

Where Curating Is: Excerpts

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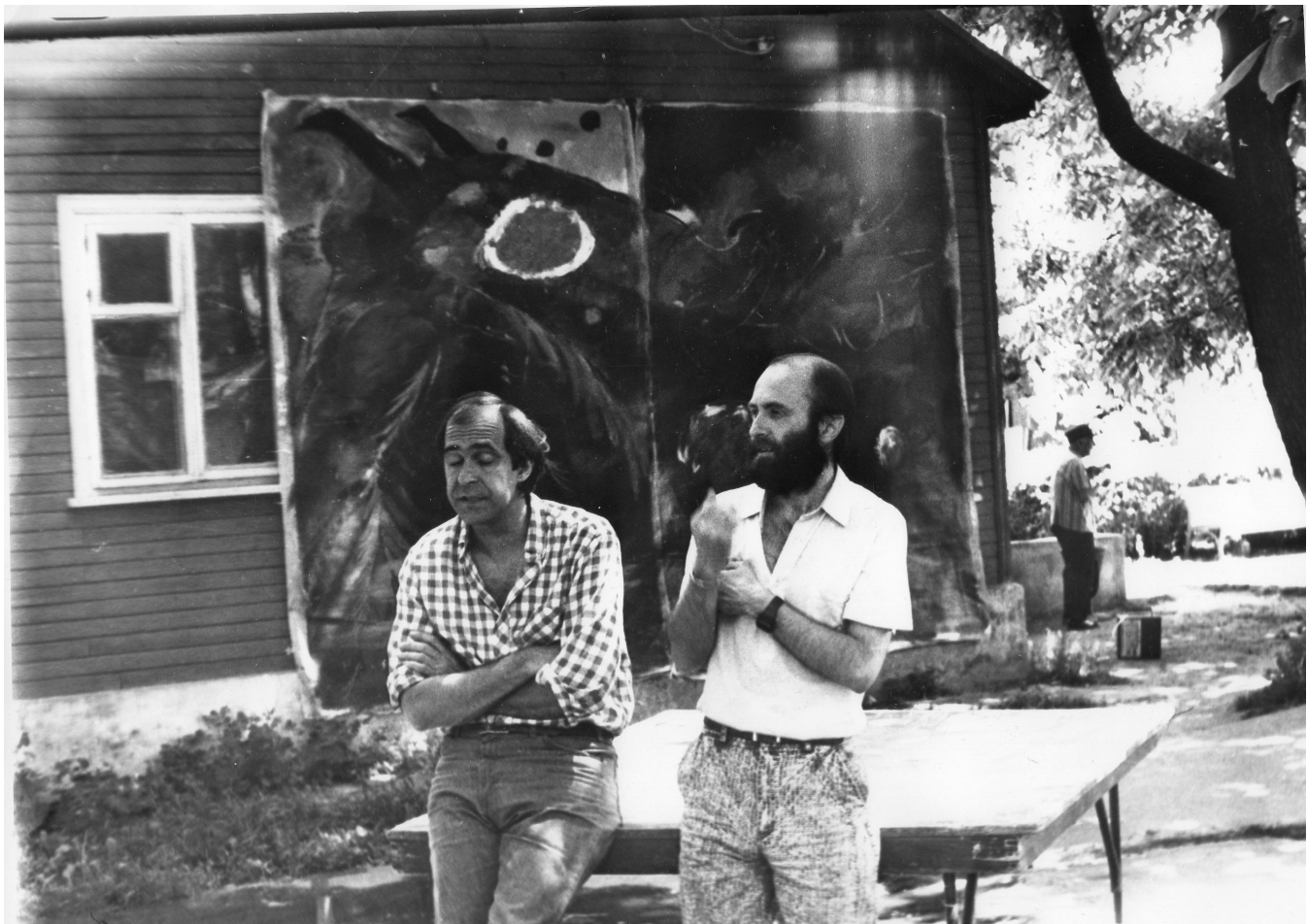
At some point, I was being told that Sedniv was my first curatorial project. I was surprised to hear these comments, but then I began to realize that there might have been something in it. Heading the youth association of the Union of Artists (1987–1992), I saw my work more like that of an organizer of the process. It was obvious that the artistic community was in a new, transforming situation. I saw people who were already involved in the process of change or who were ready to get involved in that process. But those were separate, miscellaneous efforts: at best, small groups of recent students, and in most cases solitary types, in different cities, without much support, who were not always sure whether they were doing the right thing. Not too long ago, I myself was in such a situation, and I clearly understood the situation of each of them. In general, the becoming of a young artist is a complicated and lingering process, for various reasons; that's why I wanted to do something to shorten it and make it less painful. So it was that the first desire appeared: "I need to do something with them." Then there was a question: "And what, actually, to do?" And then I thought of Sedniv (Chernihiv region). One just had to get artists together, as they did not know each other. To create a situation of cohabitation, of teamwork, in which something anticipated thing, something new, something different that was unformed, unspoken, up in the air, would be born. That is, there was an understanding back then that it was necessary to construct situations. I knew that it could be done.

Everything was complicated, beginning with the fact that we had to wait for the spring youth group for nearly a year. However, I have never again met such a burst of energy as there was in the first and second Sednivs (1988 and 1989). The exchange of ideas, plastic and intellectual, and their almost immediate implementation. The large-scale canvases – they were painted without stretchers (it took a long time to manufacture those) – were nailed to the walls or placed on the floor. I say nothing of the champions: Oleh Holosiy managed to paint three canvases, 2 x 3 meters in size, per night. The others kept up with him. And even those who worked slowly made many artworks. All the halls of the Union of Artists allocated to us for the summary exhibition were filled, and in autumn, the artworks caused a furore at the Youth Exhibition in the Manezh, in Moscow. The summary exhibition of the second Sedniv was held at the National Art Museum of Ukraine. And I don't know, actually, how to describe this work – whether that of a curator or of an organizer.

I think, in those years, it was difficult to separate a curator's work from a manager's duties. And later, at the third Sedniv, there emerged a need to somehow program the work, and aesthetic objectives were set. Not all of them gave direct results; some were able to make their presence felt only later. Pictorial art in the form of painting was a dominant form for all the artists. Even before 'depaintingization.' Of course, there were attempts to go beyond, but still, this was the main form in which everyone worked. By the third Sedniv, the first installations had already been made (I don't know how to subsume the bust of Lenin coloured by Holosiy), but these were kind of by-products of the activity. And there was a feeling that something had to be done about it. That's how the need to

reflect the concept of 'painting' appeared. I remember that I gathered everyone and suggested to think and to work on the pairs Caravaggio-Kandinsky and Poussin-Mondrian, in order to understand the roots of the plastic systems. In the end, no one did anything. I don't know what the guys thought about this and what they thought about me, but there might have been something left in their memory, and, perhaps, it was this strange task that subconsciously played a role in the case of Pavlo Kerestey, when, after a few years, he initiated and created a series based on Caravaggio's Narcissus.

You see, I was not a curator. I didn't consider myself as such. The word itself came later (other connotations were associated with this word), along with some understanding of what kind of an activity it was. But something changed in the air at that time. The very materials of exhibitions and artworks changed. And there was a feeling that the principles of exhibition organization had to be changed. The term 'project' seemed not to exist yet. In any case, it was rarely used. Some information appeared, something was seen during the first trips abroad, what had been seen was comprehended, and those were the things related to an intuitive understanding of how the exhibition had to 'exist.' To exist as an organism, or to be engineered like a machine. Or both. Either in opposition or in parallel. Or on repeat. How the thought or question was articulated. That is, there were many operations, opportunities... And so on. In such a way, we mastered what is now being taught or what can be read in books. It was a good practice, an experience which cannot be replaced by anything. So it is that each exposition is now for me like reading a book.



I should feel it, the space, with my body, shoulders, muscle tension, and breathing. How will it be – even or uneven? Only through these bodily practices can you unravel what is written in the

parameters of the space given to you. Even of the ugliest one. Up to the tactile sensation of the walls and floor... Of course, all these processes occur faster in familiar rooms. And then, after a while, you get used to it, understand its rhythm, feel how to move in it, and know its capabilities. At some point, your bodily motility connects to your brain as an operating system, which operates data streams and completes what the body has started. Creating a cognitive space, transforming disparate worlds into a cohesive image of the project, where the mechanism of observing the observer works. I'm not sure that this method is suitable for all exhibitions. I don't know whether it is possible to create an exhibition from the artworks of conceptualists in such a way. Although, why not – the body, its rhythms and physicality (not a representation, but a part of the process, the situation), the context and language, documentation...

Yuriy Leiderman

And we needed an audience, especially one made up of people of influence. Therefore, all hopes and aspirations were sent to Moscow. Only there – or so we thought! – could our works be incorporated into a wider cultural context. Of course, there they would be seen, and perhaps Kabakov, Monastyrskiy, the Mukhomorov and others would even say something about them.

For me it was easier, because I lived mainly in Moscow, where I studied at the institute. Therefore, once every week or two, I took all the sketches, booklets and other things and brought them to Monastyrskiy for review. Very often some guests were at his home, and the viewing of my works was developed into a serious discussion. In other words, Monastyrskiy was my teacher over the years. Or, if you like, my curator, too. He was remarkably capable of genuine interest, and he was tactful. He always tried to be complementary and could criticize politely as well. The highest praise for me was when Monastyrskiy said: "This is a great piece! Don't you want to leave it in my collection? People come to me, and I could show it to them." That is, I understood that the work had made it past the 'filter,' and I was happy in those days as I probably never would be later, even when I received invitations to the most prestigious exhibitions. Conversely, when he did not offer that I leave behind any of the works I'd brought to show, I left depressed.

It was a living process, a feeling of some creative development, without which the interaction of an artist or a whole group of creators with a curator is impossible. This is a line of mutual formation, transformation, when there is no feeling that one puts pressure on one another, but rather both of you feel yourselves pressed by something external and move forward full of a common interest. It is important for an artist not to perceive a curator as a manager or a boss, so that one may admit mistakes and failures along the way; this often makes things more interesting than in a smooth, flashy project. In the same way, a curator should realize that he or she is inside an unpredictable creative process, a kind of 'on-the-move gang.' After all, an art group is actually a 'gang,' not a manufacturing company. But if a curator just becomes an agent, a representative, a manager of a group of artists – if, ultimately, their entire activity is reduced to being able to state that 'my guys,' so to say, 'did a great job,' and the rest did not – then, of course, it isn't much interesting.



I also had my own curatorial practice. First, Inspection Medical Hermeneutics. Actually, we considered it not just an artistic group but also some closed institution. Apart from three 'senior' inspectors, there were, let's say, a wide range of 'junior' ones. So we sent each other these kind of 'creative reports,' and 'senior' inspectors curated exhibitions of 'junior' ones, and so on.

I had another episode in the late 90s, when Vadym Fishkin and I invented Hotelit. Just then, I was very interested in curating, and wanted to have my own space for such experiments. And Vadym was just interested in the idea of a 'refuge,' where one of us or our friends could take shelter. Hotelit appeared at the very junction of these two intentions. It was a specially-designed container with a living space inside, like a modest hotel room. And at the same time, it was an exhibition space. Everyone interested could reserve the hotel room for the night and be one-on-one with art – since perception seems to be most acute at night. Appropriate works were chosen, as well: suddenly appearing, moving slide projections, or some tinkling that appeared suddenly from under the bed. At that time, I really performed the whole scope of a curator's responsibilities: conception, inviting participants, budget, logistics, etc.

We held two exhibitions there. One was called Geologists at Sunset (2001), another, it seems, Schematization (2003). We actually invited fellow artists from around the world. I liked to acquaint them with each other. We were following the simple principle that if two different people are interesting to you, then they must be interesting to each other. Because when you come, let's say, to some international group exhibition, you can hardly get around every artist. But you can enter into creative and friendly relations with someone, which will last for years. Then they recommend

that you get acquainted on some occasion with their friend living in another city, another country. Thus, you form your personal network of special contacts and, correspondingly, small but soulful joint projects. For example, after Hotelit, I curated a small festival of performances in the French city of Valence in the same way. Or I participated in projects which in turn were organized and curated by my friends – Manfred Shu from Vienna, Honore d'O of Ghent, IRWIN from Ljubljana, and so on.

Actually, Vadym Fishkin and I had grandiose plans for Hotelit. For some time, we dreamed of an entire fleet of such adjustable Hotelit containers, circulating around Europe. However, we gave up under the pressure of technical and financial problems. It became apparent that it could work, but, for this, we would have had to neglect the rest – our personal creative work – and devote ourselves only to Hotelit. Neither I nor Vadym had such a desire.

And besides, as a curator, as well as obviously needing creative potential, you need some inclinations of soul and nature which are not inherent in all: openness, empathy, ability to get along with people, ability to both listen and persuade. Unfortunately, I don't have these. Nevertheless, over the last year-and-a-half, I've been back in the curatorial and editorial work of showing my friends in Kyiv who represent the brightest Odesa period – Serhiy Anufriyev, Leonid Voytsekhov, the late Oleh Petrenko, and Ihor Chatskin. There is nothing I can do – it's a kind of debt.

The Open Group (Yuriy Biley, Anton Varha, Pavlo Kovach Jr., Stanislav Turina)

What is the methodology for creating a project when the team acts as the curator? And what does that percentage of spontaneity and chance that happens during the work, at the final stage of the project – installation – mean to you?

PK: We form a particular structure, a well-defined one, and then we introduce 'creative chaos' into it. That is, this chaos is within certain bounds. This network which we set up for ourselves is reflected in our first curatorial project Degree of Dependence, held in Wroclaw with various artists, groups of artists and creative centers. Degree of Dependence is an attempt to patch up the hole in the history of Ukrainian art, an attempt (!) to explore group art practices in the country's art from 2000 to 2016. It was difficult to gather speed creatively within such narrow bounds of the task at hand. In addition, we had the sense that what we were doing – conducting some research, searching for participants, and collecting an archive – shouldn't have been done by artists. I was plagued with a thought that we could miss something. Although we worked on the project longer than ever before.

AV: Actually, we had the same methodology as the one used for the development of an art project; the only thing is that when the project Degree of Dependence entered into its own research path, we, accordingly, had to take on some work which wasn't usual for us before, or, at least, had not been of such volume. It should also be noted that the analytical work was done with the help of many art historians from each region, who prepared texts exclusively for the upcoming project

catalogue. Concerning the percentage of spontaneity and chance, that was exactly what was insufficient there (compared to our usual practice), taking into account the fact that the last week of the exhibition came with many surprises and, accordingly, adjustments.



ST: Before Degree of Dependence we had never been engaged in such large-scale projects, but we had more time, plus a team of producers and an architect helping us. As for the methodology, the Open Group has already realized several complex projects (multi-component and long-term ones), so it was another long-term project. As always, it is teamwork, where each one takes up what hasn't been carried on by the other; everyone must be searching for a certain niche which they will fill with their work. Of course, it's impossible to do without 'oppositions,' on the basis of which ideas are affirmed or rejected by the majority. Fortunately and unfortunately, our tastes have many points of intersection, so the selection of artists isn't a monumental challenge (as it was in that case). Since we as artists were working with curators, we easily converted that experience, trying (as far as possible) to simplify all complexities in advance. We won't say about all the artists, but we got personally acquainted with many of them during the trip that preceded the exhibition.

In such projects, meeting with the artist is a necessity that cannot be replaced by phone calls or emails. If it were possible to change something, it would have been good to talk more with the creators, as well as to search for them in other cities. It is rather a question of individual practices; as our group projects are mainly developed in advance, they almost exclude exhibition improvisation. After all, all of us have an art education, and the exhibition becomes another compositional task. In addition, the compositional component is of secondary importance in our projects. Of course, sometimes an exhibition 'brings gifts.'

YB: Decisions are each time adopted by voting, that is, by a majority, regardless of how many participants are working or taking part in the project. The methodology for developing our curatorial and artistic projects is very often similar. Thus, from the start of the project's development, it is decided how we see our representation. Many completed projects (within the artistic practice of the Open Group) show curatorial and organizational work. Concerning the installation and spontaneity at the final stage of project realization, these are the things that have little effect on the development of the project, as most of the projects are preliminarily of a promotional and documentary nature once they reach the location of their exhibition. Their visual material form is set as early as at the development stage – unlike some projects where the exhibition location is a part of the artwork (the long-term projects Open Gallery, One m³, The Passport of the Object).

Serhiy Bratkov

Each time has its own degree of specifics: for wartime, bread and blood, and for peacetime, the craving for abstraction. A curator is very much a servant of his or her time. This is a figure strongly tied to society. We know of obsessed artists but not of obsessed curators. All curators work on private or government money and must account for it in the number of visits paid to an exhibition. But there are no examples of curators who, having spent all their money, would go broke – but then make some important utterance. In addition, it happens that curators expand their influence on artists. I myself have had some incidents of disagreement with curators, and I felt unhappy in these confrontations.

In this case, the curator is responsible first to the artist and then to an audience. Of course, curators are also answerable to those who are their employers or sources of funding. Certainly, artists are also responsible: first of all, to themselves.

The question of co-authorship of curator and artist is, first of all, an ethical issue, and one for the curator to decide. For an institutional curator, this is a natural process. For example, as a teacher, I naturally take part in the creation of students' work, but this is not a process of joint authorship. Independent curators do share their authorship. Sometimes they fulfil themselves in joint projects with artists. For example, the collector Bondarenko and the artist Gutov have a joint project Russia for Everyone.



A gesture is radical in particular conditions of place and time and in a particular political-social situation. This very sociopolitical context can even serve as a justification for the prevention of the curation of an exhibition in a certain place at a certain moment. Here, a radical gesture turns the situation upside down. For example, a curator and an artist decide not to allow the public to enter or to claim that the exhibition has been moved to another location. What I have seen that has been radical: in Venice, Sierra closed his pavilion for general admission and designated only selected entrances for visitors; the German collector Falkenberg showed on the walls only labels with the names of the works, while the works themselves were locked away in a lumber room, the key to which he gave only to very inquisitive visitors.

In Kharkiv of the 1990s, contemporary artists could be counted on the fingers of two hands. The commonality of opinion on art which this brought about served as an impetus for self-organization. There was confrontation between the official Union of Artists and us. On the other hand, great attention was given by the public and the media to the contemporary art emerging at that time. This attention compensated for all the difficulties we had encountered: a complete lack of funding,

the inability of those who were not members of the Union of Artists to buy art materials. There were attempts at censorship by cultural bodies: in 1995, an exhibition by Fast Reaction Group at the regional art museum was closed after just one hour.

Yuriy Sokolov

The first time I acted in the role of a curator was rather spontaneous. First of all, there were a lot of things in my practice. Before studying at the institute, I used to work in restoration studios. It was a very good time, and most importantly, one had a lot of enthusiasm, though art was very amateurish. Everything was done with one's own hands; there were no institutions – all that came later. At that time I was hustling a lot in Kyiv and Leningrad. The circumstances were such that my desires coincided with things that were in demand. There was also a time when I worked at the Academy of Arts. Once, I was invited to meet the secretary of the city committee, who had returned the day before from Georgia, where he had visited an exhibition in which 'everything was allowed.' It made a strong impression on him, and he wanted to organize something similar. As a result, I was engaged in making such an exhibition. At the time, I was already interested in contemporary art, I visited Moscow, and indeed, back then I had a lot of enthusiasm. Besides, I knew many people within the Academy and had friends outside it too. As a result, the exhibition was called An Invitation to a Discussion. The main idea was to show something that hadn't been shown before. It was still the Soviet era. And I must say that the exhibition turned out to be very diverse, with about a hundred participants.



With the advent of independence, I was 'moved' from the university. The situation was such that the attitude towards Russians changed. I already had no job when I was invited to make the Plus '90 project. Here, in Lviv, there was an Armenian company that financed the exhibition and the catalogue, the layout of which I designed. The artists came from different countries: Poland, Germany, Israel, Armenia, Russia, and I also gathered all my artist friends. There was also another

curator, Kenigstein. He was more like a manager and dealt with organizational issues.

There was a rather unusual exhibition in Dniester hotel called The Theatre of Things. Everyone who was at least trying to make contemporary art participated in it. At that time, art objects had never been exhibited here. All these things were unusual for Lviv, the concept of installation was absent entirely, and this attracted people with originality. In my opinion, this exhibition was significant – one might even say it was a breakthrough. It wasn't large-scale, but in spite of the great variety, it formed an integral whole; in some sense, it opened up horizons for the art of Lviv.

My first gallery – Chervoni Rury Gallery – was right here, in this house at 24 Yefremov Street, in the basement. At first, I brought there all the stuff that I had in my house and then roped in the others. All my friends gathered there and made some exhibitions. I cannot say that it was curating. It was just a creators' gallery. We did everything that came into our minds. It's rather strange to speak here about 'achievements' because we just lived that way – there was a process.

Lada Nakonechna

Looking at the history of contemporary art, I associate the appearance of the figure of curator with new social, historical and aesthetic challenges faced by artists. The interest of artists in place, the relationship between elements, audience perception, social space, context, those things which are always in the field of curatorial attention, gave birth to practical experiments. A route appeared by which artistic utterances could move outside the picture frames which had long constrained them. On the other hand, there are problems of representation: the concept of an exhibition which separates itself from the salon and acquires meanings that require finding ways of working with it. Today, a curator and an artist often become partners – but not necessarily; their fields of activity differ.

Together, all agents within the field of art form a system. But while an artist can afford a separate practice and taking unsystematic actions with no responsibility concerning the viewer, a curator cannot – because he is an institutional figure. He is a mediator between a viewer and an artistic utterance. A curator is the one who is in between, who makes the perception possible, who is responsible for systems of relationship, signs, various elements: notional, formal, and so on.

It is difficult to give a definite description of the curator-artist relationship: each curator has his own 'handwriting'. An exhibition can start with a curator's admiration for the ideas and works of an artist, and vice versa, a curator can inspire an artist with his or her interests and opinions. For me, as an artist, it is especially interesting to work with a curator who conducts research and engages your work with his or her story in such a way that they show themselves in a new position. In this case, artist and curator become co-authors, and it is not even necessary for them to discuss their approaching exhibition.

The curator's task is to create a context that will make an artwork visible, so that it will be possible to perceive the utterance; to ensure that such an event will definitely occur. For an event to change

you, it must not only be felt but also be something in which you can manifest yourself as a participant and as a viewer.



The radical curatorial gesture is a completed, totally realized idea that disregards all compromise, for instance, with artists or institutions. To cope with this, a curator must possess will and a perfect sense of place, time, and of course, formal and meaningful relationships.

Unfortunately, in Ukraine, we often hear of regrets stemming from the lack of certain things that are needed for the functioning of contemporary art. These arise owing to a comparison being made with traditions of artistic practice in other countries. But we cannot just install something developed and experienced by others, in other contexts. It's true that we don't see the institution of curation or academic research of curatorial practices in Ukraine, but this is not a major problem. I feel the need to admit to the reality in which we exist, which we created, and thus the need for hard work with the material we have, with the history we have gone through – for building up discourses that would not be cut off from our practice.