

The exhibition as metaphor of social organisation

A dissent

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Panel discussion with
Love Jönsson (Röhsska Museum, mod.)
Maya Heuer (the Glass Factory)
Marscia Harvey Isaksson (Fiberspace)

Questions from the moderator to the panelists

The field of contemporary crafts is wide-ranging and encompasses many different ways of working. The new millennium has seen an increase in the number of process-related, mutable works and exhibitions and projects based on active participation. There is a discernible interest in the function of crafted objects in social situations and their ability to be an element in divergent situations and environments. At the same time, the institutional structures, galleries and museum spaces that constitute the framework for the audience's encounter with the crafts remain largely adapted to static object-based exhibitions. Can craft curators

create new spaces and contexts that are inclusive and provide opportunities for innovative strategies within the field? The discussion on the role of the curator also raises issues about who wields power over exhibition spaces and public projects. There is a strong tradition in the crafts of self-organisation in the form of artist-run shops, galleries and symposiums, where makers invite colleagues and together create new artistic contexts. How does the growing interest of recent years in the professional role of the curator relate to this legacy of cooperative and collegial-based working models?

Love Jönsson

EXHIBITION VIEW

Carambolages

Curated by Jean-Hubert
Martin, March 2 – July 4,
2016, Petit Palais, Paris,
photo: RMN

I sense in Love's questions as addressed to the panel a concern – that some of the curatorial practices from the artworld will steamroll over craft, and somehow contaminate it: the popular notion that “star” curators mishandle the art, and create their own statement; the introduction, in contemporary art shows of token, transhistorical exhibits that provide little context about the work, or why it is included in the show. In his questions, these approaches are pitted against artist-led, self-organizing initiatives, which presumably stand for “good”, or better curatorial approaches.

In this conversation, I understand the models of “star” curator and collective projects as metaphors for models of social organisation. There is certainly an urgent need to channel the social agenda of craft-making, craft-showing and craft-exchange against what is starting to feel like a surge in divisive, discriminatory, protectionist politics around the world. In that context, exhibition projects that are inclusive, that propose a form of mutualized knowledge transmission, that maximize the network effect of craft communities are not only welcome: they are a form of cultural resistance.

I agree with the politics of collective endeavors - but not necessarily with

their success as a means to produce challenging exhibitions: It all depends what one wants from an exhibition project.

Before I start, I also need to reframe Love's questions from a jewelry perspective - as jewelry is the contemporary craft I know most about. Out of the 70+ exhibitions that took place during the field's yearly Munich get-together, last year, 25 were organized by makers, a number of them without a defined curator. Meanwhile, there has been a surge in the last 10 years of Jewelry “weeks” that provide diversions from our Munich-centered world: exhibition splashout in urban settings – like Florence, Tokyo, Melbourne, Paris or Stockholm. And again, in those cases, organization is overwhelmingly collective. Meanwhile, a comparatively large number of institutional shows are also organized by makers, putting themselves at the service of their peers. None of these people are “stars” or actively seek recognition, or in fact payment.

To quote the invitation text that Love sent to this panel, the “strong tradition in the crafts of self-organisation in the form of artist-run shops, galleries and symposiums” lives on in contemporary jewelry practice – it is in fact the norm.

These are largely “amateur” projects, organized by people who are not curators by profession. Possibly – but not necessarily – for that reason, these exhibitions rarely question their curatorial premises: curation may be done by committee, and self-organized, and anonymous, but this organisational model is rarely described as a “position” against the “star curator” model, or in favour of a more inclusive system.

So, in order to think my way through Love's questions, I decided to look outside of jewelry. Taking my cue from Marianne Zamecznik's show, and its “Chinese whispers” principle, I'd like to present two projects that use a form of domino effect for its object organization. One of them is Jean-Hubert Martin's Carambolages exhibition that was recently on show at the Petit Palais, in Paris. The other is Ayumi Horie's Pots in Action project, which is online and ongoing. Although they are world apart, they share enough methodological criteria to be compared. I'll try to trace the ideological affiliations of both projects, and see if they can help me thing through the questions raised by Love. (I'd like to thank Namita Wiggers for sharing the latter project with me).



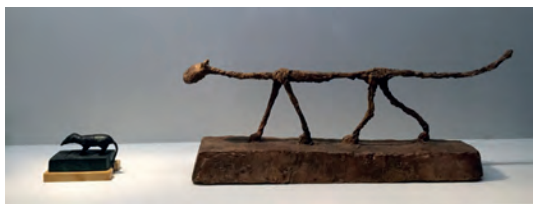
Carambolages

Jean-Hubert Martin is a rather famous figure in the art world. He had made history in 1989 with Les Magiciens de la terre, a Pompidou contemporary art exhibition that included work from all five continents. It is supposed to have challenged the eurocentrism of contempor. Art and to have announced the globalisation of the art market.

Nearly 30 years later, Carambolages is a very different proposition. Taking Aby Warburg's Atlas of “visual clusters” as a model, the exhibition is conceived as a single succession of 185 objects, selected and organized according to a principle of thematic or visual similarity (The metaphor for this principle is present in the word “carambolage”, which describes a billiard ball hitting, in succession, another two balls.)

EXHIBITION VIEW
Carambolages
Curated by Jean-Hubert
Martin, March 2 – July 4,
2016, Petit Palais, Paris,
photo: Benjamin Lignel

The exhibits are plucked from very different fields – painting, sculpture, installation or the applied arts (which includes, in this case, a suit of armour, books, engravings and woodcuts, customary or religious objects, architectural reproductions etc.)



No other justification for selection has been foregrounded than the curator's taste, and his eye for contrasted pairs. Some of the sequences of objects are immensely gratifying... They reminded me of Surrealists' excitement for creating wonder out of the "chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operation table" (Lautréamont)... Others fell flat, when the arbitrary failed to produce anything exciting.

In sharp contrast to the very "open" selection of works, the exhibition experience itself is quite prescriptive: one had to follow a certain path, and information about the work was delivered by rather tedious slide-show at the end of each alley.

The lack of captions directly near the works was supposed put every work "on the same footing". It certainly meant that visitors had no other "help" than the object itself, and many, including myself, spent quite a bit more time looking at single works than I would have in, say, a historicized presentation.

The real curatorial precedent for *Carambolages* is not Warburg, but Malraux, and his *Imaginary Museum*, or Museum without Walls: a vast archive of photographic reproductions of artworks which Malraux constantly re-organized. Two aspects of this imaginary museum – and of *Carambolages* – are I think noteworthy:

First – it locates the creative act in the process of freely assembling, grouping, and displaying works of art, rather than the art-work itself.

Second – it ascribes to individual works only a very tenuous relationship to the context of their production or consumption. It is an object-focused curation, which supposes the power of object to be dependent on the assemblage as context.



(LEFT) EXHIBITION DETAIL
Carambolages (2016),
(left) Mouse, Egypt,
Antiquity, (right)
Alberto Giacometti, *Cat*,
1951, Petit Palais, Paris,
photo: B. Lignel

ANDRÉ MALRAUX AT HOME
photo: Maurice Jarnoux

Pots in action

Pots in Action (PIA) is also premised on the idea of association, but the organisation principle is vastly different, and I think much more attentive to the social situation of objects. Here is a brief description of the project by Ayumi Horie, who began the project in 2005:

Pots In Action is a crowd sourcing project that collects and features the best photographs of handmade pottery in use by potters and ceramic appreciators all over the world. Some are candid, others are posed; what they have in common is taking the pot off the shelf and putting it to work in the kitchen, out of the kitchen, wherever pots can be found.

This project is an evolution of Ayumi Horie's original Pots In Action that she began in 2005. On her website, is a map of images of her own pottery being used by others. If you'd like to participate, tag your Instagram images with #potsinaction. Weekly challenges are issued on Sundays.

The project now involves thousands of people who have either been put in charge of a weekly challenge, or have responded to the challenges by posting pictures of pots – their pots, someone else's pot – on PIA's instagram feed.

Weekly challenges tend to showcase more focused selections of works, but there again, the posts cover a wide range of documentation: from posed pictures to tutorials, historical documents and family pictures of post in use.

Although “association” is a driving element of both PIA and Carambolages, they work in radically different ways. PIA has made much of clay as community-oriented practice; it gives almost free reign to contributors – who can upload what they want, and tend to be generous with the information they provide on their posts. Contributions are very attentive to the “situations and environments” of pot-making, pot-selling, and pot-using, to the point that they seem completely devoted to the human context in which objects are made, used, swapped or taught.

A map showing the location of pots made by Horie herself gives a small sense of the large footprint of the project (she also has pots in Europe, in Asia, and in the Pacific region). She has invited dozens of guest curators, and PIA has a little bit less than 90 000 followers. Which, considering the cost of the project, and richness of what it offers, is pretty damn impressive.



POTS IN ACTION, 2005
- ongoing, Instagram
screengrab of the
#acrossthetable chal-
lenge, curated by Namita
Wiggers

Again, two aspects of PIA are noteworthy, I think, in the context of this conversation:

First, the fact that by focusing on the “social life of objects” the project showcases different kinds of creativity: that of makers, of course, but also of users, of photographers (an important part of the project) and of the selectors themselves (like in Zamekznik project, this form of delegated curation is premised on a multiplicity of curatorial voices – each with their own agenda, taste, and background);

Second, the fact that community-building is a fundamental part of the project. As I have written elsewhere: “The organizer function less as artists than as gamemaster. Participants similarly become players,

less concerned with individual recognition than with collective action. Like in role-playing, this form of interaction both acknowledges the distinction between master and players and encourages rotation: today's organizer will be tomorrow's players in an endlessly reconfigured list of participants.”

Several ideas underscore the craft field's enthusiastic adoption of new media, and of crowdsourced projects such as PIA: the promise of self-sufficiency; the possibility of grassroots diversity through equal access; simple and powerful tools for community building and audience outreach; and the promise of empowerment through participation.

conclusion

I don't want to conclude by comparing the merits of the two projects.

As I said at the beginning, whether one prefers one or the other depends on what you expect from "shows" (I realize that I am using "show" in a very wide sense – but I think it makes sense to describe PIA as a form of "show").

I remember resenting, as I was walking through Carambolages, being "led by the nose". If this was indeed one man's imaginary museum, then there was only one way to walk through it, and that did not feel very generous, or empowering. Removing objects from their context has a long, infamous history – specially in countries with a colonial past – and that, too, is a problem (to say the least). What I got in exchange for temporarily

suppressing my annoyance was some flashes of curatorial excellence, in which the clash and love-making between two works made me both attentive to the materiality of each, and made space for rethinking what they were about, in a divergent sort of way.

My experience with PIA is less in-depth. But I love its generosity, and the seemingly infinite points of view that it provides on "pots". I am seduced by the fact it puts our shared humanity at the service of craft – and in turns posits craft as a sign of that humanity (giving hope that, well, we are not completely and totally fucked as a species).

But I am also a person born in the seventies, and I do have one worry with the collective, "opting-in" model of Pots in Action: Opting in, in a community with common interests,

Pots in Action World Map



supposes a form of complicity. The social engagement it proposes is always conceived of as functional, positive, friendly.

Should we indeed believe that projects like PIA are producing new models of social interaction, I think we should also understand how exhibition projects that channel collective impulses also become a space for debate, dissent, and decision-making.

Benjamin Lignel is an independant writer, curator, lecturer, and artist. He was the editor, from 2013 to 2016, of Art Jewelry Forum. He is currently working with Namita Wiggers on a publication and exhibition project focusing on jewelry and gender.

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POTS IN ACTION WORLD MAP (detail of North America), potsinaction.com