

## Clive Robertson

### The Artist-Curator: Struggles Over What Matters and For Whom It Matters

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I want to thank the organizers for inviting me. This is the first closed curatorial conference I've been involved in. If you read the abstract for this presentation, you all have seen that what I'm going to do is to show you some excerpts from an archive from which I'm presenting a touring retrospective exhibition that starts in January 2007, and the exhibition itself consists of what rightly or wrongly I'm calling "wallpaper", which are archive cards of different art, curatorial, and publishing projects made in different cities over a thirty-five-year span. The exhibition also has four DVDs and five CDs of archival material selected from sixty hours of video and eighty hours of audio recordings. I'm collaborating with a young artist/curator named Julie Fiala, who works both from Ottawa and also from Leeds in England; we're working on this as a sort of troubling of the distinctions between individual and collaborative production. Even though this PowerPoint presentation looks very finished, what I'm using it for is part of the process of looking at the themes of analyzing what these projects can mean, both to myself and to other people, within a particular history of artist-run practices.

So it begins here, with something that Jennifer Fisher wrote for the *Naming a Practice* book that came out of the curatorial conference in Banff in 1996. And this is a sort of précis of the etymology of the term "curate" that she writes about, which is familiar to most of us in terms of taking care of, and the connotations of an ethic, a series of ethics. And care, indicating what matters, and that in which curators can invest both themselves and their cultural capital. One interesting thing that Jennifer includes in here is the collector/curator enacting what matters and what one cares about and how one cares. I was once told by someone I'm not going to name that there was no such word as "curation", and I think it's just the vocabulary difference between North America and Anglo Europe. But here, Jennifer, because of her own interests, sort of links it to homeopathy and therapy.

The top quote comes from a book I picked up for, I think, \$4.99 from the National

Gallery bookstore, by Alan Bowness, who was the former director of the Tate gallery in London. Bowness's book, *The Conditions of Success: How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame*, published in 1989, contains the notion of public acclaim that is measured solely by attendance. So, for example, he writes that the Francis Bacon one-man Tate retrospective in 1985 had 110, 000 visitors, and the Tate record for a one-man retrospective was subsequently broken by David Hockney, who attracted 173, 000 visitors, so this notion of public acclaim is based upon attendance.

I like the top image, the painting by Charles West Cope, *The Council of the Royal Academy Selecting Pictures for the Exhibition* (1836), because it shows artists involved in the academy curating process. Cope showed some 114 paintings in these summer exhibitions but was not purchased by the Tate. It allows the question: how did this professional curatorial process become amended? As Raymond Williams informs us, you know, the beginnings of the annual curated show and later official exhibitions began in Paris in 1667 within a guild context.

So when I look back at some of these historical images, particularly this—you know, Duchamp's anti-exhibition viewer work *Mile of String* for the Surrealist show in 1942—I put the question up there: where is the selecting, evaluating, and interpreting curator, and which institution would, you know, allow Duchamp to put a string barrier across an exhibition? I'm pointing to the absence of the nonartist curator in these examples, of which there are many. On the right is Ben Vautier's *Store*, which he nominated as a total environment in 1960, and he opened the store in Nice in 1958, and here you see the store transplanted into Gallery One at the *Misfits* exhibition in 1962. Gallery One, of course, is a commercial or dealer gallery, and again, you have to ask who... what is that relationship between the curator and the artist in those circumstances?

So this is familiar for many of you. It's the *From Sea to Shining Sea* catalogue that was edited by AA Bronson. The most important part of it, for me anyway, as this publication has aged, is its chronology of artist-initiated activity in Canada from 1937 to 1987. And you see something very typical here in terms of not exactly a polemic, but this line about how this particular generation of artists created everything, or created something that didn't exist, and even though I can't erase my

own history, I'm part of that essentializing logic of "artist-run everything". And in some ways, doing a retrospective as a collaboration outside of public galleries or museums is a continuation of that logic even though in the retrospective there is more self-reflexivity at work.

So these are the sort of standard reasons why, in the late '60s and before, artists wouldn't want or need the services of a curator, and there's nothing surprising in any of that, aside from the last one, namely the coincidence of democratization and decentralization of cultural policy in Canada (and France), which to a degree supported projects and forms of artist self-determination.

These photographs are of the Parachute Centre for Cultural Affairs, an artist-run centre in Calgary I cofounded in 1975. The name plays both on institutional and relationship meanings of "cultural affairs". You can see the street site of the centre with its walk-in archives beyond which are audio- and video-production facilities and a performance space that doubled as a display space. The Parachute Centre (later named Arton's) functioned as an intermedia facility—like the Western Front and A Space—hosting an artist-in-residence programme, the publication *Centerfold*, and a national juried video festival, The Canadian Video Open.

In terms of artist curating, the Parachute Centre built upon the early programming achieved by the international performance and publishing collective W.O.R.K.S. that Paul Woodrow and I cofounded in Calgary in 1972. W.O.R.K.S. became known in Europe and North America via its international performance and artists' television festivals.

I emigrated to Canada for the second time in 1971; I had gone to art colleges in England and, as an MFA student at the University of Reading, organized several performance festivals. And so in 1972 we decided to do this festival with this grandiose title, "First World Festival of W.O.R.K.S". The open invitation for projects was circulated in eight languages and sent through a developing artist network that included FILE magazine, Catalyst, from London, and through an organization called the International Artist Corporation, run by Klaus Groh and based in West Germany.

So this is pretty typical programming practice of the time, inviting people to send

proposals and performance scores that we could then perform. We performed in public outdoor and indoor sites, and also had access to programming cable TV. The invitation used phrases like “sensory literates” and “social activists”. This orientation was influenced by the writings of John Cage, Dick Higgins, and Robert Filliou, and the art-sociology project of our peers like Hervé Fischer.

W.O.R.K.S. (We. Ourselves. Roughly. Know. Something.) was a nonincorporated collective that lasted from 1972 to 1975. So in many ways it is a production model almost without public funding.

*A Conceptographic Reading of Our World Thermometer* (1973) was an artist television series made for community cable TV. It presented the work of fifty-six artists from seventeen countries by publicly performing event scores or making short video documents. This project, produced by seven or eight artists, is a huge undertaking even in contemporary terms. We produced a catalogue available to the cable subscribers and to the participating artists for free and the whole six-hour series was available for purchase for \$240. We did sell the series to OCAD and to the Virginia Commonwealth University. I wrote a column for the newspaper *TV Times* supplement, and this newspaper clipping is an interview with the *Calgary Herald*. W.O.R.K.S. received a lot of coverage from the *Herald* and we wrote about the projects for *ArtCanada* and the UK art periodical *Art and Artists*. The W.O.R.K.S. projects were further disseminated in what is the first book devoted to Canadian performance art, published by Beau Geste Press, UK in 1974-5.

So in the mid '70s there was divergence from video artists on the West Coast, in particular, who thought that video should be disseminated for free, that we should exchange tapes, artists who were part of the Art Metropole distribution stable, if you like, who began seeing themselves as professional artists, practitioners, who wanted to be paid. And so the Canadian Video Opens of 1978 and 1979 that I organized from Calgary were artist-juried, with prize-winning cash awards and trophies.

I thought of these earlier artist curatorial projects as being prototypes, in the sense that they were not sustainable either in economic or in small organizational terms,

meaning that it wasn't possible to institutionalize all of these endeavours so some, like the magazine *Centerfold/Fuse*, were continued while others were dropped.

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