

A subjective effort to explore the richness and specificity of collective curating

By Alfredo Cramerotti, Rían Lozano and Khaled Ramadan on behalf of Chamber of Public Secrets

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

- a) The idea of collective curating is a matter of being able to renounce to what I already know in order to learn what I do not know – and someone else in the team does. How far can I embrace this attitude and renounce my individual knowledge? Collectives (should) resonate wider; it is not only a matter of adding knowledge and producing something that is bigger than the sum of its parts. It is a dynamic that works by detraction rather than addition and extends its reach precisely but renouncing to the singular power position.
- b) The above is also important in terms of building and enlarging audiences, being that an art public, a media audience or a peer community: besides renouncing or acquiring knowledge, it is a matter of giving up control and accept risk. Collective production can go awfully wrong or fantastically well for unforeseeable reasons because they involve a greater number of actors. In this context, I work within a territory that is (and remains) uncharted. Calculated risk is a chimera.
- c) Furthermore, collective curating is interesting outside the field of art. While it is rather common to group-curate literature (editors) and cinema (programmers), it is less so to ‘curate’ science, journalism or architecture. How would it be for a group of scholars to curate a scientific endeavour or programme, how could it work out a journalistic platform curated collectively (deciding together what to cover and how, not merely producing in team), and what about an urban masterplan devised by a (small) community of inhabitants? (The fact I added ‘small’ is a clue of what can/cannot work within a collective effort.)
- d) The crucial question, which exists independently from the activity of curating: why collectively? The first response would be that to work alone, I get bored – a good enough reason. There is something else. In a collective, the risk of overwhelming ideologies, blind faiths or devastating emotional responses is less. All is diluted both in relations, space and time. Of course group ideologies do exist and are no less effective than those imposed single-handed. But even if the process is slower and sometimes unnerving, there is a good chance that thinking, working and deciding together may bring a less self-centred and more interesting outcome. If people stick around long enough, that is.

It is not a 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 we take a look at some curatorial activities in the last

years and in different parts of the world, we can observe that writing in collaboration, as well as editing in collaboration and organising collective spaces for discussion seem to be *the* feature of the current diversity in the work of curators. Collective production and distribution is an interesting business throughout the history of mankind (approx 150,000 years), whether applied to hunting and gathering, settled agriculture or the revolution of the masses. However, what has always fascinated me is not anthological charts, but rather what lies ‘at the corner of the eyes’; the unwritten (and untold) part of the story. Of many stories.

To provide a sort of peer-talk about the characteristics of a few curatorial collectives does not contradict the necessity to analyze and to explore. Their activities can be seen as ‘depending’ experiences – from space, time and individual situations that trickle down on the other members of the group. In particular with regard to space, there is a consideration to make. The earlier 1990s obsession in ‘curating geographies’ such as the Middle East, East Asia and the Balkans is now reduced, almost replaced with different concerns. The current preoccupation has all to do precisely with the notion of the collective, and what this collectivity represents. Then again, the globally evident popularity of curatorial grouping (and groupies) on the visual culture scene did not happen overnight. The shift was almost anticipated. It went from object-based, individual artistic approach to participatory schemes, from community projects to research activism as well as the production and distribution of information via alternative media. Collectiveness in curating is merely the latest stage of this process, which may be far from exhausted.

The question is: how can I make a meaningful reading of this collaborative curatorial format? Is collaboration just a pragmatic capital in the very competitive arena of curating? Or is it a hypothetically defensible and significant practice? In fact, there is some good in a collective way of working, and it comes from (un)suspected practices. I get to the point: let us consider for a moment (just a moment, I swear) Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational art. Here, the audience is envisaged as a community, rather than the artwork being an encounter between a viewer and an object. 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? Interestingly, in the shadow of Bourriaud’s concept, I find increasing parallels with different curatorial collective productions, each of them testing his hypothesis on their own terms. Almost each one of the curatorial collectives I encountered have disclosed, or is in the act of disclosing, not only the mechanisms of producing and staging exhibitions or events, but often it investigates and reveals what takes place on the stage set up. It does so by means of a relational approach – organising encounters, creating the opportunity for chance meetings, initiating shared processes and so on. What this collective curating does (and individual curating does not, or much less) is to 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 which – intentionally or not – makes a difference in today’s curatorial panorama.

Taking the plural as the main character, in the next pages I will briefly outline some of the collective and cooperative activities that I consider interesting under a specific feature, different in each case. The groups are mainly European-based, since I grounded the text on personal encounters and this is the geographical area

which I frequent most. The groups are widely 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 which 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 a chronological or alphabetical order, but simply an attempt to tell a model of working which *can* get close to reality.

I have not experienced in person any of *EPT Electric Palm Tree* projects, but one of the (former) components of the collective happens to be a close friend. I say former as EPT is no longer active, apparently. Initially a two-year project (2007-8) funded by Fonds BKVB and based in Amsterdam, it operated with the aim of generating long-term activities on a trans-national scale, allowing experimental approaches and even their failures (which happened, indeed). When first asked, my friend refused to talk about the collective experience, which made me think; then, text and images started to collect in my inbox.

For what I understood from the conversations I had, the collective's focus was on issues of globalization and cultural diversity. EPT wanted to question the canonical representation of art (and the attached political and power structures) in the West while bringing on the table different modes of understanding art, and those structures, in other cultural and geographical landscapes. Which I think is an interesting goal. Pity it did not work out: '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' (my friend). The impression I have from all this is that EPT was the right project at the wrong time, or vice versa. Another try would be appreciated.

In 2009 I took part in the organisation of the 1st International Workshop on Art Criticism – organised by Université Rennes 2 in collaboration with INHA from Paris and the Archives de la Critique d'Art de Châteaugiron. During four days we assisted and were part of the work meetings of about twenty professionals and researchers related to criticism, art history and curating. Among the guests to this workshop there was a member of the project *castillo/corrales* (www.castillocorrales.fr). This is a space set in motion at the beginning of 2007 by a group of curators, writers, critics and artists, 'a shared office space and collectively-run gallery' which promotes activities such as exhibitions, residency programmes, conferences, book selling (S7B Section 7 Books) and publishing (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. And book selling (S7B) is a prototype of a mechanism of sustainability, like other experiences of this kind such as b-books in Berlin. The bookshop pursues financial independence by selling and at the same time engages quite intensely in what they sell, 'dissecting' their publications in workshops, readings and meetings. The person I met told me that all these hectic planning and doing are part of the unpremeditated activity of looking and thinking about art, which is always tied to reading, discussing, and circulating printed material. This dynamics of plural work is at the same time the practical response to a situation shared by many independent

actors of the artistic scene: sharing the work ensures the needed time to work in other things which are economically rewarded. Because sometimes books (unfortunately) are not enough.

AGM Annual General Meeting (www.annualgeneralmeeting.net) is a roaming collective project of which I am one of the initiators (apologies for the conflict of interest). It kicked off in 2003 and developed in time as a curatorial project which has a parasite feature attached: it is hosted and funded year by year by a different organization, festival or programme. In tough times it has even been (foolishly) self-funded. It is not a big event – we purportedly keep it small for financial and logistical reasons, and also because it is better to work on a relaxed pace. This smallness in size turns to a great intensity in scale, because the people involved spend time together and even help each other and us in the leading up to the project (which may be a symposium, a video exhibition or a radio programme).

I admit the whole AGM idea is more a little obsession than anything else: a constant challenge to realize a project on a string shoe which may involve well-known or emergent artists and which stems purely from a desire to sharing some time and space with a group of people we (hopefully) like. Year after year this small art/media project is building a form of trust, between us initiators but also among artists and hosting bodies. Sometimes we cannot raise funds until the last moment and somehow tickets get bought and venues get booked anyway. Perhaps, the ‘relational angle’ of each event is quite good, and people remember. Maybe not all of these relationships are genuine, but I like to think so.

Another recent example of collective proposal is (*sic*) *societat i cultura* (www.societaticultura.org). Strictly speaking not a curatorial collective, the 2007 exhibition project consisted on a periodic publication (twelve issues in total) about Velluters – an 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 a ‘storage’ and as a place for reading. The objective was to ‘swap’ the two locations involved: introducing Velluters in the museum context, and taking MUVIM out to the district streets. This could only be achieved with the active participation of some 80 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 competences and skills that worked jointly for something they have in common. This should also be read in terms of collective production.

D.A.E. stays for Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak, translatable from the Basque language to Contemporary Art Activities. Based in Donostia-San Sebastian since 1999, its focus has always been to bring to surface the dynamic between art production and the public sphere, asking questions such as what is site, what is community, what might be artistic production or collaboration. The geographical (dis)location is obviously more intellectual than practical, as it involves citizens and non-citizens to question their own environment and ‘given’ community.

In 2005 *D.A.E.* attempted to apply some of the ‘ethics’ from their own working methodology to the situation of

the workshop. The discussions resulted in almost a manifesto – a good kind of manifesto, in my view. The mechanisms of survival of an independent art structure in a small city were laid bare in 23 points/statements; D.A.E. revealed inside out what they have been thinking and doing, 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. What I would call brave new curators.

The space-based collective <rotor> in Graz (<http://rotor.mur.at>) from more than ten years manoeuvres in the curatorial and artistic field by hosting global concerns on its ‘territories’ – whether the exhibition space or another structure. In its institutionalized form (8 people in the office, 4 people in the managing committee, 5 people in the advisory board and about 60 members of the association), it develops a form of curatorial knowledge by contextualizing exhibitions in theoretical frameworks. <rotor> applies critical thinking to move towards the edges of political philosophy, activism and artistic engagement, taking up issues such as intersubjectivity and multitude.

In a typical project, the curatorial collective would question the ownership and function of the public space and ask its contributors (artists) and audience alike how to challenge such ownership. In other words, it seems to me that <rotor> test socially and politically ‘engaged’ art in both artistic and non-artistic formats.

In the field of curating performance, this collective collaboration aptly named *Brown Mountain College of Performing Arts* (started in 2006, but they claim its foundation in 1906) delivers a focused programme and at the same time expands the idea of what is 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 of this collective-cooperative venture is the light approach and tongue-in-cheek language that BMC uses for communicating 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 ‘things’, the collective raises funds and, in a sort of ‘productive parasitic’ process (a bit like AGM), applies directly what received from different bodies to commissioning new works to 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 esoteric avant-garde, only later.

The spaceless *Wooloo* collective has been active since 2002 (www.wooloo.org) and operates worldwide using the means of electronic activism. In time, it 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 may range from hosting someone at home, all the way to organizing a protest march, with all the (artistic) shades in-between.

Wooloo 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 hosting other people with the same concerns), then invited groups to organize themselves for this or that discussion or manifestation. My next door neighbour, a sixty-five-plus spokesperson of a climate change group, came back from Copenhagen enthusiastic not for the summit talks but for this very unusual and pleasant experience.

As a curatorial partnership, *B+B* (active since 2000 - www.welcomebb.org.uk) takes head-on the issue of the role of the artist in society, and its potential for change and '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. *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 commission and evaluation consultation. (If I do not remember badly, this used to be the main sources of income for the collective. The fact they are London-based might be an advantage if you offer services such as post-commission evaluation, due to the concentration of institutions and meta-institutions such as the Art Council England.)

What really struck me about this collective is their professional attitude towards not only what they do (a reasonable expectation) but also in regard to the unseen consequences that their activity may bring along. A few years ago, *B+B* approached 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 socially wrong in deprived areas in which racism, illiteracy and crime are the main features. Political (third way) wisdom here dictates that art has a positive power for change, thus the artist is central to this process. *B+B* always considered carefully their role as service-provider in the cultural industry, and opened the discussion about its potential, its benefits and also contradictions. It has been crucial for me to encounter their work; it helped to realize how I wanted to negotiate my professional position as curator, writer and artist, or – as one of *B+B* nicely put it – 'rethinking what it means to be paid to be critical'.

The case of another team met during the workshop on Art Criticism can be seen as an intermediate stage among those considered so far. *Damas* is a Basque-Catalan curatorial team that interestingly balances itself between institutional recognition and grassroots approach. The collective received in 2008 the *Abisal Award* (Bilbao) for their project *Copyzine*: a publication-exhibition, composed by texts related to authorship reproduction and distribution, and by 25 works by artists, produced specifically for the publication. The fanzine was freely

available to copy and redistribute, allowing to take home the 'art piece'.

Although nowadays the two members of the group are working in different tasks (technically the collective no longer operates), the respective experience illustrate the importance of working as part of a group for many young curators in the first stage of their career. The will of experimenting beyond the mere exhibition and the wish of taking the production out of the exhibition area are the ground onto which build one's own critical path. When asked, one of the members 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. This would be, to give a concrete example, the case of *Wiki-Histories of art in the Basque context told by artists and mediators*, a project that '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 potential collaborators (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 to use, accessible by a great number of users who turn themselves into a critical mass. This means adopting a media strategy.

In regard to *WHW What, How & for Whom*, the common understanding about their name and approach is 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, a sort of self-conscious reflection – put into practice – of the artist and curator's position in the current labour market (as B+B does). I read that in their projects, no matter if exhibitions or books or entire biennials, they search the ways in which to 'parasite' on the cultural industry (as AGM does), with the aim of discussing social and economical issues in an open way. I do not know if this corresponds to their actual work – I do not have enough first-hand information.

However, the impulse I had to ask when I met one of the members during a seminar in 2009 was not generated in relation to their curatorial approach. My urgent question was: what happened to Why? I did not ask, but someone else did (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 with our developed brain we process sign 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. 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 job, one might think. (Half kidding.)