

Week 2: Breaking out of the White Cube



This week I want to start getting the ball rolling on developing curatorial themes beyond just methods of engagement & curation – in that vein, a first idea is an exhibition in which all work has to be made within the ‘gallery space’ throughout the duration of the show, shifting the gallery into a shared studio space of sorts. I put gallery space in quotes as this can encapsulate off-site public art or installations that are developed concurrently, inhabiting the broader conceptual ‘gallery space’. In this way, the exhibition can be used in a bespoke way by participating artists: as a residency, a site for duration-based performance works, a fabrication shop, a hub for ongoing participatory artworks... I have often had friends who come into my own studio in the past

comment on how 'inviting', 'warm', or 'inspiring' the space is. Why, then, are many (if not most) art-viewing venues designed to be sterile, boring, and lifeless? (see highlighted quotes in figure 1).

The history of modernism is intimately framed by that space; or rather the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it. We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first. (A cliché of the age is to ejaculate over the space on entering a gallery.) An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art; it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains.

The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art." The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status. Conversely, things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. Indeed, the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested and proffered for discussion—a popular form of late modernist academicism ("ideas are more interesting than art"). The sacramental nature of the space becomes

Figure 1: O'Doherty, Brian. "Inside the White Cube", The Lapis Press, 1986. p.14

I am continually (negatively) struck by the ways in which art institutions plaster over and sterilise the incredibly unique architectures of the historic spaces they inhabit, evident when I recently visited the National Museum of Scotland Modern One (on the contrary, Anselm Kiefer's installation at the Palazzo Ducale during the 2022 Venice Biennale notably left the building's Venetian Gothic architecture and grand frescoes on display; more befitting than the sparse warehouses or grand white walls his work is typically shown in). In my curatorial work, I am more interested in getting non-art publics excited about and interested in art than presenting work to an art audience that, for the most part, will go out of their way to attend a gallery opening. In an ongoing, constantly developing 'exhibition', publics are inspired to engage in or consider

how they can engage with the themes being actively developed and explored in each artist's practice.

Of this week's arts organizations I researched I was most inspired by Arts Catalyst and Taipei Biennial's curatorial missions and executions. Arts Catalyst's community-driven focus on social action and art as a means of opening up learning to publics highlights the opportunities of bringing art out into the world, from a community gardening project to an English language book created by and for the refugees and asylum seekers of Sheffield. How does this level of participation and engagement alter publics' perspectives on the role art can play in their lives – and the world?

The inclusion of a music room at the Taipei Biennial is another inspiring curatorial format as it innately invites a different intersection of publics into the space; people crave third spaces and community, while paradoxically digital fatigue makes the planning and execution of social events (like going to visit a gallery) difficult. Bringing publics in with concerts, artist talks, workshops, or community engagement events can be an effective way to engage publics by 'meeting them where they are' in a way.

In Maria Lind's e-flux article "Situating the Curatorial", when discussing an interview with Irit Rogoff on curation, she explains that "curated events contain epistemological processes and are presentational rather than representational, a distinction that Rogoff credits to the visitors to an exhibition"(see Lind). Lind goes on to state that "the curatorial goes beyond "roles" and takes the shape of a function and a method, even a methodology"(see Lind). This is clearly evidenced by organizations like Grizedale and Arts Catalyst, and I am curious to explore how I can move beyond my presupposed notions of curating into approaching it as a methodology.

Over the next week, I plan on researching further into Lind's

notion of “contact zones” as developed by Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford to deepen my knowledge and develop methodologies of creating zones of meaningful conversation, interaction, and knowledge sharing between publics&art, art&art, and publics&publics.

Notes

Lind, Maria. “Situating the Curator”, e-flux Journal #116, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/116/378689/situating-the-curatorial>

Rogoff, Irit and Bismarck, Beatrice von, “Curating/Curatorial: A Conversation Between Irit Rogoff and Beatrice Von Bismarck,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 23

<https://artscatalyst.org/?NoSplash>

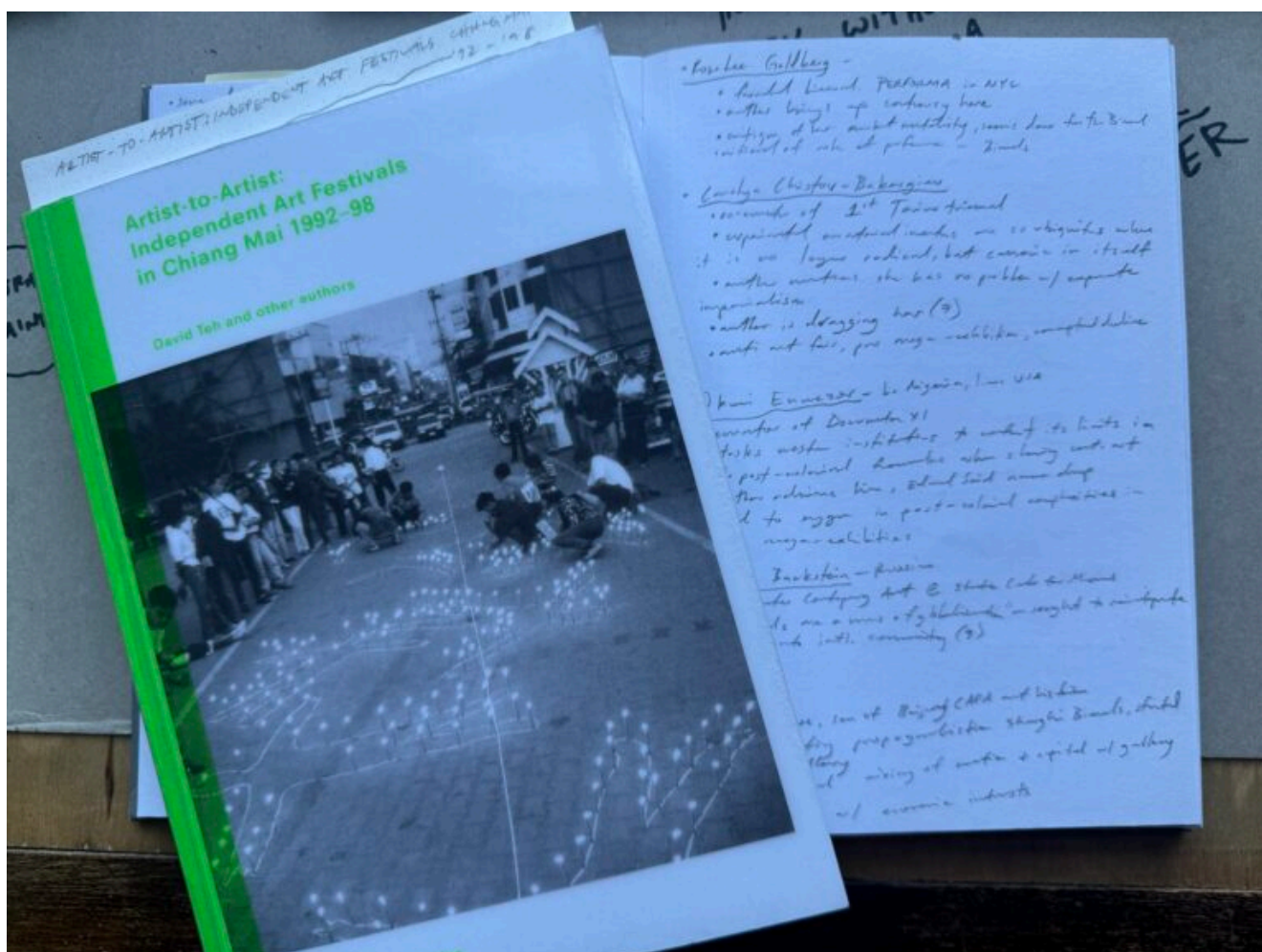
<https://www.taipeibiennial.org/2023/list/musicroom>

<https://palazzoducale.visitmuve.it/en/exhibition/exhibition-an-selm-kiefer/>

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/speedrunning-hip-hop-1234968918/>

Week 1: from Chiang Mai

Social Installation to Maintenance Art



This has been a fun week of jumping right into the world of curating.

One of the highlights of the readings for this week was art historian Ana Bilbao's essay on micro-curating and SVAOs. I have always had a bias towards the DIY and the freedom that being independent permits; while they admittedly appeal to my own tastes and prejudices, I firmly believe that SVAOs are much more powerful than storied institutions or blue chip galleries (such as David Zwirner, Tate Modern) at engaging

publics and supporting artists.

Socially-engaged Curatorial Practice?

As it is referenced in Bilbao's essay, I was inspired to pick up a copy of curator and critic David Teh's book on the Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI) festivals of the 90s to extend my interest in activating publics outside of the walls of the gallery. Teh states that "'installative' practices do not merely expand the framework of 'exhibition' but decenter and recenter it", further asking the question "what is the encounter that really matters when artists share their work? Is it not the social more than any material exchange?" (Teh 10). Funny enough, this reflects my interests in the role of curation, while also challenging my background as an artist that primarily makes paintings that do not inherently involve publics in the way that socially-engaged and participatory art practices do.

This raises a critical question I want to explore in my own curatorial practice: how can curation build authentic relationships between publics and artworks that do not innately foster participation or engagement? Performance invites participation through the relationship of performer/audience and performer/site... a painting on a white wall or film projection in a quiet back room of a gallery do not share that same sense of invitation and participation. What happens when you put paintings on free-standing walls in a public square? Or disseminate a film via USB – or airdrop?

Maintenance Art

On engaging publics, I also researched artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' practice as I had somehow never heard of her. Her Maintenance Manifesto is incredibly inspiring, particularly the relationship between development and maintenance she proposes. In an interview, Ukeles mentions that after becoming a mother she "fell out of a certain class and moved into another. And when I looked around, I saw that most of the people in the world were also in that class, that they were workers too" (Afterall Interview). Becoming a mother extradited her from the art world, and into the maintenance world. While much has changed since the '70s, Broken Globalization, the Capitalocene, and centre/periphery discourses (focus of week 1's lecture) highlight how the division between oppressor/oppressed and insider/outsider has only widened.

Curation can make visible these divisions – and potentially – work to collapse these gaps by bringing the periphery in, pushing the centre out, and seeking to build community, connections, and understanding rather than propagate division.

Notes

Afterall. n.d. "Mierle Laderman Ukeles in Conversation with Alexandra Schwartz." Afterall. <https://www.afterall.org/articles/mierle-laderman-ukeles-in-conversation-with-alexandra-schwartz/>.

Bilbao, Ana. "Micro-Curating: The Role of SVAOs (Small Visual Arts Organisations) in the History of Exhibition-Making", Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones, issue 25, 2018, pp. 118-138

Teh, David. Artist-to-Artist : Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992-98. London: Afterall Books, 2018.

The Brooklyn Rail. "MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES with Maya Harakawa | the Brooklyn Rail." Brooklynrail.org. The Brooklyn Rail. August 19, 2024. <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/10/art/mierle-laderman-ukeles-with-maya-harakawa/>.

Ukules, Mierle Laderman, "Maintenance Art Manifesto", 1969, accessed via: <https://queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukules-Manifesto-for-Maintenance-Art-1969.pdf>