

Interrogating the 'Artist-Curator-as-Artist' in After Finitude

By: Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte Written On: April 2, 2013



Nicole Ondre. "Cadmium Yellow Window" 2013. Oil paint on wall. Image courtesy of Or Gallery.

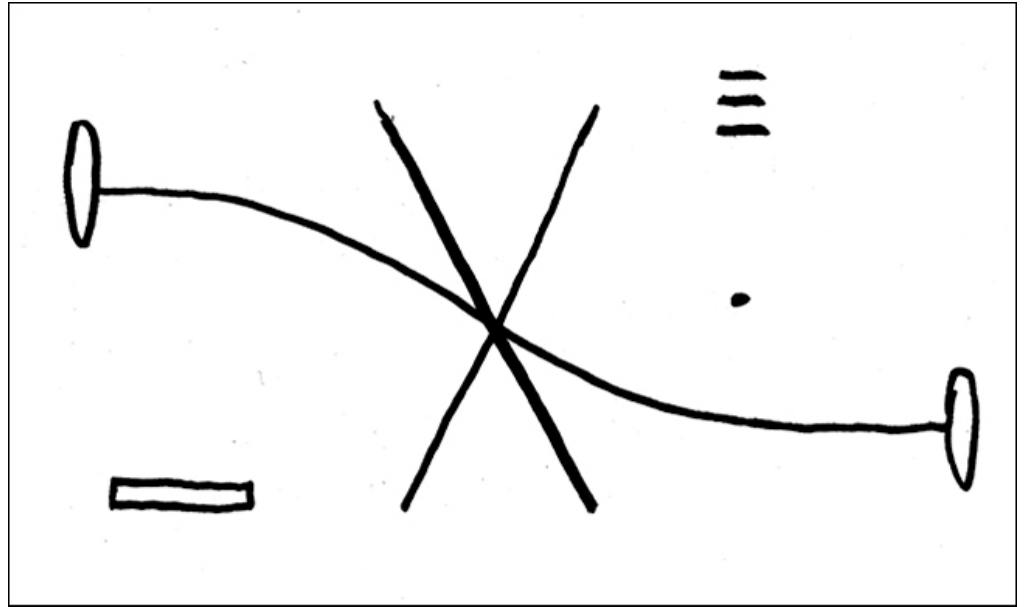
After Finitude: Neil Campbell, Hanne Darboven, Nicole Ondre, Cheyney Thompson.

Curated by Eli Bornowsky.

@ Or Gallery. February 23 – April 6, 2013

Being a "hyphenated" artist is a prevalent reality in the world of contemporary art, as artists commonly extend their functions and take on administrative, critical, educational, and curatorial roles. I believe that this is not only due to the growth of artists' professionalization since the late 1960s, but is also attributable to the creative potential that lies perhaps in the very median space that hyphenation procures: in the zone of mediation between multiple points of interests, abilities, and duties. The positions of artist-administrator, artist-critic, artist-educator cannot be dismissed only as offspring of economic realities and institutional structures; there is something to be said about the particular outlook that the artist contributes to cultural administration, about the insight into material and creative processes that underscore critical texts written by artists, and about the innovative pedagogical approaches that the artist-educator brings to the classroom. Following this logic, we may infer that the position of artist-curator, which constitutes a particularly strong wave in the wake of artistic professionalization, is not only an outcome of logistical necessity. The persistence with which artists take on curatorial positions may also be explained by the fact that the curatorial standpoint affords artists expanded possibilities for artistic research and, reciprocally, to the fact that artists have the ability to contribute a fresh perspective to curatorial practice.

My goal here is not to argue for or against this dual function of the artist, I do not wish to defend it from the attacks it may receive by some opposed to artistic professionalization, nor do I want to discuss the position it occupies within the institutional mechanisms that organize the art world – these issues and more have been addressed recently during the *Institutions by Artists* Conference, and belong to a much larger terrain of discussion that I will not venture into here. Rather, I would like to discuss the particular frictions that may emerge from the dual function of the artist-curator as part of a general argument for the expanded creative potential that artists may bring to curatorial practice. More specifically, in light of the exhibition *After Finitude* curated by Eli Bornowsky, which is currently on view at the Or Gallery, I wish to question the ethics of curatorial methods by which an artist-curator organizes an exhibition as if producing an artwork. The ethical implications of this methodology are particularly interesting to examine as they denote a certain conflict of interest on the part of the artist-curator who not only references, but essentially promotes his artistic practice under the rubric of curating.



Eli Bornowsky. Exhibition Diagram for "After Finitude" 2013.

In curating *After Finitude*, Bornowsky is not primarily concerned with providing a forum to showcase artists' works in the pursuit of aesthetic and/or conceptual research, and thus foster critical discourse about exhibited artists' practices and, more generally, expand contemporary art dialogues through the process of exhibition-making. Instead, to quote Bornowsky, "rather than having a theme or investigating ideas about exhibitions, institutions, or histories, I gave my responsibility to the experience of art in general, and to my artistic practice as an abstract painter in particular," [i] which essentially boils down to an agenda of furthering his own practice, using the exhibition as an artistic medium. It may be an understatement to say that the interests and processes that animate an artist-curator's individual artistic practice will inevitably tint their curatorial endeavours. The opposite would be surprising and it is reasonable to assume that most curatorial projects realized by artists extend from their practices in some way or other. But Bornowsky's proposition goes further: not only does he model his curatorial process on the methodologies he employs as an abstract painter, he considers the exhibition in the same way he would a painting, with the effect that the works included in the show are reduced to functioning as compositional elements rather than existing in the gallery in their own rights as artworks, and being considered as such by the curator.



Cheyney Thompson. "P31.55-YG31.55-r1.31-b1.31-bg1.31-yr1.31 (65.72ml)" 2013. Acrylic on Linen. Image Courtesy of Or Gallery.

The proposition in itself is interesting: transferring painting methodologies to the process of exhibition-making denotes a strategy in which the physicality of the exhibition space itself becomes an element through which to structure the aesthetic and conceptual relations entertained by the exhibited works. Bornowsky engages this proposition: "each artwork was chosen as a compositional component, and the relationships were designed to be modular."^[ii] His curatorial intention proposes to think through the three-dimensional space of the exhibition-site as he would the two-dimensional pictorial surface. This may, a priori, appear to be an innovative curatorial method in that it effectively translates artistic thought into curatorial work, and thus suggests a blurring of the distinctions between the two. I would argue, however, that this particular methodology is limited in what it can contribute to the development of curatorial practice since, instead of developing a new framework through which to envision the curatorial process, it replicates a pre-existing model of artistic

production and imposes it upon a different working medium/context. Following this frame of thought, we may wonder if this approach actually contributes to dismantling the boundaries between the role of the curator and that of the artist or if, on the contrary, it reinforces the divide existing between the two since one's methodological approach is prioritized and enforced onto the other's. To this effect, London-based curator Paul O'Neil writes: "as long as the discussion around contemporary art curating is constrained by its focus on the exhibition format as the main work of the curator, talk of differentiating artist/curator roles will continue to dominate a narrow field of critical enquiry from the inside."^[iii] Essentially, what Bornowsky does here is treat the exhibition format in the same way he would an artwork and thus, he focuses his curatorial attention onto the artistic treatment of this format. In a sense, he is displacing one practice with another rather than making a co-mixture of the two. In doing so, he restricts the contributions he is able to make to the project in his capacities as curator and rather, positions his artistic vision as main driving force of the exhibition-making process. Instead of embracing the particular perspective that his experience as an artist may contribute to the curatorial process, he prioritizes the artistic over the curatorial and the final formal composition over its constituent parts. As a result, the possible crossover between artistic and curatorial practice is cut short: the focus is not on experimenting with a methodological perspective derived from the space of hyphenation cultivated by the artist-curator position, but on eliding this median space altogether. The role of curator is subsumed into that of the artist.

More than the refusal to mediate between curatorial and artistic processes, what I find problematic about Bornowsky's strategy is that he does not differentiate between the responsibilities that come with producing an exhibition in one's function as curator and in one's function as artist. The curator's responsibilities are multiple and lie, on the one hand towards art history and the production of critical discourse and, on the other hand, towards the artists that are being curated. To quote curator Anne-Marie Ninacs on the subject: "Differently from the artist, the author, or any other creator who speaks only in her name and benefits from total artistic license, the curator is always linked to an institution – whether or not she is independent –, to artists, to whom she is liable to, and to the public, to whom she delivers her reflections and who in turn trusts her."^[iv] The curatorial process is inherently one of negotiation: with the artists, with the institution, between the works, with the public and, crucial to this discussion, between one's curatorial vision and one's responsibility towards the exhibited artists. The artist, on the other hand, benefits from much more freedom: giving responsibility mainly to her subject and process. Instead of exploring the specific sensibilities that lie in the hyphenated space between the artist-curator and thus adopting the responsibilities that comes with both roles, Bornowsky wants to have his cake and eat it too: he adopts the position of *artist-curator-as-artist*. The shift is not only semantic, it signifies a difference in what constitutes the curator's main responsibility: whereas the *artist-curator* position retains the responsibility that the curator has towards the exhibited artists, the *artist-curator-as-artist* denotes a primary responsibility towards the artistic practice of the curator himself, and the exhibited artists become auxiliaries in the process.



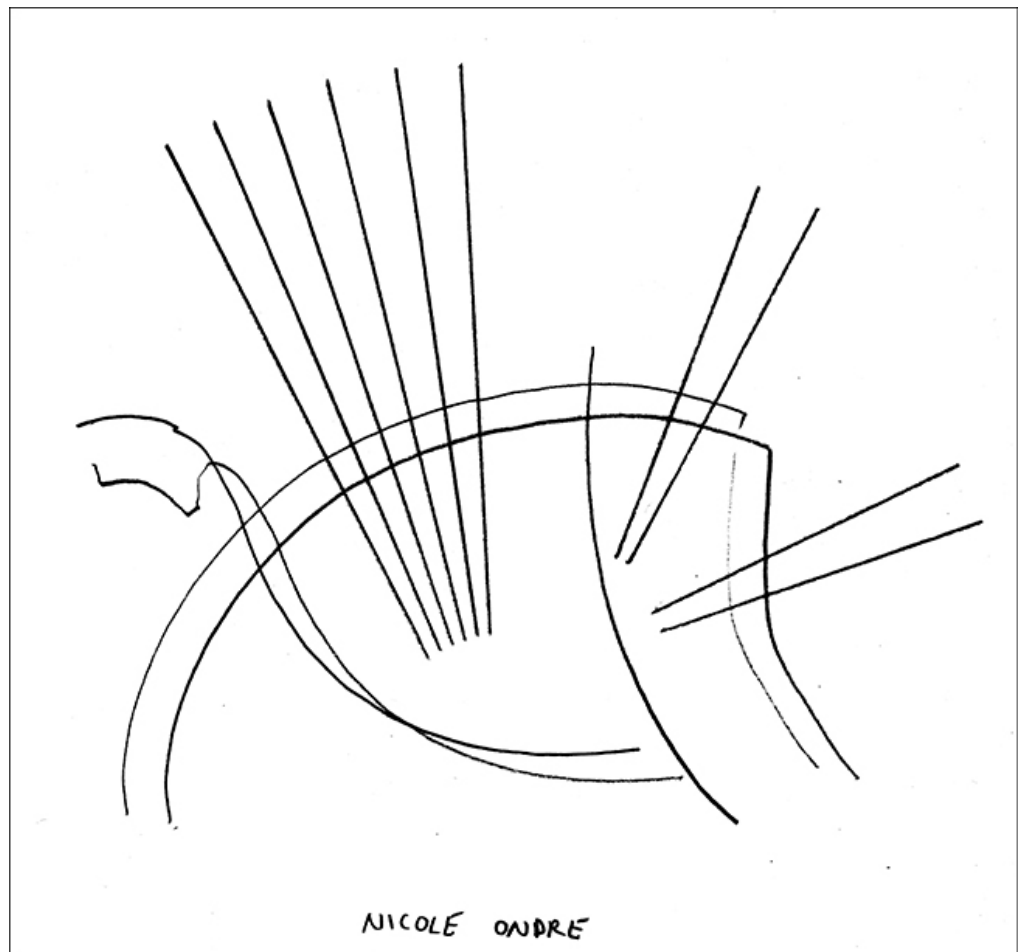
Installation view of "After Finitude" 2013. Image courtesy of Or Gallery.

In her discussion of the ethics of subjective curatorial practice, by which the curator approaches her work from a primarily creative rather than scientific methodological standpoint, Ninacs distinguishes between the curator-as-artist, and the curator who practices in the fashion of an artist. While her discussion pertains to the work of curators and not to that of artist-curators, her distinction between the two aforementioned approaches nevertheless help contextualize the ethical dimensions at play in the crossover between curatorial and artistic practice. Ninacs introduces the issue of self-promotion, which she associates with the curator-as-artist position: "This brings me to a final distinction between the 'curator-as-artist' and the curator who practices 'in the fashion of an artist': whereas the first pulls the works towards her own subjectivity in order to primarily promote her own ideas, the other temporarily forgets herself by completely investing in the works she has chosen to present, and thus concentrates her efforts on someone else, if only to better find herself in the process [free trans.] "[v] The latter proposition offers, I believe, the most potential to investigate, both creatively and critically, the overlap between curatorial and artistic practices. There are many historical antecedents and contemporary examples of curatorship operating in this sense, either through the mediation of artistic production by way of curatorial activity, as in the work of *Group Material* for example. Or, on the contrary, through the translation of curatorial processes into artistic production, as in the projects of the Croatian Curatorial Collective *What, How, and for Whom*, or as in the recent exhibition *Mapping the Everyday: Neighbourhood Claims for the Future* realized at the Audain Gallery by Vienna-based curator Elke Krasny[v]. However, the curatorial strategies employed in the aforementioned examples differ from Bornowsky's in that they serve a conceptual and/or political purpose reinforcing the subject matter of the displayed works and, by extension, the practices of the curated artists. In these examples, the authoritative voice of the curator is also dismantled: *Group Material* and *What How and For Whom* operate as collectives, and the content of *Mapping the Everyday* was determined and realized in partnership with DTES community groups and SFU students. At best, the curatorial methods employed in *After Finitude* could be interpreted as a provocation, as an experiment designed to test the elasticity of the artist's perspective in the artist-curator merger. But I am reluctant to credit this project in such a way. This is mainly due to the lack of self-criticality that the curatorial essay accompanying the exhibition demonstrates, and which, in my opinion, should normally underscore such type of exercise. The importance here of exercised self-criticality is compounded by the fact that this exhibition was not realized as an independent

curatorial project, but as an in-house curatorial endeavour of the Or Gallery.

Most of my reflection here is drawn from the essay accompanying the exhibition, which was written by Bornowsky. The actual physical display of the works in the exhibition space is in fact rather straightforward and seems more bound by the rectangular shape of the Or Gallery's space more than determined by the process of painting an abstract work. To be fair, there is an interesting tension created by the spatialization of the works in the gallery: the viewer standing in the middle of the space is positioned in a spot of heightened experiential awareness as her body intersects the invisible force field that Neil Campbell's and Nicole Ondre's wall pieces create. An embodied response to this visual field of energy is increased by the dynamism of Hanne Darboven's musical compositions, which resonate throughout the gallery. Cheyney Thompson's paintings, however, which are hung at the four corners of the gallery, seem to be filling empty wall space rather than actively conversing with the compositional tension that Bornowsky's act of "creating a collection of four artistic worlds" instigates – the "sprinkling of Thompson's paintings"[vii] appears at odds the rest of the exhibition's physical layout perhaps due to the fact that these works were not created in situ (Campbell's and Ondre's works were designed for or created in the Or Gallery's exhibition space). Returning to the text then, what I find problematic is the attitude with which Bornowsky approaches the curatorial (or curatorial-as-artistic) process, which transpires throughout his *statement* (the curatorial essay accompanying the exhibition is written in the fashion of an artist statement more than that of a curatorial essay). This text explains the different points of interest that drove his exhibition-making concept, what he appreciates in the exhibited artists' respective practices (essentially explaining how each artist fits into his vision) and a description of his thought process as he was laying out the artworks-as-compositional-elements in the exhibition-space-as-canvas.

Faced with paragraphs saturated with first-person perspectives and in which every step of Bornowsky's decisional process is accounted for, we may ask ourselves: what purpose does this document serve? The same goes for the diagrams that accompany the essay and that occupy the right margins of its print out. These sketches illustrate Bornowsky's mapping out of the exhibition's layout, trace abstract relations between the works, and render in diagram format his appreciation of the artists' practices. In my opinion, these sketches translate as esoteric drawings more than as insightful points of entry into the artworks and the exhibition as a whole. The printed document, combining text and drawings, is essentially a self-referential supplement to the exhibition-as-artwork that Bornowsky has laid out. The problem with the self-referential quality of this document is that is self-referential without being self-critical: Bornowsky accounts for his process without questioning his methods, he communicates to us his theoretical influences without making the case for how philosophical writings actually contribute to the conceptual coherence of the exhibition[viii], he samples sketched impressions of the works instead of discussing them critically.



Eli Bornowsky. 2013. Image courtesy of Or Gallery.

It would be unfair, however, to say that Bornowsky's text is exclusively self-referential. While the driving force of this exhibition endeavour comes from his own artistic process[ix], he nevertheless touches on different concepts that also feed his thoughts on how the works come together and speak to one another in the exhibition: the polarisation between the intellectual and the sensual, symmetry, systems, and, in the final paragraph of his text, a rather optimistic assessment of how this exhibition fosters experiential agency. There are breaches into a critical discussion of overarching aesthetic and philosophical issues and, some insight into the rationale for including each artist into the show even though little discussion about the exhibited works themselves is provided. These attempts at opening up the dialogue however are, in my opinion, undercut by Bornowsky's consideration of the exhibited works as compositional elements, in the same way he would treat colour and shape in their relationship to the pictorial frame in the creation of a painting. Rather than telling us about his journey into this exhibition, what Bornowsky could have written about are the ethical implications of using other artists' works to put on his own exhibition-artwork, and how he has manoeuvred the particular tension that this type of exercise engenders.

My concern with Bornowsky's lack of self-criticality is compounded by the fact that he works as Program Manager at the Or Gallery, for which he has curated other programming such as *Clamour and Toll*, a series of performances and screenings. This latter observation opens on to a different assessment of the project altogether, one that is not concerned with the methodologies of transposing the processes of one's artistic practice onto an exhibition-making project, but that

questions the ethics at play when the employee of an artist-run centre, uses his position to further his own artistic practice and treat the exhibition space as he would a canvas in his studio. The Or Gallery would not, being mindful of conflict of interest, present a solo exhibition of Bornowsky's artwork. I would argue that we are faced here with an instance of self-promotion nevertheless. The problem of responsibility recurs: whereas the responsibility of the artist-run centre should be given to the artists it supports, its members, and the artistic community at large, this instance of curating by an employee of the centre serves first and foremost his own artistic practice. We could say that this is a détournement of the mandate of the artist-run centre at its core: by giving responsibility to the artist-curator's artistic practice, the democratic platform of the artist-run centre is co-opted to foster not the myth of the genius artist, not the myth of the star curator (two myths that artist-run centres as alternative institutions aim to deconstruct), but to foster the new myth of the genius *artist-curator-as-artist*.

I am not arguing against the work of curators in artist-run centres; I do not wish to revive the debate that Reid Shier brought forth in the text he contributed to the anthology *Vancouver Art and Economies*[x]. What I want is to critically look at the methods employed in *After Finitude* as a curatorial endeavour and ask: Is this the most interesting way in which the productive point of tension between artistic and curatorial activity can be tested? Is this the most effective exploration of what artists have to offer in terms of curatorial methods? Jens Hoffmann, a curator notorious for exhibition-making in the manner of art-making says of artist-curators that they "have a different approach to curating—one that is less conformist and often more creative and unpredictable." [xi] As artists engaging in curatorial projects, can we not use these qualities to exploit the creative potential of the hyphenated space between artist and curator in order to produce exhibitions that, rather than be self-reflexive and further our own artistic practices, contribute a new perspective on exhibition-making and foster critical contemporary art discourse?



Neil Campbell. "Hangdown" 2013. Vinyl acrylic on wall. Image courtesy of Or Gallery.

[i] Bornowsky, Eli. Curatorial Essay for *After Finitude*, Or Gallery, Vancouver, February 23-April 6, 2013

[ii] Ibid

[iii] Paul O'Neil. "I am a curator." *Art Monthly* 275 (April 2004). 10.

[iv] Ninacs, Anne-Marie. "Towards More Ethical Curatorial Practices." Lecture presented at *Unspoken Assumptions: Visual Art Curators in Context*, "Thinking Through Curating" July 16, 2005, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta. 12. Original quote: « à la différence de l'artiste, de l'auteur ou de tout créateur qui ne parle qu'en son nom et bénéficie d'une licence artistique totale, le commissaire est quant à lui toujours lié à une institution—et ce, qu'il soit indépendant ou non—à des artistes auxquels il doit rendre justice ainsi qu'au public très confiant auquel il livre ses réflexions ».

[v] Ninacs 11. Original quote: « J'en arrive ainsi à une dernière distinction entre notre « commissaire-artiste » et le commissaire qui pratique l'exposition « comme un artiste » : alors que le premier tire les œuvres vers sa subjectivité pour promouvoir sa seule idée, l'autre s'absorbe complètement dans les œuvres qu'il a choisi de présenter de manière à s'oublier complètement pour un moment, à se concentrer sur autre que soi et à éventuellement mieux s'y retrouver ».

[vi] *Mapping the Everyday: Neighbourhood Claims for the Future* was a project realized through the Audain gallery's residency program. The exhibition ran between November 1, 2011 and February 25, 2012.

[vii] Ibid

[viii] Particular essays by Henri Bergson, Giorgio Agamben, Quentin Meillassoux are referenced whereas Jacques Rancière is mentioned in passage.

[ix] The first sentence of the text states: "I wanted to curate a show in the same way I would paint a picture."

[x] Shier, Reid. "Do Artists Need Artist-Run Centres?" *Vancouver Art & Economies*. Ed. Melanie O'Brian. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press and Artspeak, 2007. 187-201.

[xi] Hoffmann, Jens and Aranda, Julieta. "Art as Curating ≠ Curating as Art." *Art Lies*. Accessed March 23, 2013 <http://www.artlies.org/article.php?id=1654&issue=59&s=0>.