



The Rules of Engagement: EXHIBITION

- Warren Neidich -

Exhibition is a temporary (six months) independent art initiative located in a vacant storefront at 211 Elizabeth street in New York. Exhibition offers an experimental and contradictory artistic and curatorial approach. Only a continuous single exhibition will be shown during this six months project. Initiators: Eric Anglès, Nathalie Anglès, Elena Bajo, Warren Neidich and Jakob Schillinger.

Warren Neidich

At *Exhibition* we have a number of rules—or prescriptions—that establish three levels of chance that envelop each artist intervening in our project. The rules are as follows: first, the artist's name, written on a small piece of paper, is drawn from a hat in which up to ten names have been included. The artist is then contacted and a meeting is scheduled at the space. After the artist has understood and agreed to a set of overriding conditions upon which the project was founded—for instance, that he or she give up all rights to the work and that the work is not to be sold—the artist is asked to roll dice. Three rolls determine where the artist can operate within the space. The floor plan of the space is uniquely constituted for each invited artist so that, for instance, what was a pie-shaped conformation for one could become a set of concentric circles emanating from the center of the gallery for another. If an artwork already occupies that space, the new artist has the right to move, destroy, change, parasitize or ignore it. These three levels of chance have the effect of making this project, as much as possible, one that is uncurated. Does anyone think that these rules of chance could be instituted and recoded into a set of prescriptive devices mapped into the context of a magazine format? Could we throw the dice here as a way to begin our conversation for *Art Lies*?

Jakob Schillinger

Reading the statement I'm supposed to respond to (the order of statements predetermined, in fact, by a proverbial roll of the dice), I'm tempted to ask, Who are you speaking to, Warren? Which makes me wonder who I am speaking to right now. My interest in *Exhibition* is that it does not (at least not primarily) address an abstract audience but instead generates and gives space to concrete relations and interactions. By "addressing an abstract audience" I mean a principle that I see at work not only in the

production and showcasing of art but also in practices of everyday life: the reification of activities, the creation of representations that are circulated amongst an abstract audience—the art world or the World Wide Web, in the case of the broadcasting of one’s life via cameras, phones and online services such as Facebook. This public is abstract in the sense that it is mediated to the degree where the medium itself becomes fetishized—becomes the actual address. The medium embodies the idea of a public. This “public,” however, is in my impression not a discursive realm but a market, its principal category being visibility. Its operations are ranking, quantification and statistics, not argument or communicative exchange. Arguably, art (or life, for that matter) is increasingly produced to circulate in this realm, and thus increasingly reduced to its exchange value. Against this tendency, *Exhibition* shifts the emphasis to what one could call the use value of art—artworks as props for concrete human relations and for communicative exchange. That said, I pass my turn.

Nathalie Anglès

Indeed, how to address the format of the magazine within the context of the invitation that is extended to us, and whether it is relevant within this framework to remain consistent with the process and mechanisms we have established for *Exhibition*, were my own first thoughts. No conclusive argument was drawn from our numerous discussions on the topic. But these back-and-forth discussions only reinforce my conviction that the most significant part of this project—beyond the material results generated in the space—is the continuous flow of immaterial conversation between organizers, contributors and visitors.



Eric Anglès

Thanks, Warren, for bringing up the dice! I must say that for me they're definitely something to avoid fetishizing. A look around and it's pretty clear already that while the dice do guarantee outcomes, they don't necessarily guarantee exceptionally interesting outcomes. Nor do I find chance mechanisms all that interesting in and of themselves. But that's precisely the point, isn't it? The "interesting" is another one of those abstract categories that I think Jakob is talking about. There's this kind of anxious relief that's delivered by a common verdict of how wonderfully interesting something is that thwarts the concrete human relation that you are both calling for. And yet, while dice aren't interesting, they've been such a uniquely liberating tool in this process. They free us, if only temporarily, from the pressure of the many irreconcilable interests colliding in this experiment: our individual projects, those we invite, "career" stakes, the expectations of the developers lending us the space, which we might otherwise feel an awkward pressure to internalize. The interests of the editors and readers of *Art Lies*, which of course we could never manage to anticipate. In the end, these dice are a game of movement, color and laughter that, for a fraction of a second, rip us from the sphere of self-involvement into a present of pure possibility and projection.

Elena Bajo

The other day in our preliminary/tentative conversation, we couldn't agree on common issues of interest in *Exhibition*, and we couldn't agree on a common format to talk about the project. We tried to come up with common questions that would summarize these interests, and we failed again. Then I said very spontaneously: "Our strength is our weakness," just like that...I think I was referring to the fact that in this project, we are managing to preserve our five individual voices (even if this is a generator of constant conflict) but that we still share a common mechanism by which the project functions. The power and strength of *Exhibition* is that individuality is preserved. We are against individual voices being lost in favor of the group, but this actually benefits the project. On the other hand, we provide a space free of restrictions (except the structural rules of the game) to be intervened in by artists. The interventions in the space are traces left behind after engaging and questioning the space, the project and us. The fruits of those questions are left in the space. At the same time, the state of the space is such that if I were a visitor who doesn't know about the project and I came in and looked around, I would not even know what question to ask.





Jakob: Dear friends, I'm still conflicted about this double address, but since I really want to ask you these questions at this point in our correspondence—and since we all agreed on this format for discussion—please insert this: what status would this visitor's question have? One of the contributing artists was very critical of our project because we've established rules that the participating artists have to submit to—because we are exerting power but conceal this fact by referring to “external” laws and the “impartial” dice. What you are describing, Eric, really is an outsourcing of decision (to the dice) and our own submission to this law. (I say law rather than rules, thinking of Warren's “state of exception.”)

Now, that artist's critique was that we're not equals in our relation to this law. What are we? Sovereign? Police? I think this makes up a big part of the project. Aren't we staging and framing processes that are structurally analogous to political problems of a democracy? I've been thinking about art in political terms recently, especially about the sovereign power of the artist and the possibility of a non-sovereign force. (In a talk, Boris Groys theorized the constitutive violence rendered visible in installation art—especially when it stages the democratic processes.) What kind of power is at work in *Exhibition*? What is the status of the “continuous flow of conversation” with regard to this power? Eric, you often insist that we are not curators but artists. In a conversation with a participating artist, asking what kind of work you do, you said: “You're in it.” I think this is a crucial statement regarding the status of our conversations. Does that mean that the installation or conversations that are *Exhibition* are based on a sovereign authorial decision—are subject to the law this decision posits—which eventually need not justify itself? With regard to our discussion the other night about the curator becoming artist—yes, many curators become reflexive of their decisions and no longer claim objectivity. But aren't they still obliged to justify their decisions rationally, in discourse, while an artist's decisions can only be rejected as a whole and cannot be subject to discursive negotiation? And if that's not the case here, what are the implications of *Exhibition* with regard to this model of the artist, which arguably still structures the field of art? Is this where the agonistic principle that Elena called “our strength [and] weakness” comes in?

Warren: I think that many of these concerns are concretized in another issue that has become a focus of our conversations at *Exhibition* and has relevance for this conversation in *Art Lies*: I am speaking about the archive. If *Exhibition* is a space in which each gesture is an event, ephemeral and in some ways performative, then what form would an archive have here? How would it assemble the myriad of gestures into a narrative or story? These gestures can at times be destructive, parasitic and autocatalytic, leaving works broken, fragmented and hollow vestiges of themselves. How would power relations come into play? Especially in terms of how forms of cultural hegemony influence the conditions of the decision-making processes at work inside the parameters of *Exhibition* as it functions as a social condition between its initiators. How would that archive therefore be constructed? What texts and images would be included or excluded? How would the history of the space be remembered—and for whom? First, as a series of stories generated by a storyteller sitting in the gallery who through an oral diatribe recounts the history of each work in the larger context of the space in different terms at each recount; a virtuoso performance that has no material basis except in the memories of each visitor. Or, as a series of photographic documents taken at the time of each gesture and then assembled into a book that could then be used as a visual aid to guide visitors who enter the space and want to know what it is they are looking at and need physical evidence to feel secure. Each form has the potential to be affected by different kinds of administrative procedures that must themselves be questioned. Finally, when this experiment closes on the last day of August, what traces will be left for future audiences now transformed into historical readers? Is having a physical archive a complete contradiction to the spirit of the project? Or is it a form of generosity?



Elena: Jakob, I see us as a group of five artists who share a common mechanism of action when we find ourselves within the *Exhibition* territory, limited to its physical premises. We function as a collective in this project. The fact that today “collectives” in the art world have become institutionalized tokens that generate the interest of curators and museums looking to demystify the idea of the Modernist individual genius has affected our approach to this way of working, perhaps making us a little too self-conscious of our every intention and action. Perhaps limiting actions to a specific site, which is free of rent, and creating a temporary timeframe of six months and a set of rules in which chance and conversation play a significant role frees us from the dangers of capitalistic assimilation that beset most large cultural institutions that rely on private funding. It is within this set of parameters that other artists are invited to intervene as excess collaborators: as individuals within our collective. The original conversation mentioned earlier, in which the rules of the project are elucidated, is more than an invitation to participate with us in the space. It is an invitation to become part of our collectivity and enjoy our freedom. In this way, the rules of sovereignty incorporated into *Exhibition*'s procedures are dispersed beyond the original initiators, and our project becomes an experiment in nongovernmental agency. In other words, it functions in accordance with a multitude. And, Warren, the issue of the archive is a

delicate and intricate one. Who has the power to tell the story of what really happened? Who has the power to rewrite history, the power to manipulate memories and the power to retell a story? This has been an issue in the history of the world, and perhaps *Exhibition* is a microcosm in which displays of the micro-politics of that larger condition can be enacted, reflected upon and critiqued.

Eric: A microcosm, indeed...make that an aquarium! What is beyond doubt is the amazing density of heady conceptualizing and self-reflexive musing this echo chamber has been injecting into our daily conversation. Elena, Jakob, Warren, you each bring up the politics of this experiment. I too wonder where that is located. My view is that we should not exaggerate the significance of these funny rules of engagement we've cobbled together, either as vectors of "freedom" or of undue "sovereign power" on our part. What is it that has been happening in this room, first and foremost? Social encounters. Honestly, so far I have not found the nature and quality of these encounters to be under the gun of our eccentric little structures—catalyzed, yes, just as they are by the work on the walls and those floppy balloons in the air, but not determined. Every time it's my turn to sit at the desk, talk to an artist, greet a visitor or sit with the four of you to decide how to proceed, the most urgent and incredibly exacting demand I experience is to make myself open and available to whomever is there before me. Am I listening? Probably not so closely. Am I cutting you off? Likely. How distracted am I by my desire to see my argument carry the day? What am I assuming and presuming? What kinds of crutches am I relying on to get this conversation safely over and done with? To what extent am I projecting myself into an abstract future only to stare right back at my own image from the nonexistent vantage point of the "archive" of an experience that has not yet merited its name? This is an experience I could instead be trying to manufacture in the company of a stranger, at the risk—in the hope—of historical invisibility. This, in a nutshell, is where the politics of this experience lie for me. Those are the pragmatics of any experience, I guess...but this particular site we have constructed has been precipitating—wittingly or not—a bewildering concentration of spontaneous, ethical micro-dramas of this nature. So what might at first glance look like a theater of freedom and constraint, the rehearsal of a tired dialectic between an artist/curator enforcing the law and an artist/Houdini dancing her way out of those shackles, is far more immediately and compellingly an experimental site where each one of us present in this space is made to decide, over and over again, how to face one other.

