

# The canon of the author. On individual and shared authorship in exhibition curating\*

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All the participating artists were named by the different curators, but chosen by collective decisions and of course Harry Szeemann was the moderator-in-chief. The choice of a general secretary had become necessary as a matter of public relations; the journalists, politicians, and heads of visitors' organizations wanted a single person in charge and on whom they could depend to answer their questions. Beyond this pragmatic aspect ...[t]he *Zeitgeist* [spirit of time] proclaimed that everybody had to shift from arguing in terms of structuralism into patterns of individualism.

(Bazon Brock on *Documenta 5*)<sup>1</sup>

What is a canon? How is it constructed? The rather short history of exhibition curating as a distinct profession in the field of contemporary art, which only began being written some fifteen to twenty years ago, has evolved to a large extent around the innovative projects and practices of certain figures like Harald Szeemann – about whom Bazon Brock is interviewed in the above extract. Brock is particularly referring to *Documenta 5* from 1972, the first *Documenta* ever for which the selection of artists has been handed over to an external collaborator, namely Harald Szeemann, who in this capacity was coined the title 'general secretary'. For all previous editions of *Documenta* up until then (1955-1968), it was Arnold Bode who, together with a board of twenty six directors, had the full responsibility for the selection of artists and the organization of the exhibitions. When Szeemann was commissioned the fifth edition, Bode as well as the board resigned from their roles in order to leave him greater freedom of movement.<sup>2</sup> Szeemann appointed his own team of trusted advisors –today we would call them 'curators' as Brock also does– and a number of external partners. The advisors were assigned the various thematic strands, into which he had split *Documenta 5*.<sup>3</sup> The interesting element in the words of Brock with regard to that show, is that he presents it as a group endeavour, as collective or collaborative curating. Szeemann was beyond any doubt the 'moderator-in-chief'. However in Brock's words, this role appears more as a necessity for the public relations with the outside world (journalists, politicians, etc.) who wanted a name to address as responsible for the *Documenta's* outcome, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Lucia Pesapane. 'Interview with co-curators: Jean Christophe Ammann, Bazon Brock, Francois Burkhardt, and Johannes Cladders', in *Harald Szeemann. Individual Methodology*, Florence Derieux (ed.), Letzigraben: JRP / Ringier, 2009, 134-138 (135).

<sup>2</sup> Lucia Pesapane, 'Introduction', in *Harald Szeemann*, Derieux (ed.), 91-92; for the advisor of each section of the *Documenta* see 106-109.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed presentation and analysis of *Documenta 5* see *Harald Szeemann*, Derieux (ed.), 91-148.

an expression of the *Zeitgeist* at the time, rather than of actual hierarchies within the curators' group. In the book *Harald Szeemann. Individual Methodology*, where the interview with Brock was published, it is clearly maintained that *Documenta 5* had been the most important and complicated curatorial project during the first fifteen years of Szeemann's career. However it is also demonstrated that both in the conception, as well as in its implementation, it was the product of his collaboration with various individuals.<sup>4</sup>

Strangely enough, while *Documenta 5* is considered today a major highlight in the history of contemporary art curating, it is almost never remembered as a team project. To the contrary, it is primarily considered the individual curatorial achievement of Harald Szeemann and the implementation of his curatorial vision, the creativity of which has even caused the resentment of some artists who felt that they were used as material for the curator's artwork.<sup>5</sup> Exactly this idea of *Documenta 5* as the first major exhibition project in which a curator can be seen as creative author is the one frequently met in theoretical texts on contemporary art curating.<sup>6</sup>

In this article I will argue that if one studies systematically the history of old and recent innovations that gave art curating its status as a distinct profession and its current high prestige – and the interview with Brock was given for such a historical study by the Grenoble Curatorial Training Program – one may find that the image of the curator as a charismatic single-author is to some degree a construction. More often than one would expect, and even in cases of some exhibitions the history of which has been linked to an individual curator's name, innovations in curating have actually resulted from collective or collaborative endeavours. In saying this I do not wish to imply that the idea of individual curatorial authorship is just a fallacy or a historical mistake. I do maintain, nonetheless, that the extent to which it has become canonical is due to the, until recently, lack of systematic research in the histories of curating and exhibitions. This lack allowed practitioners in the art world to create a curator's persona as it was more convenient for the professional art world.

Michel Foucault's essay 'What is an author' could be useful in rethinking this dominant idea that the emergence of contemporary art curating is linked primarily to a single-author model.<sup>7</sup> According to Foucault, the modern concept of the author as individual figure came gradually into being since the late Middle Ages, when the author's figure appeared to perform various functions. Indeed, both in Brock's interview, as well as in the complains of artists about the priority of Szeemann's creative vision over their own in *Documenta 5*, one can see that the emergence of the 'general secretary' as author – what today we would call 'curator' – served a number of functions. Back in 1972 it gave to the outside world (journalists, politicians, etc.) a name to address as accountable for Documenta's

<sup>4</sup> Harald Szeemann, Derieux (ed.), 134-138.

<sup>5</sup> Paul O'Neil, *The Cultures of Curating. The Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012, 26-27, see especially notes 65, 66 and 67 about artists' protests and their manifesto published in *Artforum* in June 1972. It is not a coincidence that exactly for this Documenta the artist Daniel Buren wrote his well-known, polemical text 'Where are the artists?', in which he blamed Szeemann for using the artists like brushstrokes for his own art work, the *Documenta 5*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, O'Neil, *The Cultures of*, 26-27 and Dorothee Richter, 'Artists as curators', in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, Beatrice von Bismarck (ed.), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012, 230.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?', lecture presented to Société Française de philosophie, 22.02.1969 and in modified form in the USA in 1970. Translated with slight modifications by Josué V. Harari, [http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp\\_foucault12.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp_foucault12.htm), last accessed 12/8/2014.

outcome.<sup>8</sup> Another function would be that pioneers like Szeemann laid the basis for independent art curating to create its own professional space within the art world: to become a sub-discourse within the broader art discourse, as well as a distinct profession with its own institutions (e.g. trainings, residencies) and a job market. As such, they also stand for particular approaches and positions that may be adapted, debated, expanded, rejected, and so forth, by others.

My aim in this text is not to apply Foucault on curating, but to suggest that the dominant single-author model in curating has concealed the importance of collective and collaborative practices in the brief history of making art exhibitions as a distinct profession. Moreover, I would like to maintain that some of the most innovative exhibition projects in that history were either collaborations between curators, or they were projects in which the curators allowed the interventions of third parties in their work, namely artists or the public. The later perspective may prove considerably more consistent with a study of how transformations (innovations?) in exhibition making corresponded to transformations in making art. In that case the initial question of 'what is an author' should be complemented by the question 'what is a work'. But allow me to first begin with the origins of the idea of exhibition curators as authors

Up until the mid to late 1980s, the term 'curator' defined primarily a certain post within a museum. The occupant of this post was a scholar with specialised knowledge of the collections. In their article 'From museum curator to exhibitions auteur',<sup>9</sup> Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak sum up the four main tasks of curators as follows: (1) safeguarding (cultural) heritage, (2) enriching collections, (3) conducting research around them, and (4) putting together exhibitions for the public. In all of these tasks some degree of cooperation with other specialists – potentially staff members of the same institution – was part of the job. There are also examples of artists setting up exhibitions of work other than their own, such as Marcel Duchamp's design of Surrealists exhibitions and Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox I* and *Folk and Funk*.<sup>10</sup> However, generally speaking no successful artist occasionally involved in making exhibitions ever considered changing profession from artist to curator. The professional position of art museum curators did entail a prestige conferred to them by their scholarship, and the frequent contact with artists and artworks. However, as a rule, directors or board members, rather than curators, were the most prominent figures and decision-makers in institutions.<sup>11</sup> The selection of interviewees that Hans-Ulrich Obrist included in his

<sup>8</sup> The issue of accountability had proved crucial for Szeemann in 1969, the same year he was appointed General Secretary of *Documenta 5*. Following reactions to his exhibition *When Attitudes become Form* that were shared by some members of the board of Kunsthalle Bern, he had resigned from the director's position.

<sup>9</sup> Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak, 'From museum curator to exhibition auteur. Inventing a singular position', in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (eds.), London: Routledge, 1996, 231-250.

<sup>10</sup> Marcel Duchamp designed the space of the *International Surrealist Exhibition* at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938, and the *First Papers of Surrealism* in New York in 1942. Andy Warhol curated the basement storage of the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1969. He also exhibited his own collection of folklore objects at the Museum of American Folk Art in New York in 1977. For Warhol see Deborah Bright, 'Shopping the Leftovers: Warhol's Collecting Strategies in *Raid the Icebox I*', *Art History*, 24/12, 2001, 278-291.

<sup>11</sup> Heinich and Pollak, 'From museum curator', 234.

book *A Brief History of Curating* is rather telling in this: all but two interviewees gained their reputation from their positions as directors rather than curators.<sup>12</sup>

While professionals employed by specific art institutions would sometimes be invited to organize exhibitions elsewhere, to the extent of my knowledge, until the end of the 1980s, there were very few who would work as independent, freelance curators by choice. It is therefore not surprising that independent curators as agents occupying a recognizable position are nowhere to be found, for instance, in Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the field of cultural production.<sup>13</sup> Even figures like Harald Szeemann, Lucy Lippard or Seth Siegelaub who are today regarded as pioneers in independent contemporary art curating, when they were developing their individual careers they started from positions recognizable as something other than curator – Szeemann as Kunsthalle director, Lippard as art critic (though she wasn't very fond of this definition of her work) and Siegelaub as art dealer. Szeemann was in fact the first person to define himself as an 'exhibition-maker' and to consciously remain an independent professional, after he was forced to leave the position of director of Kunsthalle Bern in 1969. Nonetheless, it was the aforementioned professional positions (director, critic, dealer) that Szeemann, Lippard and Siegelaub expanded by devising innovative methods of presenting and communicating contemporary art. Through this expansion of their respective practices they became pioneers for the profession of the exhibition curator.<sup>14</sup>

### **Collective projects in pioneer contemporary art curating during the 1960s and 1970s**

Taking a closer look at the history of Szeemann, Lippard and Siegelaub's professional careers, one may in fact notice that some of their most ground-breaking curatorial projects involved the invention of new cooperation formats foremost with artists. For instance, for the show *Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form. Events – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information* (1969) at Kunsthalle Bern, Szeemann invited the artists to work in situ and produce whatever they wanted, instead of asking them for works prepared in a studio. The authority of the curator was limited to the idea and decision to turn the Kunsthalle into a workshop-cum-exhibition space, within which the artists were responsible for the final outcome.<sup>15</sup> When later he was commissioned *Documenta 5* (1972), his initial curatorial concept was a '100-day event', a 'process of mutually interrelated events'<sup>16</sup> that would take one step further both the exhibition-cum-workshop model of *When Attitudes Become Form*, as well as the participation of the public that he had experimented with for the 1970 show

<sup>12</sup> *A Brief History of Curating*, Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed.), Zurich etc.: JRP/Ringier, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Randal Johnson (ed.), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> For instance in an interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist about the show *Eccentric Abstraction* at the Marilyn Fichback Gallery, Lucy Lippard maintained that 'a lot of fuss was made about that show, partly because I was a critic and critics at that point didn't really curate shows', 'Lucy Lippard interview', in *A Brief History*, Obrist (ed.), 196-233 (199).

<sup>15</sup> For the term 'workshop-cum-exhibition' originally used for the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, see Lucia Pesapane, 'Documenta 5: Questioning Reality – Image Worlds Today, 1972. Introduction', in *Harald Szeemann*, Derieux (ed.), 91.

<sup>16</sup> *Harald Szeemann*, Derieux (ed.), 89.

*Happening & Fluxus*. In the end he gave up this plan, because the size of a Documenta project made the risk too high if the experiment would not succeed.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless he did invite five advisors – today we would call them co-curators - and a number of external collaborators to implement the various thematic sections of *Documenta 5*.

Lucy Lippard was also keen on experimenting with exhibition-making practices in which the borders between the roles of the curator and the artists were blurred in various forms of collaboration and exchange. Probably the most famous example of such projects are two of the so-called *Numbers Shows* in Seattle (1969) and Vancouver (1970).<sup>18</sup> Instead of works, Lippard asked the artists for instruction cards with which to produce the works anew in the location of each exhibition, under her supervision and without the artists' interference. This curatorial concept and practice matched in particular the work of some conceptual artists for whom the idea of a work, or the information about the idea, was more important than the work's implementation. Of course it also matched ideas and practices of minimal artists who delegated the construction of their works to workshops or industries, since the materials or sizes that they had selected for their work exceeded the possibilities of an artist's studio. Additionally, since the 1970s Lippard repeatedly collaborated with artists' groups that had an activist agenda (e.g., feminist, anti-racist or other).

Equally important during the same period were forms of exhibitions that Seth Siegelaub invented for the promotion of conceptual art in the art market.<sup>19</sup> Most famous are exhibitions he devised in the form of publications in direct response to the immaterial, information-based character of particular conceptual artists' work, and in close collaboration with them. He also edited the Xerox book as an exhibition and guest-edited an issue of *Studio International* in 1970 by inviting six other curators to curate ten pages each. In his book *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* the art historian Alexander Alberro has shown that both the logic and the form of Siegelaub's ways of 'packaging' conceptual art for promotion was in accordance not only to the character of the art, but also recent –at the time– developments in marketing.

While in the aforementioned examples the various models of innovative curatorial practices were developed in response to innovative artistic practices, and the curators worked in close collaboration with artists, it isn't nonetheless the case that Szeemann, Lippard or Siegelaub were members of any particular group or collective. The curation of exhibitions either by artists' groups or interdisciplinary collectives is another area of experimentation that often emerged alongside innovations in art making. An example is the so-called Independent Group (IG), set up by artists and architects Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson, Peter and Alison Smithson as a kind of offshoot of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, curated in 1953 the show *Parallels of Life and Art*,<sup>20</sup> a kind of environment-exhibition comprised of images hanging from the walls and the ceiling, as well as arranged on shelves. According to the description of art historian Anne Massey, exhibits

<sup>17</sup> Harald Szeemann, Derieux (ed.), 89.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed analysis of all four *Numbers Shows* see *From Conceptualism to Feminism. Lucy Lippard's Numbers Shows 1969-1974*, Exhibition Histories series, Cornelia Butler et al (eds.), London: Afterall Books, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> About Siegelaub's practice see especially Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Massey, *The Independent Group. Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-59*, Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1995, 54-61.

were drawn largely from scientific and technical sources such as diagrams and photographs of radio valves, televisions and spacesuits; photographic reproductions of visual materials ranging from radiographs to art works; as well as photographs that could best be described as anthropological.<sup>21</sup> They were printed on coarse, grainy paper mounted on cardboard. All exhibits had a coarse, raw character. The aim of the group was to challenge popular, yet for them outdated, ideas about the aesthetic and beauty in art and art exhibitions that had been inherited from modern art before the 1939-1945 war. The ground-breaking exhibition *This is Tomorrow* followed in 1956 at the Whitechapel Gallery.<sup>22</sup> There is no agreement regarding various questions around the exhibition, such as whether it was more of a pop art or a design show, whether it was really close to the work of the IG or not (since only twelve out of thirty-six participants were linked to the by then dismantled IG). Nonetheless, it was beyond any doubt a collectively organised project realized through numerous collaborations between architects, painters and sculptors. The outcome was a hybrid exhibition-environment where art and design met daily life in the consumption society.

Returning to the cases of Szeemann, Lippard and Siegelau, one could argue that they were exceptional, individual cases of art world mavericks, motivated by personal interest and curiosity and coming up with idiosyncratic ideas sometimes out of choice and sometimes out of need. They most definitely did not have the specific aim to become pioneers in the establishment of a new profession –that of the independent art exhibition curator– or to promote collective practices in exhibition-making where the borders between artistic and curatorial authority would be blurred. Nonetheless, they were not alone in their interest in curatorial collaborations: recent attempts to write histories of art exhibitions and curating have also singled out as pioneers certain directors of modern and contemporary art museums. In their case one again finds examples of a conscious interest in collaborative forms of exhibition curating.

Some of the most famous moments in Willem Sandberg's career as director of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam coincide with projects that he invited artists to curate – if one can talk of curating there at all since exhibition and art partly overlapped. He invited, for example, Jean Tinguely to co-curate the show *Dylaby* (Dynamic Labyrinth) in 1962.<sup>23</sup> Tinguely, alongside Niki de Saint Phalle and Per Olof Ultvedt, also collaborated with Pontus Hultèn, director then of Moderna Museet Stockholm for the exhibition *She – A Cathedral* in 1966. Both projects are considered amongst the most innovative exhibitions in Sandberg's and Hultèn's careers. Even though *Dylaby* was commissioned specifically to Jean Tinguely, *She* to Niki de Saint Phalle, and the participating artists created individual works, they also collaborated together in situ as a team, creating two hybrid projects, between exhibition and art environment. Besides, both projects required the audience to interact with various works for them to be completed, thus expanding creative authorship further to visitors.

<sup>21</sup> Massey, *The Independent Group*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Massey, *The Independent Group*, 94-108.

<sup>23</sup> For details and publications about the two shows see Eva Fotiadi, 'From event to archive and to event again. Re-collecting the 1960s' shows *Bewogen Beweging, Dylaby and Op Losse Schroeven*', in *Performativity in the Gallery. Staging Interactive Encounters*, Outi Remes et al (eds.), Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014.

### The transition to the establishment of the curator as creative author

Taking specifically the figures of Szeemann, Siegelaub, and Lippard as examples here is interesting under the light of what Heinich and Pollak described as the transition from museum curator as specialized professional (e.g., art historian) to that of a creative subject (*auteur*), even if none of the three started as *museum* curator.<sup>24</sup> According to Heinich and Pollak, this transition could actually be compared to that of the 'auteur' in French cinema.

To be more precise, the making of public exhibitions has been the only task 'which would allow a certain personalisation – in the dual sense of the singularity of the accomplished task and any increase in stature it derives'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, compared to the remainder of curatorial tasks (safeguarding heritage, enriching and studying collections), the making of exhibitions allowed, if not required, more creativity and liberties than scholarship leading to one singular result – the exhibition. Additionally it was the only one of the curator's tasks that received responses not only from peers but also –very importantly– from the press and the public, who would potentially give the credit of success or failure to the single curator (see here 'personalisation' as in 'increase of stature'). As a result, specifically in exhibition-making a museum curator could gain the prestige of a creative, unique *auteur* – comparable to the *auteur* in French cinema. As *auteur*, the curator could potentially be seen as a persona, irreducible to the status of his or her post as museum employee, but identified foremost by the singularity and personal signature of one's exhibitions.<sup>26</sup>

The above transition is not very far from the cases of Szeemann, Lippard or Siegelaub, the singularity of whose practices could not be identified with any existing institutional posts; indeed, the singularity was due to innovative ways of broadening their professional practices and thus also the concept of the exhibition. Of course the aforementioned patterns of co-operation with artists that are central to this article were only one part of their innovative curatorial work. Other important aspects include, for instance, their creativity in finding alternative spaces to make exhibitions. For instance, Lucy Lippard organised street projects, card shows and even exhibitions in toilets.<sup>27</sup> As already mentioned earlier, Siegelaub edited the Xerox Book as an exhibition and guest-edited an issue of *Studio International* by inviting curators to curate shows in its pages. To sum things up, it is such distinct characteristics in their curatorial practices that have rendered certain individuals known by name as exhibition-makers, and have made them count today as predecessors of the numerous independent curators who have appeared since the early 1990s, and the broadness of initiatives and tasks that the latter undertake.

At this point it would be useful to return to Foucault and particularly to his concepts of the 'author's function' and the 'authors of discursivity'. He names Ann Radcliffe as an example. She was the author of her own texts, but her works actually opened the way for the emergence of the genre of gothic novel in the early nineteenth century. To be more precise, Radcliffe's works opened the way to a certain number of resemblances and analogies which have their model in her work.<sup>28</sup> Foucault mentions as example types of characters, of relations and structures that other writers have later been able to adapt in their own work. I

<sup>24</sup> Heinich and Pollak, 'From museum curator', 234-238.

<sup>25</sup> Heinich and Pollak, 'From museum curator', 235.

<sup>26</sup> Heinich and Pollak, 'From museum curator', 235.

<sup>27</sup> 'Lucy Lippard interview', in *A Brief History*, Obrist (ed.).

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, 'What is an Author?'

would maintain here that Szeemann or Lippard performed a similar function as authors as well as founders of discursivity, a function that exceeds the sum of the exhibitions they curated. Rather, they laid the grounds for the development of a professional practice and discourse of exhibition curating, within which they and others were later recognised as authors.

### From the 1960s to the 1990s

Ever since exhibition curating started being recognizable as distinct profession, those initiatives and choices that once counted as innovations – such as broadening the notion of the art show, closely collaborating with artists, exhibiting in non-art spaces – have now become common practice. Especially since the beginning of the 1990s, they have been adapted enthusiastically and repeated countless times by independent artists and curators, as well as by art institutions. This wide adaptation and institutionalisation of alternative methods and spaces of presenting art in the 1990s does not comprise an isolated phenomenon. It came part and parcel with the globalization of the art world that imposed the need for new forms of alliances and for a culture of global and interdisciplinary networking between interested agents: groups of artists and curators, but also theorists, activists, academics and others. In this context, the collective or collaborative curation of projects by agents from one or more disciplines, has become common practice.

In his book *The Cultures of Curating. The Curating of Culture(s)* (2012), Paul O'Neil observes a shift of interest towards co-curating or group curating after 2000. He expands on three approaches to collective curating, which nonetheless are not meant to cover the entire scope of either the ideological or pragmatic reasons that have led to this shift.<sup>29</sup> He calls the first approach 'enforced curatorial team' with *Documenta 11* as example, for which Okwui Enwezor invited a group of curators to form a think tank. The team processed collectively the conceptual background as well as content of the Documenta under the direction of Enwezor.<sup>30</sup> The second approach is that of the Manifesta Foundation (MF). For almost every edition the foundation commissions a team of high-profile curators who may, or may not, know each other in advance. They are invited to collaborate in order to curate a single exhibition that should in one way or another relate to the already selected by the MF exhibition location and overarching geopolitical agenda.<sup>31</sup> Paul O'Neil interviewed curators of earlier Manifesta editions. Besides positive aspects, they referred also to difficulties, problems and compromises that result from this model of collaborative curating. In a sense, working through all the difficulties might pay back less in the outcome of the Manifesta exhibition itself, and more in the cultural capital one acquires as Manifesta Biennial (co-)curator. The third and final approach to collective curating is that of curating the curators. A characteristic example is the 50th edition of the Venice Biennial, for which Francesco Bonami invited eleven colleagues to curate each one an independent show. Nonetheless, all shows came under the general theme of the Biennial titled 'Dreams and Conflicts'.<sup>32</sup> As already mentioned above, these categories are only indicative models of group curating in recent years and are definitely not meant as an exhaustive list.

<sup>29</sup> O'Neil, *The Cultures of*, 78-80.

<sup>30</sup> O'Neil, *The Cultures of*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> O'Neil, *The Cultures of*, 79-80.

<sup>32</sup> O'Neil, *The Cultures of*, 80.

When thinking about group work in curating since the early 1990s, it is useful to consider also Magali Arriola's distinction 'between collective curating as the *shared responsibility* of selecting, confronting and putting into dialogue a series of artworks and curatorial visions, and setting up a collaborative endeavour of *shared authorship uttered as a single voice*' [emphasis mine].<sup>33</sup> The first case, shared responsibility, has to some extent been a very pragmatic, practical choice that enabled independent curators to carry out big and ambitious projects such as biennials. Taking into account the constantly increasing number of biennials, of artists, of publications and parallel programme activities such as symposia, screenings, lectures, workshops etc., it is not difficult to imagine why more than one curators are necessary to share the responsibility of major art events. Museums and art centres have also not escaped this tendency of ever growing in size and scope art shows. Consequently they have also been forced to occasionally hire free-lance or adjunct curators.<sup>34</sup>

During the same period, the art world was heavily affected by external conditions such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the expansion of post-colonial critique and – perhaps most important – developments in communication and transportation (internet, cheap flights, etc.). All these brought globalisation into the art world. Since then, individual curators could no longer keep up with the number of emerging international artists and events. Curatorial cooperation as a shared responsibility could mean joining expertise, meeting deadlines and also keeping a foot in several projects at the same time around the globe – all quite useful, if not necessary, in advancing a curator's career. Examples are plentiful. To name but some widely known: Bonami for the *50th Venice Biennial*, Okwui Enwezor for *Documenta XI* and Charles Esche for the *9th Istanbul Biennial*, they all invited other curators in order to realise the mega-projects they were commissioned for.

The collaborative model of some of the aforementioned examples is relevant also for the second category of collective curating which Magali Ariola describes as 'shared responsibility uttered as single voice'. Arguably, this second category is mostly applicable to collective art initiatives, a phenomenon that since the 1990s has proliferated worldwide. What I place under the umbrella term 'collective art initiatives' is a huge amount of groups, the character and/or motivations behind their collective initiative vary immensely. To randomly name some of them internationally known ones, Raqs Media Collective in India, the curatorial collective Why How and for Whom (WHW) from Zagreb, nomadic platform for performance art If I Can't Dance from Amsterdam, the collective Chto Delat that is comprised of artists, art critics, philosophers and writers based in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the autonomous Copenhagen Free University, the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum in Egypt and many, many more.<sup>35</sup> For all their diversity, they mostly include artists, curators, theorists, philosophers, architects, designers and so on, engaged on a permanent or flexible basis. Often formed in response to specific local or 'glocal' cultural,

<sup>33</sup> Magali Arriola, 'Towards a ghostly agency: A few speculations on collaborative and collective curating', *Manifesta Journal*, No 8, 2009, 21-31 (23).

<sup>34</sup> About the appearance and role of adjunct curators see Paul O'Neil, 'The Co-dependent curator', *Art Monthly*, 291, 2005 (November), 7-10, and Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook (eds), *Rethinking Curating. Art after New Media*, Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2010, 152.

<sup>35</sup> For examples of collective art initiatives see Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson (eds.) *Taking the Matter into Common Hands. On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007, and Paul O'Neil, 'Beyond group practice', *Manifesta Journal*, No 8, 2009, 37-45.

social, political and economic circumstances, it is interesting to see how rapidly since the 1990s many initiatives developed trans-national networks. Pivotal in starting several such collectives were shared questions regarding the role and relevancy of contemporary art in the contemporary world. Collectivity, self-organisation, interdisciplinarity and networking expressed, amongst other things, shared beliefs of individuals in horizontal organisation, transparency, democratic structures, group work and, indeed also, in sharing responsibility, experience and fun. Art initiatives ran programs ranging from traditional gallery exhibitions to artists' residencies and exchanges, network meetings, research projects, symposia, publications and sometimes also activist art and community art projects.

Taking into account the broad scope of the aforementioned cases of collective curating from the largest international art events to the smallest, or locally focused initiatives, one may wonder where the obsession with the individual curator as single author comes from. How is it possible that even a star-system of curators has been created, despite the fact that some of the important projects of stars in that system were implemented in some form of collaboration (see above e.g. Bonami, Enwezor, Esche), thus shifting away from a 'single-author' curatorial model. In the rest of this article I will attempt to show the direction towards an answer to these questions, simultaneously laying the basis for a future article.

### What is a work?

At the beginning of his essay titled 'What is an author?' Foucault addressed briefly the question 'What is a work?'. This question could actually prove useful with regard to works of art, as well as of art curating. If, as I have maintained earlier, some of the most extraordinary projects in the history of exhibition curating were collaborative projects, for which the curators were sometimes even accused of working more like artists rather than as curators, what exactly was the outcome of their labour? As mentioned also earlier, innovations in exhibition making often came as response to innovations in art making, for which old exhibition patterns didn't seem adequate. For instance, Harald Szeemann's laboratory-exhibition was a solution to the presentation of process-based art and performance. Lucy Lippard's initiative in following instructions for the construction of artworks without the artists' involvement matched perfectly well fundamental ideas of minimal and conceptual art. The same can be maintained for Seth Siegelaub's exhibitions in the form of books. As for more recent examples, the division of *Documenta 11* by Okwui Enwezor in five platforms around the globe and the distribution of their curating between five co-curators in essence reflected important transformations in the function of art in a globalized world. Enwezor placed together works, objects, films and so on, taking an approach to curating the Documenta that emphasized more cultural, rather than aesthetic aspects.<sup>36</sup> According to Jean/Marc Poinot, the point was to create a concrete experience of cultural differences that globalization tends to assimilate into the overall marketplace.<sup>37</sup>

More and more often, the roles of artists and curators become fused during the various stages of a project's initiative, conceptualisation, development and final outcome.

<sup>36</sup> For this approach to *Documenta 11* see Jean-Marc Poinot, 'Art and its context or a question of culture', in *Harald Szeemann*. Derieux (ed.), 21-26.

<sup>37</sup> Poinot, 'Art and its context', in *Harald Szeemann*. Derieux (ed.), 22.

Instead of accusing curators of artistic authorship and artists of tame passivity as Buren did in 1972, one could investigate the convergence of their interests and products. The exhibition becomes more and more often a space of primary production rather than one of display – a production of objects, ideas, activities or relations, or of the re-presentation, re-working, re-enactment or re-sampling of existing into new art or exhibition projects.

To illustrate the above point about transformations in exhibition making, let me use two rather extreme examples. The first one is the show *Utopia Station*, the last one of the eleven shows that together comprised Francesco Bonami's Venice Biennial of 2003. Artistic and curatorial authorship of *Utopia Station* expanded to an unspecified number of people beyond the curatorial team that officially had undertaken the project – namely the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, art historian Molly Nesbit and artist Rikrit Tiravanija. The exhibition venue in Venice was not used to exhibit art works in any conventional sense of the word 'exhibiting'. Rather, it was aimed at as a space for interaction and activity, including a flexible plan of events such as performances, concerts, lectures, readings, film programs and even parties.<sup>38</sup> However, most importantly, the project as understood by the curators was not just everything that took place there, in the exhibition venue. Rather, the Venice exhibition was a 'station' among other stations, an instance within a broader laboratory-situation that expanded before and after, as well as outside the geographical boundaries of the 2003 Venice Biennial. The 'exhibition' was a multi-authored process of producing ideas, activities, interactions at multiple places and times, starting already during the period of *Utopia Station*'s preparation.<sup>39</sup> It was a process that did not aim at any other, more concrete outcome, than the process itself, and this process comprised both the exhibition as well as the 'exhibited' art.

A second example is the exhibition project *Coalesce* that was initiated by Paul O'Neil in 2003 at the London Print Studio Gallery and continued until its fifth edition in 2010 at Smart Project Space in Amsterdam.<sup>40</sup> Each edition was a separate exhibition presentation, but at the same time also a continuation and evolution of the previous edition. Three artists participated to the first version and as many as eighty were included in each later versions. *Coalesce* expanded the form of the exhibition, with its particular aesthetic relations (visual, haptic, bodily etc.) which arise from the combination of the architectural environment, the exhibition design, the art works as well as the visitors. In each edition the artists collaborated on a single installation within which their separate works merged. In addition, the curatorial framework of each edition of *Coalesce* was also an evolution and aggregation of the editions that preceded it. As a result, the multiple versions of *Coalesce* in time and in space form a space-time continuum, an exhibition without an endpoint, where individual works and intentions merge.

The exhibition projects *Utopia Station* and *Coalesce* could serve as examples for considering a reason why the image of the single-author curator – and artist for that matter – still persists today, despite the acknowledgement of the expansion and diversity of models of multiple authorship. That reason is to be found not in the art world's difficulty to deal with

<sup>38</sup> Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Rikrit Tiravanija, 'What is a station?' (2003), in *Participation*, Claire Bishop (ed.). London & Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel & The MIT Press, 2006, 184-189.

<sup>39</sup> See also Liam Gillick, 'Utopia Station. For a ... functional utopia', [http://www.deutscher-pavillon.org/2009/pdf\\_gillick/Utopia.pdf](http://www.deutscher-pavillon.org/2009/pdf_gillick/Utopia.pdf), first published as part of *Utopia Station*, Venice Biennial, 2003, last accessed 16/8/2014.

<sup>40</sup> O'Neil, *The Cultures of*, 93-96.

the question of the author, and the author's function. The question of the author only distracts attention from the more difficult questions, which are: what is the meaning and the function of the art work and the exhibition – in other words, the question 'what is a work?'. It seems quite easy to address cultural products that resist categorization as exceptional, extraordinary cases, the peculiarity of which is due to the inspiration of an extraordinary author, whether an individual or collective one. Nonetheless, this approach distracts attention from the need to study these hybrid cultural products in order to challenge the limitations of our understanding of the meaning and function of art works and art exhibitions. This difficult point underlies, for instance, the remark made by Maria Lind in her introductory text to the book *Taking the Matter into Common Hands. On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*.<sup>41</sup> When discussing Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* and the criticisms it received particularly from Stephen Wright and Claire Bishop, Lind notices what she calls a 'striking commonality' between Bourriaud, Wright and Bishop. Namely, that 'they are all equally perilously impressionistic in their descriptions of artwork and equally sweeping when they mix together art and artists.'<sup>42</sup> This shortcoming in all three approaches is telling of the difficulties that the art works pose: one needs to have experienced them, or have at least a 'detailed and trustworthy eyewitness description' in order to discuss them. As 'this sort of installationist, cooperative work has proven to be more difficult to describe than other types of art, let alone analyse'.<sup>43</sup>

All this brings us back to where we started, namely to *Documenta 5*, a landmark project for the emergence of the single-author model in curating, according to recently written histories of contemporary art curating. Accordingly, Szeemann is also considered one of the pillars in the mythology developed around the curator's single-author model which, as I have tried to show in this article, comprises to some extent a construction. Quite often art exhibitions are collaborative, collective or group projects. One could use *Documenta 5* from 1972 as a telling example –and certainly not the first one– of a cultural product between art and exhibition, the concept and function of which cannot be adequately covered by either term. If by now such projects have become important to analyse and interpret, it is because they occupy a significant part of the most interesting works in the contemporary art world.

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<sup>41</sup> Maria Lind, 'The collaborative turn', in *Taking the Matter*, Billing et al (eds.), 15-31.

<sup>42</sup> Lind, 'The collaborative turn', in *Taking the Matter*, Billing et al (eds.), 20-22.

<sup>43</sup> Lind, 'The collaborative turn', in *Taking the Matter*, Billing et al (eds.), 22.