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Artist/curator practice: The operational order of the performative

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Facing Image: Image 1, full scale

How might the development of artist/curator practice into a philosophically-based praxis contribute to fine art critical discourse? Such questions are important in considering the role of artists within the institutional framework for legitimisation of a practice. Within the critical debate between the value of institutional decisions of what art gets shown, (Charlesworth 2007:98)¹ and the argument pertaining to how art is shown as a legitimate concern, (O'Neil 2004:8)² rests the potential of artist/curator practice to develop methodologies of self-reflection and communication. The latter issues marrying with the institutional framework of legitimisation, brings the position of artist/curator into an activated role of co-arbiter with the arts institution. It is specifically this issue of communication which is of importance, and is the nexus for connecting with the institutional framework.

Competency of communicating with an audience is one of the primary criticisms levelled at artist/curator practice from figures within the art establishment (Stürzl 2013:12). But the development of a philosophical foundation for the practice, based in communication, has the potential to answer this criticism through a discourse of networks, agency, being, and repetitions common to many inside and outside the art world. A discourse of one's position in a network flux is highly relevant to contemporary artistic praxis, and is the very experience which artist/curator practice is well suited to address. The dualistic role of the artist/curator potentially differentiates the practice from the individual experience of the artist, or the curator, within the art establishment framework. The highly charged self-referential and metaphysical aspect of artist/curator practice is the starting point within the praxis for engaging with these issues of networks and communication, and by extension, the question of an expanded scope for the artist/curator within the art world.

It is a generally held view within the art establishment that artist/curator practice is an early development stage of an artist's career where artists take the initiative in self-promotion.

Tate defines

“[a]n artist-curator [as] a practising artist who also curates shows or runs not-for-profit spaces from which they exhibit their art and that of other artists. Inspired by the artist led initiatives in New York in the 1960s, these spaces are often housed in temporary places – shops, warehouses, soon-to-be demolished buildings – which

¹ In “Curating Doubt,” J.J Charlesworth claimed, “Curating...nevertheless still has to function practically, institutionally and bureaucratically, by making choices about what should and should not be shown, what is and is not worth the public's attention, and eventually reasserting the orthodox distinction between curator and artist, between who assesses and who produces and who is subject to assessment. In short: value judgments articulated through the continued power of the institution.”

² In his article, “I'm a Curator” O'Neil said, “Exhibitions are as much about how art is seen as about what art is seen, and artists who consider the conditions of display as part of their strategic remit are already curating from within their own practice. But does current usage of the term artist-curator encompass shifting power relations from artist to curator and/or return it to the place of production?”

can be inhabited for free or for a nominal rent for a short period of time. The artist/curator tends to remain outside the commercial art world, and within a community of artists – often ones with whom they studied, or of a similar generation – who are frustrated by the perceived impenetrability of the art world. For some artist/curators, it is the freedom to create art, control its output and have a say in how it is exhibited that appeals, for others it is a means of survival, a way of gaining exposure for the art that they and others do.”

The issues of being outside the art establishment and wanting a say in how art is seen are clear in this definition. What is yet to be established is how artist/curator practice can engage with the art establishment as a partner in legitimising³ an art practice. While this article cannot address the full scope of this question in this space, it begins the discussion of some of the ways a philosophical foundation can be laid for artist/curator practice.

In an effort to begin to establish a philosophical foundation for artist/curator practice, my research asks if there is a relationship between autobiography and simulacra, and if such a relationship would affect views of self within artist/curator practice. The question of this relationship is based in the atemporal repetitive presentation of stories from one’s life. This atemporal repetitive presentation represents one of two types of simulacra discussed in this essay. The first is based in a concept of the simulacrum as an incommunicable and unrepresentable motivator of change. The second presents the simulacrum as a serial image which consumes its own referent, acting as an operational order; I’ll explain both of these later in the essay. The question of a relationship between autobiography and simulacra resonates throughout artist/curator practice because of the self-reflective nature of the practice, which I will also describe in more depth below. Without exception, all artworks have an autobiographical component, whether it’s intended or not.⁴

To discuss these issues, I present the results of a comparison between two recent projects on autobiography. In *When a wall gets an autobiography...* I built a fictional autobiography of a wall, and in *Marilyn’s Wedding* I made actual autobiographical artworks using my own image, basing the works on Andy Warhol’s *Gold Marilyn*, finally auto-curating them in an exhibition installation.⁵ Both projects explored the role of the simulacrum in relation to communicating the self and to the mechanics of autobiography; however, the two projects reached very different conclusions by employing different modalities of the simulacrum. The significance of these different conclusions, marks two ways manipulating the simulacrum

³ I use the term 'legitimise' to indicate when an art practice has the backing of art establishment institutions, such as public galleries and museums. An art practice outside of the art establishment is considered 'emergent' practice. This is a form of hierarchical placement and definition more than anything else. The word 'legitimise' is not used as a qualification of the value of a practice.

⁴ This statement is an appropriation of Hans Haacke’s statement: “It’s uncomfortable for me to be identified as a 'political artist,’” Haacke told the [*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*’s]. “The work of an artist with such a label is in danger of being understood one-dimensionally. Without exception, all artworks have a political component—whether it’s intended or not. . .” (Allen 2004). I would suggest that all artworks also have an autobiographical component, whether intended or not.

⁵ I use these terms ‘fictional’ and ‘actual’ in relation to my visibility within the projects. In constructing the autobiography of the wall, I used no semblance of my own image. The only thing perceptible of me was my presence during the creation of the wall as the wall changed. Whereas, in *Marilyn’s Wedding*, I worked with an image of myself at age three to make the artworks in the exhibition.

can affect communications with an audience and ultimately the position of the artist/curator within the exhibition, and possibly a wider art discourse.

When a wall gets an autobiography... was presented as part of PSEUDIO, an exhibition with artists Kelcy Davenport, Gemma Marmalade, and Deniz Johns in the Basement Project Space of Ruskin Gallery, from 18 March to 8 April 2016. The premise behind *When a wall gets an autobiography...* was to crack open autobiography and look more closely at the elements involved in its construction. The first step in this was to paint the white wall of the gallery black. Immediately, this raised questions of the simulacrum: which was the real wall? Was it the white wall, or the wall revealed by painting it black, with all its flaws, features, and characteristics?

I collected all sorts of ephemera from working on the wall in order to build a history of events and memories for the wall. For example, I saved material such as the masking tape I used to protect the edge of the wall as I painted it black. This became the basis of a multi-layered engagement where the passage of time and a sense of history played out visually as materials were layered, replicated, displaced and removed (insert image 2, small scale). Chance occurrence produced debris and marks that played a significant role in asserting the presence of the wall. (insert image 3, small scale) In allowing incident to have a place within the construction of the fictional autobiography, meant the wall became an active player in constructing its own autobiography. Anything I did on the wall was mediated by how the physical properties of the wall manifested. I purposely sensitised myself to these things, becoming hyperaware as I worked so as not to mindlessly obliterate something that was significantly characteristic of the wall, even if I couldn't immediately distinguish that significance.

(Insert image 4, small scale) Another important factor in this meditation on autobiography was the discovery that the paint became a recording material, not only in revealing the nuances of the wall but also revealing my presence within the work. The paint became a conveyancer of meaning as I exploited its properties. I discovered that the significance of a property was an unrepresentable, incommunicable, immaterial thing related to the simulacrum. The property itself was not incommunicable, there it was visible on the wall, but its significance as a conveyancer of meaning was the thing that was unrepresentable within the scene. Instead of being the medium through which meaning was expressed, it became the vehicle which conveyed meaning. The significance of these material properties presented the immaterial materiality of the paint. The paint properties themselves brought meaning to the narrative of the wall, but by capturing qualities other than their own material properties.

"The simulacrum, in its imitative sense, is the actualization of something in itself incommunicable and nonrepresentable: the phantasm in its obsessional constraint" (Smith 2005:13-14). This quote by Pierre Klossowski, French novelist and older brother to the painter Balthus, suggests an *obsessional image* produced within us by the unconscious forces of our impulsive life⁶ forms a series in which something is being repeated, but always

⁶ Smith defines Klossowski's 'phantasm' as "an *obsessional image* produced within us by the unconscious forces of our impulsive life..." (emphasis in original) (Smith, 2005: 13-14).

with a slight difference. Material property as signifier implies material as communicator, rather than it being the medium through which expression is communicated; the former is active, while the latter is passive. However, this progression from property to signifier to communicator is wholly incommunicable. Within *When a wall gets an autobiography...*, the deployment of this progression as an immaterial materiality is reflective of Klossowski's notion of the *phantasm*, as a slightly altered repetitive recurrence, which makes an appearance through quotidian activity.⁷

The final appearance of the simulacrum in relation to autobiography in this project came in the form of a paradox. If I claimed artistic authorship of the work, the visibility of this position destroyed the overall function of the simulacrum in the work. However, if I remained in the background as artist, a presence to be understood by the audience, I became a model for the simulacrum within the work; I was the 'original,' the agent of change, because all changes on the wall appeared through my interaction with the wall. The actualization of my presence in constructing the fictional autobiography of the wall was in itself incommunicable and nonrepresentable, as suggested by Klossowski. I became the *phantasm*, implicated directly in the simulacrum as an activator of change. Anything that appeared on the wall could be traced back to my interaction with the wall, but there were no clues, no discernible system or code, nothing that would indicate for viewers what would come next. Everything was linked directly to my thought processes and decision-making. As the model for the simulacrum, I was the instrument of emergence.

Gilles Deleuze, influenced by Klossowski, (Smith 2005) said, "If it is true that representation has identity as its element and similarity as its unit of measure, then pure presence such as it appears in the simulacrum has the 'disparate' as its unit of measure - in other words, always a difference of difference as its immediate element" (Deleuze 1994:82-83). My presence was the activator for this difference of difference. It was this Deleuzian/Klossowskian notion of the simulacrum as a positive motivator of change that informed *When a wall gets an autobiography...*

In contrast, *Marilyn's Wedding*, presented during THEOREM in Ruskin Gallery from 7 to 21 July 2016,⁸ was a project dealing with actual autobiographical material. Based on Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn*, this project tested the simulacrum as a communication device in the form of a serial image, which consumes its referent.⁹ Instead of being the model, I became the object of the simulacrum.

(insert image 5, small scale) I used a single image of myself as a child at age three. Through this single image, I was able to turn my image into a readable sign, much the way Warhol did with Marilyn Monroe's image. With *Gold Marilyn*, Warhol changed the visual discourse surrounding simulacra. It went from a "problematic resemblance" in René Magritte's *Ceci*

⁷ Excerpted from my project report on *When a wall gets an autobiography...*, on page 10 of the report.

⁸ THEOREM was an expanded doctoral research conference, the first at Cambridge School of Art, which presented an exhibition of practice-based research in conjunction with a PhD symposium. This offered an opportunity to experience actual work in an exhibition format where it could be viewed in context to its presentation.

⁹ From my project report on *Marilyn's Wedding*, p.3 of the report.

n'est pas une pipe, to an "operational order of the real" in *Gold Marilyn* (Durham 1998:54).¹⁰ Warhol's use of Marilyn's image became an emblem of equivalencies that performed the *Marilynity* code,¹¹ in a performance of all things Marilyn Monroe. My image, however, became a disruptive signifier of disbeliefability that deflected my presence like two positive-pole magnets repelling each other. The unknown past became a ghost in the machine of an unfinished code; instead of completing the code, it severed and looped the code. My presence was placed in a repetition loop with my image, whirling between a hidden past and a present identity now full of questions.¹²

This was a complex position problematized by auto-curation. The compression of time represented by my immediate self handling artworks I had created from an image of my own likeness as a child became a queasy defining factor in *Marilyn's Wedding*. However, it was precisely this complex problematic position that was under scrutiny. As the curator of my own work, this position carried me through an intricate network of communications, many of which I'm convinced would have been nearly impossible to communicate had I not been in the dualistic role of artist/curator. Working with a single autobiographical image of myself as the correlate to Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn*, was a highly charged symbolic act of communication. I immediately was equating myself, or at least equating my experience, with that of Marilyn Monroe as an object of desire. The risk I faced was to be perceived as some sort of deluded narcissist, but through the curation, a sense of fragility became evident in the work. It was this fragility that viewers noticed and commented on, and it was this factor that changed the narrative from one of self-obsession to one of vulnerability. In fact, it was this risk of a narcissistic label that gave tension to the project, an aspect that could only come from the dualistic role of the I-artist taking risks, while the I-curator interpreted and mediated meaning within the work that situated risk to context. (insert image 6, full scale)

The dualistic role of the artist/curator presents a nested layering of meaning in a network of communications. The I-artist has a message from within a hidden network of experience, while the I-curator, comprehending that message of hidden experience, must use it to create a message of connections which communicate with a broader network of the audience. Both positions must contend with aspects of performativity, which influence the implementation of communication. It's from within this mesh of layered messages that artist/curator practice has the potential to communicate with an audience and to contribute to a wider artistic discourse. The dualism of the role situates both a dialogic and a dialectic

¹⁰ Durham states, "...it is Warhol and not Magritte who is the exemplary painter of the postmodern culture of the simulacrum...because Warhol lays out the new visual language of this operational universe." Effectively, the 'culture of the simulacrum' changes from one of problematic resemblances to one based on an operational order of the performative. p. 54.

¹¹ "These signs of Marilynity – that stereotypical ideality composed of a stock of legendary narratives and connotations endowing Marilyn's image with the regularity and exchange-value of a logo – have long since ceased to be anchored to the individual who served as their initial support. The event marked by these paintings is thus not the loss of an actress, but the integration of her image into a code for which her existence or nonexistence will henceforth be a matter of indifference." (Durham, 1998: 57).

¹² See Project Report: *Marilyn's Wedding*, p.4

position for the artist/curator, which is reflective of our human condition of being a singular totality, of being individual and part of a vast network.¹³

(insert image 7, full scale) Subsequent curatorial research after the exhibition finished, revealed further possibilities in manipulating the space of the simulacrum, affecting the message to the audience through the curatorial.¹⁴ As I researched, it became necessary to define the material register, a term I use to describe passages in text that conjure the visual or sensory, and in artworks that place indiscernible elements as signifiers of meaning. In curatorial terms, I use the material register to explain the registration of a material indication as a location where materiality should appear but which may not manifest as materiality.¹⁵ The material register in curating involves the articulation of space, using the physical features of an exhibition space in dialogue with the artworks, as a communicative tool; using the space between the works as an active transition which signals a connection between the works, indicating each subsequent work as engendered by the previous; and the transference of visual elements between works which suggests the progression of an active translation within the exhibition.

All of these elements taken together: the dualistic role of the artist/curator, her situation within a dialogic and dialectic position for communication, the registration of a material indication and the articulation of space as a performative act of communication, indicates a practice that visualises the oscillation between appearance and disappearance of the self, whether or not that self is meant to be visible, where the artist/curator is the subject and object of her own practice. It is a practice firmly situated in the communication of the simulacrum. It is a practice that uses the operational sign of the real to present all possible referents, while simultaneously staging what is unrepresentable in the scene.¹⁶ The

¹³ In his book, *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur discussed this notion of being a 'singular totality'. He said, "If my life cannot be grasped as a singular totality, I could never hope to be successful, complete" (1992:160). This view of a "singular totality" presents the self as a singularity and an entity linked to a matrix of other selves, which is similar to the notions of the dialogic principle in Bakhtin, and situated knowledge in Haraway (Ricoeur, 1992; Holquist on Bakhtin, 1990; Haraway, 1991:182-201).

¹⁴ See sections "The Material Register" and "Summary" in Project Report: *Marilyn's Wedding*, pp. 8-12.

¹⁵ "Through this project it became necessary to define the material register. The material register is a term I've used to explain the registration of a material indication; it's a location where materiality should appear. In this juncture, the material may appear, but may not manifest as materiality. A material register is the disjunction between what appears as an object through visual or textual language, not descriptive of the object itself, but language that describes the object through the sensory and emotive resonance of the object. It is the displacement of language, a dematerialisation of material, and the signifier of an asynchronous temporal investment. The material register is the simulacrum. I first used this term in discussing the textual imagery I was using in my thesis, but as I continue to research in the studio, I found the need to apply this term to my artwork and curatorial activity. It appeared in *Marilyn's Wedding* as an object (the artworks), which carries a weighty significance of the incommunicable, and through the curation as a significance of placement that only exists within visual relationships." Quoted from Project Report: *Marilyn's Wedding*, p. 8.

¹⁶ "The significance of this active translation through transivity is the significance of artist/curator practice itself. It visualises the oscillating appearance and disappearance of the self and of the position of the I-artist, not only as subject, but as object of her own practice. Even if the work presented in an auto-curated exhibition is not ostensibly autobiographical in nature, this oscillation between a discernible active self in the work and a sublimated deactivated self as signifier is still present because of the staging of the Badian Event, that is, the staging of what is unrepresentable in the situation, and the hesitation in the inescapable fate of chance the audience will never see. The dichotomy in the situation of an operational sign of the real, which carries all

antimony of the staging of what is unrepresentable, which carries all possible referents, potentially sets the dualism of artist/curator practice apart from singular studio or curatorial praxis. It is also the thing that makes artist/curator practice agile in navigating networks and in moving assiduously between positions. It's an empowering paradox that bestows its own agency.

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referents within the unrepresentable multiplicity of the exhibition, presents a practice that is firmly placed in the communication of simulacra." Quoted from Project Report: *Marilyn's Wedding*, p.11.