What are art spaces without art?

Olive Wei

This research began in an attempt to understand what curating is and how it functions, outside of simply placing objects in proximity to one another. The sprawling web of contemporary art has created an abundance of multifaceted roles where artists are also quasi-curators, directors, programmers and vice versa. Under the current conditions where contemporary art is produced, considered, and disseminated, what is the need for curators? My thesis looks into the purpose of art spaces and curation as forms of community generation and knowledge production. Using an open-source resource file, my research becomes a shared document for continuous growth and collaboration.

> Brenson's account began by pronouncing that the 'era of the curator' was upon us, going on to outline what he described as the 'challenges facing the curatorial profession to think deeply about multiple audiences and to allow individual curatorial perspectives to be invigorated by radically, even shockingly, different experiences of space and time, memory and history'. Recognising the expanding responsibilities of the curator in providing a framework for art in relation to broader world politics – namely the 'meanings and possibilities of art in a post-Cold War, post-colonial, fin-de-siècle moment' – he warned that such high stakes do not reward 'curatorial business as usual'.[2] The time had come to understand, and act upon, what it meant to work in diverse cultural and geographical contexts.

* Michael Brenson's 'The Curator's Moment' in *CAA Art Journal* (1988) quoted in Kate Fowle's 'Action Research: Generative Curatorial Practices' in *Curating Research* (2015).

Knowledge production arose within scientific research from the study of science as a social activity. Now, when we apply knowledge production within the context of contemporary art, we can look at art as a social activity. This is not to say that art has never been social; historically, it has always engaged with different publics. It is audiences that allow the art to function. The social activity that contemporary art has produced looks away from the exhibitionary complex and towards workshops, lectures,

panels, artist talks, dinners, etc. In order to engage publics under current schismatic structures, art must engage and forge collaborators.

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The Social Turn:
Collaboration and Its Discontents

Claire Bishop (2006).

A recurrent set of theoretical reference points governs the current literature on participatory and collaborative art: Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, the Situationist International, Paulo Freire, Deleuze and Guattari, and Hakim Bey, to name just a few.[1] Among these, the most frequently cited is the French film-maker and writer Guy Debord, for his indictment of the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), and for his theorisation of collectively produced 'situations'. For many artists and curators on the left, Debord's critique strikes to the heart of why participation is important as a project: it rehumanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production. Given the market's near total saturation of our image repertoire, so the argument goes, artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by a passive bystander. Instead, there must be an art of action, interfacing with reality, taking steps – however small – to repair the social bond. The art historian Grant Kester, for example, observes that art is uniquely placed to counter a world in which 'we are reduced to an atomised pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition'.[2] 'One reason why artists are no longer interested in a passive process of presenter-spectator', writes the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, is 'the fact that such communication has been entirely appropriated by the commercial world . . . After all, nowadays one could receive an aesthetic experience on every corner.'[3] More recently, the artist/activist Gregory Sholette and art historian Blake Stimson have argued that 'in a world all but totally subjugated by the commodity form and the spectacle it generates, the only remaining theatre of action is direct engagement with the forces of production'.[4] Even the curator Nicolas Bourriaud, describing relational art of the 1990s, turns to spectacle as his central point of reference: 'Today, we are in the further stage of spectacular development: the individual has shifted from a passive and purely repetitive status to the minimum activity dictated to him by market forces . . . Here we are summoned to turn into

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These engagements are not generative but rather regenerative. In our current culture of brain rot, perpetually estranged politics, and tragic doomscrolling bait, knowledge production and public engagement within an art context can reinvigorate and reform what previously felt confined to our current realities.

(Refer to the Simon O'Sullivan on the next page.)

In Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he argues that art has lost its "aura", the artistic authenticity produced under the praxis of politics. I would argue that this 'special' quality art has always been assumed to embody takes form by activating its audience through forging connections under divisive structures. What Benjamin fails to acknowledge—or had not yet come to realize—is that art, regardless of process, has always possessed an 'aura': It is one of discursivity and thought production. I propose, to consider this discourse in a contemporary context, we might use the aura as a reference point for community building. While art opens up avenues of criticality and discourse, its art spaces, curation, and programming can draw out relations and correspondence. I refer to correspondence as separate from discourse as it implies a prolonged connection, it is an act of maintenance rather than a task.

however critically (or negatively), its object. Such critique, again as Lyotard once remarked, is trapped by its target, towards which it must, to some extent, adjust itself in order to engage. This kind of 'critical' art practice can operate as a kind of melancholic echo chamber in this sense (we might say that this is also the limitation of understanding art more generally as a form of ideology critique).

The so-called 'archival turn' within contemporary art would be a softer example of this logic. Here, art practice becomes an archiving gesture, a framing and presenting of a subset of the world. An archive practice is first and foremost curatorial in this sense; it gathers together hitherto separate elements under a banner (a concept, a theme, a name, and so on), but, crucially, it does not necessarily transform these elements. Indeed, ultimately it offers nothing more than a product (or a series of products) designed to meet the desire for knowledge – when the latter is understood as knowledge of the world as-it-is.

As has often been pointed out, the 'Art World' is insatiable in this respect; it requires evermore banners just as it creates ever more artist-archivist-curators (or, simply, new products and new consumers). Novelty here consists of new groupings of the what-already-is, the trumping of one set of knowledges with another, the identification of counter or dissonant knowledges (that nevertheless operate on the same register of typical 'meaning'). Indeed, knowledge becomes the currency of such practices (knowledge is power as the saying goes – at least power of a worldly kind).

On the other hand, can art ever be anything but the presentation of a subset of the world, seeing as it is a practice that takes place in that very world? Here, the definition of a world – what it includes and what it excludes – is crucial insofar as we might

Simon O'Sullivan, "Myth-Science and the Fictioning of Reality" (2016).

Regeneration can be considered not only as an act of making our realities more livable but as a means of reframing our understandings and the responsibilities of the art world. Knowledge production, as O'Sullivan suggests, might enter into the dangerous territory of eternal moreness, whereas fictioning can offer a foundation to explore issues within our living reality without being confined in it. What fictioning can offer is a viable approach to dealing with the utopian ideals of care and fostering that shroud our art spaces.

PIGEON FANCIER *Ingrid, what about you—for whom do you curate?*

INGRID SCHAFFNER Is this a trick question? Curators have to be attentive to their audiences. Artists may be responsible only to themselves—to make something as well as they can so that it clearly expresses their ideas, interests, and passions. But a curator's responsibility is triangulated between an artist, the work of art, and an audience. You represent artists by allowing their work to speak for itself, at the same time you have to give viewers some sense of context, relevance, particularity, or essence that will enable them to hear what the work has to say. It's a delicate business and sometimes space is all that's needed for this transmission to take place. That's your call to make as a curator.

I keep a pocket audience in mind. It consists of a colleague I respect (someone who thinks about art in different ways than I do), a family member I love (someone who couldn't care less about art except they care that I do), and the artist (of course). Remembering to count one's self as an audience member is a good way to stay true to your own passions, interests, and ideas.

Ingrid Schaffner in *Pigeons on the Grass Alas: Contemporary Curators Talk About the Field* (2013).

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Extending these ideas within this exhibition, curator Ingrid Schaffner talks of the triangulation of a curator's responsibility to work between the artist, the work of art, and the audience. In the context of this exhibition, our triangle became circular. We worked amongst each other as peers as well as each other's audience. There was a union that had been built where we were all caring for each other's projects along with the wellbeing of the show because we were producing as a whole, not individuals. The convergence happens on these pages and in our exhibition, we have been weaving, overlapping, sharing, and rethinking amongst ourselves. Instead of points of intersection, we formed a network.

This publication serves as a vehicle for talking through the things Ella, Nusha, and I were thinking about for our projects. As Critical Practices Specialists, we have produced material that goes beyond the scope of creating artwork to be displayed. However, the publication still honours the mass of knowledge everyone has produced, using this publication as a means of reflecting our exhibit within a different context. As the pages get flipped through, the points of connection throughout the class remain, maybe even heightened, as audiences can involve themselves in our modes of thinking through making.

As I walk by the Art Gallery of Ontario one morning, art workers crowd the entrance demanding fair wages. "ART MATTERS WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE?" one sign asks. I think about our art spaces, heralded for giving voice to new ideas outside of the mainstream and our place to incite change, what happens when they betray us? The art space is not just an exhibitionary complex and it never was. As this publication comes to a close, the answer I can provide for my research question: what are art spaces without the art? Is that art spaces can survive without the art but not its people. I share this show as a framework in which the community generating, knowledge producing elements of art making can come to a head.

My open-source file features the accumulation of research that has formed my attitude towards the role of curation. I invite people to engage with my research and add to it as if it were a personal textbook. It is a perpetually changing document of joint processes.

A link to download my file can be found at:
https://academic.daniels.utoronto.ca/visual-studies-thesis-2024/