

Curatorial Outsourcing: Curate Local

Lindsey V. Sharman

Outsourcing in the curatorial world is often done by quietly utilizing the labour of volunteers or curatorial assistants eager just to be close to a project, naively hopeful for recognition—authorship being typically the most coveted currency in the cultural sector. While artistic subcontracting and outsourcing is a centuries old practice that has been extensively utilized, this working method within the curatorial realm has been widely ignored. Artists are extensive outsourcers; contrary to what modernism would have you believe, the artist's studio is rarely a place of solitary ingenious creativity, but a place of work and even a factory employing any number of workers from wage earners to short-term contractors. Damien Hirst engages short term “assistants” on fixed term contracts to prepare most (if not all) of his work.¹ Olafur Eliasson employs an extensive team from architects to contextualizers, archivists to cooks. He keeps a base of forty-five employees but engages engineers, curators, and cultural producers as required.² Like in the artist's studio, curatorial outsourcing can enable one to take part in many projects at once, while outsourcing all of the “active” work to low or non-paid workers. Corporate outsourcing developed because of economic greed. Curatorial outsourcing could either continue to legitimize the exploitation of interns and non-paid workers, or play a part in the professionalization and organization of these workers.

Whereas outsourcing in the corporate world is typically seen as a negative practice, is it possible for cultural producers to employ such practices while avoiding the exploitative? When used in the cultural sector, while conceptually similar to corporate outsourcing, it is employed for different ends. The goals of corporate outsourcing, such as a reduced permanent work force, are precisely the restrictions that outsourcing for curating can alleviate. The corporate world uses outsourcing and subcontracting primarily for financial reasons; to reduce the permanent work force and employ fewer wage earners—those who have an increasing wage over time, are paid regardless

of their output, and require support from the company by way of healthcare and other benefits. Outsourcing replaces permanent workers and often results in distancing the company from a community and community-based obligations.³ In the curatorial world a small work force and an insufficient number of wage earners is often what stands in the way of completing or even commencing projects.



The corporate world has “witnessed a new enterprise structure closer to networks than the large firms of the industrial age.”⁴ What most art institutions of any size, as well as independent curators could benefit from is an established network of outsourcers or subcontractors that can be contacted and hired for a set amount of time or for a specific job. This network, however, would only be useful to both the outsourcer and the outsourced once established professionally, which causes its own long list of problems, but without which cultural capital is likely accumulated by only one author, using the free or non-paid labour of agents who would only rarely accrue their own capital. There already exists a loosely formed network of non-paid or low-paid cultural labour that can be accessed primarily through internships and educational sources. This situation that relies on exploitation is already similar to corporate outsourcing, and is rampant in the cultural sector.

Cultural producers should acknowledge this as a problem in the field—“aside from domestic work and child care, art is the industry with the most unpaid labour, sustaining itself on the time and energy of unpaid interns.”⁵ However, could outsourcing and subcontracting, counter intuitively, provide an opportunity to professionalize, specialize, and see a return on labour?

Maria Lind has recently been experimenting with the concept of outsourcing within the curatorial realm through the exhibition series, *Abstract Possible*. Different manifestations of the project, which explores abstraction’s many forms found in contemporary art and culture, have been realized in Mexico City at the Museo Tamayo (*The Tamayo Take*), The Malmö Konsthall in Sweden (*The Trailer*), White Space in Zurich (*The Zurich Test*), and in Spanga at the Tenstall Konsthall (*The Stockholm Synergies*). Unlike the hierarchy found in the artist studio, the curatorial subcontractors utilized for *Abstract Possible* are (at times) not just labourers but recognized as having valuable specialized knowledge and resources. For *The Tamayo Take*, Lind contracted the groups Pase Usted and Salon to mediate. In *The Zurich Test*, twelve curatorial students from the Zurich University of the Arts—Garance Massart-Blum, Milena Brendle, Melanie Büchel, Marina Lopez-Coelho, Jeannine Herrmann, Amber Hickey, Sonja Hug, Candida Pestana, Corinne Isabelle Rinaldis, Lindsey V. Sharman, Silvia Simoncelli, and Catrina Sonderegger—were asked to produce and facilitate the exhibition and mediation it to the public.

Because of the influx of interest in curatorial education, new curators have to be more creative in finding themselves places in the job market. While the curator, at least in the independent and lower budgeted end of the spectrum, has traditionally been concept builder, grant applier, text writer, carpenter, painter, educator, party planner, caterer, ad infinitum, the series of *Abstract Possible* exhibitions may indicate that there is a move towards a specialization of each of these tasks. Perhaps de Appel’s Gallerist Program is the first (albeit commercialized) step towards, or even in response to, a further specialization of the field.⁶

Salon and Pase Usted are two interconnected firms/projects founded in 2008 that work with many museums in Mexico, and whose efforts often result in what is labelled as “mediation.” However, what they accomplish goes much further. They offer a platform on which to exchange ideas and create a community committed to the collective development of their country. Because of their focus on mediation as a

practice in and of itself, they have created a specialized niche market within their own cultural context. These mediation specialists were contacted to organize events peripheral to *The Tamayo Take* that would improve and deepen the public’s relationship with the topic of abstraction. They took the exhibition not as a subject but as a starting point to “unfold the different discourses or ideas around the exhibition.”⁷ Three events were planned for *Abstract Possible: The Tamayo Take* that involved not only artists who were taking part in the show, but artists, theorists, writers, and architects, who were not directly linked to the exhibition but were included to expand the conversation. Pase Usted and Salon’s services have been utilized by many museums as well as independent curators, and their cultural production has resulted in all forms of capital. The three discursive *Abstract Possible* events from *The Tamayo Take* can be viewed at www.abstract-possible.org: yet another platform for investigation into abstraction designed by the members of Salon and Pase Usted.



Using this model, curators could use outsourcing not just as a means to a workforce, but as a tactic to tap into local knowledge, creating connections of shared interests by focusing exhibitions towards local populations. If one is to expand the definition of curatorial outsourcing to include not just the notion of economics and production, but also the notion of working with local collaborators and a specialization of the field, the term better describes what was implemented at The Museo Tamayo edition of *Abstract Possible*. The use of outsourcing could result in projects that more accurately represent the needs and interests of populations within the locations they inhabit and become useful for conversations within those communities. Curators who outsource to local cultural producers would not transplant a topic into a space but facilitate locally relevant conversations. One

can see, however, the danger of the curator building an oeuvre of culturally sensitive projects to the (lack of) credit of collaborators who are often forgotten.

This practice could not only increase the reception of the local public, but also solves many problems faced by an art world that currently creates a massive carbon footprint. While consumers are constantly being reminded to “buy local” should cultural producers also begin to “curate, mediate, and produce local?” While this is a practice that some curators such as the team at *Praxis für Ausstellungen und Theorie*, who regularly contract a team of architects, designers, and producers when they are contracted for projects, have been practicing since the 1990s, it has been largely unexplored, or more likely, undocumented. If artists or curators outsourced locally wherever they organize exhibitions, outsourcing could even become an economical practice that saves on shipping costs and fossil fuels, creates jobs, and exposes cultural producers to local lifestyles.

Outsourcing’s resolution to the burning of fossil fuels is somewhat of a utopian view of the potentials of this practice and it would be more likely implemented to provide curators with a resource even more valuable: the curator’s primary shortage—that of time. Timelines for projects could be greatly reduced, projects could be more vigorously examined, and, thanks to international partnerships, projects could be planned around the clock. Not able to offer the project the time that it deserved, but also to see how the concept could further develop in the hands of yet another group of producers, Lind left most of the final decisions of *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test* up to the curatorial students of the Zurich University of the Arts. In this case, Lind provided the artists under the established theme of abstraction and the students provided the rest. The students, along with the organizer of the program, were required to tap into the network of *Abstract Possible*, contacting producers in Sweden and Mexico in order to fully understand the project through the text and documentation created by Salon at the Museo Tamayo.

As a response to the Zurich art community’s interest in film, the students developed a screening program with Nico Ruffo at a local institution to offer an exploration into abstraction in film. The students also planned a workshop with children in order to attempt to create paper shapes inspired by the work of Tommy Støckel, which was both a withdrawal from the traditional academic “workshop” as well as a tongue-in-cheek response to the belief that abstract art could be made by children. It was necessary for

the students to collaborate (or communicate, in the case of Wade Guyton, who did not attend) with the artists to realize their works; and, as exhibition producers, were responsible for assuring funds for the exhibition—not an easy task for an exhibition within Switzerland with few clear “Swiss-links”. Although the team did have many ties to the country, funding bodies found it difficult to understand the role of the Swiss-based students within the scope of this project—being neither curators or artists, at times their roles were difficult to tack down, even for the participants themselves.



In complete contrast to the situation faced by the students in Zurich, if this type of working condition normalizes, it could actually see greater funds assured. Within the corporate world, outsourcing is done to save money and cut costs, but perhaps it could be implemented in the cultural sector as a creative tactic to procure more funding and to get in contact with increasingly varied public and private funds. If the practice is brought into the light, funding bodies could recognize “volunteers” or “assistants” as legitimate producers. These producers could apply to more institutions in different ways because of the diverse people and actions involved. Funding bodies may see these projects, which are more deeply explored by their multiple and varied contributors, as more culturally relevant and of benefit to support. Outsourcing within the arts could also be a way for well-known curators, who will likely remain in contact with dwindling corporate and state funding, to distribute these resources.

Outsourcing in the cultural world needs to offer something to its workers—if not monetary gain, then cultural capital in the form of connections and recognition needs to be brought to the fore. In the case of *Abstract Possible: The Zurich Test*, the most

valuable thing earned by the curatorial students was access to the network created by the project's other manifestations. However, because of the temporal and spacial limitations of the project and its producers, these connections will likely be fleeting and only enjoyed by a few in the large group involved. The largest gain found in this complex working situation is for the exhibition itself and the themes of abstraction in art today. Outsourcing provided the opportunity to slow down the often hurried curatorial process and more extensively consider the many issues raised by *Abstract Possible*, which is good for the concept of abstraction, good for the concept of curating, good for the artists, and good for the curator.



Abstract Possible shows that it is possible for a curator to outsource aspects of a project they feel unable to undertake and recognize when a task or part of a project can be better handled by another source. With outsourcing or subcontracting, an interesting project would not have to suffer because of a busy curator but could actually be improved by commissioning the help of others specialized in their fields. The most optimistic outcome of outsourcing is the possibility of extensive exploration of themes and the creation of a sustainable network of cultural producers. So long as cultural producers take responsibility for their actions, outsourcing or subcontracting can provide greater depth to the ever-expanding fields of cultural production. The exclusive retention of credit, funding, or power, however, problematizes the situation. If responsibility and recognition is not practiced, outsourcing will only perpetuate the already exploitative nature of the art world.

Notes

- 1 Aidan Jones, Kevin Dowling, and Helen Pidd. 2008. "Recession Reaches Hirst's Studios." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/nov/22/damien-hirst-studios-job-losses>. Accessed 10.12.2011.
- 2 See Olafur Eliasson. <http://www.olafureliasson.net/studio.html>. Accessed 20.12.2011, and Philip Ursprung. *From Observer to Participant: In Olafur Eliasson's Studio* (Cologne: Taschen, 2008), 10.
- 3 Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, trans. Gregory Elliott. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2006, p. 369.
- 4 Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, trans. Gregory Elliott. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2006, p. 221.
- 5 Hito Steyerl, "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy," *e-flux* Issue 21, December 2010.
- 6 "The Gallerist Programme." *e-flux*. <http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/9373>. Accessed 01.09.2011.
- 7 Interview by the Author with Jorge Manguia, conducted through Skype. September 26, 2011.

Captions

- 1 Student's brunch at Wäscherei Kunstverein after the opening of the exhibition *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test* at Whitespace. In the picture (from the right): Amber Hickey, Maria Lind, Isin Onol, Lindsey V. Sharman, Candida Pestana. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.
- 2 Lindsey V. Sharman and Marina Lopes Coelho setting up Tommy Stöckel's "Exposed Superstructure" (detail) at Whitespace, Zurich. Photo: Corinne Isabelle Rinaldis.
- 3 Painting the floor at Whitespace black, following Wade Guyton's set up instructions. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.
- 4 Children's workshop during the exhibition *Abstract Possible: the Zurich Test*. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.

Lindsey V. Sharman was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (CA). Sharman has studied art history and curating in Canada, England, Switzerland, and Austria. Most recently, Sharman was appointed to a research position with the University of Calgary as curator of art for *The Founders' Gallery* at The Military Museums where she explores contemporary issues surrounding art and conflict.