

## **More than the sum of its parts**

About the art project *Exhibition* (New York, 2009)

*By Diana Artus*

The practice of an art exhibition is usually understood as putting something upon a stage. Under the right light and organized by a strict aesthetic, the works displayed and valued are typically individual, finished objects. Thus, this kind of presentation can be understood as a ritual, extolling the rules of a market society. But when an exhibition diverges from this format, the result is revealing not only art's continual complicity with capitalism, but also how, and with what consequences, the notion of such a ritual could be reconfigured.<sup>1</sup>

As an artist I was recently involved in one such an attempt, which continues to take place at a vacant storefront in New York's Nolita neighborhood. The large number of people involved in this project, named *Exhibition*, combined with its complexity make it inevitably contentious, and antagonisms arise not only from the participant's different points of view, but often from within these views themselves. This text is a reflection on some of this individual contradictions and perspectives.

### **Project *Exhibition***

Located in the area next to the New Museum, the chosen space for the project is in the heart of New York's consumer culture and trendy art landscape. The simple black sign – *Exhibition* – attached to the store window of 211 Elizabeth Street seems to fulfill what the neighborhood inherently promises. Upon closer inspection, however, the presentation of artistic work taking place there is anything but straightforward. As a study in contradiction, by adopting the name “*exhibition*,” what is happening inside 211 Elizabeth simultaneously assumes the character of a traditional exhibition while seeking to permanently undermine it.

Initiated by Eric Anglès, Elena Bajo, Jakob Schillinger, Nathalie Anglès, and Warren Neidich, the six-month project was conceived as a project among friends. Though their roles in the art world, philosophical views, and individual practices differ sharply, it is these differences reinforced by a strong common denominator of friendship that formed one of the motivating reasons to start the collective experiment. While ensuring the greatest possible receptivity to their individual artistic practices, a fundamental aim was to provoke differences of opinion, rather than placate them. A rough set of parameters was established where the most important principle was that only one exhibition will

---

<sup>1</sup> In reference to Dorothea von Hantelmann's text *Reconfiguring the ritual*, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 74/2009, page 103-104.

be shown, during which time it will be in continuous development, as new people – artists, curators, and others known by the initiators – are invited to participate.

Throughout the life of the project, the names of potential participants are written on slips of paper and put into a hat. Approximately twice a week, the five initiators meet and pull one of these slips of paper from the hat. The name that is pulled becomes the chosen “creator,” and he or she has up to three days to intervene in the situation already present in the space. In participating, the artist agrees to relinquish their work as their own property, and once the works have been placed in the exhibition, they do not belong to anybody, nor can they be sold. They can only be used, altered, or removed at any time. Further, the placement of an artist’s work is decided by chance using dice. Each participant has three throws. According to the numbers thrown, the artist has access to certain areas of the space, which is every time delineated into new zones.

### **What you see is not what you get**

When the public enters the exhibition, what greets them is never a finished product, even if the project’s name suggests as much. The viewer perceives instead a transitory, intermediary state of changing processes, and as the character of the exhibition radically evolves, the audience is always cognizant of the possibility of sudden and comprehensive change – something which all too often disappears from the lexicon of everyday life. What can be gleaned is a sort of sensual experience resulting from constant interruption between moments of agreement and contradiction, new constructed from the used, rejection coupled with reciprocation, and continuous accumulating, developing, acquiring, repelling, segregating, and settling. The question of who realized each work is unimportant. What is fascinating is the way in which the exhibition as a whole develops and which direction it will take. That which is unforeseeable is the essential.

Even though the project’s initiators do not want to be viewed as curators, the exhibition as they have conceived it forces them to engage in curatorial decisions: for instance, which names are put in the hat. The notion of chance can also be viewed as a curatorial concept, and where a relinquishing of control occurs only under certain establish parameters. Still, by continuing to work within an experimental construct emphasizing the project’s inherent contradictions, the creators question the role of curator, whereby notions of order and arrangement are left to coincidence and spontaneity. The initiators, for example, have no clear process of arbitration as to what happens when a rule of the project is compromised or must be amended, and whether any possible anarchistic variation proposed by a chosen creator will be sanctioned. Among the founding group, there are disagreements over whether, or how often, the exhibition’s loose parameters can be broken or bent at all. An already practiced solution is to add an exception to the set of rules.

## **Transitional art**

Implicit in the exhibition's focus on inconsistency and impulse is the conscious devaluation of the material results of artistic agency. The intention is not to present, preserve, value, and sell an art object, which is nothing else than a frozen and signed fragment of what once was a creative flow. The idea is to enable a comprehensive and unbiased view on role of process, ephemerality, and the potential of cooperative effort whereby conceptions of property and attribution, embodied in the traditional exhibition ritual, are undermined.

As soon as an artist has finished intervening in the space, the next artist is led into the exhibition. Thus, some of the interventions are only visible for a few hours, sometimes not at all. The works become ephemeral structures, just "passing by." Although the process could be perceived as wasteful, it is instead the epitome of true luxury. The fleeting nature of each individual artwork liberates it from the weight and the ponderousness that accompanies conventional exhibition contexts. Apparent certainty is displaced by a confession of the uncertainty and curiosity brought on by change. Even though each work will meet an early end, the artists understand that disappearance is not equivalent to loss because memory, foreshadowing, and influence are contained within the process purported by the exhibition, and indelibly written into the condition of the artworks themselves. Thus, each intervention assumes what will be next, and in a rough dialectic, takes on what was before.

Stages of the exhibition are documented but very unsystematically. Depending on which of the initiators happens to be sitting in the space, visitors and participants have access to the historical layers, unexpected turns and absurd hooks of the project through haphazard photographic documentation, through oral narration mediated by arbitrary memory, or both. Sometimes, the artists have been quite timid, carefully placing their work next to others. Other times, they retrofitted their installations more drastically. The space resembles a palimpsest – a sheet that has been written over and over, with text added to existing layers, creating interlocking texts. The project does not concern itself with linear progress, meaningful history, or even a coherent presentation. Rather, Exhibition is a visualization and conscious formulation of pervasive contradiction.

## **No winners and losers but players**

An event such as Exhibition lives off the discourse about what has happened, and why it happens, defined by the moment shared between the participants and the observers, their arguments and counter arguments, and the attempts to communicate into and over a disparate world. The immaterial flow of comments, gestures, and discussions about practice, production, and the system by itself cause

interferences between the colliding positions. The individual objects in the exhibition and their subsequent arrangements are like game pieces in the “Mensch-ärgere-dich-nicht” (a popular German board game similar to Sorry) as they are pushed together and pulled apart, kicked out, and governed by the rules of the game. Each piece, in and of itself, is nothing else than a scattered fragment. But in their interweaving, and in the echo that resounds between them, the individual objects cohere to find collective strength. Shared confidence, openness, and material generosity form the basis of this discourse. In this sense, the project is a learning process for its participants: it is a practical exercise of working together in an area where more than ever the strategy of the liberal entrepreneur – one who knows how to outdo his competitors skillfully – is considered as the most successful and desirable.

If we regard Exhibition as a model of a collaborative society, the following becomes immediately apparent: the spirit of competition is never eliminated, and the participants continue to act as individuals but without experiencing the all-embracing separation familiar in the capitalist society. The exhibition becomes a container for which combined energy and collective process is channeled, making the tangible results unimportant. Preexisting differences and tensions continue to flourish; there is no illusion of any harmonious agreement. But the question of dominance, about alleged strengths and weaknesses, manifests itself differently from how it is experienced in day-to-day lives. It is not about how to attain a position in the limelight, but a consciousness of mutual influence and interweavement. The notion of striving in a competitive world is reinterpreted in such a way that is promising: not only are we struggling against each other, but – more importantly – for each other.

*Text translated from German into English by Helen Brown. English version edited by Brady Welch.*

<http://exhibition211.net/>

<http://exhibition211.blogspot.com/>