



Manifesta Journal

MJ#8:

Collective Curating

out now

www.manifestajournal.org

Founded in 2003, Manifesta Journal is an international journal focusing on the practices and theories of contemporary curatorship. It seeks to explore and analyze current developments in curatorial work, in correspondence with the evolution of the Manifesta Biennial over the course of the past editions of the biennial. The main aim of Manifesta Journal is to give a stronger voice to an up-and-coming group of curators, intellectuals, theorists and critics, and to function as a platform for the articulation and discussion of their positions within a pan-European and transcontinental context.

Following the first issue of this new series, *The Grammar of the Exhibition*, published in December 2009, Manifesta Foundation is now presenting the second of six issues of Manifesta Journal.

Manifesta Journal #8: Collective Curating

Anticipating the curatorial model of the upcoming Manifesta 8, which will open on October 2, 2010 in the region of Murcia, Spain, Manifesta Journal #8 concentrates on the topic of collective curating.

By appointing the curatorial collectives tranzit.org (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia), Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (Egypt) and Chamber of Public Secrets (Scandinavia and Middle East) to form the curatorial team of Manifesta 8 instead of inviting individual art professionals, Manifesta Foundation is stimulating a collaborative work method connecting different geo-political regions, an ethos and objective reflected in MJ#8.

An outstanding group of authors has been invited to contribute to the MJ#8. Within the section Positions, Raqs Media Collective, curators of Manifesta 7's Ex-Alumix in Bolzano, Trentino – Alto Adige, describe their approach towards collectivity and collective work. Vít Havránek, who, together with tranzit.org, forms one of the three curatorial collectives of Manifesta 8, focuses on the micro-politics of curating by characterizing the three components of curatorial activity: theory, practice and reality. In the section Discourse, Katharina Schlieben's essay "The Crux of Polyphonic Language, or the Thing as Gathering" discusses the antagonism and polyphony of the different actors within a collective. Within the section Studies, Mexico City-based curator Magali Arriola gives an insight into the evolution of collaborative practices within several biennials, including Documenta, the Venice Biennale and Maurizio Cattelan's 6th Caribbean Biennial. The section Mapping features a text by **Chamber of Public Secrets**, the second curatorial collective of Manifesta 8 contributing to this issue. In their text they provide an overview of active collectives and collaborative artistic activities in Europe. Finally, the section Documents presents the reprint of a historical interview with Jean Leering, former director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, in which Leering argues for the importance of working collaboratively.

MJ#8 includes contributions by: Magali Arriola, Jelle Bouwhuis, **Chamber of Public Secrets (Alfredo Cramerotti, Rían Lozano and Khaled Ramadan)**, Vít Havránek and tranzit.org, Jean Leering, Julia Moritz, Paul O'Neill, Alexei Penzin, Raqs

Media Collective, Michele Robecchi, Katharina Schlieben, Yulia Tikhonova and What, How and for Whom (WHW).

The editorial team of Manifesta Journal is composed of:

Chief Editor: Viktor Misiano, Moscow (RU)

Senior Editor: Nathalie Zonnenberg, Amsterdam (NL)

Associate Editor: Filipa Ramos, Milan (I) / London (UK)

Managing Editor: Lisa Mazza, Amsterdam (NL) / Bolzano (I)

Manifesta Journal is an initiative of the Manifesta Foundation, Amsterdam and is published together with Silvana Editoriale Spa, Milano.

For subscriptions & general information

Manifesta Foundation

Prinsengracht 175 hs

1015 DS Amsterdam

The Netherlands

E-mail: subscription@manifesta.org

Tel: +31 20 672 1435

www.manifestajournal.org

For orders

Silvana Editoriale

Via Margherita de Vizzi, 86

20092 Cinisello Balsamo (Milano)

Italy

Barbara Belloli

E-mail barbara.belloli@silvanaeditoriale.it

Tel: +39 02 61836394

www.silvanaeditoriale.it

The Manifesta Journal is made possible through the support and collaboration of:



CPS TEXT:

INSERT fig1.tif or .jpg (centred)

A Subjective Take on Collective Curating

by *Alfredo Cramerotti, Rian Lozano and Khaled Ramadan on behalf of CPS Chamber of Public Secrets*

To begin with, there were a couple of questions from Viktor Misiano, such as “If not you, who? If not now, when?” And a number of responses straight from thinking loud:

a) Collective curating is a matter of being able to renounce what I already know in order to learn what I do not know—and learn someone else in the team **does know**. How far can I embrace this attitude and renounce to my individual knowledge? Collectives (should) resonate wider; **they should produce** something bigger than the sum of their parts. Their dynamic works by **subtraction** rather than addition, extending its reach but renouncing **an autocratic position**.

b) **Furthermore, collective curating is also interesting outside the field of art and important to build and expand one’s audience**, be it an art public, **the viewers of a television channel or a community of peers**. Collective production can go awfully wrong or fantastically well for unforeseeable reasons because it involves a greater number of actors. In this context, I work within a territory that is (and remains) uncharted. Calculated risk is a chimera.

c) The crucial question, which exists independently from the activity of curating, is why curate collectively? The first response would be that I get bored working alone—a good enough reason. There is something else. In a collective, the risk of overwhelming ideologies, blind faith or devastating emotional responses is less. Everything is diluted, in relations, space and time. Of course, groups can have their own ideologies and **those ideologies** are no less effective than those imposed by a single hand. But even if the process is slower and sometimes unnerving, there is a good chance that thinking, working and deciding together may bring about a less self-centred and more interesting outcome. If people stick around long enough, that is.

INSERT fig2.tif or .jpg (centred)

It is no coincidence that this contribution, which is dedicated to matters of collective curating, is written by three pairs of hands but told in the first person. In fact, if **you** take a look at some curatorial activities over the last few years and in different parts of the world, **you** can observe that writing in collaboration, as well as editing in collaboration and organizing discussions, seem to be *the defining feature* of the work of curators. Collective production and distribution has been an interesting business throughout the history of mankind (approx 150,000 years), whether applied to hunting and gathering, agriculture or the revolution of the masses. However, what fascinates me is **not the act of charting** but rather what lies **at the edge of one's sight**; the unwritten and untold part of the story. Of many stories.

To provide **an overview** about the features of a few curatorial collectives does not contradict the necessity to analyze and to explore **them**. Their activities can be seen as **'dependent' experiences—dependent, that is, on** space, time and individual situations that **affect** the other members of the group. The early 1990s' obsession with **'curating geographies,'** such as the Middle East, East Asia and the Balkans, has now been almost replaced by **the** current preoccupation with the collective, and what this collectivity represents. The popularity of curatorial grouping on the visual culture scene did not happen overnight. **Rather, it grew from an object-based, individual artistic approach (as in the artist's studio practice) to participatory and community projects, from 'journalistic art' and investigative approaches to activism and the production/distribution of information via alternative media.** Collective curating is merely the latest stage of this process, which may be far from finished.

INSERT fig3.tif or .jpg (centred)

The question is: how can I make a meaningful reading of this collaborative curatorial format? Is collaboration just pragmatic in the very competitive arena of curating? Or is it **significant from the standpoint of theory and practice**? Let us consider for a moment Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. Here, the audience is envisaged as a community, rather than a **set of individuals each encountering an object on their own**. Relational art produces encounters through which meaning is elaborated collectively, rather than in the space of individual consumption. Why am I taking on board something *so* 1990s? In the shadow of Bourriaud's concept, I find an increasing number of parallels with different curatorial collective productions, each of them testing their hypotheses on their own terms. Almost every curatorial collective I encounter has disclosed, or is in the act of disclosing, not only the mechanisms of producing and staging exhibitions or events, **but often reveals the policies and ideologies of each choice**. It does so by means of a relational approach—organizing encounters, creating the opportunity for chance meetings, initiating shared processes and so on. What this collective curating does (and individual curating does not, or to a much lesser degree) is reveal what lies not behind but *within* the exhibition-making process: the ideology behind a display **colour**, a venue choice, or the fundraising process. This is in itself an **endeavour** that—intentionally or not—makes a difference in today's curatorial panorama.

INSERT fig4.tif or .jpg (centred)

In the next pages, I will briefly outline some of the collective and cooperative activities that I consider interesting **in terms of** specific, distinct features. The groups are mainly European-based, since I grounded the text on personal encounters and this is the geographical area that I frequent most. The groups are very different from each other, and some of them barely meet the criteria of **'curatorial collective,'** but what interests me is less their curatorial curriculum than their curatorial approach. That is to say, not what they have or have not done, but rather what angle they adopt in realizing their projects. This feature of their operation is the thread with which I sew a narrative made of places, times, ups and downs. Not in chronological or alphabetical order, but simply in an attempt to describe a model of working that *can* get close to reality.

INSERT fig5a.bis.tif or .jpg (centred)

I have not experienced in person any of EPT Electric Palm Tree projects, but one of the former **members** of the collective happens to be a close friend. I say **'former'** because EPT is no longer active. In fact, if you try visiting www.electricpalmtree.org, it says "site temporarily unavailable." Initially a two-year project (2007–08) funded by Fonds BKVB and based in Amsterdam, it aimed to generate long-term activities on a trans-national scale, allowing experimental approaches and even their failures (which happened, indeed). In the three project activities organized by EPT, all in 2008 (a workshop/lecture with a cartographer in Amsterdam; the so-called "side process" *15 Seven Times Two or Three* in London; and *Open Circuit #1: Yogyakarta*), the major directions of investigation were around issues of globalization and cultural diversity. When first asked, my friend refused to talk about the collective experience.

From what I understood of the conversations I had with **her**, EPT wanted to question the canonical representation of art (and its political and power structures) in the West, while bringing to the table different modes of understanding art and those structures in other cultural and geographical landscapes. I think this is an interesting goal; pity EPT as a collective effort did not work out, for reasons I suspect being unmatchable personal characters. **As my friend states**, "I'm one of the three who made the mess, but still can't see how things could have turned out differently with the three." The impression I have from all this is that EPT was the right project at the wrong time, or vice versa. **I'd appreciate it if they'd try again.**

INSERT fig5a.tif or .jpg (centred)

In 2009, I took part in the organization of the 1st International Workshop on Art Criticism —**hosted by l'Université de Rennes 2** in collaboration with INHA from Paris and the Archives de la critique d'art de Châteaugiron. Over a period of four days, we assisted and were part of the meetings of about twenty professionals and researchers whose work is related to criticism, art history and curating. Among the guests to this workshop was a member of the **Parisian project space and gallery castillo/corrales** (www.castillocorrales.fr). This space was set in motion at the beginning of 2007 by **curator and writer François Piron, critics Thomas Boutoux and Benjamin Thorel, artist Oscar Tuazon and sociologist Boris Gobille**, "a shared office space and collectively-run gallery" which promotes activities such as exhibitions, residency programs, conferences, a bookstore (Section 7 Books) and a publishing house (Paraguay Press).

Books in particular are seen as a sort of extension of the critical and curatorial thinking of the collective, embracing a portable and durable form which is rather different than the site-temporality of the exhibition. The bookstore (S7B) is a prototype of a mechanism of sustainability, like other experiences of this kind such as b-books in Berlin. S7B pursues financial independence by selling books while at the same time engaging intensely with the books they stock, **'dissecting'** their publications in workshops, readings and meetings. Thorel told me that all these **events** are part of the unpremeditated activity of looking and thinking about art, which is always tied to reading, discussing and circulating printed material. This dynamic of **collective** work is at the same time the practical response to a situation shared by many independent actors in the art scene: sharing the work ensures **that everyone involved has** time to work on other things that are economically rewarded. Because sometimes books, unfortunately, are not enough.

INSERT fig5b.tif or .jpg (centred)

AGM Annual General Meeting (www.annualgeneralmeeting.net) is a roaming collective project of which I am one of the initiators. It kicked off in 2003 and developed over time into a curatorial project with a parasitic feature: it is hosted and funded every year by a different organization, festival or program in a specific location (Trento, 2003; Rotterdam, 2004; Toronto, 2005; Copenhagen, 2006; Innsbruck, 2007; on-line, 2008; Derby, 2009; **Murcia, 2010**). In tough times, it has even been (foolishly) self-funded. It is not a big event —we purposefully keep it small for financial and logistical reasons, and also because it is better to work at a relaxed pace. This **intimacy, however, produces** a great intensity, because the people involved spend time together and help each other in the time leading up to the project (which may be a symposium, a video exhibition, **a magazine** or a radio program).

I admit the whole AGM idea is more of a little obsession than anything else: a constant challenge to realize a project on a shoestring budget, which may involve well-known or emerging artists, and which **stems from a desire** to share some time and space with a group of people we like. Year after year, this small art/media project is building a form of

trust between us initiators and curators (**AGM members may vary according to the project**) but also among artists and hosting bodies. Sometimes we cannot raise funds until the last moment, and yet somehow tickets get bought and venues get booked. **Due to the 'relational angle' of each event, participants feel particularly involved.** Maybe not all of these relationships are genuine, but I like to think so.

INSERT fig5c.tif or .jpg (centred)

Another recent example of a collective proposal is (sic) societat i cultura (www.societaticultura.org). Strictly speaking, **(sic)** is not a curatorial collective. Their 2007 exhibition project consisted of a periodical (twelve issues in total) about Velluters—a historic district in Valencia where silk was manufactured. The exhibition device here was almost secondary: located in MUVIM (a museum situated in the same district), it simply functioned as **'storage space'** and as a place for reading. The objective was to swap the two locations involved: introducing Velluters to the museum context, and taking MUVIM out into the district streets. This could only be achieved with the active participation of some eighty collaborators (journalists, writers, district inhabitants, artists, illustrators, designers, sociologists, university teachers, architects, town planners, anthropologists, philosophers, critics and curators). A wish list of professions, maybe. Or, an incredible array of skills that worked jointly for a **shared objective**. This can and should also be read in terms of collective production.

INSERT fig5d.tif or .jpg (centred)

D.A.E. stands for Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak, **which in Basque means** "Contemporary Art Activities." Based in Donostia-San Sebastian since 1999, D.A.E.'s **objective** has always been to bring to the surface the dynamic between art production and the public sphere, asking questions such as **"What is a site? What is community? What is artistic production or collaboration?"** The feature of **(dis)location** (see title above) is obviously more intellectual than practical, as it involves citizens and non-citizens **who are asked to** question their own environment and community.

In 2005, D.A.E. attempted to **apply the 'ethics' from their own working methodology** to the situation of **an educational workshop called *We Rule the School: conversations and research*, which took place in Arteleku Art Centre in Donostia-San Sebastian, from September 26th to October 7th 2005.** The discussions resulted in a manifesto of sorts—a good kind of manifesto, in my view. The mechanisms of survival for an independent art structure in a small city were laid bare in the twenty-three points/statements/paragraphs of **the resulting document, *On Alternating, Dynamics and Movement*.** D.A.E. revealed what they have been thinking and doing, and how they have been compromising or not—making virtue out of necessity. They put on the table the way they were working (and still are), invited twenty people to scrutinize them for two weeks and distributed the results. That is what I would call brave new curators.

INSERT fig5e.tif or .jpg (centred)

The **venue-based** collective <rotor> in Graz (<http://rotor.mur.at>) has been **manoeuvring** in the curatorial and artistic field for more than ten years now, **hosting discussions and projects about global concerns** on its **'territories'**—whether it be the exhibition space or another structure. Its institutionalized form (eight people in the office, four people on the managing committee, five people on the advisory board and about sixty members of the association), <rotor> develops a form of curatorial knowledge by contextualizing exhibitions in theoretical frameworks. **By applying critical thinking to move towards the edges of political philosophy, activism and artistic engagement, <rotor> takes up issues such as intersubjectivity and promotes discussion around concepts such as the multitude.**

In a typical project, the curatorial collective questions the ownership and function of public space and asks its contributors (artists) and audience alike how they might challenge such ownership. In other words, and if I got their vision right, it seems to me that <rotor> tests socially and politically engaged art in both artistic and non-artistic formats.

INSERT fig5f.tif or .jpg (centred)

In the field of curating performance, the collaboration **named Brown Mountain College of Performing Arts** (started in 2006, however they claim it was founded in 1906) delivers a focused program and at the same time expands the idea of what qualifies as performance art. With a wink to the more famous Black Mountain College (1933–1967, North

Carolina), the brown version (www.brownmountain.org.uk) organizes performance-based events, which range from single interventions to entire festivals, with an array of contributors from socialist magicians to stage fighters, from professional knitters to re-skilling coaches.

What I like about this collective-cooperative venture is the light approach and tongue-in-cheek language that BMC uses to communicate what they do. This mirrors who they are without pretentious statements or facades. The **Deans** of the College (departments include circus skills, magic, activism, bar tending, sports, creative accounting and dating) are actually the curators. I suppose the pupils are the artists—how fantastically twisted. Aiming to revive the ethos of collaborative work by **staging various kinds of events** the collective raises funds and, in a sort of **'productive parasitic'** process (a bit like AGM), directly applies these funds to commissions for new works from dancers, **theatre** and film people, political activists and comedians. When they do not manage to raise funds, they make do with what they find available. The whole thing sounds pretty much like 20th-century avant-garde, only later.

INSERT fig5g.tif or .jpg (centred)

The spaceless Wooloo collective has been active since 2002 (www.wooloo.org) and operates worldwide using the means of electronic activism. Wooloo has developed a curatorial approach based on the advocacy of collectivity itself. They organize mass events mixing electronic communication and logistic organization with physical participation by a large number of people. The activities of the participants range from hosting someone at home to organizing a protest march, with all the shades in-between.

The collective experiments by building the logistics of web-based participation into the concept and the outcome of their work. For instance, they facilitated the creation of a spontaneous collectivity based on the shared interest of climate change at the recent climate forum in Copenhagen (December 2009). They first organized a network of private, free accommodation infrastructure for people to be in the city (people **were lodged with** other people with the same concerns), then invited groups to organize themselves for this or that discussion or manifestation. My next-door **neighbour**, a spokesperson for a climate change group, came back from Copenhagen an enthusiast not for the summit talks but for this very unusual and pleasant experience. Which made me wonder how a collective project, far from the artistic realm here discussed, can actually turn into a meaningful experience for the individual.

INSERT fig5h.tif or .jpg (centred)

As a curatorial partnership, B+B (www.welcomebb.org.uk) takes on the issue of the role of the artist in society and its potential for change and—as they put it—“shifting understandings.” I encountered them in two seminars, both in 2005, on different topics: one about politics and art and the other precisely on the idea of collaboration and collectivity. Active since 2000, B+B works with institutions for projects involving interpretation, education activities, residencies and workshops; they also organize exhibitions and commission new works; lastly, they take on **research commissions and consultation jobs**.

What really struck me about this collective is their professional attitude towards not only what they do but also in regard to the unseen consequences that their activity may bring about. When I met them, B+B addressed what was going on in the UK at that time (and still is)—namely, the government policy that sees the arts as crucial to **'solve'** what went wrong in deprived areas where racism, illiteracy and crime are the norm. **Political agenda** here dictates that art has a positive power for change, thus the artist is central to this process. B+B carefully considered their role as a service-provider in the cultural industry, and opened the discussion about its potential, its benefits and also its contradictions. It has been crucial for me to encounter their work; it helped me to realize how I wanted to negotiate my professional position as curator, writer and artist, or—as one of B+B nicely put it—to “rethink[] what it means to be paid to be critical.”

INSERT fig5i.tif or .jpg (centred)

Another team met during the 1st International Workshop on Art Criticism can be seen as an intermediate stage among those considered so far. Damas is a **Basque/Catalan curatorial team that positions** itself between institutional recognition and grassroots approach. The collective received in 2008 the *Abisal Award* (Bilbao) for their project *Copyzine*: a publication-exhibition composed of texts related to authorship reproduction and distribution, as well as twenty-five works by artists, produced specifically for the

publication. The fanzine was freely available to copy and redistribute, allowing readers to take home **the reproduction of the art piece**.

Although nowadays, the two members of the group are working on different tasks (that is, technically the collective no longer operates), their respective experiences illustrate that the wish and will to take the production out of the exhibition area are grounds onto which build one's own critical path. When asked, **Haizea Barcenilla (the curator who formed Damas together with artist Ana García-Pineda)** insisted on understanding the collective production as a working method, a **'way of doing'** in which discussion, debate, exchange of positions and points of view end up dimming the traditional concept of authorship and the limits that define and separate the work of curators, artists and critics. One example would be *Wiki-Histories of Art in the Basque Context Told by Artists and Mediators*, a **project coordinated by Barcenilla and Saioa Olmo**. This wiki platform "seeks to build a shared history or stories of the art in the Basque area, told by the women artists and mediators that are part of it themselves" (www.wiki-historias.org). The users of this platform are invited to participate in the process of collective construction of history by means of wiki tools: a collaborative medium by definition. A straightforward idea realized with relatively simple tools, accessible to a great number of users who turn themselves into a critical mass. **This is what it means to adopt a media strategy.**

INSERT fig5ult.tif or .jpg (centred)

The name and curatorial approach of WHW (What, How & for Whom) stems from the consideration that what, how and for whom are the three essential questions to answer by any economic organization that wants to operate and thrive: what is produced, for whom and how it is distributed. WHW (started in 1999) has converted these questions almost into a checklist for every project they curate. Like B+B, theirs is a sort of self-conscious reflection, put into practice, of the artist and curator's position in the current **labour** market. Like AGM, through their projects, whether they be exhibitions, books or entire biennials, **they seek out ways to act as a 'parasite' on the cultural industry**, with the aim of discussing social and economic issues in an open way.

However, when I met one of the members during a seminar in 2009, the question I had to ask was not generated by their curatorial approach. My urgent question was: what happened to Why? I did not ask, but someone else did (Jean-Paul Martignon, the course leader). If I remember correctly, the answer was simply this: the reason is implicit in the nature of humankind. That is to say, we do things because we process signs and signals from the environment, and then act upon them. Which leads me to think that the Whats, Hows & for Whoms are ways to organize, negotiate and control what we caused in the first place. An interesting thought, in relation to curatorial activity. Basically, I am engaged in taking care of situations that I originated, and about which I have no clue if they are going to benefit or rather harm others or myself. Better change my job, one might think (I am only half kidding).

INSERT fig5L.tif or .jpg (centred)

What kind of knowledge, or perhaps wisdom, can we gather from the collective experiences above? There are a few connections I would like to make, going back to my initial mode of thinking aloud in this text. It is striking, for instance, that what I have encountered so far stems not from necessity but from will. It seems there is a positive attitude around the idea of working collaboratively that goes beyond the mechanisms of creating opportunities for oneself or the group and has more to do with the pull/push dynamic of experimenting with formats and approaches. It might last only for a certain time, and that is okay. In this sense, collective thinking and acting works as a sort of training camp.

Furthermore, it also works on the level of shaping one's attitude towards the balance of career and personal life. I might be stretching this a bit, but I am convinced that to work collectively becomes an instrument of self-**coaching**. **Do not get me wrong**: sometimes working together is a pain. But especially in the long term, the constructive outcomes vastly outnumber the difficulties faced in the beginning; not least for the skills developed in negotiating everything, everywhere and at any time, and the number of occasions, connections and experiences one can touch via group activities. Obviously, it depends on the level the group is willing to share responsibilities, failures and successes, but if the members of a collective are not prepared to do this they better find other ways of working —alone.

Finally, **I would like to close with two, slightly altered questions you might have already heard**: "If not me, who? If not now, when?" **These questions**, I believe, **are the**

engine of working collectively. **It is** too late to find excuses for not doing it, and too urgent to not be personally involved in trying to engage with it. If you think something is too daunting to do yourself, well, take a deep breath and look around. You know the way.

END CPS TEXT