

Landmark Exhibitions Issue

Curating by Numbers

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Cultural amnesia – imposed less by memory loss than by deliberate political strategy – has drawn a curtain over much important curatorial work done in the past four decades. As this amnesia has been particularly prevalent in the fields of feminism and oppositional art, it is heartening to see young scholars addressing the history of exhibitions and hopefully resurrecting some of its more marginalised events.

I have never become a proper curator. Most of the fifty or so shows I have curated since 1966 have been small, not terribly ‘professional’, and often held in unconventional venues, ranging from store windows, the streets, union halls, demonstrations, an old jail, libraries, community centres, and schools ... plus a few in museums. I have no curating methodology nor any training in museology, except for working at the Library of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for a couple of years when I was just out of college. But that experience – the only real job I have ever had – probably prepared me well for the archival, informational aspect of conceptual art.

I shall concentrate here on the first few exhibitions I organised in the 1960s and early 1970s, especially those with numbers as their titles. To begin with, my modus operandi contradicted, or simply ignored, the connoisseurship that is conventionally understood to be at the heart of curating. I have always preferred the inclusive to the exclusive, and both conceptual art and feminism satisfied an ongoing desire for the open-ended. ‘Illogical judgments lead to new experience’, wrote [Sol LeWitt](#) in 1969. Rejecting connoisseurship was part of a generational rebellion against the Greenbergian aesthetic dictatorship that was becoming obsolete in New York by the mid 1960s. Like the pop and minimal artists from whom I learned about art, I adamantly turned my back on the diluted excesses of the second generation of Abstract Expressionists.

In the 1960s critics rarely curated, and artists never did, but all kinds of boundaries were beginning to be blurred, as in the fusion or confusion of painting and sculpture that marked the beginning of minimalism. I called it the ‘Third Stream’ (as in jazz) or ‘Rejective Art,’ and then ‘Primary Structures’. My first exhibition was

the other numbered shows, and it doubled as a rather un-lucrative benefit for the AWC. There was only one

be amalgamated. Numbers were, as we know, an important factor in conceptual art. There was a certain unspoken competition to see how far an artist could really go: On Kawara had One Million Years books, Barry produced One Billion Dots (recently reconstituted in colour) and Dan Graham's March 31, 1966 covered an infinite span from the edge of the universe to the microspace between the eye's cornea and retina. No discipline was safe as artists looked far afield for raw material. I have in mind the arguments Robert Smithson and I had on finity versus infinity (as though you could argue about such a thing): he was for finity; I was, idealistically, for infinity.

Although the theoretical branch of conceptual art, represented by the likes of Kosuth, Mel Bochner, and early Art & Language, was fond of philosophical analysis and boundaries, the free-form branch with which I identified was essentially utopian in its openness to everything extant. In this branch we were obsessed with time and space, body and mapping, perception, measurements, definitions, the literal and the quotidian, and with enigmatic, tedious activities that appeared simply to fill space and time, the kind of unexceptional lived experience that might not be available to those not living it. One of my many focuses – as I wrote in the card catalogue for 557,087, a remark which resurfaced years later in my book Overlay and which resonated with my ongoing fascination with archaeology – was in 'deliberately low-keyed art [that] often resembles ruins, like Neolithic rather than classical monuments, amalgams of past and future, remains of something "more", vestiges of some unknown venture.' I went on to talk about 'the ghost of content' hovering over the most obdurately impenetrable art and suggested that 'the more open, or ambiguous the experience offered, the more the viewer is forced to depend upon his/her own perceptions.'

Peter Plagens, reviewing 557,087 in Artforum, accused me of being an artist. He wrote: 'There is a total style to the show, a style so pervasive as to suggest that Lucy Lippard is in fact the artist and her medium is other artists.' I was annoyed by this at the time, but in another sense it is not such a bad assessment of all curating, as it pinpoints one of the prime issues of the period in which these shows were made – the deliberate blurring of roles, as well as boundaries between mediums and functions. Over the years I admit I did my best to exacerbate this confusion, collaborating with several conceptual artists, LeWitt, Barry, Huebler, David Lamelas, among others. In a labyrinthine text in which I fused my contributions to a book and exhibition project by Lamelas and a collaboration with Huebler, I wrote: 'It's all just a matter of what to call it. Does that matter? ... Is a curator an artist because he uses a group of paintings and sculptures in a theme show to prove a point of his own? Is Seth Siegelaub an artist when he formulates a new framework within which artists can show their work without reference to theme, gallery, institution, even place or time? Is he an author because his framework is books? Am I an artist when I ask artists to work within or respond to a given situation?'

The 'given situation' was a reference to my chain reaction 'exhibition' that took place in a 1970 issue of Studio International guest-edited by Siegelaub, which was inspired by LeWitt's line: 'The words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain.' Around the same time I also did a show called Groups at the School

I did not become an artist by collaborating with artists, but their fixation on the 'ordinary' was what permitted my participation in their work. The introduction of text as art and the notion of the artist working in a study instead of a studio – as John Chandler and I put it in our 1967 article 'The Dematerialization of Art' – gave me, as a writer, an entrance into the game. The artists themselves were trying to change the whole definition of artist, and I was a willing accomplice, in part because I never wanted to be a critic, and because the word sounded antagonistic to the artists with whom I associated. Since they certainly were not conforming to what was expected of visual art, I saw no reason why I had to meet the expectations of criticism.

In Seattle and Vancouver, however, I was not given the opportunity to play at being an artist: I was forced to actually make a number of the pieces in the shows because there was no money for artists' airfares. Curation became unintentionally creation. Moreover, the catalogue cards describing the artists' projects often bore little resemblance to anything that was actually in the show. This was usually for one of two reasons: the artist changed her or his mind, or the piece was so out of scale or proportion to the time and

place – took precedence over individual artists' production. We do not see much of this type of show these days, as society is increasingly 'based on an accumulated individuality instead of a community structure', as Camnitzer has put it. The last exhibition I curated –