Publications on museums and exhibition making have by now grown into a veritable cottage industry, with entire bookshelves devoted to the subjects. Star curator figures, especially über-curator Harald Szeemann, are prominent in that field, their projects, practices, and words garnering significant attention. Yet in the context of long-sustained and venerable art historical scholarship, the history of the exhibition is still nascent (if recently beginning to expand), and the story of the artist as curator, a key aspect of that fascinating narrative, largely remains to be written.

When Elena Filipovic first approached us with her idea to begin to rectify this lacuna, it had already been long in the making in her head, but without the right partner to make it a reality. Just as we began embarking together on what would become *The Artist as Curator*, a series that occupied eleven issues of *Mousse* from no. 41 (December 2013/January 2014) to no. 51 (December 2015/January 2016), the practice of reconstructing an exhibition, a quite rare curatorial act before then, had received a shot in the arm with the re-creation of Harald Szeemann’s landmark 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, which restaged the seminal show almost work by work, square meter by square meter. Against that background, the series dared to ask: Why have exhibitions organized by artists remained so relatively impervious to historicization?

*The Artist as Curator* investigated this question across twenty newly commissioned or specially reprinted essays. What follows is the original introduction to that series and all the essays as they appeared in *Mousse*, along with two additional newly minted texts, together covering a range of exhibitions by artists from the post-war to the present, with an afterword by Hans Ulrich Obrist.

Such an ambitious project as *The Artist as Curator* and now this anthology of its contents would not have been possible without the incredible generosity of an engaged group of art institutions, foundations, and private individuals. For their trust and commitment, we gratefully acknowledge: Bergen Kunsthall; CAPC / Musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux; Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva; De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam; Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte; Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo; Fundazione Prada, Milan/Venice; HangarBicocca, Milan; Kunsthalle Basel; Museo Marino Marini, Florence; Portikus, Frankfurt; The Renaissance Society, Chicago; Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste Städelschule, Frankfurt; and WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, as well as Claire Burrus, Herman Daled, Massimo Minini, Jan Mot, Ethan Wagner, and Thea Westreich, all of whom helped fund the research and production of this project. At each institution or foundation we were surrounded by supportive directors or curators who aided in making their respective institutions partners in the project.

We are indebted to Lindsey Westbrook for her steadfast care with copyediting and proofing both the series and this volume, and to Fausto Giliberti for designing them. We thank Franz Koenig and Koenig Books, London, for their continued interest and support in co-publishing this anthology.

Finally, and mostly, we thank Elena, for absolutely everything.

—Edoardo Bonaspetti and Stefano Cernuschi
We know some of the fabulous stories, like the one about Gustave Courbet setting up shop across the way from the 1855 Salon in Paris. His rogue pavilion aimed to present his work differently and better, he claimed, than the French state would have in its crammed annual exhibition, where paintings were stacked to the ceiling with apparent disregard for the integrity of the works on show. The Salon officials had rejected the artist’s major works from the period, including *The Artist’s Studio* (1854–55) and *A Burial at Ornans* (1849–50), so his entrepreneurial one-person show (something unheard of in its day) would, he imagined, be not only a fitting riposte, but also a revenge on the exhibition conventions favored by the Salon. One can picture him, realist painting’s master craftsman, peddling photographic reproductions of his paintings and charging for admission as well as for the checking of canes and umbrellas in order to pay for the affair.1 In a time long before the advent of the fully professionalized species known as the “curator,” an artist was endeavoring, on his own, to choose the location, organize the scenography, make the selection of artworks to be featured, and even devise the financing scheme—all so that he might better determine the conditions of his work’s reception. With the twentieth century even more such seeming anomalies arrived: artists who not only quietly made discrete objects in their studios but took into their own hands the very apparatus of presentation and dissemination of the work they had produced—and often that of other artists as well. The annals of art history are full of such anecdotes, although they sit almost without exception on the periphery of official narratives. The reasons for this are perhaps no mystery: despite its fundamental importance as a primary context through which art is first made public, circulated, seen, and discussed, the exhibition has long been considered an ambiguous object of study at best, partly due to the tenuousness of the exhibition’s—any exhibition’s—ontological ground, no matter who curated it. Neither a stable, immutable, collectible thing (the usual stuff of art history), nor a clear product of any single hand (being, as they are, determined as much by the artist-made objects they comprise as by the curator who organized said objects); decidedly not autonomous; often deemed “merely” a frame; and irrevocably tied to the mundane pragmatics of administration (thus supposedly less “pure” and “creative” than an artwork): these are some of the reasons that might explain why exhibition history, in general, took so long to gain traction as a bona fide object of study.2 Yet why the peculiar and specific genus that is the artist-curated exhibition has taken even longer to be theorized requires another explanation.

Any explanation would surely be related to the ontological impurity of exhibitions in the wider sense, but artist-curated examples arguably further exacerbate the exhibition’s precarious nature, sitting uncomfortably close to artistic work, and yet still evidently not quite qualifying as artworks. Even if they are the product of an artist or artist collective, artist-curated exhibitions cannot be thought through the romantic idea of the artist as individual producer of immutable objects that follow a progressive, evolutionary development of forms classifiable according to artistic movement, style, or “turn.” Neither is it clear how to consider them in relation to an artistic oeuvre (is an artist-curated exhibition, for instance, entered into an artist’s catalogue raisonné? Does it get listed in the artist’s curriculum vitae along with other group exhibitions? Or rather with the solo shows?).3 Nor is it apparent whether they can be usefully compared (as artworks are) in discussions regarding the development of parallel artistic oeuvres or movements.

Speaking of exhibition history in general, the writer and curator Simon Sheikh raised the following question: “What does it mean to shift...
attention from objects to exhibitions... We have to ask ourselves not only what a history of exhibitions can tell us about art but also what a history of exhibitions will tell us about history, how it is written and read, rewritten and re-read. In response, he advanced the following proposition: if a history of exhibitions were to be written, it should perhaps be based on the historian Reinhart Koselleck’s notion of “conceptual history”—in other words, a history examined not through stylistic or chronological devices, but instead through the (materially embodied) concepts and ideas that presumably underpin the exhibitions in question. Sheik takes this as his own example, “democracy,” “the state,” “freedom,” and “progress” as such possible categories. Although the profession of the “curator” was arguably no less radical or influential a gesture. Dorothea von Hantelmann credits Duchamp with inaugurating what she calls “the curatorial paradigm,” arguing that “in the field of art it was Marcel Duchamp who anticipated, paradigmatically performed, and articulated a new archetype of creativity. In her view, it was his choice (which is what she considers curatorial) that allowed the readymade to mark “the transition of a production-oriented society to a selection-oriented society.”

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Ultimately, as his exhibitions from the 1930s until the end of his life reveal, he rendered the exhibition utterly unlike the showplaces of art facts hung more or less high on the wall that the museum at the time treated them as.

One year later, in 1917, Duchamp took on the role of president of the “hanging committee” for the inaugural exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York.18 In that capacity, he devised a curious system for the arrangement of the show, proposing to hang the artworks not according to school, style, or chronology, but alphabetically and according to chance, beginning with the exhibition with the first letter selected from a hat—thereby ensuring absolutely no favoritism while defying every known system according to which shows were typically organized. Arguably, it was precisely because he was president of the hanging committee that he made sure that another gesture he would be anonymous— he pseudonymously submitted a store-bought piece of porcelain plumbing entitled Fountain to the exhibition. The urinal, signed “R. Mutt 1917,” was, as the now-famous story goes, rejected before being lost or destroyed (no one quite knows which).19 Few had any idea that a certain Marcel Duchamp was behind Fountain; not even some of his closest friends and patrons knew, and the art didn’t publicly mention his connection to the object for decades.20 As far as von Hantelmann’s Papers of Surrealism (along with Exhibitions) is concerned, the only mention of Fountain is of emblematic 1957 is of emblematic.

The exhibition opening was a willfully provocative event—indeed, Duchamp himself has stated that when the Museum of Modern Art rejected his freshly painted gallery wall, he promptly mounted a retrospective exhibition that allowed him to play, literally, the museum’s game on his own terms. On the other hand, with flashlights as exhibition lighting, suspended soap bars as a ceiling, and department-store revolving doors as supports for paintings (as in the Exposition internationale du surréalisme [International Surrealist Exhibition] in 1938), or with artworks strung amidst a web of miles of ordinary string that obstructed passage and vision (as for the First Papers of Surrealism exhibition in 1942), to name just two examples, his exhibitions were, in each case, radical reimaginings of the conventions of display that proved immensely influential to the generations of artists that came after him.

Indeed, there are numerous examples of artists who, each in their own way, subsequently took up the practice of exhibition making as a critical medium. In the postwar period, Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore’s programmatical title of Exhibition 1938 is of emblematic.

The exhibition became a material surface and catalyst for visual and spatial experience. Hamilton and Pasmore’s was a gesture of withdrawal—“unexhibiting” as a mode of exhibiting. Along with similarly radical methodologies advanced in a number of other artist-curated exhibitions that would follow in an Exhibit’s wake, it pursued the radical reversal of the art exhibition’s usual mandate: questioning, probing, reimagining what the content and the terms of display for exhibitions could be.

Less than a year later, for his exhibition Le Vide (The Void), Yves Klein painted the whole interior of a Parisian art gallery exhibition space white, removing all of the usual, recognizable “content” from the space. It was not just a gallery emptied or simply repainted: rather, it was the signature of the modern white cube was rendered an extreme of itself. Whiter than white, Klein’s careful paint job combined several coats of pure white lithopone pigment blended with his own special varnish of alcohol, acetone, and vinyl resin.21 As he later recounted:

The object of this endeavor: to create, establish, and present to the public a palpable pictorial state in the limits of a picture gallery or other words, the creation of an ambiance, a genuine pictorial climate, and, therefore, an invisible one. This invisible pictorial state within the gallery space should be so present and endowed with autonomous life that it should literally be what has hitherto been regarded as the best overall definition of painting: radiance.22

The exhibition opening was a willfully provocative, decidedly staged affair. Many of the conventions of the art exhibitions that were used, but also exaggerated: specially printed invitation cards (3,500—a considerable number for a gallery show at the time), a commissioned text by a critic, an entrance fee (unheard of in commercial galleries but common in museums), an opening speech, drinks for the occasion (special blue cocktails), and hired guards out front (two mounted Republican guards, no less). And when Klein discovered a young man playfully drawing on his freshly painted gallery wall, he promptly called security, and had him thrown out. In other words, the space operated according to many of the rules and institutional policies that would typically characterize an exhibition, except for the radical evacuation of the exhibition’s conventional raison d’être: anything that might be mistaken for an artwork on exhibit was absent.

A few years later, in December 1966, Mel Bochner, then a young instructor at the School of Visual Arts, New York, slapped four identical rings on his freshly painted gallery wall, he promptly mounted an Exhibit’s wake, it pursued the radical reversal of the art exhibition’s usual mandate: questioning, probing, reimagining what the content and the terms of display for exhibitions could be.

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originality and reproduction as much as it did between exhibition and artwork.

On the other side of the globe, in 1968, a series of events and exhibitions by a group of young Argentine artists from Buenos Aires and Rosario called the Experimental Art Cycle took place. Their activities would lead to the conception of a large activist research, information, and exhibition campaign, Tucumán Arde (Tucumán Burns), held later that year.25 As part of the cycle of events that led to Tucumán Arde, the artist Graciela Carnevale opened her Acción del Encierro (Confinement Action) in an empty Rosario storefront gallery whose windows she had papered over. The event consisted of her locking up attendees to the opening for more than an hour. Guests (or “prisoners,” as the artist later referred to them) only afterward realized that their sequestration in the empty exhibition space (and the resultant confusion, fear, paranoia, and eventual escape) was the exhibition itself. The confinement made them, as the artist recounts, “obliged, violently, to participate”—an effect partially thwarted by a passerby who saw the desperate incarcerated crowd (who by this point had peeled off the posters covering the window) and brooded for a time.26 Once outside of the exhibition context, just before the police brought the exhibition-action to an abrupt end, the audience was given a photocopied statement that drew a parallel between the event and a place to instill activism, communal participation, and engagement. It looked and operated literally like a typical art exhibition, and its reception, both by its host institution and by the local press, revealed the difficulty with which it was recognized as an exhibition at all (rather than, say, social activism). Nevertheless, through it, Rosler inspired a whole generation of artists—from Liam Gillick to Rirkrit Tiravanija—and participatory practices in art, and she also significantly influenced what went on to become called the “discurusive exhibition,” a pedagogic, activist turn in art that used the exhibition as a privileged public forum.

Still other examples offering altogether different responses to the question of what might constitute an exhibition could be cited, like David Hammons’s unannounced 1994 exhibition at Knobherry, an operating New York shop for Asian and African objects, where his works slyly infiltrated the emporium’s usual artifacts with no indication through presentation or signage as to the differing status of each. Hiding in plain sight, as much of his work and person does, Hammon’s project was as much an investigation of the relationship of the artwork to the commodity as it was a reflection on the form of an “art” exhibition. Or there is Lucy McKenzie and Paulina Olovska’s Nova Popularna (2003), an exhibition that took the form of a temporary illegal speakeasy in Warsaw. Taking over a space loaded with historical resonance as the site of avant-garde happenings in previous decades, the duo of artists designed their own brand of vernacular or “new popular” scenography (from the bar and curtains to their own uniforms as the locale’s barmaids) as the backdrop against which they presented a rotating array of artworks, performances, concerts, and other events. One could name many more—indeed, the list of remarkable artist-curated exhibitions is long, and takes us from Yves Klein’s Le Vide (1958) to Mike Kelley’s The Uncanny (1993); from Barbara Kruger’s Pictures and Promises: A Display of Advertising, Slogans and Interventions (1981) to Willem de Rooij’s Entente (2011); from Fred Wilson’s Mining the Museum (1992) to Thomas Hirschhorn’s Musée Precaire (2004); and still other fantastically rich examples that couldn’t be investigated in this volume, but all of which prove that artists have, from the postwar period to the present, found the exhibition an incredibly potent site of intervention.

Of course not every exhibition organized by an artist explicitly seeks to shift the terms of the exhibition as such. Some have been more than anything else about expressing an artist’s particular and unusual grounds for selection while the classical format for presentation remained stultifyingly in place. And there are, conversely, a number of exhibitions made by “professional” curators (or, at least, non-artists), who for their part have managed to accomplish that task of reimagining the form of the exhibition (think of Lippard’s various “Number shows” or the Xerox Book, 1968; Gerry Schum’s Television Exhibitions I and II, 1969–70; and Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput’s Les Immateriaux, 1985). These cases can be attributed to the curator endeavoring to push the form that would respond to the nature of the work being shown, or to the fact that the curator allowed the artists, while not taking over the role of the curator per se, to have a hand in determining the exhibition. Professional curators have at times been inspired by artist-curated exhibitions and have felt challenged to rethink the exhibition’s form as a result. In other words, there are no hard-and-fast rules that distinguish the categories I deploy in order to facilitate a discussion of the subject. Things are slippery. Nevertheless, this larger project of looking at the artist as curator aims to address what has been the signal potential as a form to be pressed, challenged, and even undone. For the crucial task of a history of artist-curated exhibitions is to attend to the particularities not only of what was shown, but also to the form the exhibitions assumed. That form may or may not be considered an artwork, which is precisely why this project will ask us to fundamentally reconsider what an artwork or an exhibition are—or could be.

—Elena Filipovic
INTRODUCTION

1. See Patricia Mainardi, “Curator’s Exhibitions,” Curate de Beau Monde 120 (December 1983): 263–65. Occasional references to artist-curated exhibitions appear in various history exhibitions (Brian Doherty’s Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space and Bruce Altshuler’s The Trust Guide to Exhibition: New Art in the Frontenott Century) offer rare, early exceptions that give significant attention to the artist-curated exhibition), and there are handful of essays, each devoted to a single artist-curated exhibition, and even a few articles on the phenomenon of the artist curator (in all accounts, see the “Selected Bibliography” in this volume). But, surprisingly, there exists no comprehensive study surveying artist-curated exhibitions, nor any serious attempt to theorize the specificity of these exhibitions. Moreover, artist-curated exhibitions often get left out of larger art histories that still frequently favor discussions of autonomous objects.

2. The reconstruction of historic exhibitions is not new, but the Prada Foundation’s imperative recent efforts toward mutually reasoning and reconstruing When Attitudes Become Form is both unparalleled and indicative of how usefully limited such reconstructions (invariably see. See the remarkable publication edited by Germano Celant and Chiara Costa. When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013 (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2013).


7. For this presentation there was specifically not supposed to be a “selection”, it was open to all comers. Yet the president of the hanging committee was pretty much as close as one can get to the “curator” in our contemporary sense.

8. No matter that the exhibition claimed to have “no jury and no prizes,” and anyone who paid the six-dollar submission fee, as R. Mutt had, was supposed to be allowed to exhibit. A urinal revealed the exhibition’s posture of undogmatic inclusiveness to be, quite simply, a lie. Centered from the catalogue and the show, it was apparently hidden behind a wall partition when the public would not see it. And it was, or at least one story goes, lost almost as quickly as it had been chosen from among the pavilions supplied at the A. L. Mott ironwork and appliance store. For a collection of the most extensive research on the different accounts of Fountain, see William Camfield, Marcel Duchamp/Fountain (Houston: Menil Collection, Houston Fine Arts Press, 1999).


10. This fact cannot be overemphasized, since so many of the art historical references to the urinal as the seminal example of Duchampian iconism fail to take adequate into its lack of publicness at the time. They treat Fountain as it were, already in 1917, the art historical icon that it is today and as if one can properly speak of it without considering the fundamental role that its documentation, administration, and (delayed) representation in an exhibition (which is to say, its curation) has had on its contemporary interpretation.


15. In addition to Ana Longoni’s essay on Tucumán Arde in this volume, see also Hamshia and Marceno Montoya, Del 25 al 30 de Noviembre (2009), Mexico City: Caracter de Mexico (2010).

16. Graciela Caranval’s artist’s statement reads: “The work consists of first preparing a totally empty room, with totally empty walls. One of the walls, which was made of glass, had to be covered in order to achieve a suitable neutral space for the work to take place. In the room the participating audience, which has come together by chance for the opening, has been locked in. The door has been hermetically closed without the audience being aware of it. I have taken prisoners. The point is to allow people to enter and to prevent them from leaving. Here the work begins and these people are the actors. There is no possibility of escape, in fact the spectators have no choice, they are obliged, violently, to participate. Their positive or negative reaction is always a form of participation.” Graciela Caranval, “El encierro—Projeto for the Experimental Art Series,” Re.act Feminism, http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=uk&k=A-a
This is an anthology of essays that first appeared in *The Artist as Curator*, a series that occupied eleven issues of *Mousse* from no. 41 (December 2013/January 2014) to no. 51 (December 2015/January 2016). It set out to examine what was then a profoundly influential but still under-studied phenomenon, a history that had yet to be written: the fundamental role artists have played as curators. Taking that ontologically ambiguous thing we call “the exhibition” as a critical medium, artists have often radically rethought conventional forms of exhibition making. This anthology surveys seminal examples of such exhibitions from the postwar to the present, including rare documents and illustrations. It includes an introduction and the twenty essays that first appeared in *Mousse*, a newly commissioned afterword by Hans Ulrich Obrist, and two additional essays that appear here for the first time.
