**Before Exhibiting**

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**1. Setting forth**

Is there anything, you might wonder, that hasn't been said or written about the work of exhibition-making and curating? The shelves groan under the weight of all the books, and then there are the magazines, journals, fanzines, exhibition brochures, "readers," the symposia, lectures, and degree programs. The results of a search in the library catalogues makes my head spin, the offerings of bookstores are overwhelming, and all I can think of is Douglas Huebler's remark that "the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." [1] Not much, for that matter, actually sticks; I browse here and there, but rare is the text that really captures my attention. Names, discourses, and places blur and fade into each other, a chaos that leaves me perplexed. Then again, perhaps that's in part because I'm getting older? Memory filled to capacity! *I do not wish to add any more!*

One hot spring day, the steady breeze that so often blows in Vienna flushes me across the Danube Canal and into the 2nd district's familiar streets. I cross the plaza outside Jean Nouvel's Sofitel and turn into the weird, short end of Praterstraße, a hundred-yard stretch of hipsterdom: Bunter Hund, a new sandwich shop that advertises a Shlomo Toast; Boutique Song, which has been here for a while; and the restaurants Ansari, Mochi, and Ramasuri. The terraces are crowded with patrons consuming after-work beers, after-work espressos, and after-work gelatos. None of that for me, not today—I've scheduled a round of wrestling with words. Will I have time for even one after-work whatever in the next few weeks? I've barely finished one text when the next deadline looms, one piece needs to be revised, an exhibition announcement is due, files need to be uploaded and tested, meals prepared and laundry done, a toe patched up and a vaccination appointment kept. The crux with work is downtime, and although the soul now does its fair share of the work, the body will never get around to its after-work beers. [2] They hover before my nose, beckoning, like a carrot that can keep an entire herd of donkeys moving.

"Write whatever you want," the curator had told me, "it's about the meta level." I don't quite believe him. What would he say if that meta level were a real place? What if I simply stayed on Praterstraße? After the posh block I pass by Palais Wenkheim, the Spar supermarket and a hookah bar, a lingerie and a bicycle store, and finally I stop at the traffic light to cross over toward Nestroyhof. Three Hasidic boys come tumbling toward me on the crosswalk and I think about Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks commemorating the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai, which starts on the evening of May 30th this year. Two days ago, a young couple approached me not far from here, outside an enormous electronics store; the man in an oversized, black winter coat that was flapping about his limbs, the tired-eyed woman in jeans and a T-shirt. They'd bought the wrong diapers and fabric softener in the drugstore and wanted to return them and get their money back and could I take care of that for them? I look at them and at first don't get it, then I take a glance at the receipt and signal the woman to follow me into the store. As we walk, the man whispers to me in English that they're from Syria and that his wife is pregnant. The sales clerk takes the merchandise back without batting an eye and hands the money to the young woman. The man is waiting outside with a small gaggle of people around him, and as I leave they all call out "Thank you!" in heavily accented English. I don't turn around. If this was a scam, I think to myself, Austrian society can surely afford to absorb the loss. I need to adapt my moral ideas, and that's not easy. Changing entrenched habits of thinking, my therapist says, isn't an act of reason; it happens in deep layers of consciousness and by reprogramming the brain's neuronal interconnections. She tries to make it happen with a technique she calls "brainspotting"—needless to say, I'm skeptical.

So is there anything that hasn't been written? What's there that still needs to be said? Isn't it all idle chatter given that a walking stereotype, an uneducated, loud, blustering, male, white, heterosexual American with no manners

dominates the public debate with his tweets? No matter how many exhibitions in Athens, Venice, or Kassel that implore us to pay attention to the art, the artists, the "people," the place or history, the pictures that will ultimately be remembered show an American president who brazenly shoves his Montenegrin colleague aside and pushes into the first row during a photo shoot with the leaders of the NATO countries; a political figure who permanently blurts out in plain, and indeed all too plain of terms, anything that bothers him. Should we see him as the recurrence of the same, as a reenactment of the 7th president of the United States, Andrew Jackson, [3] or compare him to the 37th president, Richard Nixon? [4] It doesn't matter—what makes this 45th president so interesting is that by virtue of his mere presence he exposes all institutions to ridicule; that he turns virtually everything into a meme and that he will change the how and what of political jargon—the repertoire of formulas and set phrases—forever. Will we respond to this maelstrom of chaos, madness, and absurdity by feeling impuissant, fearful, and depressed?

We need a revival of political art, an artist who runs a small publicly sponsored art space in a residential complex in Berlin-Lichtenberg explains to me during a meeting. I object that there's plenty of political art around, it just doesn't necessarily make it into the museums and exhibition halls, and when it does it isn't especially loud. It's the places we need to change, I argue, and you of all people should know. All change starts small, she replies, all we can do is put cracks in the matrix, instigate something; we need more empathy! Strange, I muse, everybody's talking about empathy these days …

**2. Setting up**

So what's there still to be said about an exhibition and about exhibition-making? I'm working from a paradoxical point of departure: as I write these lines, the exhibition *ba* ≠ *b*+*a* doesn't actually exist yet. All it is is plans on paper. Now that would hardly seem unusual. People constantly write catalogue essays for and about exhibitions that have yet to be installed. Still, isn't it peculiar? Here is a situation that's very much about presence, about seeing and experience and the relations the various parties can enter. It's about how that presence is supposed to let us understand, learn, and see after the fact. Yet we perpetually write and talk about the exhibition in its absence. It presents an event that is yet to come. There are all sorts of tools, of course, to help us imagine this future event: floor plans, hanging plans, 2D and 3D models. There's some resemblance to the architectural design process: for the longest time, the central question was whether *disegno* was "the *a priori* or the *a posteriori* projective depiction of a mental image of a building"; [5] contemporary discourses, by contrast, tend to understand design practice as a performative process, a step from idea to graphic representation that needs to be elucidated, and a complex activity that oscillates between a historic dimension and a future that may come to pass. [6]

Architecture, objects, works of art are forever half present, half absent. Walking to work, I see a building as though for the first time. I'd "forgotten" to see it because my eyes had always been fixed on what was behind it. The object in the foreground is a small structure from the 1950s standing at the former final stop of a tramway line, whose tracks still loop around it. It's painted a creamy white and has lots of small windows; a round flat roof whose curvature is echoed by the shape of the tram shelter across the street, that hasn't fallen victim to modernization (yet). Maybe it's landmarked, maybe it has fallen into oblivion, maybe it was deliberately left in place as a misfit amid the newly built and yet-to-be-built ensemble of glazed façades and green roofs.

I pick up the exhibition's ground plan. The show opens in September. It's the anniversary exhibition of the municipal collection of the City of Vienna, a public institution, and meant to look back on the collection-building efforts of the past ten years. I've read the concept for the show, I've seen pictures of the works that have been selected for it, I've spoken to the curator about his selection. The floor and installation plans note architectural details of the galleries and include schematic representations of the individual works. One can tell which will go where in the rooms.

In the layout they appear to be on equal footing; that will change on the site though: the attention of spectators, passersby, and exhibition visitors altering the presence of objects, the architecture, and the works of art. The plan establishes a kind of democracy, but such equality is illusory already now; each object has its purchase price, insured value, market value, and the curator, in the end, has his personal preferences. In the synoptic plan, we who contemplate it seem to possess uniform information on everything and everyone. There's neither foreground nor background, only structures, forms, surfaces, possibly colors, figures—encoded information about spatial relations. As the historian Karl Schlögel has argued, there are maps that are obsolete the moment they are drawn. [7] This plan—which, right now, exists as the idea of a space—is one such map. In the next few weeks, as these present observations will be copy edited, proofread, and translated, as the catalogue will be printed and shipped to the exhibition space, the plan (as an idea) will probably already have changed, and have been adapted to the actual spatial situation and the presence of the works; to serve as a navigational aid, it would have to be redrawn.

The gallery is segmented into several interlocking spaces: an elongated hall, structured by a band of niches (with and without windows) extending across the entire length of one side. Pillars, set before these niches, mark out another vertical axis that divides the room into a ratio of 2:3. The entrance area feels like an extra hallway wedged between the elongated and squarish parts of the gallery. Another set of six pillars of varying dimension frame and separate it from the other segments. The area to the right, whose structure is likewise defined by niches and apertures (former windows and door bays), is "smoothed" by thin curtain walls. Altering the room's quality to make it more of a classic "white cube," the curtain walls are obviously helpful in terms of hanging art. In the plan, the works are indicated by rectangles of different lengths and widths and marked with codes; 6 squares in the long hall: 9/1; a hatched square, its sides three times as long, in the eastern hall: 2/3; two narrow rectangles, touching at a 90° angle, nestled up to one of the pillars, their short sides one third of the sides of the small squares, their long sides five times as long: 7/4. The first digit refers to the chapters under which the curator has grouped several works; the second presumably indicates the individual work. The chapters are somewhat segregated in the exhibition but nevertheless communicate across intervening spaces and along visual axes. The elongated rectangles also bring to mind small circuit designs or relays that might be switched on or off; the squares look like chimney ducts. So what kinds of currents course through this "circuitry"? What flows in the exhibition space? People? History? Meaning? Ideas? Energy?

In a catalogue accompanying an exhibition on 1970s architecture in Los Angeles, architectural historian Sylvia Lavin examines the ways in which Carl Andre's artistic practice crossed the boundary between art and architecture:[8] the use of industrially produced construction supplies, the placement of the works on the naked floor, and exhibitions in lofts—spaces associated with manufacturing and industry—gave rise to what she describes as a theoretical-historical confusion concerning the contextualization and categorization of what Andre was doing. In his application of grid structures and "primary geometries," she writes, Andre went further than his contemporaries. [9]

One example Lavin discusses at length is Andre's exhibition *Equivalents*, installed first in New York in 1966 and then in Los Angeles in 1967. The relocation went hand in hand with changes to the show; for instance, solids became hollow volumes. For the poster announcing the exhibition, Andre made the drawing *Cuts* (1967), which transposes the previously separate groupings into a floor plan/room layout on graph paper. The drawing doesn't indicate clearly whether the rectangles represent voids or solid bodies. Although chronologically speaking it came after the 1967 exhibition design, it occupies a spatial or, more precisely, a temporal interstice: made between the first and second shows, it also *predates* all possible subsequent iterations.[10] The structures in the drawing resemble those in the exhibition layout for $ba \neq a+b$ that I've been given: rectangles of varying lengths and widths set into relation with one another, forming a constellation that appears to be held in place by the graph paper's grid as much as its own intrinsic stability. However straightforward this blend of setup plan and tabulation may seem, it proved highly effective, and its

influence can be felt even today: as Lavin reports, the drawing and other documents led the architect Frank Gehry to believe that Andre created some of his sculptures through verbal instructions alone, without any "construction plan" or sketch; [11] Gehry, in other words, read the artist's production process as thoroughly related to the architectonic environment, a return to the immediacy of the architect's work—a misapprehension reflected by the increasingly spare instructions in his own plans. Certain "stylistic features" of Gehry's work, Lavin argues, were in fact a product of this openness and temporal indeterminacy. [12]

**3. Setting out**

Another description of the exhibition plan might go like this: A wall separates 9/3 and 7/1, so the twain shall never meet, the flows of communication have been severed. 5/1 needs a lot of room and wants to be the center of attention, but then complains that the other participants are keeping their distance. 5/4 has chosen an unstable stance that's constantly at risk of collapse, while 3/2 feels cornered. I might read the positions of the rectangles and squares and their distribution on the sheet of paper in purely relational terms, speculating about possible interactions: among the works of art, between the art and the architecture, between the works and their future beholders. Such relations may be amicable, indifferent, or inimical. In any case, a design drawing is a structuralist visualization,[13] not unlike a systemic constellation: several elements have something in common; their significance is revealed within a system or arrangement of figures, objects, or elements. Both are reconstructions of something, an idea or a real situation of past experience, and both exhibit what they visualize for purposes of analysis while already implying the possibility of change. So although the exhibition layout may at first glance seem quite definite, it's in fact open and dynamic, the initial configuration of a space of possibility that will be reenacted in the real space of the exhibition.

What, then, are the constellations that emerge into visibility in the gallery? Which interrelations are established, which ones dissolved? Will there be a sense of genuine strangeness when we, the visitors to the exhibition, encounter things, objects, installations, constellations, in unexpected and novel guise, perhaps with a familiar "face" here and there? Will we be able to bridge this strangeness, this otherness, which is in no small part ontological, or will the objects remain as alien to us as we are to them? During my research for another piece of writing, I stumble across a slim blue volume, one in a series of booklets published in connection with dOCUMENTA (13). In no. 27, titled *Ironic Ethics*, the Italian philosopher Franco "Bifo" Berardi sketches a psychological profile of Silvio Berlusconi, then prime minister of Italy, and examines the effect of Berlusconi's policies on Italians.[14] The parallels with the current situation and the American president are positively uncanny. Be that as it may, Berlusconi inspires Bifo to rethink the relationship between ethics and politics; he advocates a "materialistic ethics of pleasure and sensibility."[15] His conception of sensibility and—another term he brings into play—empathy, appeals to me because it steers clear of any moral interpretation. Bifo isn't interested in installing or restoring a moral authority that prescribes the "correct" assessment of "true" and "false" or "good" and "evil." He's aiming at an abstract and at once concrete connection between self and other in a psycho-social sphere that appears to be so thoroughly fractured today by the exploitation of labor, consumerism, and media technologies that the "ethics of pleasure" and empathy he envisions are blocked. Art, Bifo argues, has the power to act as a tonic and "therapy", renewing "the relationship between the organism and the world, particularly the relationship between bodies in the social space,"[16] as he puts it with reference to Félix Guattari's concept of "chaosmosis."[17] This conception, an "ethico-aesthetic paradigm," frames aesthetics as "the science of perception, of pleasure and suffering […] that studies what makes empathy possible"[18] and so can ultimately reconfigure ethics and politics. Empathy, in Bifo's view, is thus something that helps us transcend an otherwise singular universe; that can sense the other's body as an extension of the self's own, as part of a new form of collectivity.[19] It's in this same sense that the plan, the setup of the exhibition, can become something else, a diagram

of the abovementioned relationships, a model of a temporarily possible collectivity in which some of the actants[20] are already on the scene whereas others aren't, but in which the interpretive process unfolding in and between the relationships is *per se* open-ended.

In a world remolded by the materialistic cynicism of power, which informs its rhetoric and has already quashed rules that held in the past, this conception may let us think, identify, and sustain a niche in which the sensibility of perception conditions a different politics of ethics. This state of exception, it should be noted, doesn't constitute a temporary preliminary stage of a form of power or normalization yet to be consolidated; it represents a pluralism, however precarious.[21] I realize how idealistic that sounds as I write it, but how else could I have written these remarks?

A friend of mine, an artist, has been working on a lecture titled "Institutions as a way of life." It's his plea for an instituting praxis: he sees the institution as a site and form that allows for projects to be nurtured and realized, for risks to be taken and contingencies to be embraced.[22] It's the return of the institution, akin to and yet clearly distinct from entrepreneurialism, as an in-between space and, ultimately, a space of possibility. This widely invoked "in-between," I wonder, where that would be? Perhaps in the temporal displacement between not-yet and always-already? Between the draft, the funding application, and the sealed and delivered charter, perhaps even between the idea and its circulation? However that may be, he concludes his lecture by exhorting his listeners to "take care of your friends,"[23] and I find myself thinking that that's really going to be the crucial point.

*English translation: Gerrit Jackson*

[1] In 1969, the artist Douglas Huebler participated in a legendary exhibition of conceptual art curated by Seth Siegelaub for which he composed this statement. The second, less widely quoted sentence reads: "I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and place." http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/17/arts/douglas-huebler-72-conceptual-artist.html (accessed on May 27, 2017).

[2] Franco "Bifo" Berardi, The Soul at Work. From Alienation to Autonomy, Los Angeles 2009.

[3] The Atlantic, November 30, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/trump-and-andrew-jackson/508973/ (accessed on April 20, 2017).

[4] Time Magazine, May 9, 2017, http://time.com/4697223/trump-nixon-comparisons/ (accessed on May 11, 2017).

[5] Angelika Schnell, "einleitung," in: Angelika Schnell, Eva Sommeregger, and Waltraud Indrist (eds.), entwerfen.erforschen. Der „performative turn" im Architekturstudium, Basel 2016, 9.

[6] Ibid., 14.

[7] See Karl Schlögel, In Space We Read Time. On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics, New York 2016.

[8] See Sylvia Lavin, "Studs, Snapshots, and Gizmos: Los Angeles Dearchitectured," in: Sylvia Lavin and Kimberli Meyer (eds.), Everything Loose Will Land. 1970s Art and Architecture in Los Angeles, Los Angeles 2014, 29.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 30–31.

[12] Ibid.

[13] See Maximilian Müller, "eine strukturalistische tätigkeit," in: Schnell, Sommeregger, Indrist, entwerfen.erforschen, 87–88.

[14] Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Ironic Ethics, dOCUMENTA (13), 100 Notes—100 Thoughts, Kassel 2011, 4ff.

[15] Ibid., 11.

[16] Ibid., 14.

[17] See ibid., 12.

[18] Ibid.

[19] See ibid., 13-14.

[20] Beatrice von Bismarck has outlined such a model in an essay on “The Exhibition as Collective,” but with a focus on Bruno Latour’s theory of actants. She reads the “exhibition as a collective” and its permanently renegotiable processes of subjectivation as an analogue of the process of the formation of a community’s social structure. I’m much more interested in the actual relationships between them, with the concrete forms they take in time and space and the potential consequences. See Beatrice von Bismarck, “The Exhibition as Collective,” in: Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (eds.), Cultures of the Curatorial, Berlin 2012, 289–302.

[21] See Berardi, Ironic Ethics, 15.

[22] Bernhard Garnicnig, “Institutions as a way of life,” lecture, Department of Site-Specific Art, University of Applied Arts Vienna, May 26, 2017.

[23] I’m grateful to Bernhard Garnicnig, Uwe Jonas, and Franz Thalmair for our conversations, on which I have drawn as I wrote these remarks, and to Seth Weiner for our ongoing exchange of ideas on how we work.