

Alissa Firth-Eagland

The Generative Curatorial Gesture

“The ability to be open and transparent in ways that can inspire trust and risk is one of the talents that can link curatorial and artistic creation.”

My major interest is in curatorial practice as a creative act in itself, and I’m pretty sure that comes from my training at the Ontario College of Art and Design as a visual artist. I studied performance arts and video and then took Curatorial Practice towards the end of my studies, so, much like an artist uses their medium to reveal their world, I use the exhibition as a pedagogical tool to teach, to learn, and to inspire new perspectives, new ways of understanding, and new ways of seeing. In developing this presentation, it became really obvious to me that my collaborative working relationships with artists are the cornerstone of my practice. I do insert myself into the art-making process through strategies like negotiation and discussion throughout the process of an exhibition, and I do create non-neutral scenarios, challenging artists to work in different media that they may not ever have worked with before, and definitely in unusual venues. My main strategy is the commission, and I’m going to provide you with some examples, but first I just want to talk about my impulses behind the commission.

I’m really interested in commission as a way to support both the production and the research of a new work of art. It can create additional resources for artists by supporting both creation and exhibition, and it also creates new opportunity for artists to delve into new trajectories. Other drives associated with the commission for me are cultivating knowledge about our world, but more importantly, for me, learning through the process myself. I use the commission as a strategy to do that, as sort of a practice-based research strategy. I just want to remark on one thing that Anne-Marie said, draw attention to it, because I think there is a bit of an overlap there: “exposing what we are trying to understand”. I thought that was a really nice way of wording a strategy that I think that I use. The original name of my paper was “Learning Through Curating”, but I renamed it “The Generative Curato-

rial Gesture”, and actually—Can I get you to turn the projector back on? *[laughs]*

In March 2005, I curated *Feats, might*, an evening of live performances, for FADO Performance Inc. and The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, using a commission—oh, actually—sorry, I’ll back up a bit. Paul Couillard approached me from FADO and asked me to curate an evening of emerging performance art, and I wasn’t incredibly interested in doing that so rather than do that, I asked if I could work with video artists who use their own presence and persona in their practice, and asked them to perform “unplugged” or “acoustic” for the first time in front of a live audience. They developed new performances specific to the space used, which was the Great Hall in Toronto, so I guess I’m a nondisappearing curator, for sure. *[laughs]*

I just want to talk about how I’ve worked with these artists a little bit and describe my process. I started just really looking at a lot of performative video works by Canadian artists, especially emerging artists, because I wanted to stick with the criteria that Paul had set out for me, and then went on to really narrow the selection by asking instructors that I knew at various colleges. I got it down to about fifteen artists, and I started doing some studio visits and really talking about whether people thought they could perform live, if they’d never done it before, and what kind of project they would propose. Finally I narrowed it down to three artists: Brian Joseph Davis, Daniel Cockburn, and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay. This is a documentation of Daniel Cockburn’s performance, who actually... I didn’t suggest one way or the other whether they should include a video signal, but Daniel chose to include one during his performance.

Another element of this project that I was really keen to explore was the inspiration of dialogue between audiences—for example, the video-art audience in Toronto and the performance-art audience tend to be quite separate. They don’t really overlap much, so I really wanted to address audiences, rather than audience as a singular, and connect those two communities. So this framework definitely allowed for a lot of involvement on my part, and I really designed it that way, but rather than exercising heavy-handed creative guidance, I really just asked a lot of questions throughout the whole process and advocated for alternative positions that

the artist may not have envisioned.

So I negotiated with them during our studio visits about the form that their work would take, and in a roundtable discussion we had online, I asked questions ranging from specific to hypothetical, eliciting responses and new considerations about the media of both performance and video. Some of those questions were: “Why do include yourself in your work, what is the reason behind that?”; “Do you perform ‘artist’ or do you perform ‘Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay’?”; “Do you consider it a marketing strategy to use your own image?” So really thinking about the performative relationship between those things and trying to suss out a language about cross-discipline work.

Another element of my practice that I use is the publication. I’m really keen on using a publication as a way to ground ephemeral things, like performance by video artists who’ve never performed live before, into a more tangible object. So what I did was, I asked a local print-maker, Duncan Walker of the City Beautification Ensemble, to produce a limited edition of four hundred copies of the catalogue, so he hand-silkscreened the covers and they’re numbered. So, again, just referencing the performativity of the evening through the performative act of printmaking, drawing a link through those different things.

I’m just going to talk about an older project for a minute. *Sorry for the Inconvenience* was a community festival-based project. The Junction, in Toronto, has a regular festival, and they approached Emelie Chhangur and I to curate an exhibition, and we decided we wanted to work with site-specific public performance and intervention.

So we created a catalogue. The publication was really one of the main elements that we were trying to... really explore the idea of performativity, so we tried to work with this map format where you literally have to perform the text. It’s kind of this bulky, big thing. You need to like flip it over and fold it up, and it’s in the way, and you’re standing on a street corner, and it’s really enormous. The designer that we worked with actually incorporated longitudinal and latitudinal kind of markers, so that to read the text you have to follow them. So inserting a more performative act

into the actual publication that referenced the performative acts that were happening at the event.

This is the City Beautification Ensemble [*referring to slide*]. They sort of counteract the ubiquitous concrete in the city by painting features on the street with gold colours. So he's painting a manhole cover there with gold and it's sort of between graffiti and beautification.

The next project I'm going to talk about is something I did while I was here. I see the exhibition as a workshopping environment so in addition to challenging artists to consider medium, I often asked participating artists to analyze site and space by producing projects for unique venues. Most recently I curated *Sound Madness 1 & 2* as a part of my role as Curatorial Work Study at the Walter Phillips Gallery. These public programs were conceived by senior curator Sylvie Gilbert as a way for the artists-in-residence as part of the Sound and Vision residency to explore the overlap between audio and visual elements in their art practice in a public way. So I worked with artists to scout locations that inspired audio experimentation and mounted these projects in specific spaces throughout the centre: stairwells that had really great acoustics...This is the visualization lab [*referring to slide*]. I don't know if any of you made it on the tour yesterday, but I really was just enamoured with that space. It's this black hole in the basement that nobody goes down to, and I really wanted to animate the space.

Basically, I was just interested in getting people into locations that they wouldn't normally use and—I'll come back to the invitations, sorry—having these performances happening, drawing the audience through a bunch of locations, so it's almost like a bit of a tour of the series, it's really giving them a bit more of an experience and drawing it out a bit.

This was a collaborative work between Linling Hsu, a classically trained violinist, Amir Amiri, who plays the dulcimer—it's a seventy-two-stringed instrument—and Don Simmons. You can't see Don, but you can see his Mac on the right. Don is an electro-acoustic artist from Calgary who basically intervened on their acoustic stuff with electro stuff, so it was just a lot of remixing and the live performance ended

up sounding quite unusual.

I'm going to play a little bit for you later, but, yeah, basically just trying to observe the residency and what the artists were doing while they were in residence here and responding to that, making studio visits, talking with them about who they might want to collaborate with and exploring those collaborations between them, discussing the projects that they were working on on the side, and actually providing critical feedback.

I commissioned this invitation from a young artist, Jen Hutton, who is working at the Banff Centre. She created, I just really... I give people a lot of space. I basically say stuff like, "Well, it's a sound piece. Can you make something that references sound?" I know that she's a sculptor, so it's sort of this calculated risk, knowing that she works with paper forms in the past, and just saying, "Can you make something?" So she designed this piece which is basically a usable object of play which references the exhibition's unseen focus of sound. It's just meant to be a talking device and a listening device and something that inspires dialogue and play around the exhibition.

Through the practice-based research of my independent curatorial endeavours, I've found that a pedagogical dimension of an exhibition of contemporary art can reside in its forms and curatorial methodologies. An exhibition can both unravel and contextualize our world, much the same as finding the right word to illustrate a complex idea in a sentence. My curatorial strategies—commission, discussion, the solicitation of cross-discipline work, and the fostering of innovative methodologies—have come from a drive to both learn and teach within the medium of contemporary art exhibition. I view the exhibition as a learning experience for the audience, the institution, the artist, and the curator. For those involved, an exhibition is a lens through which ideas can flow, become focused, magnified, and be projected into the world.

I'm going to read one other thing that... this came from my original abstract, and it's sort of the question I'm interested in posing today, and I'm hoping it will bounce off some of the other ideas that have been presented. And I'm definitely coming at

this from a position of an independent, so I should probably say that. But it really relates back to ethics and it does relate to what Anne-Marie was talking about.

Inevitably, the curatorial act proposes a model of culture for an audience. Curatorial undertakings are a subjective process, bringing the personal experience, and, even more significant, the nascent opinions of the curator, into focus. Curatorial practice is a specific building of history, a marked effort towards creating meaningful, archival document, and, much like pedagogy, it has built-in political motivations. While it is significant to acknowledge the inherent power in curatorial practice, it is equally important to note its potential as a political and agitative artistic practice that challenges the status quo. Is there an educational process inherent in the use of the curatorial medium because of its translational ability to decode, transmutate, construe, interpret, modulate, and cultivate knowledge about our world? What are the implications of the exhibition's pedagogical dimensions, considering the subjective position of the curator?

That's the crux of it for me, and I'm hoping we can come up with an answer, or a couple of different options. I'm going to introduce one other really kind of, maybe, hot button item, and then play some music, and that's the concept of the curator as a producer. And I guess I'm talking about that in the context... it could be considered in the same way as a film producer or a music producer. So, onward and upward.

This is a track from *Sound Madness 2* that was recorded that evening by Amir Amiri, Linling Hsu, and Don Simmons, and I'm going to play you about... I don't know how long I have, but maybe three or four minutes. And this is starting in the middle of the song. *[music]*

Presented at *Unspoken Assumptions: Visual Art Curators in Context*, "Thinking Through Curating"
July 16, 2005, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta