

Geschichte als Kontext
Innerhalb der kulturellen Ökonomie
Display und Autorität
Praxis fokussieren: Verbindungen herstellen

Julie Ault (Künstlerin, Autorin und Mitbegründerin der New Yorker Künstlergruppe Group Material) und Martin Beck (Künstler und Autor) sind Vertreter einer kritischen Kunstpraxis, welche die Bildende Kunst als erweiterte Form kultureller Praxis auffasst. In ihren Arbeiten und Texten werden die Verhältnisse zwischen Geschichte und Gegenwart, Aktivismus und Kunst, Präsentation und Institution, Historisierung und Archivierung von künstlerischer Praxis neu vermessen. Sortiert in vier Kapiteln, enthält dieser Band ausgewählte Texte von Julie Ault und Martin Beck aus den Jahren 1995–2003. Das Schriftmedium Buch erfährt eine mehrfache Aufladung und Neuinterpretation: Als Künstlerbuch und Streitschrift ist es zugleich sein eigenes Gestaltungsmodell.

History as Context
Inside the Cultural Economy
Display and Authority
Focusing Practice: Making Connections

Julie Ault (artist, author and co-founder of the New York-based artist collective Group Material) and Martin Beck (artist and author) are representatives of a critical form of artistic practice that understands the fine arts as an extended form of cultural practice. Their works effectively redefine the relationships between history and present, activism and art, presentation, and institution. Divided into four chapters, this book features essays by Julie Ault and Martin Beck from 1995–2003. The familiar printed medium “book” receives an extra charge of meanings and reinterpretations. Both an artistic product and a pamphlet, this publication also defines the model for its own creation.

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CRITICAL CONDITION
AUSGEWÄHLTE TEXTE IM DIALOG

Julie Ault
Martin Beck

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CRITICAL CONDITION

AUSGEWÄHLTE TEXTE
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Julie Ault Martin Beck

Umschlag / Cover: Julie Ault, Martin Beck, *Display System*,
Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Wien, 2001; Foto: Gerald Zugman

architecture—the desert itself. In his attempt to describe the space of the desert, Banham is continually thrown back to his own position. Again and again he finds himself on the edge of the desert space, gazing into the distance from there. He takes up this very personal experience of continual approach and yet invariable distance, and localizes a paradigm of desert space in this link between proximity and distance. In *America Deserta* Banham describes space from its edges, whilst the “real space” of the desert remains a surface for projection.

In the 1970s, Jencks, Antonioni, and Banham all looked at the transformation of the modernist paradigm, in very different ways and from very different standpoints. Each of them worked out direct and indirect descriptions of what was changing, which overlap at specific junctures. These moments of overlap are, however, neither intended nor obvious, but rather the product of chance concurrence and random comparisons. Taken together, these descriptions nonetheless form a network of thematic strands, allowing the reorganization of space in the framework of an “end of modernism” to be seen as the result of the articulation of the linguistic, visual, and conceptual fringes.

1 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1977.

2 Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta*, Layton, Utah: Gibbs M. Smith, 1982.

Exhibition as Political Space

Julie Ault

The request from the organizers of the conference *Dürfen die das?* that took place in 2000 at the the O.K – Centrum für Gegenwartskunst in Linz, Austria, read:

Our idea is that each speaker should formulate a personal statement, or even a thesis, to explain why they chose to work in their particular way, in their particular place. Given our assumption that they all have a political approach and at the same time have chosen to work in the cultural field, our questions are: What is the goal of your practice? Would you call it a political one? Politically informed? Does one have to cross the borders of the art world to act politically, or is there a political discourse within the art frame? Does it make sense at all to replace the terms “art,” “curating,” etc., by “cultural work”? Does it refer to a different form of communication with relation to the public?

What follows is the talk which was stimulated by these questions.

I work as an artist and have lived in New York City since 1977, although recently I have temporarily been living in Los Angeles. I work primarily in U.S. contexts so my comments here extend from those working experiences. I have dialogues with some artists and some individuals who work in art institutions in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and Britain. Those dialogues come from shared interests in the interrelationships of art and politics, in critical art education, and in cultural politics—all interests which are relatively marginal within the larger art field and cultural economy. Although I often have the impression that, compared to the U.S., there is an active discourse about cultural politics in European countries, I suspect it's just wishful thinking and that such concerns are equally peripheral as in the U.S.

I work individually and in collaborative constellations, producing exhibitions as well as multiform projects and publications, usually organized around a particular theme or set of interests. The medium I favor most is exhibition-making. Exhibition-making, as a practice, involves numerous activities including the conceptualizing of a subject, conducting research, distilling information and ideas, working with artists and others, collaborating with various people in the administration and making of an exhibition, designing the installation and display, and representing the project publicly through texts, formal presentations, and casual conversations. All aspects of making an exhibition—from inception to reception—involve social processes and dimensions. Consequently, I view exhibition-making as a political process that takes place in the cultural field. I consider exhibitions to be active contexts for presenting art and artifacts and their related cultural and political histories.

Most art institutions have standardized procedures for doing things. Coming up against those procedures—from developing a structure for an exhibition to determining information in a press release—with alternative modes and agendas invariably presents conflicts. Every detail in the process of making an exhibition, from the conceptualizing of its subject and scope, to negotiations with staff at a presenting or sponsoring institution, is imbued with politics—on the everyday procedural level as well as on the larger level of cultural politics. Political conflicts which are specifically relevant to a project's subject matter may also emerge. Nearly every exchange that takes place within the making of a project has eventual consequences for viewers, so I regard nearly every exchange in the process to be an aspect of my practice.

I didn't choose this practice from a list of existing possibilities, but developed it over time, primarily in the context of Group Material and the larger politicized milieu of 1980s and 1990s cultural activism in New York. For the purpose of today's discussion I want to articulate the features and goals of that practice, but I have to add that I don't consider these to be fixed or formulaic. I work contextually, and a contextual approach means the (material) criteria and methodologies employed are contingent on purpose, location, material parameters, and the issues at stake. It's uncertain whether I will be making exhibitions five years from now or not ... or whether I will be engaged in other strategies, other

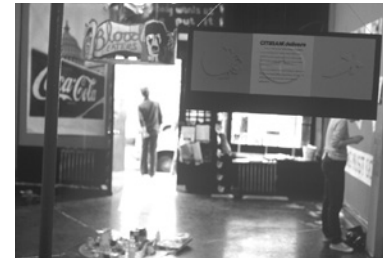
forms of communication, and working in other arenas. I have chosen to work ephemerally on a project-to-project basis. Similarly, I have chosen to teach on a visiting basis rather than committing to a single institution. These choices give me a great deal of freedom and mobility.

As an artist interested in bringing my social, political, cultural, and aesthetic concerns into an integrated practice, I have fashioned ways of working on an ad hoc basis, while trying to stay true to what I like doing. From my perspective, cultural practice and process should be in some ways pleasurable and educative on a personal level as well as externally effective and engaging.

From 1979 through 1996 I worked in the NYC-based artists collaborative Group Material. Through opening our own exhibition space and staging shows and events within it, through installations made for not-for-profit art spaces, university galleries, and museums, and through interventions into publicly sited advertising spaces (all of which I regard as forms of cultural activism), Group Material interrogated interrelationships between culture and politics. The interior exhibitions were typically thematic, and combined fine art in various media and styles, mass-produced items, and artifacts within designed environments. These exhibitions were often concerned with topical issues or debates in culture and politics, and were institution or site-dependent.

In its early collaborative process, Group Material began making exhibitions as forums or situations about specific sociopolitical themes. Over time, this evolved into an ongoing practice which the group in its various configurations developed into what could be termed a signature style of exhibition-making. When Group Material ceased its activities in 1996, I wanted to continue to organize exhibitions and thematic projects, independently as well as in new collaborations.

Why exhibitions? Exhibitions are sites where art and artifact are made public, where social processes and contexts that art and other kinds of



Group Material, *Consumption: Metaphor, Pastime, Necessity*, 13th St. space, New York, 1981



Group Material, *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central and Latin America*, P.S.1, Queens, 1984

production come from can be described or represented to viewers. Exhibitions are social spaces where meanings, narratives, histories, and functions of cultural materials are actively produced. They are intersections where art or artist, institution, and viewer meet.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, like many, I felt exhibitions as commonly mounted by curators and gallerists were inappropriate presentations of artistic practices and products that obscured potential meanings, politics, and discursive dimensions of much cultural production. To challenge the status quo of how art circulates, many alternative artist-run venues were initiated in recent decades. Alongside, many artists and collectives sought to control the display and distribution of their work and to express a strategy that operated outside the traditional confines of museums and galleries. There seemed to be an abundance of influential alternative models, but the

need to develop strategies for exhibition-making, display, and distribution beyond the standard approaches which treat art and artifact generically is still ongoing.

The gulf between artist and curator is first and foremost a division of labor. This division territorializes and professionalizes activities of making, interpreting, presenting, and distributing art. Embedded in the artist/curator distinction is the assumption that artists make things and curators present them: that artistic processes are speculative and subjective, while curators' methods are interpretive and analytic. We know though that aesthetic and informational contexts for presentation of work are integral to people's experiences of art. It is not then in artists' interests to yield critical and contextualizing functions to curators.

Artists who don't consider installation and context, or other communicative factors in the circulation of their work because "that's not their role," sequester their practice to inside the "frame" of the artwork. Neither is it in curators' interests to deny creative and critical agency in their practice for the sake of supporting existing professional boundaries that influence the production of meaning, or to reproduce an illusion of curatorial objectivity.



Group Material, *Education & Democracy*, Dia Art Foundation, New York, 1988

Among other things, curating or exhibition-making is a process of inclusion and exclusion. The curatorial field, by definition, is invested in hierarchical descriptions of culture. Though usually not outspoken, a hierarchy of cultural practices is discernible upon considering what institutions deem worthy of their support, what they subsequently exhibit, and what they don't. As well, power structures are evidenced by taking into account criteria and organizing principles of exhibitions, how they are enacted, and how viewers are addressed.

Only recently has curating emerged from the institutional closet and begun to acknowledge itself and be discussed as a form of cultural practice. A shift is in process: curating, which has been traditionally perceived as an unobtrusive activity, is increasingly recognized as a form of cultural production. Over the last few years curatorial issues have frequently been subject matter for panel discussions, and for debate in the art world. These discussions have often centered around artists' fears that curators' growing prominence overshadows their own, and that some curators are inappropriately assuming a collaborative role with artists. Curatorial training as a division of study is being developed in several new programs in the U.S. and in European countries. This, then, is a significant moment in the field. It is an ideal time to mitigate previously held conceptions of what curatorial practice entails, of what a curatorial educative environment might include, taking into account current cultural contexts. As well, it seems the perfect time to redefine what people's expectations of curators are (and what curators' expectations of themselves are) and what they might be.

The discipline most closely linked with the curatorial profession is art history. Curatorial education is largely centered around art historical methods and tools. The relationship can certainly be a productive one. However, a set of limitations is lodged into place by this circuit in which one discipline feeds, or produces the other. Academic theories of curating translate into a set of appropriate subjects deemed valuable for introduction into the discourse of art history. In this scheme, exhibition-making is reduced to a pseudo-science reliant on a limited vocabulary of formats and structuring devices deemed credible by the authorities that be. The exhibitory field is fraught with formulaic exhibition formats as well as conservative display devices which are accepted as academically

viable or viable in marketing terms. But the practice of adopting existing exhibition forms for whatever content—as though those forms were neutral, or as though artistic production is generic—is dubious. Such a conception does not take into account the exhibition as context itself or as producing factor. All too frequently in such set-ups viewers, artworks, and institutions are positioned in rigid roles. And, vital artistic practices as well as social processes and dynamic contexts are objectified and potentially neutralized.

The field of exhibition-making is an arena of action which I critically address through the practice itself. I want to challenge the division of labor between artists and curators through the methods I employ making exhibitions. Although my activities as an artist sometimes appear to mirror those of a curator, I don't call myself a curator for a number of reasons: because of its historical association to connoisseurship and elitism; in order to make visible a subjective approach which curators don't necessarily avow; to emphasize exhibition-making as a form of cultural production; and to claim artistic license. Distinct from common institutional or academic curatorial models, I view the curated exhibition as akin to an artwork in which every conceptual and concrete aspect involves choice rather than adherence to convention. Therefore I think it is crucial to approach exhibition-making activities newly in relation to the particular contents or material to be exposed. Display and presentational modes are necessarily flexible. My aim is to produce exhibitions and presentational environments which self-reflexively

consider the context(s) the artworks/practices extend from, as well as the new context(s) being posited by/in the exhibition. Alternative exhibition strategies can interrupt the imposture of neutrality and propose dynamic situations and temporal dislodgement of boundaries and hierarchies that support the status quo of mainstream culture.



Julie Ault, *Power Up: Reassembled Speech, Interlocking: Sister Corita and Donald Moffett*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, 1997

At this time, I am particularly interested in enacting alternative exhibition strategies (structures, subject matter, and modes of display and presentation) in what we might refer to as mainstream institutions. In this way one can address large and diverse audiences, attract attention for the exhibition otherwise not easily garnered, and propose alternative agendas and methods in contrast to business as usual.

Within exhibitions, I attempt to exploit the ways art can connect ideas through an experiential and visual engagement, and how art, artifact, and exhibition environments can provide tools for critical thinking and analysis, access to information, visual thinking, pleasure, and so on. I am experimenting with how aesthetic choices made while realizing an exhibition function as information and encourage specific readings and understandings of cultural histories and current contexts.

Considering the current cultural climate in which people, ideas, issues, politics, and things appear, circulate, and disappear rather quickly, it seems useful to access the authority of an institution, and by extension lend authority, visibility, and value to artistic strategies and cultural products which challenge and critique dominant aesthetic, cultural, social, and political structures. Through the exhibition medium I am also engaged with historical inquiry, in investigating and proposing alternatives to traditional historiographic practices.

Although the *fact* that politics and culture are essentially linked might be a given in much theoretical discourse, the symbolic and actual attempts to obscure the interconnectedness of culture and politics are daily enacted in countless ways, in the world at large as well as within art fields in particular.

Civic processes appear to be locatable when deliberated and determined in arenas which are defined as political, but such sites of exchange are not the only venues for political activity. Cultural production also occurs on socially and politically inflected terrain. Inevitably all art advocates something, whether a political position or a type of descriptive system—art that presents itself as an autonomous aesthetic object advocates viewing it that way.

Politics and culture cannot be disconnected; the processes by which art is taught, made, distributed, financed, shown, and used are not

neutral, but are shaped by historical, economic, and social dynamics. One role of cultural activism is to articulate critical readings of these processes and examine the relationship between artists and social structures, including the art industry. Cultural activism in the art field can illuminate crucial links between culture, politics, and social agency.

Exhibition-making can be an efficient and engaging way to express and portray social processes and conditions. For example, through introducing into art institutions ephemeral material including political graphics, or art and artifacts that are commonly marginalized due to their political content or low economic status, the potential to convey historical circumstances, strategies, and conflicts to new viewers is activated.

Temporary exhibitions share an ephemeral quality which makes intervention and exposure of symbolic potential possible. In a way similar to political graphics acting in the street, exhibitions can introduce agendas into the public spaces of art institutions. Exhibitions can temporarily change or recode the spaces they inhabit. Exhibitions, as forms for the presentation of specific materials, art or otherwise, are also forms for proposing complexity through what they materially, intellectually, and aesthetically bring into proximity, for the narratives they can intertwine. Potentially, an exhibition produces a new political space in a cultural site.

Power Up, Reassembled

Julie Ault

Power Up: Sister Corita and Donald Moffett, Interlocking is a three-way dialogue in the form of an exhibition. The version this brochure accompanies is expanded from the original exhibition which took place at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut in 1997. Sister Corita, later known as simply Corita, was a Catholic nun who lived and worked in Los Angeles for thirty years. She reached a wide audience with her popular silkscreen prints and engaging style of expressing her views on faith, art, and society. Donald Moffett is a New York City-based artist who emerged in the context of the AIDS crisis. As activist, artist, and designer, Moffett has broadly contributed to the gay liberation and AIDS activist movements. Moffett works in a variety of media and uses various modes of distribution in order to engage diverse audiences. My background as an artist has essentially been in collaborative processes of exhibition-making engaged with interrelationships between culture and politics. My role in this project is organizing *Power Up*. I regard conceptualizing the exhibition's structure and designing its aesthetic atmosphere as an artistic practice, the exhibition as a medium.

Frances Elizabeth Kent was born in Iowa in 1918 to an Irish Catholic family which five years later moved to Los Angeles. Upon completing her Catholic education, Frances entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary Religious Community and took the name Sister Mary Corita. Between 1938 and 1968 Sister Corita lived and worked in the cloistered, communal environment of the Immaculate Heart Community.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII's Vatican II decree on the "Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life" called for movement toward modern values, including fewer restrictions on nuns' daily lives, and a new focusing on



Julie Ault, *Power Up*,
UCLA Hammer Museum,
Los Angeles, 2000

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LEITER KOMMUNIKATION / HEAD OF COMMUNICATION: Marius Babias

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