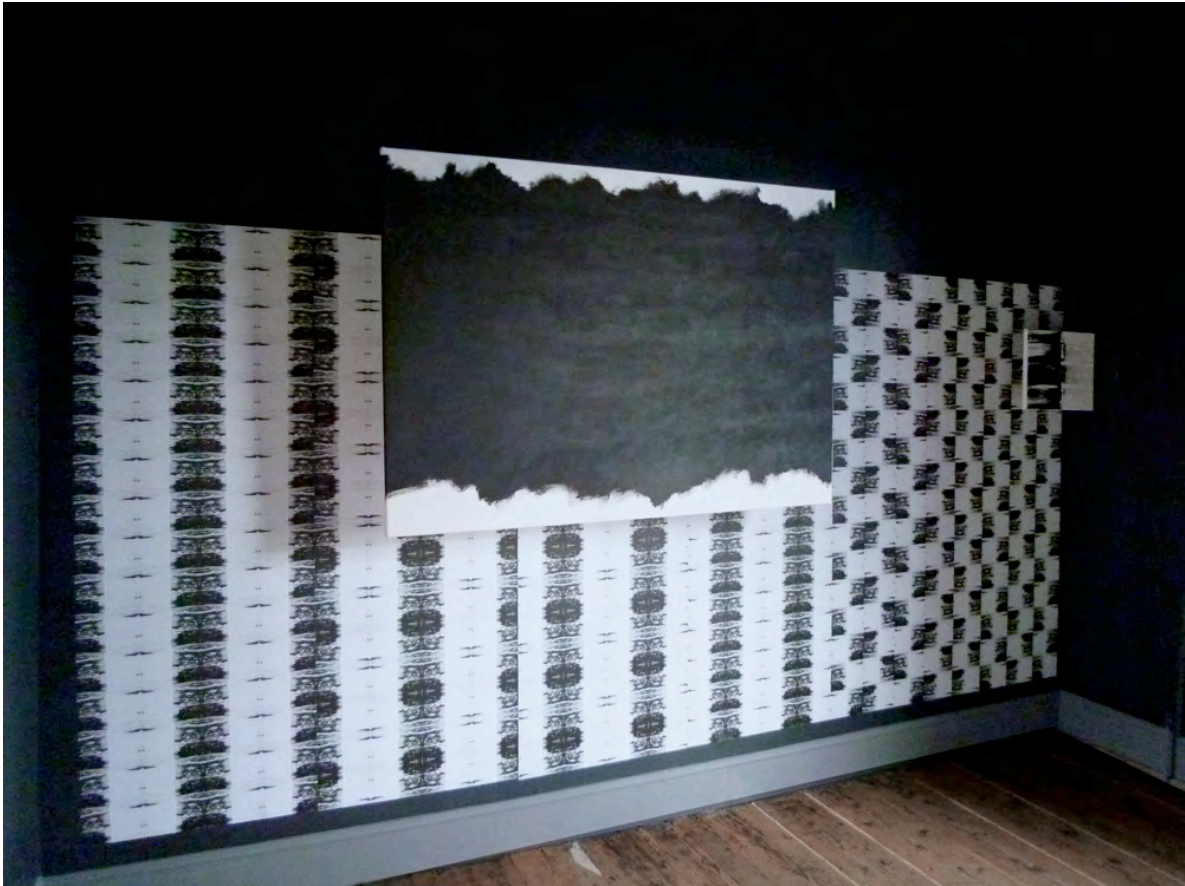


Exhibition Case Study:

## A project space called 'I'



ARTHOUSE1 Gallery  
4 to 26 September 2015  
45 Grange Road, London SE1 3BH

A solo exhibition of work by Jane Boyer  
Curated by Jane Boyer

## **Abstract**

This exhibition is the first of three case studies to research the relationship between autobiography and simulacra within the transient self, and how this complexity relates to artist/curator practice. The research sets out to understand the role of self within the practice, especially for the artist/curator as curator. This dualistic role presents complexities not only for the artist/curator, but also for curating practice in general. Much of the debate in curatorial discourse with regard to artist/curator practice is centred in issues of competencies and ethics when working with other artists' work and when communicating with an audience. By considering issues of the self within the practice, it is hoped this research will present a knowledge set providing the means useful in diffusing some of these contentious issues by which the practice may gain a more secure acceptance within the art establishment.

By focusing on autocuration for the first case study, many of the fundamental issues of self with regard to artist/curator practice have been established. These include: a definition of the transient self, an initial exploration of the active simulacrum, recognizing the importance of appearance/disappearance for the self within the framework of the exhibition, naming the dual self of the I-artist and the I-curator, and clarifying the distinction between 'autobiography' and the 'autobiographical'. This will lay the foundation for exploring the ethics of working with other artists, and continuing the research into communicating effectively with an audience in the remaining case studies. These case studies will present the artist/curator curating herself in relation to other artists in a group show, followed by a test case where the artist/curator is curated by a peer curator. Leaving the test case until last in the series of three case studies will allow for a deeper analysis of issues and findings. Once the issues of the self and ethics have been identified for artist/curator practice through the first two case studies, the artist/curator will have greater capacity to clearly analyse and compare the outcomes from the test case, looking for parallels and differences within the findings and for artist/curator practice in general.

This project produced several tangible and recorded outcomes which are: the exhibition itself along with photographs of the exhibition installation in the gallery, two video recorded critical discussions critiquing the exhibition, a video recorded artist talk given to a group of visitors to the gallery, an exhibition catalogue prototype designed with gallery director, Rebecca Fairman, including an essay written by Martin Golding, an essay written by the artist/curator for inclusion in the book if published, a peer review of the exhibition, a self-critique of the exhibition, along with a brief and simplified audience survey gauging the level of audience consideration for exhibition curation and views on artists who curate their own work. A painting commission has also been received as a result of the exhibition.

Placing the exhibition within an artist-run gallery provided many benefits, such as a near free-reign in using the space, but perhaps left some challenges unanswered, for example, would an autocurated exhibition like this have been possible in a public gallery space and what limitations would be involved? Peers visiting the exhibition

posed several questions, such as, “so what’s the difference between an exhibition where you curate yourself and a show you put on?” This question specifically was very helpful in working out the implications of curating one’s own work, and for defining the distinction between a ‘self-curated’ exhibition and an ‘exhibition put on by an artist’.

Several Thank You’s are in order: First, to Rebecca Fairman, director of ARTHOUSE1 Gallery for her valuable contribution to *A project space called ‘I’* and to her generous support of the project. Second, to Mary George and Richard Ducker who most respectfully, intelligently, and sensitively critiqued the exhibition, and to Artwise, who unfortunately were forced to cancel their critical participation due to scheduling demands. The willingness of Susie Allen, Laura Culpin and Dea Vanagan to participate in a peer critique was very much appreciated. Third, to all the visitors who came to see the exhibition, especially those who took the time to fill out a visitor survey. And finally, heartfelt thanks to Martin Golding for writing an insightful essay on my work placing it in art historical context for the exhibition catalogue, and to David Minton who wrote an equally insightful review of the exhibition. I was overwhelmed by their words and the connections they saw in the work.

Special thanks are reserved for my supervisors Sergio Fava and David Ryan whose good opinion, support and guidance are invaluable to me and were key in designing this study.

Jane Boyer  
29 September 2015

## Case Study Design

- Autocurated exhibition of work
- Peer critique of the exhibition
- Audience survey
- Self-critique

The study was designed in four parts: first, the exhibition of artwork as a practice-led research inquiry. This exhibition, *A project space called 'I'*, premised "...an exhibition of the I-artist curated by the I-curator..." (Boyer, 2015a). It was anticipated that by working through a project, the theoretical would be made practical, and real issues would surface through the implementation of the project. The second element of the study, a peer critique, was chosen for its discursive value and critical challenge to the exhibition premise. It was a significant element of the study. The peer critique offered insight and posed important questions that guided the development of the study findings. A simplified audience survey to determine how important the audience considered curating to be to the understanding of artwork in general and to determine the audience views of an artist, who curates their own work, was the third element of the case study design. The final element was a self-critique of the autocurated exhibition. This taxing element is the logical extension of artist/curator practice, which challenges the established rules of art criticism, a challenge possibly even more provocative to the hierarchy of the art establishment than artist/curator practice is to curating. The purpose of doing a self-critique for this study, however, was not to test its provocation value, but to test the limits of the authority of the self in artist/curator practice.

## Assessment of Study Elements

Placing the case study exhibition within an artist-led gallery space presented some challenges and benefits. It was a challenge to fit the 'case study' structure of the exhibition into the business of the gallery, however the artist-led structure of ARTHOUSE1 Gallery meant that those challenges were possibly more forgiving than what would have been faced in a for-profit gallery or a public gallery space. The challenges posed by this were primarily centred on the audience survey. There were questions from the gallery director on its purpose and significance, as well as a serious question of the fairness of the survey being anonymous. The director felt it unfair to ask for visitor's opinion without letting them identify themselves. An explanation of research ethics was required in order to overcome this concern. The other challenges were those faced by any artist or curator presenting an exhibition; namely needing to be flexible and willing to make compromises to accommodate the guidelines and style of the gallery. For example, it would have been preferable to capitalize the first letter of each word in the title, 'A project space called 'I'. This formatting of the title by the gallery director was made to diminish the perceived importance that capital letters in the title suggested. Not a significant detail, but one

which had an impact on the overall style of the presentation. It was understood by the director that I would need to do the curating and exhibition design, she very respectfully let this happen. However, she did make one important suggestion on placement of work, which was adopted. She suggested the small *Flag* painting be placed so as to protrude from the adjacent wall rather than hang on the wall within the *Enigma Wall* installation. This suggestion was adopted because having considered this kind of presentation for a painting before, it was clear it would be to advantage. Overall the director was very amenable to placement decisions for the artworks.

Other issues came as questions by peers in the audience about the artwork and the exhibition premise. These questions fed into the peer critiques. One of the most significant questions to arise regarding the premise was, “so what’s the difference between an exhibition where you curate yourself and a show you put on?” At first this question was unanswerable, but on reflection, distinct differences became apparent. On the surface, there is very little difference between an artist curating her own work and an artist presenting an exhibition of her work, but looking deeper into the intentions of the artist those differences become significant. An artist who is curating her own work will choose work from different creative periods and will take work out of series, isolating them from their original creative context, recontextualising them to generate new meaning for the works. Likewise, it is supposed that an artist who is reinterpreting the gallery space in addition to, or for the purposes of recontextualising her work would also be included in this notion of autocurating. This is a supposition because this issue was not specifically addressed in this case study, but analogies can clearly be seen. Allowing this redefinition of the works to happen is a significant difference between a self-curated exhibition and ‘a show put on’ by an artist. The redefinition suggests using the artwork as discursive material. It’s this ‘artwork as material’ that separates the intention to curate from the intention to exhibit. An artist curating her own work will use her artwork as material for discourse, changing its meaning and removing it from its original creative context, whereas an artist putting on a show of her work will exhibit her latest body of work. The latter may have great expressive importance as a body of work for the artist, and the presentation of the body of work may be a significant presentation for the artist’s career, but the difference in intention to recontextualise and redefine meaning for the work is the striking difference between autocuration and presentation.

This leads to the issue, of “whose voice?” which surfaced in the peer reviews. The professional curator acts as mediator when communicating with an audience to present the expressive viewpoint of the artist, acting as an authority on the artist’s work. This is complex territory for the artist/curator. The I-artist and the I-curator share the voice of authority, both as creator and presenter. But how is the voice of authority to be distinguished between the ‘creative authority’ and the ‘presentation authority’? An early solution was found in drafting the premise text for the exhibition by using the first person ‘I’ for the voice of the artist and the passive voice for the voice of the curator. This separation in writing occurred naturally in drafting

the text, which suggested this could be a useable strategy and structure. However, in redrafting the text to address issues of length and clarity, this separation was lost and it became impossible to separate the two voices one from the other; this led to the question of whose voice was speaking within the text and even within the exhibition. It was suggested by one of the critiquing peers that the voice of the curator was visible, but not that of the artist. My lead supervisor rebutted this, saying he felt both voices were visible. It is significant to note that the critiquing peer did not know me previous to accepting the invitation to critique the exhibition and was obliged to respond to what she saw and read in the text only, while my supervisor was more familiar with my creative output. Nevertheless, the result was that the critiquing peer wanted to know more about the artist and my supervisor saw more depth in the work, gaining more understanding for the project as a whole, both of which are considered positive results.

The second critiquing peer raised an issue of the variety of styles represented within the different works in the exhibition and asked how I understood them hanging together. My response after consideration was that these works addressed issues of the self in some way or another and I was “thinking through the works,” to borrow a phrase used by my second supervisor, to consider how I understand the issues of self and simulacra being investigated. In other words, in “understanding how the works hang together” it was less an issue of artistic expression than a review of how I understood the issues under exploration. However, the expressive and artistic elements were first and foremost in importance to the presentation of the work within the exhibition. These and all the other questions raised were significant in processing and analysing the exhibition project and in formulating the self-critique of the show.

Writing the self-critique of the exhibition posed a real challenge personally, but was a powerful suggestion by my second supervisor. It is the logical conclusion to the autocurated exhibition. Whether this could ever be realised as practice within the larger discourse of art criticism is outside the parameters of this study, but it raises fascinating questions and presents distinct challenges for the authorial self and the art establishment. Within the boundaries of this study, writing a self-critique tested the limits of the authority of the self within artist/curator practice. Objectifying an artwork created by the I-artist for use by the I-curator is a complex problem involving redefinition of meaning, both for the work and for the role of the self in practice, but objectifying the self for self-criticism is a highly charged act of agency within the sphere of artist/curator practice. It asserts that the I-critic has authority over the I-curator and the I-artist, and is a voice of equal importance with peer criticism. The purpose of the self-critique within this case study was to create a vehicle for analysing the decisions made for the exhibition. I found it necessary to rely on peer criticism in order to formulate my own analysis because I could not remove the knowledge of their questions posed for the exhibition from my analysis and developing view of the show. This may have been primarily because most of the peer criticism preceded the composition of the self-critique. This preceded order was not planned, but was a result of logistics. It would be very interesting to test

how this works when no peer criticism is proffered in advance. Essentially, I could step outside myself, but I could not step beyond the knowledge of already received peer criticism.

The audience survey was a very simple tool to gauge the consideration of the curation of an exhibition in general. It was also used to get a sense of how visitors felt about artists who curate their own work; asking if members of the audience would perceive the exhibition as an extension of the artistic expression or if the exhibition could be seen as an objective presentation by the artist. Finally, it asked for an audience member value judgement of whether artists curated their own work successfully. The results generally indicated that curating is either always or usually considered important in the communication of the meaning of an artwork, and that curatorial interpretation usually helps audience members to gain a deeper understanding of the work. Most respondents saw the autocurated exhibition as an extension of the artistic expression rather than an objective effort to present the work to an audience, however of 17 responses, 4 considered it to be both expressive and objective. The respondents were uncertain about making a value judgement on whether artists curate their work effectively for a viewing audience. The tally of responses and comments are provided in a separate attachment to this report.

This project produced several outcomes:

- The exhibition itself and the photographic record of its presentation.
- 20 new artworks, 1 theoretical installation realised, 2 older unseen and unnamed works given a defined identity.
- Prototype exhibition catalogue produced through Blurb Inc. online publishing.
- Critical essay by Martin Golding written for the book.
- Curatorial essay written by the artist/curator to be included in the book if published.
- 2 videotaped peer critiques.
- 1 videotaped artist talk to an audience at ARTHOUSE1.
- 1 exhibition review by David Minton.
- 1 self-critique review written by the artist/curator.
- Short audience survey.
- Promotional materials for the exhibition.
- This case study report.
- A painting commission from the exhibition.

### **Assessment of Study Findings**

The study findings relate to two different areas within the study, first the philosophical topics explored through the artworks of the transient self, active simulacra and the autobiographical trace. The second area of study findings relate to the curatorial issues of curating oneself: how the transient self facilitates the

passage between the I-artist and the I-curator, how the active simulacrum works as foundation for the transient self and as an activator for change, the distinction between autobiography and the autobiographical and the significance this has for artist/curator practice, and finally, how the voice of the I-artist and I-curator can be communicated effectively to an audience.

The artworks in this exhibition were chosen because of their reference to self. They were selected from creative periods from 2008 to 2015. Some of these works although dated 2008, had never been seen or titled. All of these works suggested a narrative, often autobiographical in nature. It was this autobiographical nature that first required definition for the case study. "The artworks in this exhibition tell a story, it's not important what the story is, but what *is* important are the ways in which the means of telling a story are translated into visual terms: the repetitions, linkages and transitions, the relationships created through images and objects, the layering of imagery, things reclaimed and reused, things appropriated, and the gaps which provide the space for mutability... All of these concepts are contained within these works, which are not autobiographies, but are the autobiographical curation of a self" (Boyer, 2015a). This description from the premise statement made the claim that the works were not autobiographies, from this point, it was necessary to distinguish between the 'autobiographical' and 'autobiography'. It became apparent through looking closely at the works; no temporal narrative was present, no story with a beginning, middle, and end. What was visible, were snippets of 'storied' elements. These elements hinted at a narrative, but went no further in revealing any context, relevance or relationship to the artist as author of the works, as would be the case in an autobiography. There was no way to know if these elements were true or fictional. These elements were termed "autobiographical" in line with Louis A. Renza's (1977) comment, "Thus we might conceive of autobiographical writing as an endless prelude: a beginning without middle (the realm of fiction), or without end (the realm of history); a purely fragmentary, incomplete literary project, unable to be more than an arbitrary document". This quote sums up the nature of these storied fragments in the artworks, while hinting at a simulacral essence in the autobiographical through the 'fragmentary', 'incomplete' and 'arbitrary', and the inability to be anything more than those things. These artworks, like the autobiographical, are simultaneously, true, fiction and history. As a result of this ambiguity, what is conveyed is a sense of lived experience, and of the active simulacrum simultaneously in appearance as 'truth', 'fiction' and 'history', without ever revealing if one is more real than any of the others.

"I'm using my own work as theoretical material, 'thinking' through the work to explore and express contemporary philosophical perspectives of the self. In this instance, the curation is less an extension of the artistic expression, than a review of how I understand the complexities of self and its relationship to simulacra" (Boyer, 2015b). This explains how I understand the variety of works hanging together in this exhibition, which I describe as "the story of telling a story" (Boyer, 2015b). This 'story of telling a story' introduces the 'active simulacra'. This view of simulacra as 'active' is based on the Deleuzian notion of simulacra as something more than a



copy, but “an instance which includes a difference within itself...all resemblance abolished so that one can no longer point to the existence of an original and a copy...in other words, always a difference of difference as its immediate element” (Deleuze, 1968). “The story of telling a story is not a meta-narrative in the sense that it's a story about a story; rather it's the instance where the structure of the narrative is revealed. It is the instance when all activity of the simulacrum can be seen, in other words, it's the schema of the active simulacrum, the record of the simulacrum in action. The “story of telling a story” is the instance when the structure of story telling is made visible” (Boyer, 2015b, footnote 3). My aim is to expand the concept of what simulacra can be with this notion of the ‘active simulacra’. A project space called ‘I’ is the beginning of this formulation.

In establishing these two elements, the autobiographical trace and the active simulacra, the transient self became apparent in the works. This was most readily perceived through a strong theme of disappearance visible in the work and reinforced through curatorial decisions. For example, in the Enigma Wall installation, “[c]omposed of three works: *Enigma Wall (2015)*, *We're no longer seeing, but reading (2011)*, and *Flag (small)(2008)*. The original meaning of these earlier works changes when placed in relation to *Enigma Wall* wallpaper, which is itself a transmutation from painted original (2008) to tiled digital image (2013), to hyper-replicated pattern (2015). What was a frozen gestural movement (*Flag*), and a theoretical coupling of different artistic views of self (*We're no longer seeing...*) becomes a statement of the transient, simulacral self; a self that changes in time, unsure of whether it is beginning or ending, with unreliable perceptions, and a body which disappears within its own representation of itself” (Boyer, 2015b).

From the visibility of these theoretical elements within the work, the curating then became an issue of placement and reinforcement rather than a fully expressive exercise. This happened in several ways, most significantly, but perhaps most subtly, by the thematic division of the main gallery into two parts. On the right, “a group of curiously mute works, quiet enigmas with no discernable action, but rather a quiet stoicism as activity happens to them; the sunlight passing over them, the breeze causing them to flutter, the reflected light causing them to fade, reflections happening on their surface” (Boyer, 2015c). And on the left, “a group of work dominated by a large black blob. The gestural slinging of black paint onto the white canvas forms this circular shape, like a black sun having a tantrum... This gestural activity is carried through the other works on this side of the gallery suggesting an active agent at work” (Boyer, 2015c). This separation between a passive and active self reinforced the sense of transience, disappearance, and the reappearance of the self in a continuous ebb and flow, with the newly entitled painting, *Ebb*, at the centre point of this division.

“Our forming, the becoming of ‘I’ proceeds through the development of dispositional traits, not chosen, given, revealed in action. We find out who we are, even as we state who we are. Dispositions are the product of raw experience; Pavlov's dogs did not choose to dribble. We become close and distant, embrace and recoil

through nerve endings as our story writes us. Jane Boyer's work here is to do with 'I' the artist and 'I' the curator, both simultaneous and alternating one with the other. Implicit in this is separation, is a duality, a stepping back to gain perspective on the 'I' that is observed. The evolution of curation from presentation to interpretation to the refolding use of art as material in itself through which the curator appropriates creativity in the manner of the artist, has been reappropriated here, (re)absorbed as the working process(es) of the artist. A collage of actions becomes an osmosis of roles. This is an exhibition with struggle at its heart. Who am 'I'? How am 'I', it concerns the matter of becoming, through fragments collaged, memories recovered, experiences revisited" (Minton, 2015).

This question of a transient self has immediate implications for artist/curator practice, especially when curating one's own work. When should the artist's voice be apparent, when the curator's? Can they 'speak' simultaneously? Does one have authority over the other? Can they be in opposition or are they always in synchronicity? How can an audience distinguish which is which?

Three questions were posed while curating *A project space called 'I'*:

1. How can I communicate effectively with the audience in visual terms and through the written texts?
2. In analysing the dualism inherent in artist/curator practice: when is a division of the dualism useful? When is fusion inevitable?
3. Will a parallel be drawn between the dualism of the self and the dualism of the artist/curator practice?

The first question presents practical issues of communication, while the other two are more philosophical, but nonetheless, ground the question of communication. An understanding of the dualism of the self and the practice, it is hoped, will make for better communication with the audience.

The question of communication is yet to be fully answered. It is a complex issue that needs an understanding of audiences; this was the reason for issuing the audience survey. I felt it important to get a general view of how audiences regarded curating and how they felt about artists curating their own work. The peer critique questioned whether the communication was accomplished successfully. It seems then, that the importance of curating is well understood, while the question of whether artists curate themselves effectively is yet to be decided. This has a bearing on effective communication, because if visitors' expectations are uncertain, clear communications are required to overcome these uncertainties.

This case study, and the two to follow, provide testing grounds for issues such as these, and are significant for research in the field of practice; they are the location of hands-on practical inquiry and application. They offer a chance to see artworks and theoretical postulations placed in context and to receive immediate peer/visitor feedback. Because curating is engaged with audiences, it is important to have practical data from actual curatorial activity. The whole research thesis is largely

divided into three research areas:

1. Literature review
2. Studio practice
3. Curatorial practice

The exhibition case studies are the unifying factor for all three research areas. As mentioned, two case studies remain: an exhibition where I curate other artists, placing my work in relation to theirs, which will test the ethics of presenting my own work in relation with other artists' work, and a final test case where a peer curator curates my work. The test case will offer the opportunity to compare results and issues identified through the first two case studies where I'm actively curating, against results of a peer curating my work.

### **Reflections on the Study:**

This first exhibition case study focused on curating myself, raising issues of communication with the self and with the audience, along with issues of duality within the self and when assuming the dualistic role of artist/curator. In exploring these issues, what became apparent was the necessity of a transient simulacral self in order to move between these positions, facilitating the rhythmic appearance, disappearance and reappearance of the self. The study was effective, as a deeper understanding of all these issues, which were already well considered, was gained. So much so, I could wish for the opportunity to repeat the study to examine the differences of understanding and their application. Communicating with the audience, in particular, I think would benefit from this.

Throughout the case study, it was my goal to be flexible and to consider the position of others involved, namely the gallery and those peers who very kindly gave their time to participate in the study. I was aware that the gallery had certain publicity standards to maintain as well as certain established protocols. I did not want to interfere with any of these and allowed many of those decisions to be made by the gallery; as a result, the promotional materials (postcards, invitation and publicity poster) were designed by the gallery. I also designed a poster for the exhibition, which I include as part of the outcomes for this study. I posted these posters around ARU and Cambridge School of Art. I made no objection to the gallery using their own poster in circumstances they saw fit. I worked collaboratively with the gallery to design the exhibition catalogue, providing the workflow, images, artwork details and guidance on layout drafts, while gallery director, Rebecca Fairman, worked to design the cover, layout of the pages, and overall book design. We both agreed it was a very successful effort. Rebecca also very kindly rendered my video piece, *2 Minutes*, for the exhibition. She understood the importance of my curating the exhibition, and left those decisions largely to me.

Reflecting further on the peer critique, it may be significant that the curator was perceived and not the artist by the peer, because the artist's voice had all the artworks to speak for it, whereas the curator's resource in the exhibition presentation may be overlooked or taken for granted by the audience, even though

the short survey in this study suggested that audiences usually feel curation helps them to understand the artwork. Curatorial decision-making is not always singled out for consideration within an exhibition experience, it can recede into the general perception of the overall exhibition while the artworks take centre stage. I think if the artist's voice had been perceived above the curator, it would have suggested artistic presentation, rather than autocuration was at work.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of this study, for me, was the way the artworks informed and reinforced the findings. Many of the works were direct postulates of the theoretical issues investigated, though they were not made for that purpose, nor were those theoretical issues uppermost in mind while working in the studio. As most artists will attest, when working creatively in the studio, the creative drive is the overwhelming force not theoretical concerns. A testament to the fact, most of these artworks were made well before this case study was designed. These philosophical issues intrigue me, so it may be no surprise the artworks were so closely related to the theoretical issues investigated in the case study, but I found the depth of that relationship stimulating nonetheless, as did others, to my great satisfaction.

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## Survey Participant Analysis:

- 17 responses from an estimated 100 visitors
- 8 of 17 listed their profession as 'artist'
- 11 of 17 were over 50 years of age
- All listed themselves as avid art enthusiasts

## Question responses:

1. Do you consider the way artwork is presented to be an important element in communicating the meaning of artwork? Response choices: Always, Usually, Not Sure, Rarely, Never.

- 8 respondents chose 'Always' as their response
- 7 chose 'Usually'
- 1 chose 'Rarely'
- 1 was split between 'Always' and 'Usually'

2. Does curatorial interpretation of an artist's work help you to gain a deeper understanding of the work? Response choices: Always, Usually, Not Sure, Rarely, Never.

- 5 respondents chose 'Always'
- 8 chose 'Usually'
- 2 were unsure
- 2 responded 'Rarely'

3. When an artist curates his or her own work, do you see the presentation as an extension of the artistic expression or an effort to objectively present the work to an audience? Response choices: Expression, Objective Effort, Both, Neither.

- 10 respondents chose 'Expression' as their response
- 2 chose 'Objective Effort'
- 4 respondents chose 'Both'
- 1 chose 'Neither', with this comment: "It is very difficult to be 'objective' outside the box of prejudice, however open & interdisciplinary one's approach. Like Niels Bohr, we can only approximate positions."

4. In your experience, do artists curate their work effectively for the viewing audience? Response choices: Always, Usually, Not Sure, Rarely, Never.

- 4 respondents chose 'Usually' as their response
- 12 chose 'Not Sure'
- 1 chose rarely