swiss *Ausstellungsmacher* Harald Szeemann acted as more than a caretaker or facilitator: with respect to the artists he exhibited, he was also co-conspirator, surrogate, comrade, muse, and, at times, combatant. From his revolutionary exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* at Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, where artists were invited to conceive of the museum as a studio of sorts, making work directly in (and in some cases on) the building itself, to his innovations in the 1980, 1999, and 2001 editions of the revered Venice Biennale, Szeemann's radical approach to the exhibition format both fed off of and inspired some of the most innovative artists of his time.

One of the artists within Szeemann's avant-garde orbit was James Lee Byars. A native of Detroit, Byars emerged in the 1960s as an otherworldly character, fashioning himself as something of a flamboyant vagabond. His ritual-laden performance works were complemented by a meticulously cultivated personal style that centered on monochromatic suits, long hair, and head coverings that obscured the artist's eyes. Szeemann and Byars met when Byars turned up in Bern during *When Attitudes Become Form* (despite having not been invited to present his work in that group show). The two first worked together in 1972, when Byars participated in Szeemann's *Documenta 5*. For Szeemann's "100-Day Event" Byars produced two performances, *The Introduction to the Documenta 5* and *Calling German Names*, both of which were performed on the edifice of the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel.

In the Harald Szeemann Archive and Library, now at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, more than a dozen boxes of documents attest to the long and intimate relationship between Szeemann and Byars. For Byars, letter writing approached (and eventually crossed over into) the status of an art form, and his output was both prolific and obsessive; his cryptic and highly stylized correspondences written to curators, artists, gallerists, and friends offer

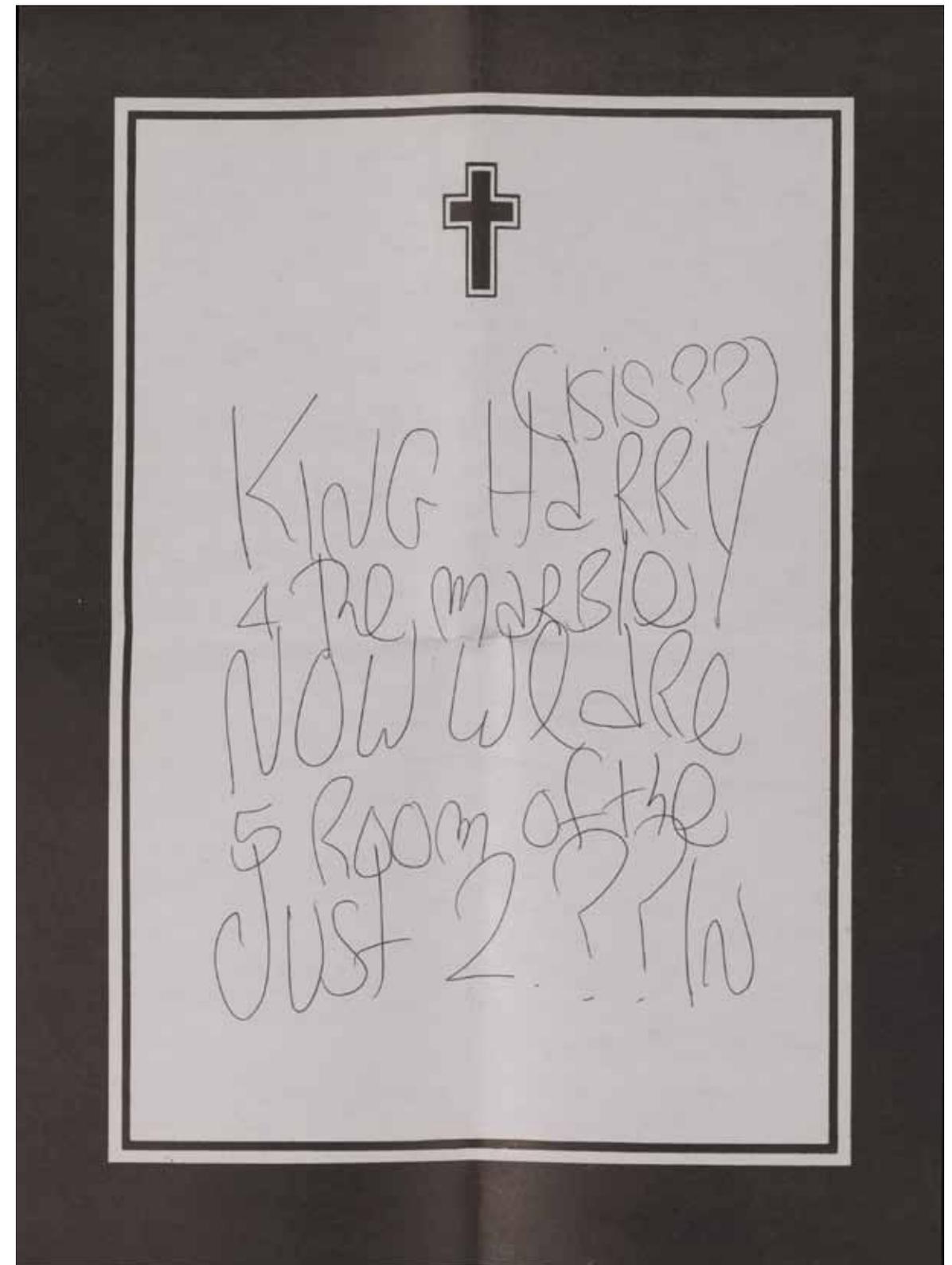
a tangible trace of what was largely an ephemeral artistic oeuvre. Between the 1970s and his death in 1995, Byars penned thousands of letters and postcards to Szeemann, addressing him invariably as “King Harry.”

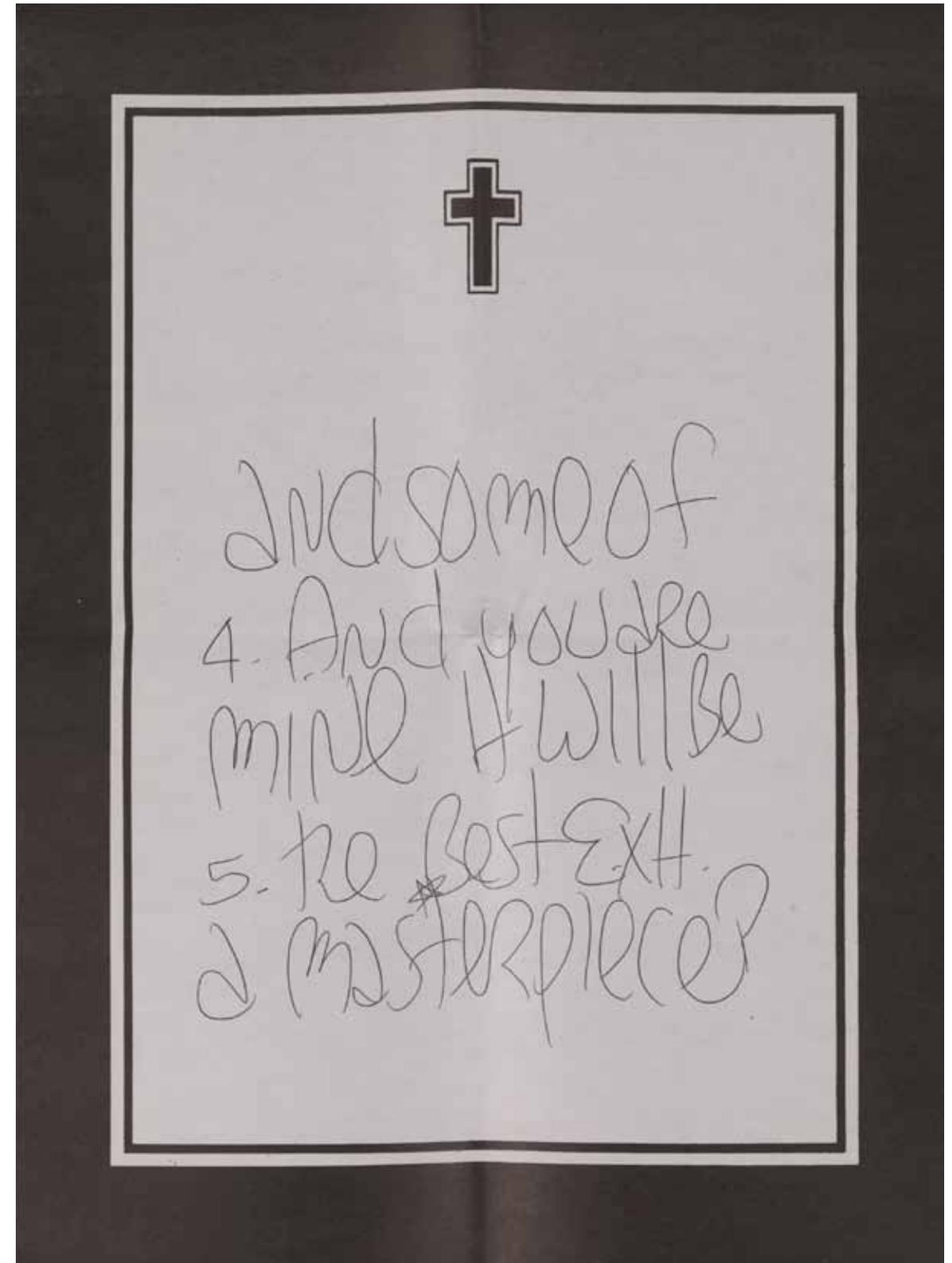
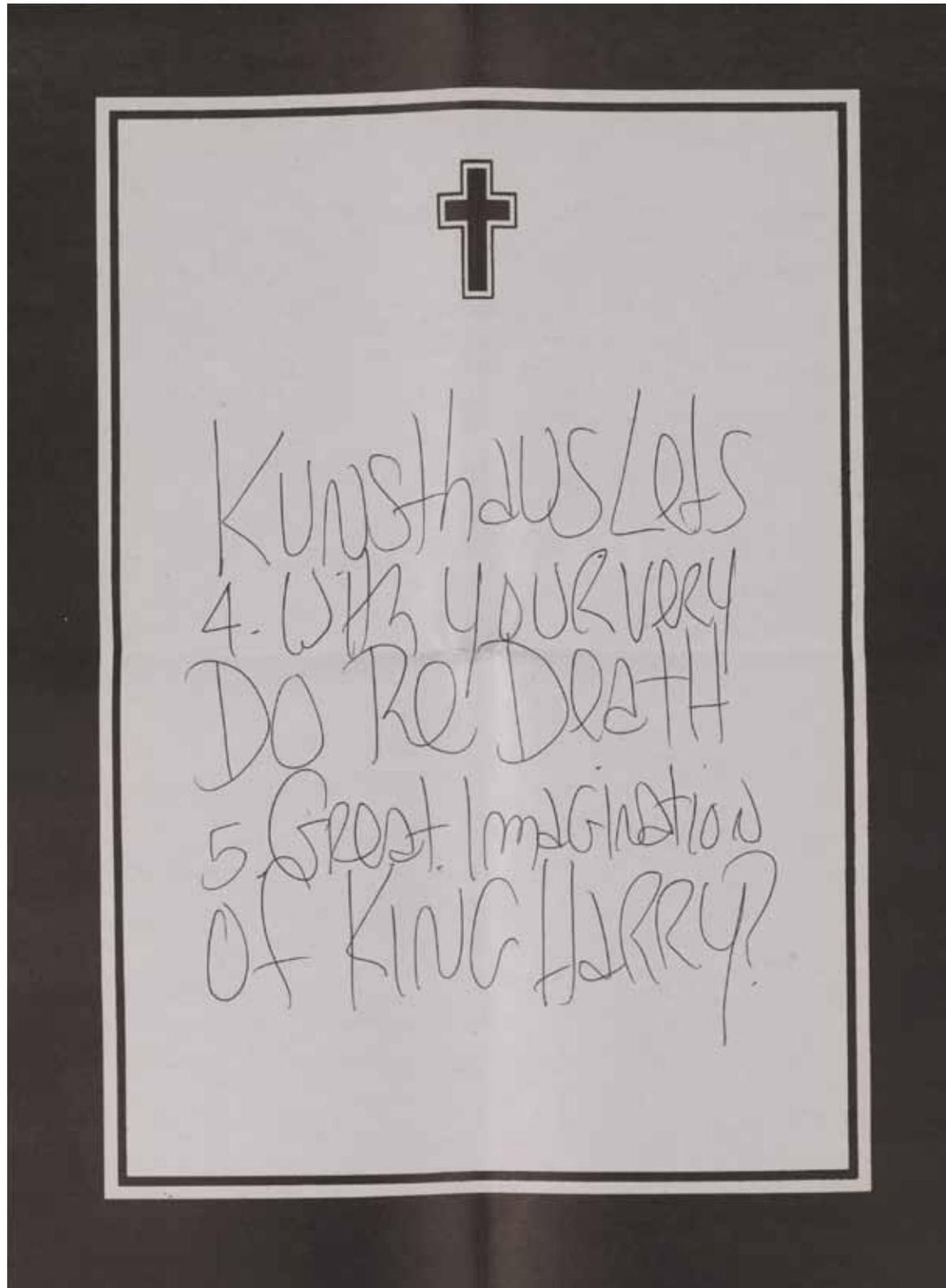
Looking across this correspondence, their “characters” come into focus: Byars, with his star-laden handwriting and effusive affectations, takes on the role of the eccentric, and perhaps strategically naive, artist, while for his part Szeemann plays the exasperated father-curator, setting pragmatic limitations on the artist’s quixotic demands. Through their letters Szeemann and Byars demonstrate—in a dramatically exaggerated version—a push-pull relationship between two individuals who both made the crossing of bounds an integral part of their practice, exemplifying the productive antagonism that can exist between curator and artist.

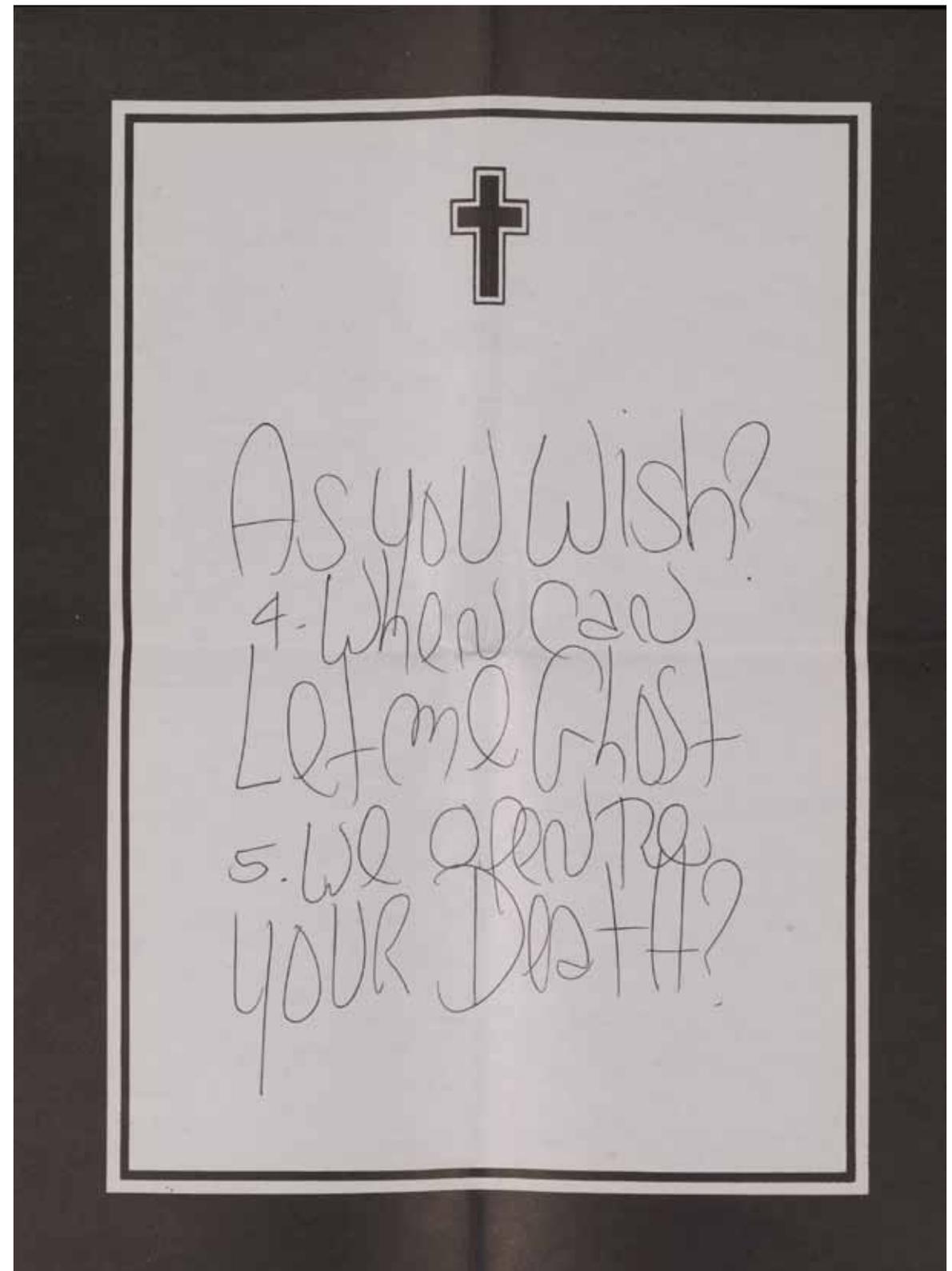
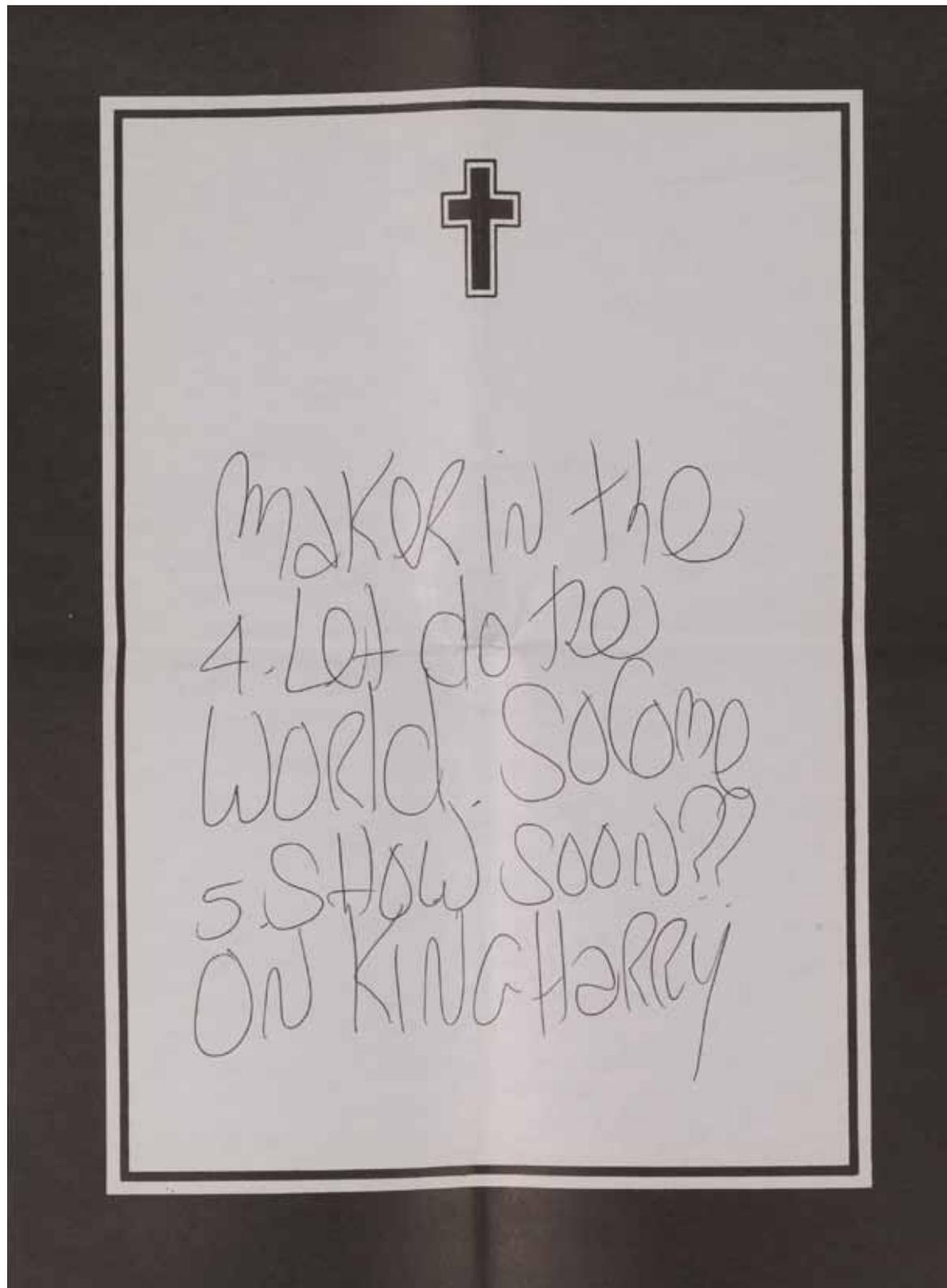
Which is not to say that the push-me/pull-me dynamic between Szeemann and Byars was simply a game. Around 1979, after years of dialogue, the two had a rather serious falling out over Byars’s inclusion in Szeemann’s *Aperto* exhibition at the 1980 Venice Biennale. While Byars’s notes to Szeemann always drip with sweetness (“King Harry I deeply appreciate your invitation to the Biennale,” “You write the most beautiful perfectly special texts about me,” “Love Love Kisses JLB,” et cetera), Szeemann had apparently reached his limit. Rather late in the planning stages, it seems, Byars wrote to Szeemann requesting (and not for the first time) a pink page in the exhibition catalogue, along with a triangular vitrine in the exhibition space. Frustrated, Szeemann replied, across several handwritten pages: “There will be no pink page in catalog. . . . So please give exact measurements of [triangle] vitrine in your room . . . you promised in August (?) to be more human. Why didn’t you try when there was still time?” Washing his hands of Byars, Szeemann essentially passed him off to the Biennale organizers, and though Byars would indeed perform in Venice in 1980, the relationship between the two men was never quite the same.

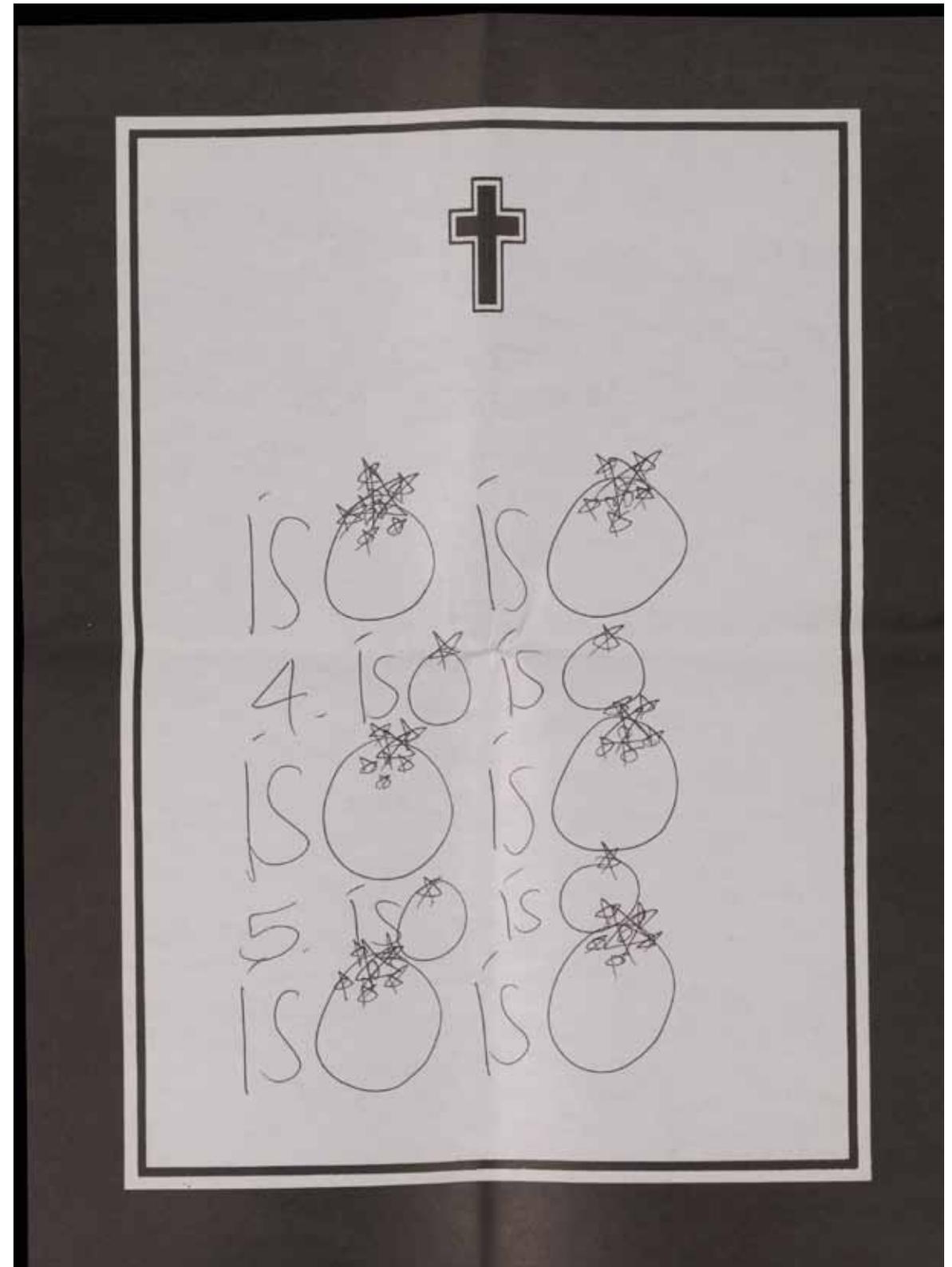
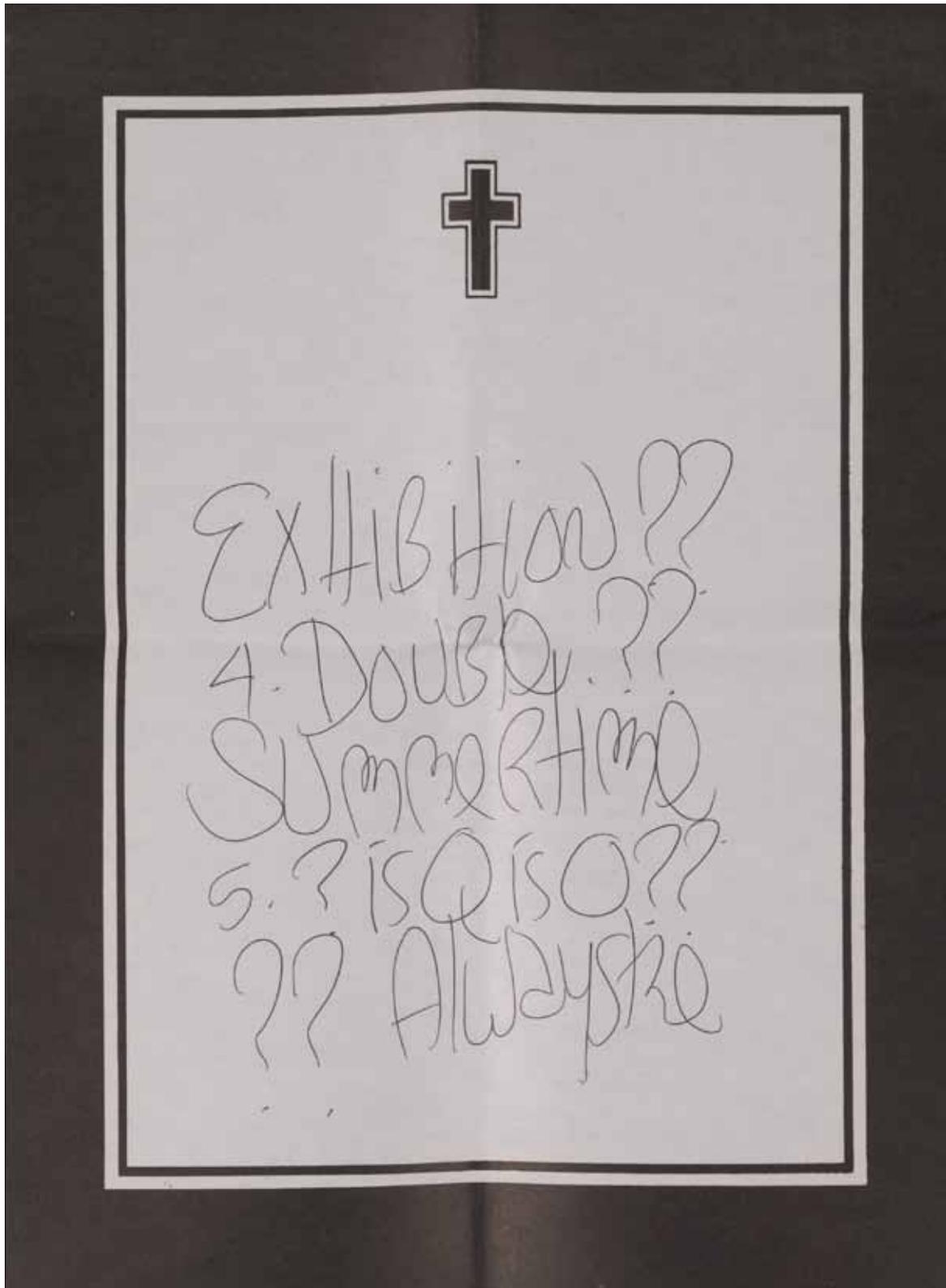
In Byars’s 1988 letter reproduced on the pages that follow, he is reaching out to Szeemann about a new idea for an exhibition. On simple stationery marked with a cross at the top, he proposes a performance in which he would embody (or “ghost”) Szeemann himself and perform his death. Reading odd and then even lines on the pages, we can decode his proposal: “Lets do the Death of King Harry? With your very Great Imagination and some of mine it will be a Masterpiece? And you are the best Exh. Maker in the World. So come on King Harry let[s] do the show soon?? As you wish? Let me Ghost your Death?”

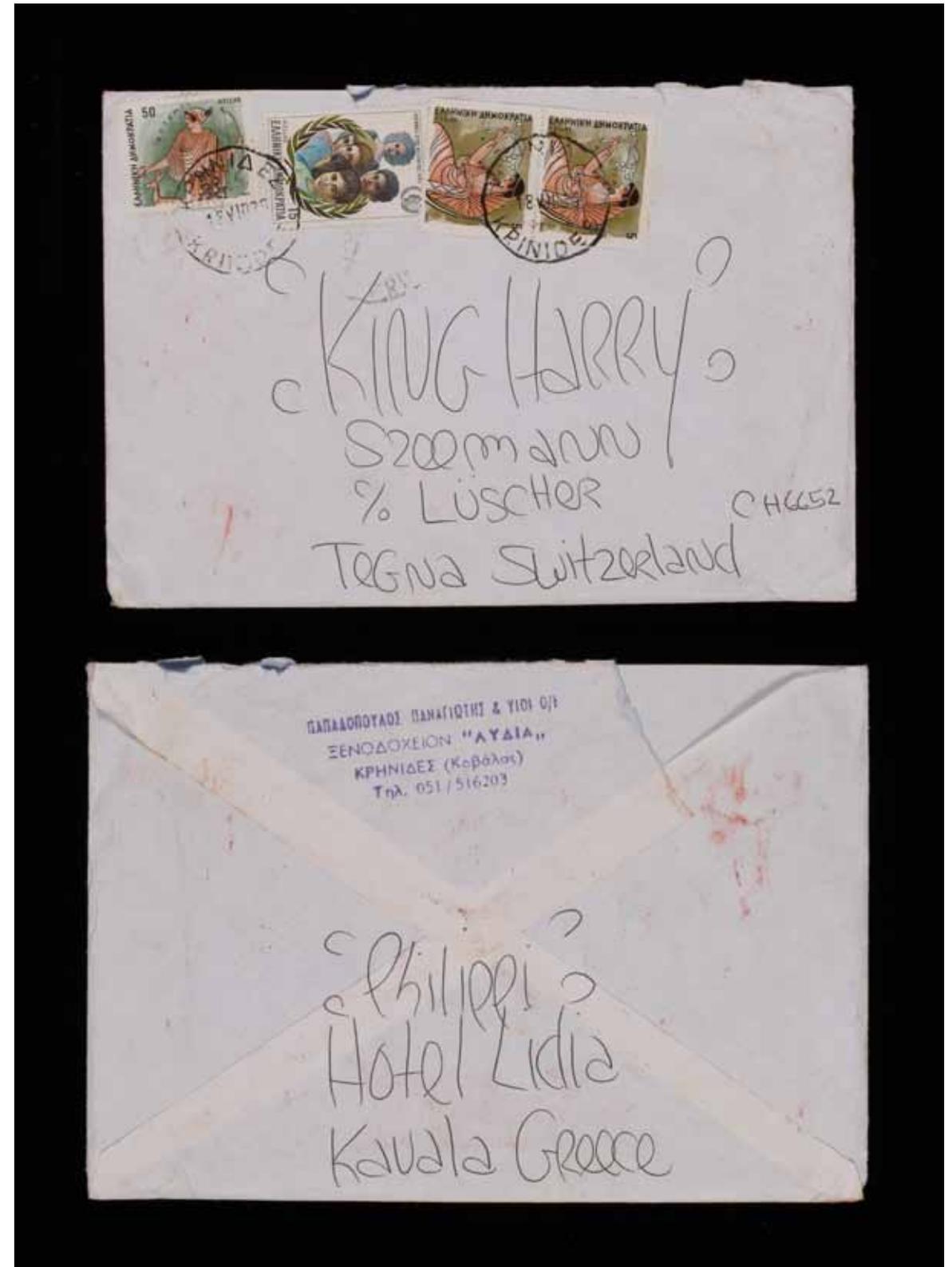
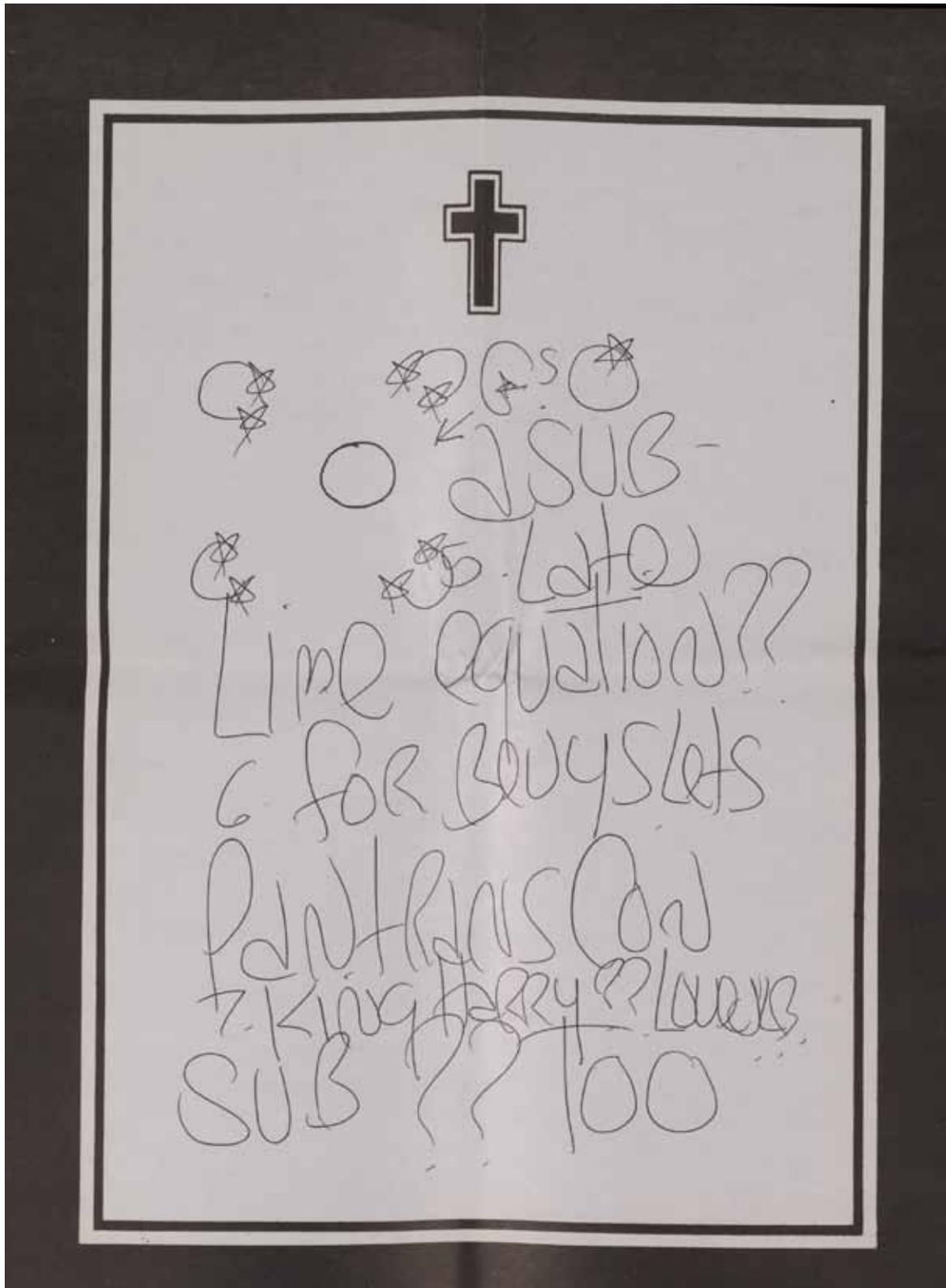
Following images: Letter from James Lee Byars to Harald Szeemann, 1988. Harald Szeemann papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles © Copyright the Estate of James Lee Byars











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LA CRITIQUE

Triple Candie: Let the Artists Die

Emiliano Valdés: Who Has the Power?

Nontobeko Ntombela: Remastered

Daniel Birnbaum: Hijacking the Situationists

Slavs and Tatars: The Splits of the Mind, If Not the Legs

Rachel Rose: Artist, Curator, Meaning

LET THE ARTISTS DIE

Triple Candie

You come together with the fundamental belief that art is good—not good in the sense that all art is interesting or important, but rather that it is essential, that it makes our lives more meaningful, maybe even that it can advance civilization.

If art is good, then it follows logically that artists are necessary, for they make art, and, therefore, they too are good. This doesn't mean that they are good people—that has long been considered irrelevant by many—and it leaves aside the argument that an object becomes art through curatorial selection and contextualization (most of you will find that position pompous). What it means is that the world needs artists and that your job as a contemporary art curator is to convince often-skeptical publics that this is true.

We should note at the outset that we are speaking to those of you employed by museums and nonprofit spaces in the United States, for that is the world we know best. Here, the default position still remains overwhelmingly artist-centric and promotional. But there are cracks in this foundation.

Massimiliano Gioni, who describes himself as “fairly conservative,” echoes the attitude of a small but increasingly visible group of curators when he writes: “That a curator is presumed almost by definition to be a supporter, defender, and admirer of the works he or she puts in a show . . . is quite reductive and naive.”¹ He distances his practice, somewhat disingenuously,

from the model of the curator-as-promoter, preferring instead curator-as-interpreter—not of artistic intent but of artworks themselves. The curator's job, he argues, is to find the seed of interpretation “already lying dormant within the artwork” and exploit it.² This “means granting [curators] room to disagree within the views expressed by some of the artworks and objects on display.”³

Gioni's curator-as-interpreter walks a fine line: he asserts a curatorial viewpoint that is mildly creative, but is careful to avoid stepping into the artistic arena. Echoing Umberto Eco, he warns that the curator must not over-interpret, or *use*, the artwork at hand, which would lead to “the distortion or misappropriation of an artwork's meaning. . . . Unlike authors, who have total freedom, curators must reckon with the artwork,” he writes. “Their freedom must be defined and limited by the work.”⁴

Fantasizing the death of the artist-author can be enormously generative—for art historians, curators, viewers—but what, we must ask, does it mean to be “defined and limited by the work”? And at what point does a curatorial interpretation become a distortion, an artistic act? Conversely, can a distortion be a non-artistic, political act? Following Giorgio Agamben's statement that “the profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation,” might radical creativity applied to the curatorial

¹ Massimiliano Gioni, “What I Did Last Summer,” *The Exhibitionist* 9 (April 2014): 31–32.

² Massimiliano Gioni, “The Limits of Interpretation,” *The Exhibitionist* 4 (June 2011): 18.

³ Gioni, “What I Did Last Summer,” 33.

⁴ Gioni, “The Limits of Interpretation,” 17–19.

beget a rejection or undoing of the sacred?⁵

Take, for example, our presentation of a Bill Viola video—*Ancient of Days* (1979–81)—in 2007.⁶ We exhibited it upside down, in silence, alongside two slides of paintings that were projected out of focus. While both literally and figuratively flip, the decision to invert was informed by a segment of the video in which the camera pans vertically 180 degrees, resulting in the image appearing temporarily on its head. Thus, wrongly presented in our Harlem gallery, the key moment offered respite within an otherwise-disorienting experience. The subtitle of the exhibition made our intentions clear: “Misrepresenting an artwork can result in a non-art experience of comparable value.”

Most would say that we were mis-using, even abusing, our privilege as curators by misrepresenting an artwork in this way, regardless of the idea that the gesture or act was directly informed by the work. Or that we were playing artists, first by not working with them and then by claiming a certain freedom generally denied to curators.⁷ From our perspective neither is true. The Viola project was clearly labeled as not art. Second, we don’t claim to be artists; we view our work entirely within the discourses of the curatorial and the educational. Our projects express deeply held ambivalences about art, artists, and

their alignment with those subsets of humanity infected by the Veblen virus.⁸ The reason we choose to work in the exhibition format as opposed to writing magazine essays is because even today the exhibition remains the privileged form of art presentation, and our goal is to unsettle the mechanisms of value, exclusivity, and control. “Art is a fine large word,” John Cotton Dana once wrote. “It shares with liberty the task of serving as an excuse for many crimes.”⁹

Clearly, however, we have a problem: the more we engage the exhibition as a medium of critique, the more and more our projects look like art and the more we act like artists. Before writing this text, we passed several months on our living-room floor sewing banners inspired by Tadeusz Kantor’s 1985 play *Let the Artists Die*. Emblazoned with artificial flowers from a craft store, the crude but beautiful banners will serve as props in a future Triple Candie-curated exhibition, probably in a museum. We will claim them not to be art, but we’re increasingly unsure if it matters any more.

But we digress. Let’s get back to the issues with which we set out at the beginning of this brief essay: Do we share your belief that art is basically good, and that artists are necessary? That’s a tough question.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 92.

⁶ *Flip Viola and the Blurs (Misrepresenting an Artwork Can Result in a Non-Art Experience of Comparable Value)*, June 17–August 12, 2007.

⁷ Writing on a different show, Ken Johnson quipped, “Ms. Bancroft and Mr. Nesbett should make clear whether they are running a gallery or doing their own conceptual art. Otherwise, their project comes off as confusing, confused, and duplicitous.” Ken Johnson, “Art in Review: ‘Cady Noland Approximately,’” *New York Times*, May 12, 2006.

⁸ By this we mean a zeal for conspicuous leisure, consumption, and Veblen goods in an age of mass inequity.

⁹ John Cotton Dana, reprinted in *The New Museum: Selected Writings by John Cotton Dana*, ed. William A. Peniston (Newark, NJ, and Washington, DC: Newark Museum and the American Association of Museums, 1999).

WHO HAS THE POWER?

Emiliano Valdés

I was talking recently with the Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo. She described to me a project she planned to develop in Europe, in which she would travel to the venue where her performance was to take place infested with lice. She would then have them removed one by one, possibly by a European (Caucasian) curator. Such a work aims to pose questions of counter-colonization and cultural parasitism—and, in Galindo’s choice of collaborator, to expose the relationship between artists and curators as one invariably characterized by power imbalances and a relation of servitude.

Whether this work will materialize at all, or in a form resembling this preliminary plan, remains to be seen. But what it brings to the table, even if only as a proposition, is a concern (held by many artists) about the potential instrumentalization of artistic practice by curatorial discourse, and the need to reclaim art’s autonomy. Galindo’s proposal also brings up the negotiation of a shared space, that of exhibition, which is certainly a common ground between artist and curator—but also, and this is essential—between artist and audience.

While her proposal evinces legitimate concerns, what we, artists and curators, have failed to understand in the rapid development of the *new* curatorial model, is that as public intellectuals we share responsibility in regard to current social and aesthetic concerns. And that, while our means are different, our ends concur. In the contest between artist and curator, we miss the fact that the issue is not about who has power but about what that power is for. And it is precisely through collaboration and dialogue that we can, and should, forward artistic thought,

research, production, and presentation. Because the real power, the only one worth fighting for, as Suzanne Pagé stated in a 1998 interview with Daniel Birnbaum, is the power of art.¹

Artistic practice springs from a reaction to the world and a desire to stretch beyond it; it is a type of interpretation of current conditions, translated into images, forms, processes, and experiences. Therefore the responsibility of foregrounding those experiences in exhibitions guides the curatorial exercise, as an act justified not only by the contents, but also by their delivery to an audience. In this act, curators are not at the service of artists, or vice versa, but at the service of art. Pagé, for example, argues that her real power is to give artists the maximum freedom to develop their ideas. This freedom—and courage, for that is what art also requires—must then be shared with an ever-growing number of participants. Audience, therefore, is an essential part of the artist-curator equation.

Accordingly, of the many tasks of the curator, mediation is among the most urgent. By mediation I do not mean offering information as a kind of prosthetic, compensating for the “lack” of any given spectator. Instead I mean creating an environment in which the audience feels that their experience of art is precisely the experience they *should* be having.

At work I am often asked by audience members of all backgrounds, as they point to one of the exhibited works of art, “What does this mean?” I have yet to find an absolutely convincing way to respond with what I believe, which is that a work of art means whatever it means for the person posing the question. There is no correct interpretation, but rather a possibility for experience. Returning again to

¹ “Backstage Presence: Daniel Birnbaum Talks with Suzanne Pagé,” *Artforum* (February 1999).

Pagé, she concludes her interview by arguing that “the greatest danger is that contemporary art will be ignored because the ability to perceive it, and the generosity required to accept it, will be lacking.” What she seems to gloss over, however, is that this “ability to perceive” is in fact inherently present in any art spectator, and that it is the curator’s job to make him or her aware of that potential.

Two aspects of curating have stuck with me for years, and remain my fundamental goals: to

generate the circumstances for artists to create, and to generate the circumstances for audiences to experience. These goals can only be achieved with the awareness that as curators we work for the benefit of art: its production, its maintenance, and its reception by multiple audiences. As long as we keep in mind that the final outcome is a shared experience among artists, curators, and audiences, we will be placing power where it really belongs: in art itself.

REMASTERED

Nontobeko Ntombela

As João Ribas argued in his essay “Curating as Spatial Resistance,” published in issue 11 of *The Exhibitionist*, the meaning of the word “curator” has shifted so much so that it no longer denotes one straightforward thing. Rather, it has become a buzzword linking cultural producers, activists, catalysts, and socialites. Ribas urges that “contemporary curators must battle to retain the understanding that ‘curating’ has held historically in the field of art, beyond connoisseurship and mere selection.”¹

The crisis of the term resonates as well in the context of South African contemporary art. As the newspaper columnist Lin Sampson wrote in March 2015 in the “Lifestyle” section of the *South African Sunday Times*:

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but these days everyone calls him or herself a curator. It might have something to do with the Cape Town Art Fair. The place is crawling

with svelte young people as thin as credit cards who have degrees in “visual arts.” These are the curators—frequently the old “assistant” remastered. The beauty of this word is that nobody really knows what it means.²

The curator’s appearance in a popular national newspaper suggests just how widely accepted the word has become—and Sampson’s sarcastic characterization exposes its controversial status. She continues:

First they have to learn art speak, now recognized as an international language, designed to bamboozle and confuse as it raps one along the strings of false values that define much of the art world today.... It is a career open to anyone who is familiar with phrases like “mutability of identification in South African art” or retail.³

¹ João Ribas, “Curating as Spatial Resistance,” *The Exhibitionist* 11 (July 2015): 28–33, as paraphrased by the editors in the issue’s “Overture,” 3.

² Lin Sampson, “Thin, Pompous, and Waffly? You Should Curate,” *The Conch*, Viewpoint in “Lifestyle” section, *Sunday Times*, March 1, 2015, 7.

While the limits of Sampson’s grumpy commentary are obvious, such opinions about curatorial practice do raise a number of questions about the general understanding of the profession as it exists in South Africa. For example, international curators usually access the work of South African artists through “guided tours” of artists represented by two of the nation’s major galleries, through select friends of the “old guard” of arts administrators, or, as indicated by Sampson’s article, through art fairs. These forms of contact offer very little access to artists who are not already represented in the mainstream. And while there are an increasing number of new online platforms, for instance *ArtThrob*, *Art Africa*, and *Art Times*, that offer international curators access to a wider range of artists, one could argue that those platforms are also quite selective in their representations of South African contemporary art.

In her 2007 article “Gatekeeping Africa,” the artist Sharlene Khan attests to this highly mediated access and warns against the kind of “shopping” strategy that accompanies it, as it only works to reproduce the same tropes that have historically relegated African art to a status as “other.”⁴ Despite certain developments—including ongoing post- and de-colonial debates that have performed, as Rasheed Araeen describes in a text reproduced in issue 11, a dismantling

of a chauvinistic “master” art history⁵—Khan’s skepticism remains relevant, and the position of the curator in South Africa remains contentious.

Furthermore, the acknowledgment that local curators work in a different kind of economy from international curators (on their shopping trips) has not changed the fact that curating is frequently seen to perpetuate, rather than question, separatist categorizations of race and gender. These suspicions are the lasting legacy of apartheid, which systematically excluded people of color from participating in the writing of South Africa’s art history.

It is therefore not only the private relationship between artists and curators that demands interrogation, but also the various public images of the curator that mediate that relationship. To overcome this (understandable) mistrust, other forms of curating must be foregrounded—the curator’s task must itself be “remastered.” Resisting its popular conflation with the art market and the shopping ethic, we need a curatorial practice that speaks to what the artist Molemo Moilola calls “practioning,” or “thinking through and making in context.”⁶ This approach would have as its central task addressing the aspirations, demands, and histories of the different African regions, in ways that speak to the specifics of their contexts and are not prescribed by Western frameworks.

³ Ibid. There has been rapid growth recently in curatorial initiatives in South Africa, which is part of the discipline’s increasing public visibility. Before this, the curator was not usually understood as an important figure in the making of exhibitions. Nor did the role have much presence within academic institutions; but today, academic institutions are increasingly grappling with curriculum development around curatorial practice, given its growth as a profession.

⁴ Sharlene Khan, “Gatekeeping Africa,” *Artlink* 27, no. 2 (2007), <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/2959/gatekeeping-africa/>.

⁵ See Rasheed Araeen, “When chickens come home to roost,” *The Exhibitionist* 11 (July 2015): 22–27.

⁶ Moilola describes “practioning” as “engaging different practices simultaneously in ways that contradict, or make difficult, our initial wider opinions: a compendium of sorts, but as a whole thing, not a sum of its parts.” Molemo Moilola, “Practioning,” in *Compendium*, ed. Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi and Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum (Johannesburg: iThuba Art Gallery, 2014), 2–3.

HIJACKING THE SITUATIONISTS

Daniel Birnbaum

Geir Haraldseth's informative article on Moderna Museet's 1969 exhibition *Poetry Must Be Made By All! Transform the World!* in issue 10 of *The Exhibitionist* emphasized the museum's ambition to participate in social change, not just exhibit it. I would like to elaborate on some of the specific features that made it different from other shows at the museum in the 1960s. These remarks are part of an endeavor, initiated by the critic Kim West and myself, to explore the relationship between some key notions developed by the Situationist International (SI) and the curatorial practice that materialized in well-known exhibitions at what were arguably Europe's most experimental art museums in those years, the Stedelijk in Amsterdam and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.¹

There was a confrontational aspect of *Poetry Must Be Made By All!* that was otherwise absent in the exhibitions staged by the museum during the years it was directed by Pontus Hultén, whose politics of inclusiveness did not promote revolt and for whom art, as Haraldseth puts it, was seen as a means to integrate and to level any form of disparity. Compared to such playful curatorial projects as *SHE—A Cathedral* (1966), described in detail by Matthew Drutt's essay in issue 2 of this journal, the revolutionary graffiti included in *Poetry Must Be Made By All!* marked a more confrontational approach and displayed a proximity to the SI that is nowhere else to be found in Hultén's projects. The revolts in Paris, which had taken place just a year before, emblemized, says Haraldseth, the worldwide riots at the end of the 1960s, and by extension the revolutionary ideas

of contemporary thinkers such as Guy Debord.

Let me recall two episodes in the conversation that the SI developed with the museum, and with the idea of the exhibition in general. In 1959, negotiations began between the SI and Willem Sandberg concerning a large manifestation of the Situationist movement at the Stedelijk, to be titled *Die Welt als Labyrinth* (The World as Labyrinth). As far as can be determined, the exhibition would have consisted of two main parts. The museum's interior would be transformed into a labyrinthine environment through which spectators would drift, discovering new passages and connections along the way, at once immersed in a mazelike setting and empowered with the ability to invent their proper paths. The second part was intended to be a three-day *dérive* through the city. The project was never realized, and the SI's withdrawal was followed by the expected round of insults. Sandberg, as SI member Asger Jorn stated, "represented that cultural reformism which, linked to politics, has come to power everywhere in Europe since 1945."²

In 1962 Sandberg, in collaboration with Ad Petersen, Daniel Spoerri, and Jean Tinguely, developed—or, to use the Situationists' own concept, *détourné*—the SI's planned exhibition into the group show *Dylaby*, short for "Dynamic Labyrinth." This exhibition has been canonized as one that pioneered a new conception of the display space as a site of production, and popularized a new notion of audience participation. The Situationists, predictably, were not amused. In the *Situationist Times*, the exhibition was described

as a "fake labyrinth" that added up to nothing more than "consumer manipulation."³

Hultén, who had close links to the Stedelijk, presented *SHE—A Cathedral*, his newly founded museum's first international success, as a sequel to *Dylaby* and involved some of the same artists: Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, and Per Olof Ultvedt. It is thus no exaggeration to claim that the Moderna Museet was founded on the hijacking of Situationist ideas made consumer-friendly through a process of recuperation that removed the confrontational criticality of the SI. For writers such as Robin Mackay, who want to emphasize Hultén's key role in the integration

of the European museum of modern art into the culture industry, and who describe his next creation, the Centre Pompidou, as a receptacle for "festive neoconservatism," this neutralization of the confrontational approach and uncompromising criticality of the SI necessarily appears as a logical step.⁴ It is thus of interest that in *Poetry Must Be Made By All!*, the last major group show produced at the Moderna Museet under Hultén's directorship, a door was opened that let some of these confrontational energies into the museum. That door was opened by Ron Hunt, a radical librarian from Newcastle and the curator of the show. Hultén, to his credit, did not shut it.

³ *The Situationist Times*, no. 4 (October 1963): 180. Edited by

Jacqueline de Jong, this was a special issue on the labyrinth as form and concept.

⁴ Robin Mackay, "Immaterials, Exhibition, Acceleration," in *30 Years Les Immatériaux* (Lüneburg, Germany: Meson Press, 2015), 225.

THE SPLITS OF THE MIND, IF NOT THE LEGS

Slavs and Tatars

Soon after we founded Slavs and Tatars, some mistook us for curators. A decade later, we still receive the occasional email requesting information about artists from, say, the Caucasus, or inviting us to conceive an exhibition of regional artists. By the perpetual fires of Yanar Dag, we swore to one another we would never curate. Perhaps out of fear but mostly out of ignorance. For all its professional promiscuity, curating contemporary art has but one obstacle to entry, and yet we can't seem to clear it. We're not interested in art. As a practice, sure, but as subject matter, not so much.

We began as a makeshift publishing concern. While we may suffer from a certain logorrhea—with seven or eight books in as many years—we've never written about art. Our publications address religiosity, ritual, and language

politics, but never a word about sculpture, not an utterance about working process, nor any account of why we do what we do. We don't allow for curators or critics to write about us in our books, either, as we see catalogue essays as a marketing tool at best and a conflict of interest at worst—the art-world equivalent of insider trading. Contrary to an attempt to control the reception of our work by commissioning a colleague to write an essay, this decision stems rather from a belief in a healthy critical ecosystem, with some semblance of an ethical firewall. Even if such critique is sometimes difficult to swallow, as in 2012 when *Afterall* published Anders Krueger's "Beyond Nonsense: What Slavs and Tatars Make," a relentless six-page critique.¹

Without the curator, we would be hard put to

¹ Anders Krueger, "Beyond Nonsense: What Slavs and Tatars Make," *Afterall* 31 (Autumn–Winter 2012).

¹ See *All the King's Horses*, an ongoing series of Sternberg Press publications in collaboration with Moderna Museet, edited by Daniel Birnbaum and Kim West.

² Asger Jorn, "Die Welt als Labyrinth," *Internationale Situationniste* 4 (January 1960), translated by Paul Hammond at Situationist International Online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/diewelt.html>.

understand why our practice belongs within this given milieu. And without the curator's consideration, invitation, and production, our activity would have remained within the parameters of paper. Even so, too often our interactions with curators remain confined to the woeful platforms of email, Excel, and PDFs. We are maximalists. After all, our geographic remit extends to more than one sixth of the Earth's increasingly splintered surface, and includes large numbers of distinct ethnicities and language groups who will all fight—tooth, nail, and claw—to pay the dinner bill.

It is therefore with equally obscene excess and expectation that we now consider the role of the curator. Let us spell out some of those expectations. We demand an alchemy from our curators, similar perhaps to that expected from us. Halfway between scenographer and magus, the curator creates synchronous worlds. We look to the curator as an art historian who will help us rescue the idea of innovation within continuity and tradition, and counter the modernist emphasis on rupture. We're living the winning years of "a secular rage to know it all," to quote Charles de Foucauld. What once was strength has since become weakness: our "enlightened" minds continue to consider thought and being as distinct, divorced phenomena. If today's museums, Kunsthallen, and artist-run spaces are doubling as yesterday's cathedrals, must we leave the numinous, the sacred, the *mysterium tremendum* at the door?

In our view, the curator's remit must extend to the ethereal as well as the mundane: this conspiracy, this breathing together (Rumi calls it *hamdami*), of the sensual and the spiritual. Jermaine MacAgy, the first director of Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum and mentor to Dominique de Menil, often spoke about hanging paintings to "hit at the tits." The Southern flourish of her adopted home aside, the relatively low-hung collection at the Menil reinforces the contemplative, intimate experience for which the museum is renowned. Had MacAgy privileged the crowds, she would have placed a Lucio Fontana painting high enough to see over the heads of visitors; instead she hung it so the slash hit at the sternum, a one-on-one blow that asks for—nay, demands—consideration.

Perhaps within the space of the exhibition, the page, or the performance, we approach nothing short of a different climate of being

(*eqlim-eh wojud*). Medieval cartographers, taking their cues from Ptolemy, considered the Earth to have seven climes (from the Greek *klima* or inclinations) or regions (from the Persian *kishvar*) of beings. When Henry Corbin, the French philosopher and scholar of Islam (not to mention the first translator of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* into French) coined the term *mundus imaginalis*, he referred to an eighth climate, one where the spirit is corporealized and the body spiritualized. In order to reclaim the facultative, cognitive meaning of the imagination from its common usage as unreality or fantasy, Corbin used the word "imaginal": an intermediary world, halfway between the physical world and the intelligent one, not of this world or the next, where images appear not from the subconscious but rather the sur-conscious, as intellectual images. An active imagination allows the curator to suspend the laws of non-contradiction and balance the brass tacks of budgets with the digestif of discourse.

In dealing with such thorny or seemingly obscure issues as, say, a medieval genre of advice literature or Turkic alphabet politics for publics in Brisbane, Baku, and Bielefeld, we acknowledge that some form of mediation is necessary. But the ability to tell and yet not tell, to present without representing, to cultivate a culture of ambiguity, where the exhibition, work, or event can be experienced as two antithetically opposed, mutually exclusive perspectives (and therefore many others in between), requires of our curator the ability to do the splits. Not splits of the legs, but of the mind: one lobe stretching to one extreme and another to the other.

Among the three main axes of our practice—publications, lecture-performances, and exhibitions—the first two articulate certain concerns: say, a line of research, or a proposition, through the pages of a book, within the scope of an essay, or during a live lecture. It is in that last, the exhibition, where we look to the curator to *disarticulate* these very concerns, to muddle the line of research, to counter a proposal. To disarticulate in no way implies silence. It is not the staging of a lack of articulation, but rather the unwinding of the thread that makes the sweater.

ARTIST, CURATOR, MEANING

Rachel Rose

Deep down, for me, making anything is a struggle for meaning. My wanting to make something is organizing a feeling and trying to connect. Making is everywhere, all the time: in ordering food, in lying in bed, in typing an email, in writing this, and also technically in an exhibition. In *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950), Marion Milner wrote about trying to draw freely, without slipping into recognizable pattern or form:

It seemed almost as if, at these moments, one could not bear the chaos and the uncertainty about what was emerging long enough, as if one had to turn the scribble into some recognizable whole when in fact the thought of the mood seeking expression had not yet reached that stage. And the result was a sense of false certainty, a compulsive and deceptive sanity, a tyrannical victory of the common sense view which always sees objects as objects, but at the cost of something else which was seeking recognition, something that was more to do with imaginative than with common sense reality.¹

I remember, as a kid, lying in bed looking up to see blobs in the shadows of the ceiling. With someone else, it could have been social. How quickly can you convert these blobs into a person, a dog, or a cloud? But alone, the need felt more like fear. If I don't make this blob a person, maybe it will become a monster. It could get out of control. I compulsively felt a need for things to become known.

Making an artwork is that activity, alone and inverted. How long can I allow this strong feeling to stay without defining it? How long can I not know what's going on, and put energy into not

knowing? How can I stay away from "false certainty," my "compulsive and deceptive sanity"? I can't help but feel an internal pressure toward definition, but a conscious resistance to it feels more important. And that's because the nuance of the thing made in the struggle against definition feels more genuine and honest. What's made can help me relearn what it is, what its meaning means.

There's a difference between this internal struggle and making an exhibition. The visible and invisible facts of an exhibition's making—from the building to the budget—hatch real, external anxieties about meaning. It's not my need for certainty that I have to resist; I'm not inventing figures in shadows. There's an audience, and that audience wants meaning. And for me, it's necessary to be realistic about meeting this need. Meaning in an exhibition is like the plotline in a film. It's where intelligibility is, where I put my expectations, and where, at some point, I become disillusioned. The explanation doesn't line up with what I experience. I don't see it correctly. It's imperfect.

This unavoidable disillusionment reveals something sad about the potential of exhibition making: it's tragic to try to produce meaning. And that's because in art, you never quite get there. At the same time, the act of trying is raw and important. And it's what makes the exhibition a potential home that encloses a rare relationship based on what is real and true. That relationship is between artist and curator. Accepting how imperfect meaning making is, the two try, together. A real relationship with someone else, like the one we have with ourselves, is about our struggle to connect with meaning.

Looping back to the filmic metaphor: for me the best parts of movies are when the director

¹ Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 86.

gets disillusioned with the plot and gets lost in rhythm, blocking, light, and movement. Fight scenes express this well. We hear voices louder than we should. A hand moves slower than it should. Things slide fast. Footsteps. Something hits something else. A gunshot. More footsteps. I know it's a fight scene, but I fall into a sensuality that transcends that. As a viewer in an exhibition, I escape into movement despite myself. I might try to follow the plot, but I get caught up in sensory details: the time of day (how hungry I am), the scale of the space (how small or big I feel), the volume of the sound (how drawn in I am by what I hear), who is standing next to me (how attractive or repellent they are). As half of the duo making an exhibition, I have these senses in mind. Thinking about them and using them is how we can deal with this paradox of plot and movement, for ourselves and for the audience who then comes to view. And for us (artist and curator), this basic consideration of sensory experience is a real struggle. And though it might seem unexciting to think about where people will sit, or how many people might be in a room at one time, our connection with those facts ultimately allows the exhibition to be a place for us to connect with one another in the struggle for meaning; that feels like making something truthful.

CONTRIBUTORS

Fia Backström
Artist, New York

Daniel Birnbaum
Director, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Juan José Cambre
Artist, Buenos Aires

Claire Fontaine
Artist, Paris

Anne Ellegood
Senior Curator, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Liz Glass
Associate Editor, The Exhibitionist, Providence, Rhode Island

Jens Hoffmann
Editor, The Exhibitionist, New York

Anthony Huberman
Director, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco

Inés Katzenstein
Director, Department of Art, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires

Julian Myers-Szupinska
Senior Editor, The Exhibitionist, Oakland

Nontobeko Ntombela
Curator and Associate Lecturer, Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Rachel Rose
Artist, New York

Slavs and Tatars
Artist Collective, the area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China

Kerry Tribe
Artist, Los Angeles

Triple Candie
Curatorial Agency, Philadelphia

Emiliano Valdés
Chief Curator, Museum of Modern Art, Medellín, Colombia

THE EXHIBITIONIST

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Founders:

Jens Hoffmann and Chiara Figone

Printer:

The Prolific Group / Printed in Canada

Distribution:

United States

NEW DISTRIBUTION HOUSE

newdistributionhouse.com

office@newdistributionhouse.com

Europe

MOTTO DISTRIBUTION

mottodistribution.com

orders@mottodistribution.com

Friends of Exhibitionists:

Noreen Ahmad, Jack Kirkland, Elisa Nuyten, Ross Sappenfield, Luisa Strina, Julie Taubman, VIA Art Fund



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info@the-exhibitionist.com

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