

Curating with/in the System

by Sabeth Buchmann

“Art without Artists?” It was under this alarmist title that, two years ago, the artist and e-flux co-founder Anton Vidokle criticized curators for claiming the status of artists and critics in an inadmissible manner. His finding was not new. It had already been a topic of discussion in the late sixties, when the curator and critic Lucy R. Lippard was accused of using the exhibitions she designed after the manner of the Concept Art of her day to stylize herself as an artist who regarded other artists merely as a medium.¹ The polemic set forth by her colleague Peter Plagens in *Artforum* was a response to the first of the so-called “numbers exhibitions” Lippard staged between 1969 and 1973 in various locations and named after the size of the respective town’s population: 557,087 (Seattle Art Museum, 1969), 955,000 (Vancouver Art Gallery, 1970), 2,972,453 (Centro de Arte y Comunicación in Buenos Aires, 1970) and c. 7500 (California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, 1973). The exhibition catalogues were loosely bound bundles of 5x8-inch index cards designed by the participating artists and exchanged and supplemented by new ones from one venue to the next. This flexible and modular exhibition and publication model points on the one hand to the predilection—typical of Concept Art at the time—for mundane information design as well as non-hierarchical compilations and the equal value of objects, idea sketches, texts, drawings, photographs, etc. On the other hand, the catalogue texts, presented in the typewriter style typical of Concept Art, were integrated into this system of artists’ contributions, and the degree to which they thus lost their special status was equalled by the degree to which the distinction between artistic and curatorial stances and methods was in fact subject to negotiation.

It is precisely here that the crux of a new curatorial spirit seems to manifest itself – the spirit that echoes in Vidokle’s article and that, as is exemplified (not only) by Lippard’s projects, bears a relation to the development of a “curatorial system” (Magda Tyzlik-Carver) beginning to make itself felt in the late sixties. What is meant here, more specifically, are collaborative practices organized in socio-technological networks and comprising not only art, but also—as proposed by Maurizio Lazzarato—interfaces of immaterial work and immaterial goods and extending to encompass the areas of education, knowledge, and information.² As will become evident in the following, Tyzlik-Carver’s definition of the term “curatorial system” bears similarities to Lippard’s exhibition models, which—in the spirit of the virulent critique of hierarchy prevalent in the late sixties—were directed against conventional principles of selection and ranking, and which reveal an interest in themes and discourses pertinent to art and related fields. For example, curators and critics like Lippard relativized their own power of decision and judgement and declared themselves collaborators of—and on an equal footing with—the artists: a shift prompted as much by the latter as by the former; after all, artists had begun to integrate curatorial and art-critical elements and discourses into their work, from work to text to exhibition. This phenomenon heralds the departure from rigid object forms in favour of the communicative situations and socially conceived

media praxis cited by Helmut Draxler in relation to post-conceptual practices around 1990,³ which advanced to become a standard (however controversial) within a discourse and exhibition praxis of an anti-institutional nature. What is astonishing about Vidokle's statement, against this background, is his claiming of a standpoint supposedly outside the system and oblivious to this historical context.

The following will nevertheless take a closer look at whether, and in what respect, the ousting of artists criticized by Vidokle is foreshadowed in concepts such as the "numbers exhibitions", or whether Lippard's projects offer points of departure for a critical discussion of the present-day manifestations of the "curatorial system", which do without the trite recall of conventional role models. This question is also significant in the sense that Lippard's exhibitions were not isolated experiments. If there is mention here of parallels to contemporary manifestations of the "curatorial system", then it is also because her exhibitions bore a direct relation to her publicistic activities. The latter included the production of anthologies as well as a non-profit circulation operation bearing the name "printed matter" co-founded by Lippard in the mid-seventies. "Systemic" activities of this kind could be equated with the politics of publicity directed towards expanded publics, i.e. towards the accessing of a cultural milieu with limited purchasing power, and analyzed by Alexander Alberro in connection with the group around the legendary gallery owner Seth Siegelaub⁴—a praxis based on the assumption of a cultural primacy of information and communication media and encountered again today in enterprises such as e-flux. In the latter, however, it presents itself as an expression of an advanced network economy in which commercial and non-commercial activities merge (the latter including the exhibition and event spaces run by e-flux as well as an online magazine), and which can serve as an example of the degree to which the international goings-on in the areas of art, exhibition, and art criticism have meanwhile become interwoven.

It is thus difficult to explain the success of a globally operating enterprise such as e-flux outside the "curatorial systems" presently in the process of taking their gloves off with regard to what has long since become canonical critique of the anachronistic image of the (lone) artist. All the more astonishing is it that Vidokle—who definitely has a point with his attacks on presumptuous curator behaviour—wants to reverse this trend, which is part of the organizational form of e-flux. Precisely against the background of Lippard's projects, which deliberately relativized, combined, or reproduced traditional institutional roles and reinforced cooperatively conceived aspects of presentation, mediation, and distribution as opposed to author-centric forms, it proves questionable to want to disentangle artistic and curatorial concerns to the degree of unambiguity suggested by Vidokle. Such argumentation would merely amount to the suggestion of the solipsistic role conceptions that artists once revolted against, among other things with the aim of taking the curating business into one's own hands and thus challenging the curators' role.

This challenge was programmatically taken on by, for example, the exhibitions designed by Siegelaub in catalogue format such as *January 5–31 (1969)*, as well as by Lucy R. Lippard's exhibition and book projects. Conceiving of themselves as "organizer and editor", both exhibited a new understanding of the curator's role. What is more, as emphasized by Cornelia Butler, MoMA curator and the author of the main essay in the publication on the "numbers exhibitions",⁵ Lippard's exhibitions were essentially a new type of non-thematic group show. However strongly influenced she was by the painting of the fifties and sixties, Lippard showed almost no paintings in her "numbers exhibitions". On the contrary, quite in keeping with (Post-)Minimalism and Conceptualism, the latter were dominated by sculpture in

the broadest—i.e. in the process-oriented, place-specific and temporary—sense, as well as photography, film, sound art, and text-based works.⁶ In comparison to Siegelau, who operated as the ally and dealer of a few exclusively male New Yorkers,⁷ Lippard featured in her “numbers exhibitions” far greater and more heterogeneous constellations of works by artists living between the American East and West coasts as well as in Canada, Argentina, and the United Kingdom. In this respect, as Butler points out, Lippard’s projects approximated the type of group show also successfully staged by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969 under the title *Live in your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*,⁸ and thus offer a new perspective on his status as the originator of the contemporary, international group exhibition, a reputation that tends to be considered singular.⁹ To the extent that the focus was primarily on attitudes, methods, and communicative situations rather than on the selection of a few big artist names, this then-popular group show format definitely exhibited non-hierarchical traits. Yet, whereas in the case of Szeemann this amounted to the elevation of the curator to the status of an “exhibition auteur”, Lippard positioned herself much more prosaically and modestly. In retrospect, for example, Lippard characterized her curatorial activities as that of a “compiler”¹⁰—a self-description that is to be considered against the background of her editing/publishing projects.

From 1964 onward, Lippard wrote for art magazines such as *Artforum*, where she served for a time as editor-in-chief, and *Art International*, where she had a regular column, but she increasingly questioned this role. Her work as a freelance curator, on the contrary, which came to dominate her activities from 1966 onward, offered her a means of shedding what she considered the parasitic role of art critic.¹¹ The degree to which she conceived of herself as an art producer—concurrently with her increasing emphasis on political activism (within the framework of the anti-Vietnam protests as well as labour-union and feminist agendas)—corresponds to the degree to which she rejected the art critics’ power of definition derived from their quasi-institutional status, but also the conventional conceptions of “connoisseurship”¹² and good taste. It was in this phase as well that she and John Chandler jointly published the essay “The Dematerialization of the Art Object” (1968). The text formulated the proposition—as popular and at the same time as controversial then as it is now¹³—that the traditional material-object paradigm was dissolving in favour of idea and process-oriented, temporary and ephemeral, science/scholarship-compliant, performative and communicative work forms. Characteristically, their often textual complexion—if not to say their morphology—is mirrored in the anthology Lippard published five years later: *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973). Entirely in the style of the Concept Art of the time, the book’s cover offers a summary description of its content: “A cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia.”¹⁴ In analogy to the related aim of producing a fragmentary, but at the same time representative, selection and documentation of “so called conceptual or information or idea art”,¹⁵ Lippard explains in the preface to *Six Years* that the book was about “widely differing phenomena within a time span” and not about a “movement”, and that there was therefore no “precise reason for certain inclusions and exclusions except personal prejudice and an idiosyncratic method of categorization that would make little sense on anyone else’s grounds.”¹⁶

Lippard’s proposal for a non-hierarchical compilation of texts thus integrates decidedly arbitrary and self-mocking elements—an aspect that can also be applied to the figure of the “compiler”. This is expressed in representative manner in the strategy Butler refers to as “curating by numbers”, which construes the act of curating as something vague and unoriginal, and hence freed of overloaded claims to

creativity. This, then, is also the attitude at the core of the reciprocal relationship between the critique of authorship, of the work and of the institution set up in her exhibitions, an approach designed to confuse conventional role models and competences □ and exhibiting certain similarities to the endeavours emerging at around the same time, as a conscious echo of the historical avant-gardes, to put concepts of the artwork conceived exclusively in aesthetic terms into a new perspective within the framework of media/episteme-based systems of depiction. The emphasis on the “technical reproducibility” (Benjamin) of the artwork manifest in the catalogue exhibitions and artistic magazine contributions thus went hand in hand with a programmatic dedifferentiation of the production and mediation professions. Lippard’s “numbers exhibitions”, however, adopted the role parodies popular in the art scene of the time¹⁷ and applied them to the position of the curator.

Finally, shifts of this kind are also manifest in the intertwining of curatorial practices and art criticism of the kind (not only) Vidokle sees at work in the present-day exhibition system. According to Lippard, this intertwining was a logical deterritorialization of institutional terrains: “I began to see curating as simply a physical extension of criticism.”¹⁸ Her book *Six Years* accordingly functioned as a publicistic counterpart to her “numbers exhibitions”—an analogy that corresponded to the creed of Concept Art (and that of Siegelau), according to which the distinction between a physical object and its linguistic proposition is merely functional (and not fundamental) in nature. From this perspective, the analogy between curatorial-publicistic productions and “dematerialized art objects” appeared entirely consistent. “It [*Six Years*] has also been called a ‘conceptual art object in itself’ and a ‘period-specific auto-critique of art criticism as act’.”¹⁹

What according to Vidokle can be interpreted as an inappropriate pretence of artistic-ness on the part of the curator is expressed in Lippard’s words as a balancing act. It does not represent an *a posteriori* attempt to elevate her book to an art object, but merely a reminder of its reception, which must be considered within the context of a climate in which the vision of the equality of everyone involved in art prevailed.²⁰

This applies particularly to the manner in which Lippard linked the figure of the “compiler” to that of the “writer”.²¹ To define curating as an act of writing and, conversely, writing as a form of curating bears a relation to the discourses on authorship that were particularly virulent at the time and are today a critical standard. Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” echoes in the dialectic of relativization and expansion of role and competence profiles represented by Lippard.²² The figure of the “compiler” can be related to the activities of collecting, researching, archiving and translating that are based less on individual than on systemic authorship, activities of which artists, as we know, avail themselves to the same degree as curators and critics. According to Cornelia Butler, the figure of the “compiler” served to deprofessionalize one’s own praxis and to interweave the activities of the curator with that of the art critic. This self-image thus not only went hand in hand with a relativization of curatorial authorship, but also with an increase of power in the sense of an expansion of the zone of criticism in such a way as to help curating to more potency.

In Butler’s view, this reinterpretation of the curatorial is accompanied by the fact that artists, for their part, began foregrounding the work of making: “Calling paintings and sculpture simply ‘works’, reflecting making as a part of meaning. The products of exhibition-making were more commonly designed as ‘projects’, aligning the activity of the curator more closely with the production of artists”.²³ This

idea implies a certain equation of artistic and curatorial production with Marxist definitions of work²⁴ that puts Lippard's project in the context of a (post-)revolutionary concept of art, characterized at the same time by a shift away from self-contained work forms towards cybernetically conceived ones. Another aspect of this is, as conceived by Tyzlik-Carver, the revaluation of "immaterial activities" (from emotional work on relationships to performative actions, from service to management functions), which according to Beatrice von Bismarck "led to a revaluation of relational processes relative to autonomous products."²⁵

In this context, the fact—pointed out by Butler—that the "numbers exhibitions" were "low-budget" projects comprising portable works and shown in small, peripheral, underfinanced institutions is relevant. For example, in connection with 2,972,453—the "numbers exhibition" conceived for the Centro Arte y Comunicación in Buenos Aires—Lippard spoke of the attempt to organize a "'suitcase exhibition' of dematerialized art that would be taken from country to country by 'idea artists' using free airline tickets."²⁶ Her "numbers shows" can accordingly also be considered in the context of the development which art theorist Michael Sanchez analyzes in connection with forms of network-based circulation prevalent today. The example he cites for this is the feedback-oriented website *Contemporary Art Daily*, which he considers a remediation not only of an art magazine but also of the group exhibition. At *Contemporary Art Daily*, he points out, the circulation of artworks and the functional principles of social networks overlap.²⁷ With reference to a text on the subject by Rainer Ganahl, Sanchez sees the historical conditions for this phenomenon in the curatorial practices prevalent around 1970. According to his train of thought, a decisive reason for the popularity of international group show projects like *When Attitudes Become Form* lies in the significant reduction in the price of airline tickets and the resulting higher circulation speed. Meanwhile, he observes, we observe an increase from "jet speed to light speed" and a "curating tempo" that has "sped up to rival that of the RSS feed."²⁷ Whereas in the context of the climate prevailing around 1970 it seemed logical for cooperation-minded curators and critics to avail themselves of seemingly "dematerialized" work forms—above all language as a medium allegedly independent of profit-oriented ownership claims—today such practices are accordingly returning as technically advanced media formats adapted to the advanced economy of social networks. Even if he argues his point in a manner entirely different from Vidokle, Sanchez deduces from this a totalisation of the curatorial which, in light of Lippard, however, should be put into perspective: after all, her reinterpretation of role models and competences is an expression of an effort to expose their problems and contradictions and to put the same up for discussion. In other words, Sanchez's theory that curating today encompasses social networks and life in general in addition to art objects sounds a bit as if everything were being jumbled together here in order to reproduce precisely that blend that is the target of his criticism.

In light of the anti-hierarchical implication of Lippard's figure of the "compiler", the question also arises here of its significance for Vidokle's finding according to which one reason for the devaluation of art criticism lies in the expansion of the curatorial. If viewed from this perspective, the figure of the "compiler" with direct-democratic qualities in the framework of contemporary curatorial systems—the figure whose guise artists and critics alike can slip into—would be at least as responsible for the degradation of artists and critics as the assignment of the aura of the "exhibition auteur", criticized by Vidokle, to the curator. The struggle against politically compromised role models and representation conditions could accordingly be observed in virtually picture-book-like manner from the perspectives of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari. After all, the "curatorial system" that evolved in the period

in question shows that the critique of power goes hand in hand not only with democratic-political strategies of self-empowerment, but also with the transversal dissemination and reterritorialization of power functions. This is an aspect related less to individual intentions and strategies as to structural frameworks.

Against this background, Lippard's considerable resistance to traditional forms of institutional legitimation can by all means be reconciled with the role she embodies of a locally and internationally connected and recognized art historian, art critic, curator, activist, and writer. Yet this does not suffice to regard the related feminist deconstruction of patrilineal positions of authority and power as settled. On the contrary, the question must be raised as to whether and how the accompanying substitution of the established dichotomies of production and reception, exhibition and publication, aesthetic and information-dualities that uphold the prevailing divisions of labour—appears today in the guise of a “curatorial system” that reorganizes power and hierarchy in a manner that seems unchallengeable because it purports to be institution-critical and direct-democratic. In view of the openly profit-oriented, market-share-grabbing networks, what this amounts to is a diametrical reversal of the strategies of “negotiation” which, according to Beatrice von Bismarck, picked up the thread of “the political orientation of institutional criticism around 1970” in order to counter the “competition aspect.”²⁸

This attitude is also expressed in Lippard's feminist-activist espousal of the cause of underpaid “art workers” and structurally marginalized women artists that was to become the point of departure and reference for her firmly partisan art criticism. In the fourth and last of her “numbers exhibitions” –c. 7500 (1973, Valencia, California)—she presented exclusively women artists, thus responding to the criticism of those artists that she indeed wrote about them, but exhibited them only in isolated cases.²⁹ In the foreword to her book *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (1976), she confesses that the women's movement changed her relationship to life in general and to art criticism in particular on account of her newly acquired freedom “to respond to all art on a far more personal level. I'm more than willing to be confessional, vulnerable, autobiographical, even embarrassing, if that seems called for.”³⁰ It goes without saying that such intimate avowals were founded in the feminist conviction that the private is political—a conviction meanwhile corrupted in view of the omnipresent pressure to publish. Lippard untiringly gave verbal expression to the conditions of isolation, exclusion, and uncertainty under which, in her perception, a large majority of the women artists she wrote about in her compilations produced their work. The style of her art criticism thus appears to have been personally and politically motivated to equal degrees. Lippard took her politicisation as an opportunity to put her authority up for negotiation once again and to present herself as an autodidact. As she continued in her foreword, she herself had been compelled to learn the vocabulary of art criticism anew from the women artists' reports on their experiences so as to be able to convey an authentic language, i.e. one not based on traditional male-oriented patterns. With the aim of promoting and spreading such a language, Lippard spoke out, in a suspiciously essentialist vein, in favour of separate art schools, collections, museums, etc. Thanks to her curatorial concept of the “compiler”, she did not merely propagate the “three prominent exceptional women”,³¹ but proposed a representative grouping that did justice to the multifariousness of the approaches pursued by women artists in her day. We undoubtedly have this form of discursive “curating” to thank for the fact that, not only in Lippard's own exhibitions, the proportion of women artists increased substantially, at least for a time.

Disappointed by the way the (primarily male) concept artists clung to the mechanisms of the art market, Lippard would soon recognize the naivety of social

utopias—such as that of the non-hierarchical language—and how they in fact participate in power politics.³² Nevertheless, it was evidently necessary to subscribe to such utopias in order to achieve the destabilization of institutional labour division and thus to expose the prevailing politics of exclusion and conditions of representation. Lippard's models of the proliferation and flexible diversification of role and competence profiles ultimately appear to correspond, to an extent, to present-day performance expectations. The same can be said of the reciprocity of de-hierarchization and power gain, as well as the revaluation of immaterial / devaluation of material work. And anyone who today speaks out on behalf of dispossessed and disenfranchised artists would be well advised to recognize the political potentials, but also the contradictions, of a "curatorial system" which, at least in Sanchez's view, may soon degrade power-crazy curators to an anachronistic footnote—unless of course they turn up again in the guise of the system administrators who, as was recently the case at the Berlin Biennale, arrange chairs in a circle and announce their visions of non-hierarchical cooperation in the framework of e-flux and *Contemporary Art Daily*.³³

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Notes

- 1 See Peter Plagens, "557,087", *Artforum*, November 1969, pp. 64–67.
- 2 See Magda Tyzlik-Carver, "Interfacing the commons: Curatorial system as a form of production on the edge", online at: <http://www.kurator.org/media/uploads/publications/essays/public-interfaces/tyzlik-carver.pdf> (accessed 1 July 2015).
- 3 Helmut Draxler, *Die Gewalt des Zusammenhangs. Raum, Referenz und Repräsentation bei Fareed Armaly* (Berlin: *b_books*, 2007). Also see the project curated by Draxler in 1989/90 for the Museum in Progress, Vienna, "Message as Medium": <http://www.mip.at/persons/helmut-draxler> (accessed 1 July 2015).
- 4 Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).
- 5 Cornelia Butler, "Women – Concept – Art: Lucy Lippard's Numbers Exhibition", in idem et al., *From Conceptualism to Feminism. Lucy Lippard's Numbers Shows 1969–74* (London: Afterall, 2012), pp. 24–31. The foreword I wrote for that volume served as the basis for this essay.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See Christian Rattemeyer et al., *Exhibiting the New Art: 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form'* (London: Afterall, 2010).
- 9 See Michael Sanchez, "Contemporary Art Daily", in Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum and Nikolaus Hirsch, eds., *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human*

Figure in Semiocapitalism (Berlin: Sternberg, 2011), pp. 53–61, here p. 54. Sanchez refers to Rainer Ganahl for this attribution.

10 See Lucy R. Lippard, “Curating by Numbers”, *Tate Papers*, 12, 2009, n. p., accessible online at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7268> (accessed 1 July 2015).

11 See Lucy R. Lippard, “Introduction: Changing since Changing”, in idem, *From the Center, Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York and Toronto: Dutton, 1976).

12 Cornelia Butler compares this outlook with that of Marcia Tucker. The entropic character of process-oriented art forms that dominated exhibition activities in the late sixties evidently also challenged institutionalized role profiles.

13 This criticism was aimed at the one-sided idealization of idealist, intellectual and rationalist concepts. See, for example, Pamela M. Lee, “Das konzeptuelle Objekt der Kunstgeschichte”, *Texte zur Kunst*, 21, 1996, pp. 120–29, here p. 126.

14 See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997) (previously published in New York: Praeger, 1973), cover.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

17 Frank Stella, for example, declared himself a “housepainter”, and Sol LeWitt an “office worker”.

18 See Lippard 2009 (see note 10).

19 *Ibid.*

20 The dedifferentiation of the work and its mediation that goes hand in hand with the normative, authoritative judgement also entails problems, as it derives its legitimation – as in Lippard’s case – by citing subjective preferences and a closeness to her chosen artists: how much more exclusive and obscure must such criteria have seemed in view of the in-group behaviour also characteristic of present-day networks?

21 See Butler 2012 (see note 5).

22 Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” first appeared in print in no. 5/6 of the art magazine *Aspen* edited by Brian O’Doherty in 1967.

23 Butler 2012 (see note 5).

24 *Ibid.*

25 Beatrice v. Bismarck, “Kuratorisches Handeln. Immaterielle Arbeit zwischen Kunst und Managementmodellen”, in Marion von Osten, ed., *Norm der Abweichung* (Zürich and New York: Edition: Voldemere, 2003), p.88.

26 Quoted in Butler 2012 (see note 5); first appeared in Lucy R. Lippard, “Escape Attempts”, in Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, eds., exh. cat. *Reconsidering the Object of Art* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), pp. 17–39.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

28 Bismarck 2003, (see note 25), p. 11.

29 See Alexandra Schwartz’s interviews with Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Agnes Denes in Butler et al. 2012 (see note 6).

30 Lippard 1976 (see note 11), p. 2.

31 On this subject, see Isabelle Graw, *Die bessere Hälfte. Künstlerinnen des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Köln: DuMont, 2003).

32 See Lucy R. Lippard 1995 (see note 26).

33 I am grateful to Søren Grammel for an illuminating discussion of this topic.