

## Jenifer Pappararo

### The Art of Stepping Aside

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In the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists began questioning the position of the museum. Through their work, artists directed attention to the structures and procedures of art exhibition. In general, they aimed to challenge conventional exhibition methods by undermining the museum's presumed neutrality and disinterest. Drawing their arguments from the numerous artworks and practices that work to define and mess with the assumed logic of the museum and art galleries, seminal texts such as Lucy Lippard's *The Dematerialization of the Art Object* and Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* established new histories that exposed the rigid frame of art institutions. Further, the label "institutional critique" emerged in the early 1980s and was solidified as a movement by Benjamin Buchloh's essay, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", which was published in October in 1990. In *Naming a Practice*, Buchloh deemed institutional critique itself as a viable space for artistic production, and this continued. Later artists such as Andrea Fraser came to prominence in the early '90s as she defined her art practice within this critical framework.

Nearly forty years later, elements of this challenge to the ideological status of the art museum or contemporary art gallery—such as its assumed neutrality—are now commonplace and clearly understood as a means to negotiate. But still, within this direct criticism, new sites of contention are put forward for debate and exposed as restrictive obstacles to topple. And so the curator, I think, is a relatively new target for criticism. Even though the role of the curator is implicit in the critique of the institution and its exhibition practice, this critical examination of museums and art galleries has also, ironically, helped to establish curating as a practice, defining the role of the curator, and moving it to the centre of contemporary art discourse.

So institutional critique, for better or for worse, helped to produce or give prominence to the curator or curating as a discipline, while simultaneously making this

discipline a central site for critical debate. But even with this repositioning of the curator—which is evident in the growing numbers of grad schools directed at curatorial studies, the phenomenon of the international superstar status of curators and the morphing of the curator into critic, editor, and artist. The “shifting expert”, as Ben Portis alludes to in his presentation abstract, the curator has quickly become an expert on any number of different topics... But even within this expanding field, nothing has changed so radically except that a new figure, or figurehead, has in many ways become emblematic of a larger system of art exhibition, production and distribution.

Serbian artist Tanja Ostojic’s work *Black Square on White* and *I’ll Be Your Angel* for the forty-ninth Venice Biennale is a perfect example. For the latter piece, she became Harald Szeemann’s—the biennial’s curator—she became his guardian angel. For the opening days of the exhibition, the artist never left his side. She positioned herself in the most visible spot, accompanying Szeemann to openings, press conferences, and various parties. Inversely, *Black Square on White*, for which she shaved a square into her pubic hair, was only made to be seen by the curator himself, who, through Ostojic’s work, was physically rendered a viable mode for exhibiting and distributing her work. I mean, for Ostojic, Szeemann was the institution, and she chose the most accessible and the most visible space within that institution to exhibit her work.

With the curator at the core, critically examining exhibition structures is still the site for artistic production. For the second Tirana Biennial in Albania, an exhibition that was curated by six curators and divided into thematic sections, an artist curated, as his artwork, six curators whom he asked to exhibit work. Some of those curators chose to curate other artists while some produced work. Harald Szeemann was one of the curators asked. He exhibited a series of screen prints.

And nationally, Vancouver artist Mark Soo who produced *Curating Curators, 2003*, a work that exhibited a list of curator’s names that he amassed by asking curators to name two curators who he then asked to name two curators, and so on. And so, I think Soo’s intention was to invert a common curatorial method of research, which is simply asking artists for names of other artists. There is also An-

drew Hunter, an artist/curator, who uses the work of other artists to build complex narrative-based works or the artist collective Instant Coffee, to which I belong, who uses the work of other artists in their installations.

The beginning of my practice in the curatorial field was generally aimed at examining curating as a process. One of the first shows I curated for an art gallery was The Jennifer Show. Its basic aim was to examine curating group exhibitions as a process. In so doing I attempted to simplify the terms, starting with naming the theme. As such, I created a caricature of a group exhibition by using my name as the main reason to bring artists together. Since Jennifer is such a common name and I had already worked with several artists named Jennifer, I knew with some assurance that I could produce a successful exhibition. Even though I think the work in the exhibition was good, in looking back, I see the failures of this project as a whole more than its successes.

I'm not sure how interesting it is to always foreground the process. Someone I'll use as an example is Jens Hoffmann, who is currently the curator at ICA in London, and someone who I think has built his practice by foregrounding curatorial processes as part of the exhibition structure—so much so that at times curating is the theme of the exhibition. For example, *Artist's Favourites*, where Hoffman, invited thirty-nine artists to choose their favourite artworks to be exhibited in the context of the group show. To a certain degree, Hoffmann deferred his curatorial decisions by distancing himself from the selection of the artwork. But ultimately he chose the artists who were to choose the exhibiting artists, distancing the artists from the curatorial process by limiting their participation in the installation process. He designed the overall layout of the exhibition, which was hung salon-style on a brightly painted wall behind stanchions.

As a curator, I like to question my role as a curator, but I don't like the questions to subsume the artwork or art production. It seems that when curators foreground a critique of their exhibition practices within their exhibitions, art production becomes secondary to the process of exhibition and reception. But when artists use work—and this is why I started with the history of institutional critique—when artists use work to critique the system they are working within, the terms of this

critique seem to play out more evenly, forming a triad, a more balanced triad based on the relationships between art production, art exhibition, and art reception.

So how as curators do we keep a discussion of the process of curating present while always keeping the artwork present? Lately I've been interested in the notion of usage, one that addresses the economic term "nonrivalrous". In relation to creative property, "nonrivalrous" defines a type of production or product that does not deplete with multiple users. If someone uses your idea, you can still use it. It cannot be taken away from you like a material possession. If I use your car, you can't use it, but if I apply a formula you designed, I don't stop you from also using it at the same time. In the past, I've used this term as a starting point to explore different methods of collaborative art production, but it also seems an apt way to look at curatorial processes: first, because it is important to acknowledge that we are using work by artists as a means to express our own ideas, and secondly, to keep a check on how we negotiate that usage. I know it seems a given that, when we use other people's stuff we should take care of it—but that simple formula gets slightly more complicated by how each party defines "care".

But I don't think this difference in meaning is so difficult to overcome. In negotiating what constitutes as "caring" I think the borrower must always defer to the lender's terms. As borrowers, curators are submissive. But for the curator I see this deferral not as a position of compromise or of loss, but as a place where curatorial agency is defined. In large part, this agency is defined in negotiating understanding, but how that negotiation between lender and borrower, artist and curator, is undertaken is where the true complexity of the relationship lies.

So I don't have a definitive answer, and I'm actually ending this introduction short with that question in mind, and hoping to find within the next few days some insight into that, focusing on that relationship. Basically I'm deferring the harder questions to everyone else here.

So thanks.