

## KIM DONALDSON

### Re-Framing Artist as Curator

#### Abstract

When looking at images of Marcel Duchamp's studio around 1916-18 what emerges could be, in our terms, a type of exhibition space. Here works appear to be carefully placed on the walls and floor and some are suspended from the ceiling. As a semi-public space it served as a place where he lived, entertained and presented his art works.<sup>1</sup> It was an exhibition space, of types, that did not really look much like other institutions exhibiting artworks around this time.<sup>2</sup> The way that Duchamp's studio appeared could be interpreted as a reflection of his attitude and so too could his comments when he wrote, 'All exhibitions of painting or sculpture make me ill. And I'd rather not be involved in them.'<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this was an indication of his boredom and dissatisfaction with the institution of art accounting for his repeated challenges to the exhibition form.

This paper will offer a journey through a series of 'artist as curator' initiatives that contribute to the way that the form of the exhibition is currently perceived. Beginning with Marcel Duchamp's curatorial activity, they will be discussed as examples of a persistent form of seriousness. An elaboration of the methodology of performing the curatorial will then expand the notion of the 'artist as curator' through a contemporary project, *Technopia Tours*.

In 1972 during an interview with Man Ray the interviewer referred to his activities of the 1920s and 30s as fun. Man Ray corrected him by stating that it was not so at the time. 'It was very tense. It was very bitter and there was no humour in it. ...What we did was really to upset things. ... Subconsciously to clear the way ... for something new which we didn't know yet what it might be.'<sup>4</sup> This is the attitude of seriousness that I would like to refer. Irit Rogoff has described it as 'a stubbornness that refuses to acknowledge the rule of power while fully understanding its dominance. It is a mode of criticality, of being able to analyse a set of conditions while living out their realities...'<sup>5</sup> She adds that it is about being inside the art world but not being convinced by its logic. This position of disenchantment enables speculations on how things could be

---

<sup>1</sup> Filipovic, 2009, p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> The 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art (the Armory Show), New York, of only a few years earlier is an example of this difference.

<sup>3</sup> Filipovic, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Man Ray, 1972.

<sup>5</sup> Rogoff, 2013, p. 70.

different. Questions need to be asked and then communicated through performative means. Rogoff goes on to say that,

Thinking is a practice that always addresses a problem or an issue, whose drive is to bring about something better – not more valuable, or more logical, or more right, but better in that it opens up into numerous possibilities through imaginings, or desirings, or wishful projections, or most importantly through the ability to shift paradigms, to suggest another set of assumptions, another driving logic.<sup>6</sup>

The seriousness that Rogoff describes requires an embodied criticality that emerges beyond criticism and critique. It is the act of being inside something, being conjoined with a context through a process of doing. This is quite different to criticism and critique that rely on theoretical evaluations and analysis made from the outside. Criticism finds fault and exercises judgment according to its values and critique examines the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic. Criticality differs by being embedded in the problem it is addressing.<sup>7</sup>

Bringing about something better requires a performativity generated from the inside. What emerges are speculations, or steps into the unknown, that require testing. As actions or utterances, that are never identical and include deviation and difference, they often need to be repeated many times. To produce change a process of transformation must take place. From here new directions can ensue that have not been tested before. This requires a certain risk as in all probability these 'gestures', as Brian O'Dougherty named them in the 1970s, will not work at first. As a form of invention they draw attention to the context and the ideas that they change and join. If successful they become history and then eliminate themselves until such a time as 'the context mimics the one that stimulated it, making it relevant again.'<sup>8</sup>

In 1916 Marcel Duchamp hung some *Readymades* in the umbrella-stand area at the Bourgeois Gallery in New York.<sup>9</sup> They went unnoticed. Then in 1917 he tried again with the submission of *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists Exhibition. His work was certainly noticed on this occasion but rejected on the grounds that it was not art. Presenting his objects within the exhibition context had raised a serious question about where the boundary lay for what was and was not art.

Duchamp's questions continued when in 1933, with his friend Constantin Brancusi, he ventured another curatorial speculation at the Brummer Gallery in New York. Here perhaps the question in the artists' minds was again about boundaries. This time it was about where the workspace ended and the exhibition space began. Through the process of curation a transformation was enabled and the commercial gallery space took on the essence of

---

<sup>6</sup> Rogoff, 2013, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Rogoff, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> O'Dougherty, 1999, p. 69 - 70.

<sup>9</sup> Filipovic, 2009, footnote 3 on p. 19.

Brancusi's studio. My argument is that the thinking used by these artists was directed towards trying for something 'better'; something that brought a sense of the studio into the gallery. Their efforts could then generate something new.

Duchamp's 'artist to artist' curatorial relationships continued to develop with his 1938 appointment as the 'generateur-arbitre', for the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* at Galerie Beaux Arts in Paris. As the umpire, or mediator, Duchamp collaborated with the Surrealists to generate an experience that radically shifted what an exhibition looked like. Elena Filipovic states that,

He turns the elegantly appointed eighteenth-century interior into a darkened "grotto" covering the ornate mouldings, ceiling, and bank of lights with ... 1,200 suspended coal sacks. He installs an iron brazier in the centre of the main hall and hangs artworks on uprooted department store revolving doors. The ceiling undulates, the walls are blackened, and coal dust invariably falls onto the finery of the exhibitions guests.<sup>10</sup>

Add to this a pool surrounded by real grass, four large comfortable beds and dirt and leaves covering the floor. At the opening visitors explored the darkened space with torches. The sensory extravaganza included the smell of roasting coffee and the sound of a German Army marching song combined with cries from a performer simulating hysteria.<sup>11</sup> Despite Duchamp not attending the opening, his activity had stimulated something that had never been experienced before and prompted further 'serious' questions within the art world about the boundaries of what an exhibition could be.

Four years later in 1942 for the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition, held in New York, Duchamp challenged the notion of the how an exhibition was viewed. By criss-crossing the space with a complicated network of white string, boundaries or barriers, were set up within the gallery. What seemed initially like an impenetrable web was instead a carefully devised series of guides that directed the public through the gallery to experience the space in a new way.<sup>12</sup>

At this point I'd like to draw attention to the methodology for "performing the curatorial", which proves useful when examining the attitude discussed so far. This recently articulated curatorial form signifies a shift of emphasis away from a more prescribed attitude of exhibition making. Here the curator can be inside the exhibition making process to such an extent that the end result is not apparent. Beatrice von Bismarck describes it as a microcosm of oppositional forces, thrown together like a meteor shower, moving toward an unknown, 'incomprehensible', outcome within the space and time of the event. This process requires mediation to force a continuous negotiation between all elements. They become 'temporary constellations always in a

---

<sup>10</sup> Filipovic, 2009, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid and also Sandford, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Vick, 2008.

state of becoming.'<sup>13</sup> Contesting an uncomfortable, yet nevertheless cohesive whole they occupy a temporal space. Von Bismarck refers to these constellations as 'actors' and 'actants'. This alludes to Bruno Latour's network theory where interactions with both the human and the non-human aspects of contemporary life all have consequences. This thinking gains significance as an expanded form of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary term 'heteroglossia', where many voices create a 'dialogic', or conversational, exchange that forms a narrative. With Latour this field is vastly expanded to incorporate such influences as the cultural, environmental, contextual, relational, material and attitudinal. Each of these has the effect of creating difference, or otherness.

A curator, like a translator, is an intermediary that bridges differences. As Boris Buden states, 'She seems to always stand somewhere in between, mediating between producers and consumers of artworks, enabling a communicative exchange between artists and art critics or art audiences ...'<sup>14</sup> This mediation implicates a positive force where a creative connection is made, mostly in terms of communication like traditional translation. The curator and the translator are perceived as a figure that unites what has been divided. They build bridges over gaps and help with the crossing of boundaries and chasms, in short they are reconcilers of differences.<sup>15</sup> Translation is a filter that lets some things pass and blocks others. As a negative force it separates, splits, divides, excludes and dismisses. It introduces a border as a discrimination. These borders define 'the external left-overs', 'the space of cultural trash', and create 'gatekeepers' that uphold their own particular value systems.

Traditional translation is two different languages and two different social spaces. It is a homolingual address.<sup>16</sup> The traditional curator also operates within this homospheric model as the mediator between art production and art reception. As Buden states, 'There is no innocent mode of address – however purely linguistic or cultural, however idealistic or 'superstructural', it will always have, like ideology, real consequences.'<sup>17</sup> He calls for a 'heterolingual' address where translation is not reliant on the same information being communicated. It is a space where miscommunication and the unknown mingle together effecting each other to create something new.

In this expanded form the curator seeks to capture the heterogeneity of the art world via the spatial conditions of an uninterrupted heterospherical address. This is a love that exists between knowledge and art that comes through the curator's matchmaking, a true love with ambiguities, misrecognitions, failures, disappointments and betrayals. Curating is not

---

<sup>13</sup> Von Bismarck, 2012, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Buden, 2012, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sakai, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Buden, 2012, p. 34.

creating but citing and referring. It is an assemblage, a bundle, that shifts something elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

I would now like to refer to an 'artist-to-artist' speculation, *The American Trip*, proposed by Ed Kienholz and Jean Tinguely in 1966. Coming across this work in the re-staging of *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Prada Foundation in Venice, it struck me as a move towards the notion of the heterosphere. As one of Kienholz's *Concept Tableaux* this work was a response to his dissatisfaction with time intensive and costly production. Each of these conceptual works began with a proposal. This took the form of a plaque and a detailed framed description and costing of the work. From here there was the potential for a second stage, a drawing, and then a third stage where the work would be completed.<sup>19</sup> *The American Trip* proposed that Tinguely and Kienholz take a road trip together to make a work. As a gesture between two artists it began with no fixed outcome in mind. They would just drive until, as the proposal goes, they 'were compelled by a thing, a place [or] a situation to do something.'<sup>20</sup> I would like to suggest that Kienholz saw Tinguely's 'European eyes' as a positive force that could shift **his** experience of America somewhere else.

*The American Trip* was never realized yet gains resonance through my contemporary project *Technopia Tours*. Here through a 'criticality' that embraces 'difference' this curatorial project presents as a series of events, or exhibitions. It is global in scope and identified by workers wearing orange uniforms. Relying on an increasing network of artists and curators in diverse locations it is open to collaborative opportunities as they arise. Overall, it seeks to make visible what is often overlooked in the processes of the artist, the curator and their public. I would like to refer to this group as 'art tourists' because they share a common interest, art production and its presentation<sup>21</sup>. Beginning each journey with an expectation of adventure and amazement they travel to places they have never been to before. As passengers they hope that they will gain an extra something that will stimulate and add value to their lives. *Technopia Tours* questions how things are and through performative means makes speculations about how things could be different, and perhaps 'better'. Sometimes these 'gestures' go unnoticed and may not work at first, but with persistence and repetition a different, often unexpected, direction ensues.

In summary, one can argue that dissatisfaction with the institution of art generates thinking that scrutinizes and challenges. By using the example of Marcel Duchamp, I have outlined a methodology that asks questions and tests solutions. It aims to move things towards something 'better'. Framed through a lens of 'seriousness', gained from knowledge of the contemporary art world, this activity requires persistence through a performative dimension. By aligning the attitude of the 'artist as curator' with the methodology of 'performing the curatorial' a language can be articulated that will

---

<sup>18</sup> Buden, 2012, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Brooks, 1996, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> Kienholz and Tinguely, 1966.

<sup>21</sup> Meta Bauer, 2013, p. 75.

accommodate a nuanced and uneasy alliance of disparate parts. Here miscommunications, the unknown and differences of all kinds can collide. This interaction, that whilst precarious, is inherently productive. Within this context *Technopia Tours* promises ongoing activity and enables the possibility of something new.

### **Biographical Statement**

*Kim Donaldson is an artist and curator. Her self-initiated projects challenge the exhibition form through multi-layered and many faceted processes that engage institutions, collections, artists and the public in various locations. Often going beyond the field of art these projects have included the establishment of Techno Park Studios, a gallery/exhibition space (<http://www.technoparkstudios.com>) and the solo exhibition *Between the Lines* at Heide MOA, which researched the private library of the Reids. Her most recent project *Technopia Tours* has travelled to Zbludza, Berlin, Birmingham, Singapore, Venice and London with collaborative iterations involving over 15 artists. Kim lectures at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne.*

## Illustrations



Fig. 1. Kim Donaldson, *Technopia Tours*, 2013, digital photograph, dimensions variable. (Copyright Kim Donaldson.)

## Bibliography

- Brooks, 1996:** Rosetta Brooks, *Kienholz: A Retrospective*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Distributed Art Publisher, 1996.
- Buden, 2012:** Boris Buden, 'Towards the Heterosphere: Curator as Translator', in *Performing the Curatorial*, ed. Maria Lind, Berlin: Sternberg Press and Tensta konsthall, 2012.
- Filipovic, 2009:** Elena Filipovic, 'A Museum That is Not', in *e-flux journal*, #4, March 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-museum-that-is-not/>; accessed October 21, 2013.
- Kienholz and Tinguely, 1966:** Edward Kienholz and Jean Tinguely, *The American Trip*, Concept Tableaux, 1966, [http://www.tinguely.ch/de/presse/pressematerial/2012/Kienholz\\_Pressebilder.html](http://www.tinguely.ch/de/presse/pressematerial/2012/Kienholz_Pressebilder.html); accessed October 14, 2013.
- Man Ray, 1972:** Man Ray, 'Man Ray on the Seriousness of Dada', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dDdHlw0GMQ>; accessed October 25, 2013.
- Meta Bauer, 2013:** Ute Meta Bauer, 'Authorship (ext)ended: artist, artwork, public and the curator: Ute Meta Bauer and Yvonne P. Doderer, interviewed by Annemarie Brand and Monika Molnar', in *On Curating*, Issue 19, June 2013.
- O'Dougherty, 1999:** Brian O'Dougherty, *Inside the White Cube*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999.
- Rogoff, 2003:** Irit Rogoff, 'Smuggling' - *An Embodied Criticality*, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>; accessed May 6, 2013.
- Rogoff, 2013:** Irit Rogoff, 'On Being Serious in the Art World', in *Visual Cultures as Seriousness*, London and Berlin: Goldsmiths, University of London and Sternberg Press, 2013.
- Sakai, 2010:** Naoki Sakai, 'Translation as a filter', trans. Gavin Walker, in *Transeuropeennes, International Journal of Critical Thought*, 2010, [http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/en/articles/200/Translation\\_as\\_a\\_filter/](http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/en/articles/200/Translation_as_a_filter/); accessed August 11, 2013.
- Sandford, 1995:** Mariellen R. Sandford, ed., *Happenings and other Acts*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Vick, 2008:** John Vick, 'A New Look: Marcel Duchamp, his Twine, and the 1942 First Papers of Surrealism', *Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, 2008, [http://www.toutfait.com/online\\_journal\\_details.php?postid=47245](http://www.toutfait.com/online_journal_details.php?postid=47245); accessed October 24, 2013.
- Von Bismarck, 2012:** Beatrice von Bismarck, 'Introduction', in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jorn Schaffaff and Thomas Weski, Berlin



and Leipzig: Sternberg Press and Kulteren des Kuratorischen an der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst, 2012.