

Electra was hierarchical. We had job descriptions and job titles, and our salaries reflected this. It was never a collective, in the 'traditional' egalitarian sense, and the hierarchies were evident in our day-to-day running, decision-making and 'perks' (for instance research travel). This structure was intended as a way of reflecting seniority in terms of experience and length of commitment. Nevertheless transparency and a horizontal dialogue were encouraged, with a desire to include all staff in key discussions and decision-making.

Electra was set up as a limited company, with three main shareholders, the two founders, Lina Džuverović and Anne Hilde Neset, as well as Irene Revell who joined the organisation in 2004. The ownership percentages reflected the amount of investment (unpaid time, paid time, 'risk', expertise) each of us had invested, at the point of its division, or an attempted version of this split. In addition, others who have made a significant contribution to the organisation over the years as freelance staff in a variety of curatorial and production roles, include Fatima Hellberg, Holly Ingleton, Sinead McCarthy, Ash Reid, Lisa Rosendahl, Dawn Scarfe, and Lucy Shanahan.

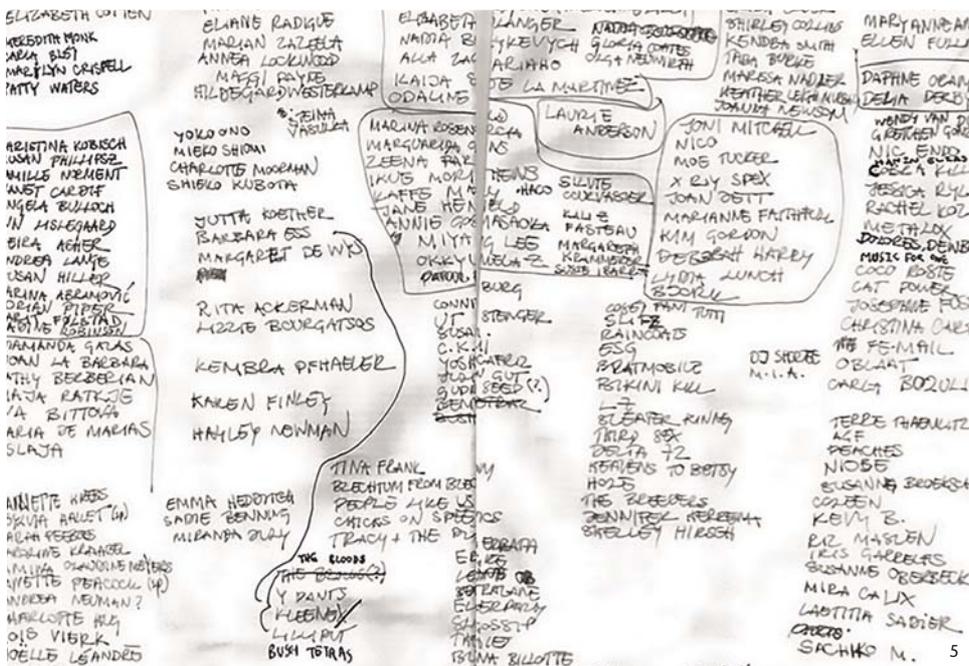
Each project would contribute 20% of its overall budget towards core costs of the organisation. Though in reality, especially in latter years of Electra's activity, this varied wildly (mostly downwards) in each situation, against a pervasive economic shift that saw many earlier sources of funding dry up in an economy that was shrinking overall at the same time as facing an increasing demand from ever-growing numbers of small-scale initiatives and new organisations.

Care

Our belief in fair payment was part of a wider ethos of taking a greater level of care and attention to detail at every level than we felt was customary in arts production at the time. This reflected our interest in fostering a community, rather than simply producing and staging some art. Through close, slow collaboration with artists and other partners with whom we worked, we sought to create a space in which practice could be speculative, take risks, take its time, without being entirely output-driven. These methods were a result of prior experience in larger institutions with an endemic culture of carelessness and, at times, exploitation. We still strive to reject the insidious over-production and exhaustion of the ego-obsessed mainstream art world. Yet, of course, given our own excitement and ambitions, coupled with a rather slender infrastructure (two to four freelance members of staff at any time), we often did 'punch above our weight' in ways that were both essential to the organisation's development and outward visibility, but ultimately personally exhausting and, at times, soul and health-destroying.

*Curatorial vision and the 'Inchoate'*⁸

The curatorial vision was not clearly articulated. This lack of articulation was initially due to the aforementioned speed with which opportunities had arisen, but also an effect of a desire to not be self-limiting, and a desire to resist the categorisations that we felt to be so problematic in canonical art history. In this sense, the organisational thinking went very much hand-in-glove with the ethos of the individual projects and research, which often sought to expose or undermine these rigid structures. Our projects all shared an inherent interest in historical 'blind spots' (both within, and beyond art history) twinned with inter-generational approaches to curating, those that consider the influences of particular histories on contemporary practice.



Even today, a precise definition of the curatorial vision of Electra may elude us, but we could say that its ethos lies at the intersection of the self-organisational ethos shared by Fluxus, No Wave, Punk, Riot Grrrl, and their contemporary legacies, although the wish to avoid precise taxonomies and categories altogether remains central to the organisation. Electra's curatorial vision was always more centred on the type of process and engagement we wished to be living, than the products of that engagement. Described at one stage as 'working with artists who work across sound, performance, moving image and text on questions of political and social urgency', provided an improvement on the earlier, even more wilfully vague, tagline which read 'Commissioning, Curating, Producing'.

Our approach to feminist politics, and practices, was discussed in detail in a text entitled "Twice erased: The Silencing of Feminisms of Her Noise"⁹, which explored the ways in which feminism was articulated (or rather not articulated, but implied) in Electra's methodologies, via the *Her Noise* project. It is worth noting that whilst a clear articulation of feminist, post-colonial, and other critical approaches to historicisation in what we might broadly term 'intermedia' might seem like a reasonable proposition in 2016, we struggled for a viable way to describe these impulses that was not instantly toxic (damaging due to the unpopularity of such a discourse in general terms) for the organisation in 2005, or even 2010. Whilst we would eschew the notion of 'waves' of feminism that obscure the continuous and ongoing developments of feminist practice(s), it is true to say that never in our working memory has there been a greater acceptance of these terms than in the present (and yet never has there been more ambiguity in the intentions of their use).

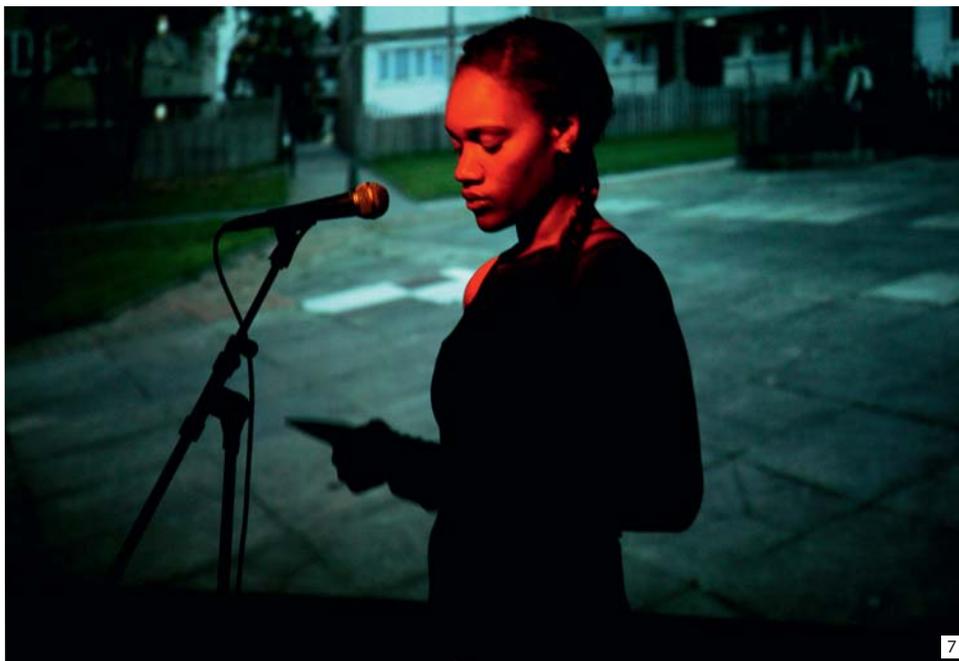


Curator as Fan, Curator as Friend

Many of Electra's projects emerged from a sense of 'fandom' towards certain protagonists or areas of work, or at times towards particular ways of articulating politics, rather than a more 'academic' position. We are indebted to art historian Catherine Grant's thinking in this regard in her paradigm-shifting 2011 essay "Fans of Feminism"¹⁰. Grant's text rethinks the model of intergenerational influence within feminist practices through the queer figure of the 'fan'; a joyous accounting for these desirous modes of identification that might take an informal, non-institutional, or even amateur route to knowledge-production, allowing for the fact that seeking out such obscured histories requires a level of ardent yet almost always innovative dedication.

In effect, the curatorial red-thread was more readily associated with our experiences of certain communities and subcultures than an academically acquired rationale, in line with this notion of the 'fan'. One point for further consideration of the 'curator fans of feminism' might be how this model operates for more than one such *fan*—for instance in a collective, group, or organisational setting. How much

must, or even can, fandom be shared, or at least overlapping? And how in turn does this operate amongst audiences?



A different, but not unrelated, model with equal relevance to Electra's *modus operandi* was articulated by curator Viktor Misiano in his 1998 text "The Institutionalization of Friendship"¹¹, in which he foregrounds links between disparate artistic communities in different cities, united by no other force but friendship. Turning to sociology, Misiano explains that, "The only type of a social link not determined by some regional or family relationship, professional cooperation, ideological solidarity, or erotic attraction is friendship". He goes on to qualify friendship as "a type of serial solidarity" different entirely to the lovers' need for togetherness, the familial bond, the repeated production-driven togetherness of those joined by work, or the shared ideological goals of political togetherness. Friendship is unregulated, self-instigated over and over again, and excludes personal gain.

But in DIY communities, it is precisely friendship, the "serial solidarity" that begins to give way to something more like work—joint, exciting, and inspiring work. Electra incorporated elements of what happens when friendship imperceptibly migrates into a different form of togetherness, because shared interests and ideas often lead to 'doing something together'.

Fidelity, or, 'The Ethical Slut'

Some firmly stated commitments from the outset were based around a belief in longer-term, often ongoing, relationships with artists. Accordingly a depth of engagement was prioritised in our fields of research that was in opposition to the time-scales imposed by the exhibition cycle of larger, mainstream institutions. Initially we even toyed with the idea of 'representing' artists whose work was too non-commercial or marginal for gallery representation, echoing the historical impulses of organisations such as Circles and the London Film Maker's Co-op, or the Women Artists' Slide Library. Electra's ongoing and often multi-annual research process, though no means unique, remains far from dominant models of 'fast' curating, today best exemplified by the widely adopted 'name-check' curatorial model of the Serpentine Gallery marathons (and their legacy, already proliferated

globally) which feature dozens of artists' and thinkers' contributions in a short time, and other ways of relaying content that seem to push for this inhumane scale. We felt disturbed by the dominant curatorial 'colonial' drive to 'claim' artists, the more obscure and unknown (exotic) the better, and as many as possible, without any clear commitment to a depth of engagement. This 'virgin' narrative seems an ugly remnant at the heart of mainstream curating, perpetuating its often-violent colonial histories. In a regime where success is so strongly predicated on volume and speed of production/output, one of the most radical gestures might be to adopt an understanding of 'fidelity', or in rejecting the heteronormative associations of such a term, at least giving some consideration to the question of how to be an 'ethical slut'¹².



Subsumed, Co-opted–Nice, But Not Essential

The enormous diversity of Electra's projects—each intended to find its own specific output, presented (ideally) in its own best-suited context(s), with its own time-scale and budget—makes it difficult to point to a 'typical' Electra project. This form of site-specificity and context-sensitivity, while curatorially ambitious, holds two distinct disadvantages for the organisation. Firstly, a small organisation that resists the idea of a 'signature output' and always works in partnership, is likely to struggle to attain visibility or even discernibility in a landscape increasingly dominated by branded entities (artists and arts organisations both adopting the corporate model of having 'signature', easily recognisable outputs, styles and visual identities), particularly when working with larger institutional partners (13). Secondly, a bigger, and perhaps more ethically rooted concern emerges out of a growing sense that Electra was increasingly offering well-packaged artistic *products* to large mainstream institutions, resulting in a sense, at its most extreme, of grassroots communities being co-opted and instrumentalised to serve momentary interests and trend-driven agendas of mainstream institutions seeking access to new audiences and 'emerging' practitioners without having to 'get their hands dirty' (fleeting engagements with, for instance, feminist discourses, sound-based practices, queer politics).

The relationship with the institution remains conflictual for us to this day, in particular with regard to the question of co-option in curatorial practice. Whilst Electra's relatively marginal curatorial agendas were readily afforded a platform in larger institutions, providing the organisation with a certain amount of perceived mainstream success, the long-term benefits of these sporadic instances remain questionable to us. Our "curatorial and production services" (to use the output-driven language the organisation had adopted) rarely led to fundamental shifts or long-term engagement on the part of our partners, institutions that hosted Electra-produced and curated projects. The stakes could be wiped clean as soon as our collaboration would be over and as soon as the audiences would depart (but not before the event would be fully 'claimed' through documentation, marketing, and social media by the host institution). Particular 'niche' practices, questions, methods or politics—central to Electra's operation—became usefully appropriated by a host of mainstream agendas that had little to do with the communities and histories in which Electra was invested. This outsourcing model frequently served as a way of bringing in new audiences, reaching out to specific communities for the large institution—a key operational model in the insufficiently thought-through inclusion rhetoric of New Labour of the early to mid-2000s. The longevity of such initiatives was of little concern to the institution, as long as their reach and audiences could be documented and recorded for funding purposes. Where there has been deeper, more ongoing commitment from institutions, this, in fact, is usually tied to single individuals, rather than being more widely embedded: individuals who may leave their post for another institution, perhaps in another country or continent.

At the same time, the model of collaborating across a wide range of different exhibition partners does have an interesting effect in its heterogeneity: neither ruling out this liberal game of infiltration/high visibility (for all of its quandaries), nor the more radical/intimate alternatives.

Electra's intrinsically anti-patriarchal model of resisting dominant structures, fostering and nurturing marginal communities, and attempting the creation of a 'safe space' positioned on the sidelines of the whirlwind of action-packed London overproduction, eventually yielded an unsurprising conclusion on the part of our funders. The work of an organisation which deliberately strove to contribute to niche communities and small audiences, and its refusal to play the numbers game of working with more artists and seeking larger audiences, led to the conclusion that such an organisation was no longer necessary. "There are lots of larger institutions doing this work now" was part of the logic that may have contributed towards the ending of a ten-year-old regular funding contract with Arts Council England in 2014. Notions of care, long-term commitment, attention to detail, and slow, well developed outputs all stem from the socially undervalued realm of unpaid, traditionally female labour (the domestic) in which well-being emerges from process, not grand gestures and bombastic events.

Does this sound simple? / Fuck you!¹⁴

By way of conclusion, we return to what remains one of the most complex aspects of running a feminist, grassroots organisation—the process of articulation itself. This becomes explicit in the exercise of writing a text such as this one, an act of looking backwards: both in the sense of having to search for histories that "one was not told"¹⁵, but also in the act of back-projecting meaning onto what was difficult to describe, and continues to be so. The connections we make here are ones we have made through the process of working things out over thirteen years of Electra, not through some perfectly formed pre-emptive gesture.

In a recent essay on the theme of confidence, feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed argued that:

"The more a worldview is supported, the less confidence you need to uphold it. There is confidence in the system. If you are trying to challenge that system you might need even more confidence than you would otherwise have needed. You face resistance and ridicule. The walls you come up against don't even appear to others. The wall you speak of becomes a phantom wall. You have to hold on harder, be firmer in your conviction, because your conviction brings you up against a world"¹⁶.

She goes on to warn that "[th]ere is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to tamper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure. A feminist movement that proceeds with too much confidence has cost us too much already."

Ahmed's assessment of confidence—both the difficulty of its desperate lack in the face of doing this work, yet the continual need to challenge it as a currency in the first place—resonates with us throughout our work, and its articulation.

As much as an attempt to determine what might constitute a 'feminist art organisation' is desirable from the outset of such an endeavour, we also wish to emphasise that this must be an ongoing and self-reflexive process; that understandings, language, historical references might only emerge *through* this process. Sometimes the difficulty of articulating these notions is a matter of being "up against a world" that offers little more than a veiled cynicism or outright derision.

Put in other terms, it's questionable whether a feminist art organisation that we could have neatly packaged-up—for the consumption of funders, the funding system, wealthy collectors, et al.—would be an organisation worth faltering to create. We stand with Lis Rhodes in favouring the "crumpled heap", and as Ahmed concludes her text, "We falter with feminist conviction. As we must."

Captions

1 Marina Rosenfeld, *Sheer Frost Orchestra*, 2006 performance (part of the Cage Musicircus), Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, curated and produced by Electra. Image: Shirley O'Loughlin

2 Jutta Koether and Kim Gordon performance and talk, Tate Modern, 2005 (part of *Her Noise*). Image: Lina Džuverović

3 "I tried to tell them about Electra" (postcard from Lina to Irene, August, 2005)

4 'Perfect Partner' performance, commissioned by Electra, 2005, Barbican Centre, A film by Kim Gordon, Phil Morrison and Tony Oursler. Image: Tony Oursler

5 *Her Noise Map* (Anne Hilde Neset and Lina Džuverović), part of the *Her Noise* project (2005)

6 27 Senses residency, August 2006, Schwitters' Hytte, Hjertoya, Norway and surrounding area (l-r: Jutta Koether and Carl Michael von Hasswolff; Kenneth Goldsmith and Lina Džuverović). Image: Simon Wagsholm

7 Claire Hooper, *Eris: the path of ER*, 2012, film and live performance with Danielle-Marie Shillingford, MC Lioness and Beatrice Dillon (for LUX / ICA Biennial of Moving Image), live performance commissioned by Electra. Image: Christa Holka

8 Irene Revell in conversation with Pauline Oliveros, Artist Talk and Perfor-

mance: Pauline Oliveros, Tate Modern as part of Her Noise: Feminisms and the Sonic, 2012, curated by Electra in collaboration with CRISAP (Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice, University of the Arts London). Image: Katie Snooks

Notes

1 Lis Rhodes, "Whose History", *Film as Film: Formal experiment in film 1910-1975*, Arts Council England, London, 1979. Exhibition catalogue.

2 We use the term *diffraction* in light of post-humanist understandings. For discussion see Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs Gender and Science: New Issues Vol. 28*, No. 3, Spring 2003, pp. 801-831.

3 Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Jeanette Iljon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy, Susan Stein, "Women and the Formal Film," *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*, Arts Council England, London, 1979. Exhibition catalogue.

4 Lis Rhodes, *ibid.*

5 The Interference series ran bi-monthly for three years at the LUX Centre for Film, Video & Digital Arts in London, and presented seventeen events between March 1998 and March 2001. The series was conceived by Lina Džuverović (then working as Education Co-ordinator at the Lux Centre) in collaboration with *The Wire* magazine (represented curatorially by Anne Hilde Neset, with substantial curatorial input from Rob Young) as a way of connecting discourses around moving image work and sound-based practices. The series of talks, performances, screenings, and panel discussions featured, among others: Brandon Labelle, Terre Thaemlitz, David Toop, Philip Jeck The Scratch Perverts, Erik Davies, Robin Rimbaud-Scanner, Kodwo Eshun, Thomas Koner, Jurgen Reble, Add n to X, Vicki Bennett - People Like Us, and Kaffe Matthews.

6 Electra was legally founded in May 2003 in London, by Lina Džuverović and Anne Hilde Neset as an organisational structure that would enable the production and delivery of the curatorial project *Her Noise*.

7 Electra had responded to an 'Invitation to Tender' from Arts Council England, who wished to take on three new 'media arts' agencies—at a time when the discourses of 'media arts' were still poorly understood within larger institutions, and in parallel a more general interest amongst funders in smaller models such as the 'agency', footloose, with low overheads and supposedly entrepreneurial potential.

8 We borrow this term from David Toop's description of certain researched practices that do not seek determinate outcomes (he includes in this term artists Annabel Nicholson and Marie Yates).

9 Džuverović, Lina; 'Twice erased: The Silencing of Feminisms in Her Noise', *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, University of Nebraska Press, Issue 20, 2016, forthcoming

10 Catherine Grant, "Fans of feminism: Rewriting Histories of Second-wave Feminism in Contemporary Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 34 (2), 2011, pp. 265-286.

11. Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt, *The Ethical Slut*, Greenery Press, San Francisco, 1997.

12. As in Vivan Zihel's eloquent discussion of "If I Can't Dance" in *Curating Research*, Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., Open Editions, London, 2015.

13 Hernoise.org, which was created in 2012 by *Her Noise* archivist Holly Ingleton.

14 Lyric by Kim Gordon, taken from 'The Sprawl', Sonic Youth, Daydream Nation, 1988.

15 Lis Rhodes, *ibid.*

16 Sara Ahmed. 2016. "Losing Confidence". Feminist Killjoys blog. Accessed 24.03.2016. <http://feministkilljoys.com/2016/03/01/losing-confidence/>

Lina Džuverović is a curator and Lecturer at the Department of Art at the University of Reading. Formerly she was Artistic Director at Calvert 22 Foundation (2011-2014) and Director of Electra, a London-based commissioning organisation, which she co-founded in 2003. She is also a PhD candidate at the Royal College of Art and Tate, researching Pop Art in the former Yugoslavia. Selected curatorial projects include *Monuments Should Not Be Trusted* (Nottingham Contemporary, 2016), *Sanja Iveković - Unknown Heroine* (South London Gallery and Calvert 22, 2013); *IRWIN – Time For A New State & NSK Folk Art* (Calvert 22, 2012); *27 Senses* (Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2010), *Favoured Nations, Momentum, 5th Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art* (2009), *Her Noise* (South London Gallery, 2005).

Irene Revell is a curator and writer who has been working across professional and 'DIY' registers over the past sixteen years. Her work seeks out new contexts and connections for practices with challenging social and political implications. She is Director of Electra; a member of the Cinenova Working Group; and Visiting Curator on the MA Sound Arts, UAL. Recent collaborative projects include Cinenova series *Now Showing* (2015-); *The Multi-versal Score*, Wysing Arts Centre (2015); *Someone Else Can Clean Up This Mess, Flat Time House* (2014). Recent writing includes a forthcoming contribution to *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image* (ed. Lucy Reynolds, I.B.Tauris, 2016), *Caesura/ Acceso* (forthcoming), *Camera Austria* (with Kerstin Schroedinger), *NOIT*, *Psykick Dancehall*, and *The Wire* magazine. She was associate editor of *Aftershow: Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz* (Sternberg, 2014).

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Angels in the White Cube? Rhetorics of Curatorial Innocence at dOCUMENTA (13)

Nanne Buurman

Introduction

Recent years have seen a tremendous boost in feminist curating. While problematizations of sexist representation, canon critique, and quotas for women have been around for a while, exhibitions dedicated to feminist and queer issues or the work of women artists are currently proliferating. Yet, despite this increased feminist concern with the gendered content of exhibitions, which is also mirrored in the accompanying literature,¹ the specific relationship between gender and curatorial authorship remains largely a blind spot or tends to link curatorship with masculinity.² This is surprising because the curatorial field is increasingly dominated by women. It is all the more remarkable because – complementary to stereotypical associations of artistry with masculinity – structural analogies may be drawn between traditional scripts of femininity and widespread curatorial codes of conduct. Beyond the shared etymology of care work and curating in the Latin *curare* ('care'), they have in common an emphasis on modesty, restraint, and the negation of authorship, as well as an emancipatory historical trajectory from behind the scenes to centre stage.

Well into the twentieth century, curatorial care for collections and the self-negating housekeeping usually performed by women may be compared as backstage agencies that had few public merits but adhered to a separation of spheres, in which the author-ity and autonomy of artists and men was secured by the invisible care labours performed by curators and women respectively.³ The ideology of the white cube, which veils curatorial agency in favour of a purported autonomy of the artworks, thus corresponds with nineteenth-century ideals of pure femininity, personified by the Victorian Angel in the House, who was expected to perform her domestic duties quietly to provide the backdrop for her husband to stage himself as the head of the house. Still today, the figure of the Angel in the House, famously criticized by Virginia Woolf (1942), has its counterparts in curators who modestly declare their innocence. In a manner befitting the Victorian ideal of the desexualized hostess and mother, who labours invisibly in the background to care for her loved ones and guests, curators of all genders claim that they merely prepare the stage for the artists as the protagonists and do not have any authorial ambitions of their own. This conception of non-authorial curatorial agency sometimes even manifests itself in generalizing normative codes of modesty. In 1978, for example, the curator Alanna Heiss observed: "While the demands of art centered on the meaningful expression of the self, the demands of curating predominantly included the ability to absent the self, to provide the neutrality of context necessary to artists and audience [...]" (2012: 491).⁴

Since Brian O'Doherty's (1976) critique of the pseudo-objectivity and virginity of the white cube, the conception of a neutral exhibition has no longer

been tenable. Nevertheless, the topos of curatorial innocence paradoxically seems to have become all the more important after figures such as Harald Szeemann called into question the traditional backgrounding of curatorial agency by articulating authorial claims. Before the late 1960s, curators had been conceived of as custodians operating primarily behind the scenes of museums, their chief responsibility being the care of collections as well as the study and preservation of art, whereas its mediation and exhibition had only been of secondary concern. In their article, "From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur. Inventing a Singular Position", Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak (1996) write that pre-authorial custodian curating was characterized by "the tendency towards the erasure of the person in the post", partly as a consequence of dealing with artists as "an extremely individual lot" (ibid. 234). They find "[t]races of this form of abnegation" in "the voluntary assumption of those traits deemed appropriate for a curator – reserve, modesty, discretion" as well as "sacrifice of wealth and fame" which they link "to the high proportion of women curators [...]" (ibid.). Against this background, the author-ization [sic!] of the curator as an (independent) exhibition-maker, who owes his authorship not least to an analogy with traditional conceptions of artishood as sovereign creation (Grammel 2005, von Bismarck 2005: 177), can also be understood as a 'masculinization of curating'. Analyzing the iconic photograph that shows Harald Szeemann surrounded by artists at the occasion of *documenta 5*, Dorothee Richter points out that, "Szeemann's pose is a distinctive positioning, based on historical schemata, especially of the curator as a god/king/man among artists" (2012: 232).



Since the 1990s, this heroization of individual charismatic curators has been relativized by media-reflexive approaches to curating that address exhibitions as social spaces in which a large number of actors and agents contribute to the production of meaning. Indebted to traditions of artistic institutional and representational critique, discourses of critical curating have called attention to expository practices, modes of "giving to see" and the powerful effects of curatorial constellations. In other words, rather than focusing on curators' singular personalities, issues of contextualization, staging, display, and the ways in which visitors are addressed have since come under scrutiny (e.g. John/Schade/Richter 2008). Hence, diverging from the above-cited claims of innocence, the author-ity of exhibiting was not rejected, but reflected upon, decentralized, and differentiated. In the curatorial field, the crisis of representation thus first became apparent during the late 1960s,

when the author-ization of the curator and the subjectivization of exhibition-making called into question the notion of expository neutrality that had for so long gone unchallenged. From the 1990s onward, critical reflections on the mediality of exhibitions have proliferated, leading to an increased awareness of the aesthetic, epistemological, and social effects of curatorial framings. This includes a growing recognition of the constitutive role of the visitors – as manifested in the controversies over the issue of participation – so that, from about 2010 onward, there is even talk of an educational turn in curating (e.g. O’Neill/Wilson 2010).⁵ Whilst proponents of post-representative curating conceive of exhibitions as inherently political social spaces where the meaning of exhibits is constantly negotiated (e.g. Sternfeld/Ziaja 2012), some neo-objectivist curatorial tendencies – much in line with currently influential post-humanist theories – claim to let exhibits of human and non-human provenance speak for themselves.⁶



The developments roughly outlined above can also be observed with regard to the various editions of *documenta*. Founded in 1955, the institution was described by Arnold Bode in the catalogue of *documenta III* (1964) as a “museum of 100 days”. However, this recurring large-scale exhibition differs from museums in that it is not devoted to the collection, care, and study of objects, but above all to the exhibition and mediation of contemporary art. Accordingly, the documentary claim to representativeness inscribed in the institution’s name was challenged from the first *documenta* onward (see Schwarze 2006: 9–13). This became most explicit in *documenta 5* (1972), because its curator Harald Szeemann replaced the scholarly-objective approach with his ostensibly subjective curation of what is canonized as one of the first thematic exhibitions ever (see Germer 1992). Akin to the traditions of representational critique and media-reflexivity, *documenta 12* (2007) eventually exhibited the act of exhibiting itself as a governmental practice (see Buurman 2009). This essay discusses *dOCUMENTA (13)* (2012) as an example of how the power inherent in the dispositives of showing (once again) became (or was rendered) invisible by verbal and visual rhetorics of innocence. In the following, I specify the ways in which the political dimension of exhibiting (e.g. von Bismarck 2008) – i.e. “the power of display” (Staniszewski 1998) and the hierarchization of visitors and exhibits implied in their constellation (see Beck 2007) – was deproblematized.

Curatorial Authorship at dOCUMENTA (13)

One of the chief concerns proclaimed by artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was the critique of anthropocentric worldviews, which was to be achieved by an expansion of cultural agency to include scientific researchers, political activists, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Despite this radically inclusive approach, *dOCUMENTA (13)* was in many respects characterized by a recentralization of authorship on exceptional humans. Whereas the preceding *documenta 12* (2007) – with its ostentatious *mise-en-scène* – had shifted the attention away from artist-subjects and contexts of production towards the context of reception, the effects of display on the perception of objects, and the experiences of visitors, *d(13)*'s display, in contrast, was curbed in favour of centring the attention on the artists as its primary authors. Thus, *d(13)* countered the reflection of exhibitionary mediality and author-ity, epitomized in *d12* by the mirrored entrance hall (fig 1), by once again re/turning to the model of the white cube (fig 2). Due to this adherence to the notion of curatorial objectivity, not only was the constitutive role of the visitors' corporeal and mental presence in the space largely ignored, but the ways in which exhibitions shape meaning, mediate reality, direct the visitors' attention, and influence their experiences were also almost completely subdued. The outward appearance of the curator as an 'innocent angel' – suggested, for example, in the repeated emphasis on Christov-Bakargiev's "friendliness", her "optimistic smile", and her "curly blonde hair" (Schlüter 2012a: 23) in various mainstream media portraits with such telling titles as "Die Heilerin", i.e. "The Healer" (Rauterberg 2012), and "Madame Maybe" (Schlüter 2012a) – however, has to be put into perspective. Aside from the discrepancy between the curator's verbal claims of non-intervention on the one hand and the power relations inherent in every actual staging of a show on the other, *dOCUMENTA (13)* is also marked by a number of other inconsistencies – for example, contradictions between the post-humanist stance and the focus on the lives of the artists, or between the critique of logocentrism and the strong role played by texts. Not least, curatorial authorship oscillated ambivalently between a compliance with the model of the invisible female hostess and the (re)centring on the curator as an object of attention.⁷

Rhetorics of Curatorial Innocence in Texts by Christov-Bakargiev

In her curatorial essay, Christov-Bakargiev (2012a) postulated that, "A holistic and non-logocentric vision [...] makes us more humble, able to see the partiality of human agency, encouraging a point of view that is less anthropocentric" (2012a: 31). Nevertheless, the curator's manifold declarations of modesty were performatively contradicted in her programmatic texts as well as by her public appearances, lectures, and interviews given in an assertive style and remarkably self-confident demeanour. In fact, her verdicts on the curatorial and her critiques of anthropocentrism, digitization, and cognitive capitalism are presented quite authoritatively. Famous as an eloquent celebrity curator herself, Christov-Bakargiev, for instance, repeatedly criticized the popularity of curating in favour of advocating for a concentration on the art and the artists. In volume one of the three-volume catalogue, *The Book of Books*, for example, she writes: "After more than a decade of these discourses, mainly dedicated to curatorial practices or to broader cultural studies and postcolonial theory, it is pleasurable to reread, for example, Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007) and the gestalt theories of the perceptual psychologists." (Christov-Bakargiev 2012b: 650) Christov-Bakargiev sides with Arnheim's diagnosis that: "Art may seem to be in danger of being drowned by talk." (Christov-Bakargiev 2012a: 38). She joins him in his critique of the "excess of art criticism and theory" (*ibid.*) because "often, these writings do not speak about the artworks themselves, but about curatorial positions in art today, constituting a meta-artistic discourse" (Christov-Bakargiev 2012b: 650).



In interviews with representatives of the media, Christov-Bakargiev likewise repeatedly emphasized her interest in artists while explicitly asserting a lack of interest in matters of mediation, display, and the positioning of audiences. As she explained in a conversation with Kia Vahland (2012: n.p. orig. German) in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: "The more you think about display, the less you permit visitors to enter into dialogue with the [artistic] research." Furthermore, in an interview with Ralf Schlüter for *Art* magazine (2012b: 96), she explicitly distanced herself from the authorial concept of the curator, particularly criticizing the idea of the curator-as-artist (ibid; idem in: Rauterberg 2009). According to Christov-Bakargiev, curators are responsible for the fact that "even the artists no longer feel at home in large-scale exhibitions" (ibid., orig. German). Hence she expressed her aspirations for a "hospitable" *dOCUMENTA (13)* (ibid.) and demanded strengthening "the authority of the artistic" (idem in: Schlüter 2012b: 96, orig. German). Christov-Bakargiev's rhetoric thus complies with the codes of modesty cited at the beginning of this text. Her insistence on restraint evokes the idea of curatorial innocence and

the possibility of direct access to the exhibits, untainted by curatorial framings or medial interferences of the exhibition: "A documenta is a membrane between the audience and the world behind the exhibition: artists, intellectuals, technicians. I tend to concern myself more with the world behind the exhibition than with the audience [...]. It's been my experience that if I don't think so much about the visitors, people are the happiest. They have the feeling of being granted undistorted insights into this other world behind the exhibition" (Christov-Bakargiev in: Vahland 2012: 11, orig. German). Moreover, she conspicuously often spoke of her "humility", "humbleness", and "modesty" as an initiator of (artistic) processes and emphasized the importance of curatorial "care", "concern", and "commitment" for objects (Christov-Bakargiev 2011: 5, 2012a: 34ff., idem in: Jocks 2012: 369ff.), thereby evoking the pre-authorial understanding of curating as a custodial-conservatorial caring of collections. Her rhetorics of humility thus contributed to playing down the curatorial powers of meaning-making.



Christov-Bakargiev's professed abstinence from a meta-artistic narrative of her own may further be observed in her insistence on *d(13)*'s lack of a concept. On closer inspection, however, the concept of a non-concept – which seems quite reasonable against the background of her critiques of logocentrism, cognitive capitalism, and curatorial meta-discursivity – turned out to be an elaborate concept indeed. *d(13)*'s conceptual foundations were laid out, for example, in Christov-Bakargiev's programmatic essay, "The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and lasted for a long time" (2012a), which appeared in the press portfolio and the *Book of Books*. An excerpt of the text was also prominently posted on the wall in the otherwise empty entrance hall of the Museum Fridericianum, which – as the traditional starting point of a tour of the documenta – is the ideal site for a curatorial prologue. In other words, *dOCUMENTA (13)* was by no means characterized by a relinquishment of theory and curatorial discursivity. In fact, the show was accompanied by a considerable amount of text and theory. Examples are the numerous conferences and seminars that took place within the framework of *d(13)* or the *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* series published as a prelude to the show, as well as their compilation in *The Book of Books*, which for its part not only makes a weighty impression with its title, but also with its massive dimensions and its extensive "Reading list: Propaedeutics to fundamental research" comprising nearly four hundred entries (18–26).

The paradox of this ostentatious curatorial modesty, expressed in the concept of ‘conceptlessness’ as well as in a declared curatorial scepticism that – with its emphasis on the propositional, the open, and process-oriented (e.g. Christov-Bakargiev 2012a: 36f; idem in: Jocks 2012: 366) – tends to totalize non-knowledge, was moreover mirrored in the exhibition’s visual identity as a non-identity. The corporate design developed by the agency Left-Loft consisted chiefly of a rule for how to write the word *dOCUMENTA (13)*, which was permitted to appear in various typefaces and to be applied to various backgrounds. The design of the notebooks from the *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* series that vary in colour and size, as well as the rule that there are no rules (Christov-Bakargiev 2012c) with regard to the wearing of the green silk scarf serving as a ‘non-uniform’ for the guards (fig. 3), adhered to a similarly inflectional pattern. As we shall see next, this modulation of supposedly individual possibilities within a prescribed template could also be encountered in the exhibition design.



The Invisibilization of Display at *dOCUMENTA (13)*

On the display level, too, the exhibition rhetoric of *dOCUMENTA (13)* was characterized by a discrepancy between curatorial disclaimers of authorship, including the respective foregrounding of the artists, and a less obvious concentration of author-ity in the hands of Christov-Bakargiev. The most prominent parts of the show were staged in the modernist style of the white cube. That, as well as the tendency to isolate individual artistic positions from one another and to prioritize biographical information in exhibition texts, turned the artists’ subjectivity into one of the main attractions, while the curatorial powers of display were backgrounded for the sake of expository neutrality, an ethics of care, and artistic autonomy. Due to her critical attitude towards the dominance of ‘starchitects’ (Christov-Bakargiev in: Stock 2012), Christov-Bakargiev commissioned punkt4 to be in charge of the exhibition architecture of *d(13)* because the firm’s architects presented themselves as ‘modest’ and tried “to restrain themselves as designers” (Stöbe 2012: 8, orig. German). According to their website, “No exhibition architecture has been ‘designed’, but rather the existing materials have been left to speak for themselves to the greatest extent possible. Solutions for the visible interventions (passages, entrances, ramps, gates) are indebted to a pragmatic aesthetic that is always close to the artist and the function” (punkt4, orig. German). Furthermore, the website mentions that the architects tried to follow the principle of “the most minimal

interventions possible” and therefore even resorted to “hidden architectonic interventions” (ibid.).⁸



This minimally invasive agenda was also applied to the show’s installation design. With very few exceptions, the walls in the main venues – Fridericianum, Neue Galerie, documenta-Halle and Kulturbahnhof – were painted white. Likewise, the display systems were kept so plain and unobtrusive that they tended to blend in with the white walls. In fact, most of them self-effacingly faded into the background in a manner that calls to mind the notion of ‘camouflage’ (figs. 4–6). Moreover, the lighting in these spaces was generally inconspicuous. Besides the spotlights evenly illuminating the exhibits, the prevailing light-diffusing ceiling lamps neither called attention to themselves nor to their subtle powers to produce atmospheres and direct attention. Furthermore, many of the windows were discreetly covered with shades of different degrees of transparency that softened the sunlight. These window screens were kept so simple that they could easily be overlooked. And finally, even the furniture and technical equipment were blended into the surroundings in an optically neutral manner (fig.7). Loudspeakers or fans, for instance, were veiled under white covers so that the galleries were kept clean of anything that could disrupt the experience of art or remind viewers of the manifold ways in which it is mediated.

As a consequence, the spaces appeared so pure that curatorial dramaturgy remained largely unnoticeable at first glance. In fact, the steering of the viewers’ attention and movement was very subtle. Visitor guidance and the architectural positioning of the audience were so inconspicuous that visitors were apparently free to choose their route through the show. Moreover, the means of directing the viewer’s gaze were used sparingly, formal relationships between the objects were highlighted only rarely, and visual axes played a subordinate role. In many cases, vistas were even blocked by partitions at the transitions from one space to the next. Instead of providing an overarching curatorial narrative, *d(13)* almost came across as a conglomeration of solo exhibitions. Monographic rooms devoted to individual artistic positions prevailed. In the Auepark, practitioners even had little houses at their disposal, which the architects helped to design according to the respective artists’ wishes. The only decision made by the curator was that the little cabins be positioned in isolation from each other to make it impossible to see from one

house to the next. As a result, the aforementioned constellation of individual articulations in a predetermined serial framework was repeated here as well. Where works shared exhibition spaces, each artistic position usually had at least a corner or wall to itself. This clear spatial separation of the different contributions, as well as the delegation of responsibility for the installation to the artists, apparently followed an ethos of curatorial non-intervention and thus suggested the greatest possible autonomy for the artists.



The space called *The Brain* was perhaps the most notable exception (fig. 8). Situated at the heart of documenta's traditional main venue, the Rotunda of the Museum Fridericianum, it was reminiscent of cabinets of curiosity – containing, as it did, a multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, a Latourian parliament of things, gathered to represent the exhibition's leitmotifs. In fact, many of the artworks staged in mutual isolation in the rest of the show bore a relationship to the themes outlined by the curator in *The Brain*. According to *The Guidebook*, "The many threads of dOCUMENTA (13) inside and outside Kassel are held together precariously in this 'Brain,' a miniature puzzle of an exhibition that condenses and centers the thought lines of dOCUMENTA (13) as a whole" (2012: 23). This materialized object-based mind map of *d(13)* functioned as a miniature curatorial museum, a glimpse into the brain of the show's mastermind. Its associative character was underscored by the seemingly random combination of various styles of display furniture. Yet even if *The Brain* with its collection of glass cases from differing time periods could easily be interpreted as an act of the musealisation of the museum or as a media-reflexive meta-exhibition of display systems, that particular interpretation was apparently not intended. According to a member of the curatorial team, the glass cases were used for purely pragmatic – more specifically, conservatorial – reasons, so that here curating presumably is to be understood less in the strong sense of an authorial (self-reflexive) steering of perception, but rather in the weak sense of a custodial "care of objects". According to the punkt4 architects' website,

even the glass wall separating *The Brain* from the rest of the exhibition had been inserted for the purpose of climate control “in such a way as to make it invisible to the visitor” (punkt4, orig. German). Here, once again, the ubiquitous effacement of curatorial interventions becomes transparent, so that the pane of glass reads like a *pars pro toto* for *d(13)*’s negation of the mediality of exhibiting.



Ambivalent Hospitality. The Hostess as a Liminal Figure

Despite the quite obvious mediatedness of objects separated from the viewer’s eyes by display cases and panes of glass, Christov-Bakargiev’s self-denying rhetorics of care, her foregrounding of the artists’ intentions, and her insistence that the objects speak for themselves (e.g. Christov-Bakargiev in: Vahland 2012; idem 2011: 7) suggested the possibility of direct access to the things as such. Consequently, as I have tried to show in this essay, the author-ity of the display to generate meaning – i.e., to give the objects a voice and to influence aesthetic experiences and readings – was largely obscured, while curatorial control nevertheless prevailed. By turning a blind eye to the discursive, institutional, and material framings, *d(13)*’s purportedly non-interventionist approach thus not only effaced the curator’s author-ity but also neglected the recipients’ contributions to meaning-making in favour of the pure presence of the “the real thing” (Buchmann 2015: 127).⁹ The disguise of curatorial authorship had the side effect of weakening traditional patterns of curator-bashing. Since at least the 1970s, curators have been accused of imposing their curatorial concept on the artists, of disregarding the latter’s individuality and intentions in favour of curatorial meta-narratives top-heavy with discourse, or of heretically entering into competition with artists by claiming an authorial position. Of course, these patterns of critique – which have meanwhile ossified into formulaic clichés that are often applied regardless of the specific exhibition’s qualities – can also be found with regard to *d(13)*. Nevertheless, many critics have refrained from them and lauded the curator’s authorial restraint (e.g. Sommer 2012: 3).

Thanks to the vacillating interplay between verbal- and display-rhetorical declarations of innocence on the one hand, and the now implicit, now explicit concentration on her person on the other, Christov-Bakargiev came across as an enabling hostess who merely created conditions and set the stage for others to shine. With the aid of this hospitable set-up, she was able to insist on the autonomy and individuality of the artists without relinquishing a demonstration of her own significance. This model of curatorial hospitality, however, is ambivalent in that it can simultaneously contribute to relativize author-ity and to reproduce centralist notions of authorship (Buurman 2016b). Switching back and forth between the role of the protagonist on stage and the function of the stagehand behind the scenes,

Christov-Bakargiev may be characterized as a kind of reversible figure, a liminal presence between *ergon* and *parergon*. As a hostess, she was – on the one hand – able to blend into the background like the Angel in the House, while – on the other hand – presenting herself as the main subject of *d(13)*. This oscillation between foreground and background, opacity and hyper-visibility makes it difficult to determine whether this ‘coy ploy’ was a masquerade or mimicry, an affirmation of clichés or their subversion.

Finally, this equivocal performance of curatorial authorship provokes further considerations about the ambivalent functions of in/visibility in post-disciplinary neoliberal societies of control. As Elena Filipovic has pointed out, the model of neoliberal globalization paradoxically lives on in the white cube, often against the curators’ intentions (2010: 328ff). Therefore, one may ask to what extent the white cube, defended by Christov-Bakargiev as a “space of emancipation” (idem in: Schlüter 2012b: 98), can also be understood as a neoliberal smooth space, in which invisible curatorial hands create the impression of an egalitarian libertarianism that glosses over existing hierarchies, exclusions, and restrictions. In 1990, Gilles Deleuze diagnosed a turn from Foucauldian disciplinary societies to societies of control, where direct disciplinary measures are replaced by barely noticeable means of soft power. With this in mind, it is perhaps no coincidence that the metaphor of the “curator-as-prison ward” – coined by Robert Smithson when he accused Harald Szeemann and *documenta 5* of “Cultural Confinement” (1972) – has been replaced by that of the “curator-as-healer” – Hanno Rauterberg’s epithet for Christov-Bakargiev in his article “Die Heilerin” (2012). Against the background of general biopolitical deployments of femininity, I worry that the ‘re-feminization’ of curating – or, more precisely, curatorial performances of “womanliness as masquerade” (Riviere 1929) – not only risks upholding the myth of the white cube’s virginity but also – despite best intentions – whitewashing the actually existing inequalities of the current capitalist regime.

This is a revised and expanded version of the article “Angels in the White Cube. Rhetoriken kuratorischer Unschuld bei der dOCUMENTA (13)”, originally published in *FKW/Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*, 58, Special Issue *Revisionen des Museums. Praktiken der Sichtbarmachung im Feld des Politischen*, eds. Jennifer John and Daniela Döring, April 2015, pp. 63-47.

Translation from German by Judith Rosenthal, expanded by Nanne Buurman.

Captions

- 1 Mirrored entrance hall of the Museum Fridericianum during *documenta 12* (2007), Photo: Ryszard Kasiewicz, (c) documenta Archive
2. Whitewalled entrance hall of the Museum Fridericianum during *dOCUMENTA (13)* (2012), Photo: Nanne Buurman
- 3 Silk scarf as sign of identification for the *dOCUMENTA (13)* guards, Photos: Nanne Buurman
- 4 Display (for the work by Thomas Bayrle) in the *documenta-Halle*, Photo: Nanne Buurman
- 5 Display (for the work by Kristina Buch) in the *documenta-Halle*, Photo: Nanne Buurman
- 6 Display (for correspondence between Alighiero Boetti and Harald Szeemann) in the Museum Fridericianum, Photo: Nanne Buurman
- 7 Furniture, technical equipment and ceiling lights in the *Neue Galerie*, Photos: Nanne Buurman
- 8 Installation view of *The Brain* (with works by Judith Hopf, Giorgio

Morandi, Giuseppe Penone, Horst Hoheisel, Lawrence Weiner), Copyright: the artists/VG Bildkunst, Bonn 2012, Photo: Roman März Please don't print this image in large, for reasons of reproduction rights.

All pictures courtesy of documenta and Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungen GmbH.

Notes

1 For feminist curating, see, for instance, de Zegher (1996), Baert (2006), Butler/Mark (2007), Hayden/Skrubbe (2010), Dimitrakaki/Perry (2013), Kivimaa (2013), Red Min(e)d et al. (2013). For feminist museology and problematizations of racist and sexist display, see, for example, Hauer et al. (1997), Pollock (2007), John (2010), Krasny (2013).

2 Barbara Paul (2007) and Dorothee Richter (2012), for instance, have addressed the construction of masculinity in curatorial self-stagings.

3 As Lucy Lippard remarked, "It is far easier to be successful as a woman critic, curator, or historian than as a woman artist, since these are secondary, or housekeeping activities, considered far more natural for women than the primary activity of making art" (cited in: Bryan-Wilson 2009: 164).

4 Many more examples could be cited, see for instance Obrist (2009, 2014).

5 Nora Sternfeld (2010, 2012) has prominently criticized the appropriation of educational aspects into the curatorial field as being primarily beneficial for curators. She problematizes how it does not challenge the gendered division of labour that marks curators as producers (linked to the artists) and educators as reproducers (linked to audiences) and thus maintains an unequal distribution of reputation and (social and economical) capital amongst these groups of actors. For the gendering of power relations between curators and educators, see also Kaitavuori et al. (2013).

6 I am referring to the impact of philosophical currents, such as Speculative Realism, New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, which have emerged as part of a more general theoretical (re)turn to materiality and the agency of non-human actors, as, for instance, represented by theorists such as Donna Haraway or Bruno Latour.

7 For a striking example of the strong concentration on Christov-Bakargiev see, for example, *The Logbook*. In my article "CCB with" I discuss how the curator turns into the prime exhibit of this second part of *d(13)*'s three-part catalogue (Buurman 2016a).

8 Beyond the main venues discussed in the following, this agenda emphasized the character of the existing architectures adopted by *d(13)* so strongly that these locations sometimes became "authentic" exhibits themselves, as, for example, the bunker in the vineyard.

9 In many ways, Buchmann's findings, concur with my own analyses. According to her, *d(13)*'s harmonized notion of collectivity remained uncritical of the "mediatedness of reality," which has "apparently become invisible" (ibid.138, orig. German).

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