

A Plea for Tenderness...

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Introduction

Alternative to what?

When I was approached to give a lecture on alternative media and places, I was inclined to do a rant on the exponential increase of curating figures and curated activities over the last ten years – something I always wanted to do by lack of a proper understanding of what this entails. This increase of lectures, events, screenings and music nights – even curated coffee bars and lifestyle magazines, that are part of a wider cultural field, but not necessarily connected to and engaged with current artistic practices, curating and writing as such. However negatively influential this tendency might be: the idea that curating is now a widespread activity, but commonly misunderstood as the act of selection and pairing, and thereby emptying out its potentiality as a profession, it will not be that focus of this talk. That being said, it led me to think about what is alternative still to curating: what does it mean to go outside of curating by means of curating...

Also in the framework of this lecture series, we have to ask ourselves the question, again and again: alternative to what? What alternative media and places? The stating of the word 'alternative' already implies and imposes some given structure: and in order to be responsive to that, we must try to come to terms with it, perhaps even make it strange to understand it. So, sincerely, how are we talking, and about what?

I was asked to talk about alternative scenarios and formats, from a curatorial viewpoint, in light of the current politicization of culture and recent governmental funding cuts in the arts. Without being facetious, this is a problematic and highly consequential issue, for artists, writers and performers, curators and mediators, spaces and institutions alike. In that, it has astonished me that from the political side of the spectrum, the funding cuts and the decline of subsidies have been advocated as a necessity in the key of a general and European financial crisis, but rather I have an inclination to think that there is an ideological subversion to that, which is being withheld for worse. One might call that falconry, or as we say in Dutch, "een drogreden". With hindsight, one could argue that the cuts were bound to happen: that there has been a reliance on support that was internally deteriorating, perhaps by misunderstanding, a lack of communication, and the idea that art lost its mass-appeal, which really works badly within populist tendencies.

The fact of the matter is that we now have to work with and around this situation, and with this talk I would like to underscore that there certainly is tremendous potential, but we have to use tricks, and use an applied sense of inventiveness, not only to the work we put out in the world, but also in regard of how this should be done by means of self-organisation. In so doing, I would like to make a plea for tenderness by addressing two formats as alternative to and without the need for state funding, for that matter.

The Domestic Exhibition

Swedenborg Epic.

Both examples which I would like to foreground position themselves against the reductive claims of being either autonomous or dependent. I would even claim that many artists, curators, magazines, among others, feel more independent than they would like to be at this moment. My plea for tenderness concerns the notion of 'interdependence': a setting in which each member of a given group is mutually dependent on the other partakers.

Lets take, for example, the exhibition format of the domestic exhibition. Inherent to the term, and generally speaking, a domestic exhibition takes place in a living environment, either occupied or desolated. It's not that there's anything new about this format, but I suppose it has been somewhat undervalued due to art's constant surge for professionalisation. This format mostly operates outside of institutional contexts, with the exception of some, for instance, Chambres d'Amis (as in guest rooms, or, literally 'friends rooms') by Jan Hoet in 1986, or Berlin 37 Räume (Berlin 37 Rooms) by Klaus Biesenbach of 1992. The recurrence of this format, however, enables a group of artists to give a presence to and contextualise their work – optionally in consultation with an external curator, without the need for the legitimisation of a hosting space. Mind that this might be more problematic than it seems: the monitoring of the quality of the curatorial thesis or the exhibition statement is very important as the exhibition generates its own support structure and reputation. In other words, you cannot rely on the reputation of the space to give you leeway for inconsistencies.

Most importantly, I would argue, is the idea of making your art go public. So often it is the case that one is being confronted with the catch-22 of time, money and space. Working on a domestic exhibition with a group of like-minded people this can be evaded: if you are willing to dedicate your time, spend some of your money and agree on a suitable space. In contrast with this, and this might sound banal, I would recommend to think beyond your work as being accessible via a website, and it is not accessible via a website. Although digital representation of one's work has become more of a requirement, it definitely lacks intimacy and proximity. This has not so much to do with ideas around

authenticity, but rather with raising an awareness of your work, in the presence of your peers, fellow-artists, and the people invited that might show up.

As a recent example I will discuss a domestic exhibition I curated myself in London with two friends. At the time we used to live in Brockmer House, a brutalist building in the Eastern part of town. At a given moment we googled the name Brockmer, which referenced John Paul Brockmer, who was a known member of the Moravian Church (a Protestant denomination). We found out that he once gave shelter to Emanuel Swedenborg, a famous Swedish philosopher, scientist, mystic, etcetera. During his stay with Brockmer, Swedenborg allegedly went insane. In our research we found three accounts upholding his insanity, but most of them were based on rumor and hearsay, as advocated by contesters of his then other-worldly thoughts. We decided to use the accounts as a departure point for a domestic exhibition, for which we invited five artists with a keen interest in researching histories and visual approaches towards fiction. Four of the works were commissioned, whereas one work was an existing sound piece trying to establish a communication with Swedenborg himself.

Ultimately, the exhibition gave rise for artists to explore different fields and versions of a story. It established a collaboration between five artists, three curators and a photographer, who had never worked before, but now all promote each others work. All in all we spent £150 for three trays of beer, printing a booklet and a floor plan, and in order to buy some materials for the artists. No fees, but in my opinion, a great sense of surplus value. Consider it.

Self-Publishing

Reading Complex Act V – Postscript

Another instance of generating an awareness of your work I would like to discuss concerns self-publishing strategies. As mentioned before, the representation of your practice as an artist working today, hinges more and more on translation into texts, portfolios, websites, blogs as a means to the re-distribution of what you set out to create. In that, one has to balance between a physical and spatial practice and its digital re-distribution in order to, simply speaking, mark your presence. Unless, of course, you were already working with digital media in the first place.

Self-publishing has been much in demand over the past years and is now among mainstream and standardized possibilities of engaging with printed-matter. One can think of Blurb, Lulu, HP Magcloud and Hato Press. The issue with self-publishing is that printing a publication of your works and texts avoids the system in which it is bound to circulate. In other words, it is offering you the option to print a bundled volume, although the

distribution is often limited to the web-shop of the same company, and indeed, it's unlikely you can maintain proper distribution and make your publication worthwhile financially. I suppose this is somewhat beyond the point at an early stage of one's career. The fact that it allows you to mediate, distribute and circulate your work is already of great importance.

As an alternative to that I would suggest to think of your practice in collaborative terms. Again, the idea of interdependence as an act of working with your peers on a publication that, for instance, shares a certain subject, thematic or approach, or as a means to relate to a given time and space. In doing so, you are suddenly involved a various strands of organisation which allows you to work with different positions and people from the field: i.e. a photographer, a designer, a writer, a printer, and so forth, which will be of help in a later stage in your career.

To give an example from a recent project: this year I have been working with AND Publishing, a London-based platform exploring print on demand technologies to publish conceptually driven artists' books. Their work is an interesting hybrid between print-on-demand and self-publishing combined with a selection- and argument-driven approach. In other words, after they agree on what you propose to publish, they will help you to realise your book, provide a International Standard Book Number (ISBN), and perhaps most importantly, distribute the book to independent book sellers and feature the book on their website. The major difference with other self-publishing strategies is that this service places your book in the right context and legitimises your work in the process of doing so, through approval, selection, maintaining quality, etcetera...

More specifically, the book we published is called Reading Complex Act V – Postscript and formed the final act for a series of exhibitions, events and a symposium that took place in various locations in London from 2011–2012. To be even more specific: we – that means my colleague and I – have privately invested £300 pounds to make this analogy of examples, of everything that has been taking place. Now that the project has come to an end, we have this volume to rely on, making us aware of the fact that exhibitions and projects are ephemeral and timely per definition, but that its effect can continue, allowing for new projects to take place through documentation. Evidence really.

In conclusion we should ask the question of how to work better in uncertain and somewhat unstable times. I say working better, not only working, because I suppose that after we re-evaluate and negotiate our positions, strike a balance, we will have to assert the potential of our resources – and do we have a choice really? I suppose we have, even better in the sense we are urged to be apply a sense of criticality to our activities, and I don't mean that in a negative sense, but criticality as a way of talking and thinking through our ideas. Through all recent upheaval we might think that the world of possibilities has shrunk to

impossibility... I would claim the contrary is true: we have to engage ourselves in formats in which we are able and willing to work together, reach a consensus, whilst maintaining one's own viewpoint. I hope the two formats I have discussed, underscoring the potential of your work going public, creating an awareness of your activities by means of interdependence, collaboration and establishing long-term networks, while demanding a relatively low financial input, will harness you in some way to continue making statements.

These are the times to work with a structural approach, to speak with a clear voice that evades jargon – as Ryan Gander states: “say it simple” and we might address more people by creating unsurpassed forms of understanding, remain makers of new imaginaries, still allowing for complexity.

You possibly think I am rambling by now, so I should wrap up.

Thank you.

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