THE MUSEUM IS NOT ENOUGH
Arguments, Generously Arranged

Wilfried Kuehn and James Voorhies on shaping relationships between object, idea, setting, and viewer
I'm very mistrustful of elitist institutions and the exhibition as a secluded event for cognoscenti. But then the next question is how not to be populist.
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This allowed us to show them in full daylight and without glass displays, producing a closeness between visitor and artwork that was in line with the 1960s concept of resist art being embedded in everyday life. We worked with extremely well-made prints, but in a down-to-earth way. It worked very well, I think, because it was not falling into this trap of trying to animate. Then in another section, in darker rooms, we showed the original documents of the time. The only originals in that exhibition were the written letters, the documents—things that would be in an archive, usually.

JV This reminds me of a challenge that I read that you faced for Documenta 11. You were asked to design a space that was open and fluid for the eventual placement of objects, not all of which were known. You were choreographing a future spectator to experience an unknown catalogue of objects in the space. But before we go into that, I am curious to hear more from you about in and out of the enfilade, so basically I think no two people experienced the exhibition the same way.

JV That reminds me of IKEA. You can cut through, across the children’s area, for example, to get through the thing faster than if you followed the path.

WK But at IKEA there is a beginning and an end. At Documenta 11 there wasn’t. But of course we were aware of the manipulative spatial layouts store displays follow. That’s why the shortcuts through the corridors were so important to establish subjective narration and agency.

And then for relating and linking different installations, the question of the media came in. Okwui Enwezor, who curated the exhibition, wanted to show many time-based works that required precise spatial conditions. So we learned as we went that we had a number of cinematic spaces that were standing in the middle of a fluid parcours. And that was a challenge. It had to be confronted step by step, turning the more generic urban layout into a very specific architectural design, without completely solving the inherent contradiction between the idea of fluid movement and the requirements of cinematic spaces.

JV This sounds challenging, and problematic. The exhibition as a thing is an argument, and just to throw the combination of objects, space, and people into the air is where the argument could be lost. You lose the opportunity to guide the spectator.

So, to understand better, are you offering a form of engagement that is understood visually—the parcours, the snaking kind of atmosphere—that is then interrupted?

WK The biennial-type exhibition oscillates between a constellation and a competition. It is curated, but since the participating artists each concentrate on their own piece, they focus on being protected from rather than related to the neighbouring works.


Zobernig twice on real architectural projects, both realized—a museum and a church. We broke down the professional distance between our practices by contributing equally to the design of spaces. This is quite liberating.

That sounds like your current project here in Montreal, at the Insectarium. You’ve spoken about how enjoyable it is to work in collaboration with the entomologists.

Yes. But you need partners in this, and you need not to be afraid of losing authorship. The curatorial for me is an interesting model of authorship, because it is based on an authorship that invites others in. That’s why I find it interesting to think of the curatorial as a new and more contemporary technique of design. This is my thesis, but maybe that’s more playing the ball to you now. What is the curatorial as authorship?

I also appreciate the collaborative nature of the curatorial, that and the way context is the primary force when organizing an exhibition—context being social, political, spatial, and institutional conditions, and the question of how to create something together that will mean something to spectators and the community. There are curators who definitely want their ego to be visible in the work. I tend to recede and create a framework that is open enough, but where I still take responsibility for the exhibition or the program, like at the Carpenter Center.

The most interesting things are happening in institutions where there’s guidance, yet there’s a porosity in what transpires, meaning that a number of different publics—even from different social and economic backgrounds—can find something potentially at stake in the institution. That balance is not easy to achieve. One must still lead the thing. That means one must define the thing, raise money for it, and build audiences by building the institutional character.

What role does space play for you as a curator, for instance when you think about the Carpenter Center and its spatial context?

The space was everything. The exhibitions were organized with artists who would see the space as an interesting challenge, a beautiful problem.
The Carpenter Center was a challenging space. The entrance does not present itself so easily. One is unsure how to move through it. The concrete walls cannot be punctured in order to hang anything. The walls are colored. Nothing can be secured to the concrete floors. The space is full of floor-to-ceiling windows. And light pours through, creating issues for loans and conservation. Alas, I always thought the building was a beautiful problem—one doesn’t just install objects inside that space; you choreograph them in relation to architecture and the movement of viewers. The concept of display in this case is much more expansive, not unlike your work for Documenta.

So would this mean that you start from these very strange predicaments or constrictions in doing your curatorial work, or do you ignore them because it’s basically too much?

You confront them. The first thing I did was hire James Goggin, who’s a graphic designer teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design. He developed a new website, a new graphic identity, new wayfinding. Our hours of operation were not even on the doors. This choreography of the visitor is really important because part of my charge, in this case, was to bring audiences to Carpenter Center, to make it a pulsating and living thing.

And you worked on this wayfinding with a graphic designer? Not with an architect or an artist, for instance?

Yes. But James also designs exhibitions, so he thinks quite spatially and comprehensively about the spectator.

And then in your exhibitions, you also started from the architecture?

Yes. Always.

The idea of the backdrop then becomes quite interesting. What is the physical interaction between an exhibition made there on purpose and the space? Does the space influence your curatorial choices?

Yes. The space was everything. The exhibitions were organized with artists who would see the space as an interesting challenge, a beautiful problem.

I am attracted to work by artists who like to utilize space as an integral part of the work. Shahryar Nashat, for example, has a keen ability to engage with space quite expansively and claim it as part of his work, so all the different pieces arranged in the exhibition space, including sound and video, are choreographed in relation to the spectator. Viewers don’t need to read anything. They walk into and out of his exhibitions and have a sense of what he’s working on. Through the sensuality of the space and the works he makes, he makes viewers feel that our bodies are fragile, our skin tears, we bump against things and break.

Shahryar wanted to install pink linoleum across the entire ground floor as a means for him to claim that space from Le Corbusier. That plan was completely unaffordable. We then began to shift through different scenarios. We ended up with a pink translucent window film installed on all the large plate-glass windows. It was still quite expensive. But when viewers walked into the Carpenter Center, they knew that there was something else happening. He aggravated the space in the best of ways. Visitors’ familiar understanding of the space was suspended, and therefore they had an experience where they were required to stay longer. We are so hyper-mediatized; as an audience, we know how to interpret and read images very quickly. I believe that art’s big challenge today is how to hold attention in this culture where attention is short and experience with many kinds of images is so common. One must hold the visitor through the physical implication of their body inside a spatial experience.

Still, to me, architecture of this kind appears very patriarchal, in a way. You could imagine becoming tired of always engaging with the found space as a somewhat neurotic presence of the past.

But I believe parameters are really good. Parameters—like budgetary constraints, a spatial limitation, geographic dispersions—all allow an extraordinary level of creativity to come to fruition.

I would say the same about architecture in general. When we have a client with no limits, it doesn’t work.

Has any institutional or museum space influenced your practice?

Ideally, museum architecture would be invisible, producing spaces without exhibiting itself, producing relations rather than yearning to be center stage. That is rare. There are a few structures I really appreciate as typologies or spatial models. One of them is Dia: Beacon, which explicitly followed a non-architectural approach. I always found the generous invisibility of the intervention very good there.

A different sort of invisible architecture is present in the Schaulager in Basel, not so much in the exhibition space, which I don’t care for, but in the


3. View of VES student exhibition at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, ca. 1970. Le Corbusier's building requires curators to develop a position relative to its spatial and material qualities.
The object on display was a vehicle through which knowledge about the world emerged.

Schaullager proper. There you can schedule a personal showing of a specific installation—so it’s like a library of spaces, not just objects. Architecture plays a very important role, without much drama.

Of course we’ve been very influenced by Cedric Price’s Fun Palace, the ultimate invisible architecture. The Centre Pompidou broke down the idea of the museum into a big, commercial-like but truly non-commercial place where you would just go and not necessarily have to see an art show.

... It can breathe and expand depending on what’s in there.

And when we had an exhibition of our House of One project at Le Centquatre in Paris last year, I thought, “Wow, the Centquatre now is really what the Pompidou wanted to be forty years ago.” It’s really an inclusive place used by people from various back-grounds—people do yoga, they play and perform. They also go to exhibitions, but they mainly go there to meet. Pompidou is an upscale place for tourists, but Le Centquatre breaks down the institution as an elite product. This is why we maybe have to look for institutions not in the centres, but more where the majority of people live, the fringes.

What kinds of spaces matter to you?

In the summer of 2017, I visited Maria Lind at Tensta konsthall in Stockholm. I was there to have a public conversation with Carsten Höller, who figures prominently in my book Beyond Objecthood. On the evening of our talk, Maria organized two other artist talks and a cocktail. The konsthall was open late, and there was such a conflation of people together in one space. Everyone seemed to have something at stake in what Maria created.

The idea of spaces that can transform from theatrical spaces to exhibition spaces to other forms is hugely interesting. It’s something we should be much more engaged in. But usually, when you read the brief for a museum competition, this is not the case. There’s the so-called polyvalent space, that’s basically not open as it sounds—it’s just generic. And generic is not open. Generic means basically it’s like a fair-trade hall in which anything could happen, but also nothing happens, really.

Well, this is the crux. If a space is everything, it’s nothing, and this is why I believe—again, going back to the question of authorship—one needs to take responsibility for what the space is and how it should function.

I’m surprised to hear you appreciate these different open spaces, such as Dia Beacon. They have the potential if not handled correctly, to be too open and useless. I think it is difficult if the curator or those who are designing the exhibitions—the architects—aren’t aware of that challenge.

But if you look it more pragmatically, you can ask how any particular situation or condition will actually be dealt with. You have a curator, you have an exhibition. Then it happens that conventional museums are the best, because they provide clean and good spaces and not much can be wrong—like, for instance, at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, where all the exhibitions look good because each space is different but well-proportioned, and you have a parcours. Almost every curator or artist has made good exhibitions there. But it’s also kind of absurd, because it doesn’t challenge you. I think it boils down to the challenge of making an architecture that is at once open and specific.

And it relates to how people experience the spaces and what they encounter there. I think this is a very important shift: to take responsibility for also involving the visitor, to think of the visitor not as someone who watches for pleasure or understanding, but as someone who’s involved, as a user who also has responsibility.

Using means someone taking something in their own hands. And this potential of the exhibition is something—again, Fluxus is very important for this—that needs to be explored much more.

Which also goes back to the original concept of the public sphere. People came together to look at an object and slowly discuss its aesthetic qualities in order to gain more knowledge about it and the conditions in which it was produced. The object on display was a vehicle through which knowledge about the world emerged.

Yes. It’s instrumental, then. The object is not there only for itself, but it acts as a vehicle.

And, extending that concept, the exhibition is the object today. The cohesive orchestration of objects inside a space, placed next to one another in concert with the spectator, makes an exhibition that is an articulated and legible thing—an object.

I would agree with that. The exhibition as an object is a very interesting development, because that makes sure that we don’t just say: “Yes, objecthood has been overcome.” Because you cannot overcome it. It’s really finding it that’s interesting. What is the object, actually?

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