Public Art: Consequences of a Gesture[1]? An Interview with Mary Jane Jacob

by Monika Molnár and Tanja Trampe

1

AUTHORSHIP: ART(WORK) – ARTIST – AUDIENCE. How would you describe the relationship between the three above-mentioned participants?

Mary Jane Jacob: Thank you for this trio, but it wasn't always that way. The artist and the artwork: that's the duo of commerce that dominated in the art world I entered, one overshadowed by New York as a center for showing and sales, an art world very much limited to the US. I'd like to think I did some work to change that.

One change was putting audience into this equation. To consider the fullness of this dimension was to enable audience as a participant in making the work with progressive contemporary artists—not community arts, art therapy, or the like—but actualizing the audience as co-author and involving them in ways that were more open and generous.

It was not to forsake the viewer, who can be moved personally in front of a work of art. Before I arrived at the new-public-art stand of *Culture in Action*, which we will get to in a moment, I had sought out the work of artists whose *personal* social engagement could prompt a response on the part of the audience. There was the drama of war and communist oppression or the Holocaust in undertaking the first US retrospectives of Magdalena Abakanowicz and Christian Boltanski respectively, the reimagining of one's home and history in the four-site show of Jannis Kounellis in Chicago and the eighteen installations that constituted a meditation on slavery in Charleston, South Carolina. But I felt to rethink the relationship to audience we needed to make a leap to a different edge of practice, and maybe then, after some assumptions were looked at anew, we might be able to come back and really value conventional gallery experiences, too.

Initially I thought this was a jump forward, seizing a new territory and shifting the discourse. But over time I came to find that I was not so much doing something new as perhaps rehabilitating some old ways. This included the mission of early 20th-century American thinker John Dewey and museum directors of that era who were in part influenced by him to make museum spaces for 'the people'. Their democratic notions were given another thrust with the freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s. All this set the scene for my professional arrival, but it was only later that I draw a through-line.

We can say it was the hubris of youth to think I was working in a new way; we might see it as a desire to be a part of art's avant-garde. But I think I

had to experience the relationship of art-artist-audience for myself—first as an audience member, for a time as an art maker, and then arrive at being a curator. I needed my own examples, my experiences and revelations to know the meaning from the inside out. Then later, it was a validation to read Dewey's ideas about how the artist makes the artwork only halfway with the viewer completing it, and how he believed that the artwork lives only in our experience of it.

Artwork-artist-audience is an interdependent trilogy. What's left out of this equation is the institution. Having started in museums, I saw how they can offer the art experience, but also be a distraction or destructive to experience. There was the greater corporatization of museums as fundraising and marketing machines (what has been called the Guggenheim Effect). As I left museums in 1990 the 'institutional critique' of traditional modes of display was on the rise. So the setting was there for another way of working.

But I didn't make this shift out of museums for any theoretical reason. It was my lived-experience of curatorial practice within the business of museums, and of the art experience that was growing increasingly secondary. I hoped to regain this (in part for myself) by developing artists' projects in lived spaces [not so much working in 'public space', as I was never a public art administrator on a governmental or corporate level], I found art could be realized in remarkable ways working in the spaces where people lives played out. There, art could have meaning, and could matter to anyone because what the artist and audience cared about were the same. We look back now at this as 'site-specific' or 'community based', or 'socially engaged art practice', but for me it wasn't about naming a movement; it was necessary to relocate the relation of art to the place and people, as it had always been from time immemorial.

For me to realize this relationship of artwork-artist-audience, I had to get out of the museum, get the institution out of the way. The curator is not part of this series of words either, but I do think we can play a useful role.

The artist is present[2] is beyond all questions a quality characteristic. What happens if we replace this term by 'The curator is present'?

MJJ: So I will speak to the need for the curator's presence, even though left out of the list we have just discussed. Curators can be more nimble where institutions are encumbered, though certainly institutions have resources that secure their place in the power structure. But what curators bring to the equation is care. It's right there in the root of the word: cura.

I've just gone back to a classic book I never read before, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert M. Pirsig[3]. The author talks about what makes work an art: care. He distinguishes between being involved and being a spectator. This has something to say to the tired audience paradigm of participant vs. spectator and can offer greater depth of meaning. If we think about participants as an audience that is involved, that put care into what they are doing—even if sitting in a theater seat or walking through a gallery—then we see that there are many ways of engaging art. Interacting in some physical, visible participation is only one.

Caring, this engaged audience functions in a way parallel to the artist who is invested in the making of the artwork. For Dewey this connection of artist-to-audience was so fundamental that he said: "To some degree we become artists ourselves"[4]. Meanwhile Pirsig ties caring to quality, saying: "A person who sees Quality and feels it as he works is a person who cares". So we might think about the experience of art, what Dewey called "an experience worthwhile as an experience", to be an experience of quality.

2

This caring has a lot to do with curating. In fact, as I said, caring is at the essence of the curatorial function. Sometimes the curatorial role is assertive, taking control or challenging other protagonists, including artists and audiences, to take action; sometimes it's more facilitating or, to use Pirsig's metaphor, it's good maintenance. But usually it's a mix of all this. Curating done well, with care, is important to

the functioning of art. And I think the expansion we have seen in recent decades, the greater and more nuanced ways of curating, has developed in response to a demonstrated need.

CURATORIAL PRACTICE: EXHIBITION – ELEMENT – EXPERIENCE. What is the letter 'e' telling you: exhibition, element or experience...?

Monika Molnár/Tanja Trampe: We intend to force the direction on the influences and the results, if any (for example: exhibition, element and experience). How can the curator, the artist, and the audience benefit from 'results', if any? How are we able to declare a result? We learned from your work, that there are lots of influences. The audience can somehow evaluate the artist, the curator can use the audience's experiences for future ideas, and the artist can be inspired through the outcomes and echoes from the audience. We are interested on these synergies: depth and size, strong or slight, or neutral influence as status quo or snapshot?

MJJ: I've been thinking about why we have exhibitions. What does an exhibition do that looking at artworks does not accomplish? If Dewey claimed that art is the experience, not the work or object of art, what experiences do exhibitions afford? What elements can we point to?

I guess I would say that the exhibition is a place where art can do its work. In exhibitions artists meet an audience, while having another way to experience their own art, so they become the audience, too. In an exhibition the audience gains access to art. While we think of this as access to the mind of the artist, the exhibition is a vehicle by which we can access our own mind. With such potential, the job the curator does matters.

For the curator, all the elements of the exhibition—I mean ALL, from the practical and mundane to the intellectual, visible and invisible aspects—affect the art experience, hence the artwork. With this in mind, the curator's job is connected to those of everyone else's in the making; the curator needs to employ a smart and critical outlook, as well as an aesthetic or tasteful eye. Reflecting on what was accomplished, how others reacted, the curator, like anyone doing a job they care about, is invested in an ongoing process that we can call a life's work.

What exhibitions also do is acknowledge the place of the audience in the making of art as experience. The audience's essential role in art is made manifest there. Here we see how art happens. This doesn't happen for each of us with every work of art, but those that give us pause (and this can be positive or negative at the moment we see it, and can change or grow over time) can play a role in our lives. That's why I make exhibitions.

How do you describe the main steps in developing curatorial projects? Would you like to open your curator's toolkit and show to us your most important tools and describe them briefly?

MJJ: There are steps but they are not so linear, not so clearly progressive even though necessary to the process. For me, it starts with something that I have questions about, that I don't understand fully. It starts, too, with an irritant: something that gets in the way of something I care about or value.

The next step always involves sharing these questions with others who care to be in the conversation and might illuminate the way, and this usually starts with talking to artists. This was not really possible when I worked in museums where the process was more protected and closed, institutionalized and sequestered. This sharing comes in the form of one-to-one meetings, small group or large for conventions, through writing emails or essays…there are many ways and I always end up using several with any given project. In fact, they become the modes of the project itself. I would not call them 'para-curatorial', as does Maria Lind, because I think they are fundamentally curatorial activities and because I do not subscribe to a hierarchy by which the exhibition is at the apex; it, too might be a step in a process on the way to something else, even if that thing wasn't imagined at the outset.

But what is critical here is to stay open and let the process lead your intuitions, emotions, and ideas. I follow this messy, circuitous path, taking care to listen to the process and see where it leads. I try to steer or test rather then lead the process. It takes time to be with a question. It is an organic process of enacting questions out loud and with others, positing next steps, but changing them fluidly, sometimes instantaneously. So I need very patience, personally grounded, caring collaborators and staff who are not so invested in their ideas or a fixed plan, but excited about where a process can go and comfortable with the uncertainty of not knowing the way.

An example of this kind of process is charted in the introductory chapter of a recent book Chicago Makes Modern: How Creative Minds Changed Society[5]. In it I recount how questions about modernism today led us to think about questions of human and social development, about events in Chicago, to support the creation of projects by artists, designers, and architects who played with these ideas, to undertake many public programs, and to organize three exhibitions. Finally this book resulted but it does not document the process or the shows; it emerged as a work unto itself. Yet we didn't see this at the outset; to get there is to be engaged throughout the whole process. Like artists, like anyone doing what they care about and are invested in, the curator lives the process.

MM/TT: Taking care of the uncertainty and trying to keep it seems to be very topical within present curatorial processes: You describe a 'mind of don't-know' and the 'empty mind' as an important condition for your work. Carolyn Christov Bakargiev said that the word 'maybe' was the essence of her concept for last year's documenta13. Could you please go one step deeper and tell us how you organize yourself to keep the possibilities to play with during the whole developing process? Further: would you say that you mostly succeed? On your website we can found a list in eight steps, a kind of a recipe for exhibition makers. Can you tell us more about this recommendation?

MJJ: These lived processes are a little like describing wind: every time is different and you learn from experience guided by what you value. There is no formula, so I even hesitate to make what the list I wrote a few years ago, and which you found and include here seem like the answer, but, ok, it's a start. I have altered some of the points:

1. Locate the reason why you are doing an exhibition, the aim
2. Let art lead to you
3. Have partners in the exploration
4. Imagine opportunities
5. Openly venture ideas
6. Listen to artists
7. Listen to audiences
8. Care about the process
9. Trust the process
10. Trust that art will make things happen.

3

What are the major impacts for a curator seen from your perspective? Do we have main drivers? You described your recommendations to exhibition makers: Do we need to follow them strictly?

MJJ: In this process, the main—perhaps only driver that matters—is the problem: that swampy terrain of questions on a subject. The process begins murky with the problem not clearly determined, but I do not wait until I have sorted it out and have the precise thesis. Getting there is part of the exhibition-making process. And for me this is always a shared process of research, collaborative more or less, among many persons. I have to hear others and I absolutely have to hear what the process has to say.

MM/TT: We would like to take the thread again on the point of listening to the process: Asked in 2003 by the artist group World Question Center (Reloaded) you formulated the following question as the most important on that moment: "How can we truly relocate the nature of art to face and to facilitate our need for human communication, human connection?" Would you say that meanwhile–one decade later–this question has been answered? Or would you even modify the question? If yes, in which direction would you do it?

MJJ: I still think that art as communication and connection between people is something I strive to achieve because art, uniquely, can do that; it is a definition of art, what it does. So it is not something solved, but it is always a goal.

PUBLIC ART: IT'S HISTORY AND FUTURE

It's been 20 years since you curated "Culture in Action" in the city of Chicago. Couldn't you summarize the most important shifts within the public art field since then?

MJJ: *Culture in Action* started the same way: with a morass of questions about art in public space. It depended on artists' voices first, and each who participated in the show shaped where I took it. I had my motivating irritants, too: bad public art, too much public art, the use of public funds to build artworks that were inert, public art processes that conspired against creativity rather than inspiring new creativity, and little consciousness of the audience except to contain or pacify them in the process. This kind of work goes on and in the US it is legislated, ironically, where other support for the arts has fallen by the wayside in the last 25 years.

But today there is also an acceptance and belief of art that places the audience at the forefront. Artists who crossed thresholds two decades ago—having been agitatedly, even aggressively challenged by those who thought they had no right to step into this terrain and that their work was not art—have allowed successive generations to stand more firmly on new ground. Now we are in a great period of expansive experimentation. This explosion, the proliferation and fecundity of publicly engaged art, is important and embracing this excitement, as we go forward. So I grow impatient with debates such as Claire Bishop's of autonomy vs. morality because both can be present in a work. There are also more productive and less oppositional discourses.

What is your advice: How should exhibition making be expanded within the next decade?

MJJ: In the future, I hope we can take the participation and socially engaged discourses and widen them. There is much to be gained from looking at how art creatively intersects with other fields, building productive alliances rather than taking political stances that just point out what is wrong. And with this, we can also fortify what art can do out of and, maybe even in, museums.

That's why care is so important. Artists care about the questions they are working on. What they do is needed and useful, especially now. Curators take care as partners, cultivating ideas, holding open an exploratory space during the time of creation, and then caring for the exhibition of what was explored for a time, in a context, in an art way. Maybe we should alter your list: artwork-artist-curator-audience.

Notes

1 Daniel J. Martinez' work "Consequences of a Gesture" (1993), was one of the events organized as part of "Culture in Action" in Chicago (1991-95), an ambitious series of public projects aimed at a radical redefinition of "public art." It took the form of a parade developed by Martinez over two years and involving the participation of 35 community organizations and 1000 Mexican Americans and African Americans, children to the elderly. Participants paraded through three neighborhoods: Maxwell Street public market that was removed by the city the following year (1994) to make way for the University of Illinois's expansion, thus an ode to the market's demise after more than a century; and to two ethnically divergent areas of Chicago: African-American Garfield Park and Mexican-American Pilsen. For more information on this and recent works by Martinez, see: Culture in Action (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); www.stretcher.org; Daniel Joseph Martinez: A life of Disobedience (Cantz, 2009), www.frieze.com/issue/article/culture_in_action; Exhibition Histories: Culture in Action and Project UNITÉ (London: Afterall Books, 2013), Tom Finkelpearl: What We Made – Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation (Duke University Press, 2013).

2 www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/965; www.regina-frank.de

3 Robert M. Pirsig: Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York, 1974, p. 34-35, 275)

4 John Dewey: Art as Experience, (New York, 1980, p. 348, 302)

5 Mary Jane Jacob, Jacquelynn Baas: Chicago Makes Modern. How Creative Minds Changed Society (Chicago, 2012)

Captions

1 Daniel J. Martinez, *Consequences of a Gesture,* Chicago 1993.

2 Haha, *Flood, A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare,* Chicago 1992-95, commissioned by Sculpture Chicago's *Culture in Action.* A group of participants built and maintained a hydroponic garden in a storefront by cultivating vegetables and therapeutic herbs for people with HIV.

3 The exhibition *Learning Modern,* bridged the historic roots of American modernism in Chicago and its critical role in education in the mid-20th century, linking it to the contemporary critical practices of artists, architects, and designers, and was the center piece of the program, *Living Modern Chicago* (2009-11).

4 Wolfgang Laib, Unlimited Ocean, 2011. The exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of

Chicago Sullivan Galleries is one of the artist's largest pollen and rice installations to date.

Mary Jane Jacob *holds the position of Professor and Executive Director of Exhibitions and Exhibition Studies at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she leads practice in curatorial training and is currently spearheading a major research project on Chicago social practice. As chief curator of the Museums of Contemporary Art in Chicago and Los Angeles, she staged some of the first U.S. shows of American and European artists before shifting her workplace from the museum to the street. Recently her programs have led to co-edited anthologies such as "Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art", "Learning Mind: Experience into Art", "The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists", and "Chicago Makes Modern: How Creative Minds Changed Society". Among others in addition, Jacob was awarded the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award, Public Art Dialogue's Lifetime Award for Achievement in the Field of Public Art, and as one of the key influential women in the field of visual arts in the U.S. In 2012 Jacob was awarded a Warhol Foundation Curatorial Research Fellowship.*

4