

Witness report “Curating in the Gallery Field”, 28 & 29 November 2011

By Lauren van Haften-Schick

Photo's: Cassander Eeftinck-Schattenkerk

A post-workshop conversation revealed that the only presenter to discuss actual artworks and the joy of producing exhibitions was Jennifer Flay, director of the FIAC art fair. Using her presentation to highlight the growth of the fair and its calculatedly spectacular events, Flay is no mere marketer, and is genuinely interested in supporting artists' projects and encouraging a dialogue around the work. This earnest enthusiasm was almost ironic, as the art fair is often assumed to be the context that is the *least* about art. Instead her motives are typically those we expect of the best curators or educators, or the founders of not-for-profit galleries and artist run spaces, yet they were stated emphatically by the face of one of the most powerful and high priced international art fairs in the world. At a time when many of the major fairs are owned by a conglomeration aptly titled Merchandise Mart, the fair director is the figure we would expect to be the disengaged money-minded businessperson, when in reality, Flay is the person you'd have the most fun seeing the exhibition with.

It's true that most dealers do what they do out of love and that operating as an independent business is a strategic choice. The flexibility afforded by the autonomy earned as a dealer is one way of promoting artist practices that require a high level of financial or organizational support while bypassing the complicated and occasionally prohibitive politics of art institutions. The collector or gallerist as patron is still a relevant model, and it is not uncommon for major projects to receive all or most of their funding from these private sources, regardless of whether or not the work is truly saleable. There is a lot of evidence in defense of this model as a win-win scenario. Yet along with the benefits also come the risks inherent to investing one's time, personal financial assets, and reputation. Business always remains business, but in art, it often can't help but be personal too.



Because of the conflicts inherent in mixing money and passion - a financial and gift economy - it is often all too easy to draw rash conclusions about the evils of the art market, to call dealers thieves, and to say that artists who don't attain great financial and public stature have been duped, cheated, or worse, robbed. And unfortunately as in any legal or business conflict, a little more honesty would go the furthest. The art market is a grey economy, and, probably second only to drug trafficking, is the largest and least regulated industry in the world. Understandably, there is a lot of opportunity for bad business as well. Once the financial stakes become as high as they are, and show no signs of dropping, grey areas are no longer acceptable, and because of the industry's own volatile nature, vast range in scale and inherently global reach, self-regulation is the only logical conclusion.

De Appel's Gallerist Programme is looking to begin this very conversation in order to work towards making transparent the ways in which art institutions and the market already work together, and to develop new models and standard business practices for the commercial gallery field. Part of this interest comes from the acknowledgement that gallery professionals are often not business or legal professionals, and as a result, it is often too easy for small gallerists and the artists they work with to fall victim to deals gone wrong or endless other pitfalls that come with such an unpredictable business. At the same time, the market is also too easily manipulated by the right amounts of money at work in the wrong hands. Many dealers who started their careers in the seventies and eighties will today openly speak about entering the business for their love of the art and working with artists, but had little to no clue about the technical aspects the business when they began. From the first market boom and crash in the early 90s it has been clear that stakes are absolutely too high not to have an understanding of these larger and very consequential issues, and yet, two decades later, this is still taboo in the gallery world. Similar to the mentality of many not-for-profits and institutions who believe that art practice and exhibition should be independent of financial business, many working in the commercial art world also maintain that business training does not belong in the business of art. Yet it is clear that the stakes of the market are now high enough that some standard, some kind of regulation, or at the very least, some notion of best business practice is needed.

Often, for better or worse, and for reasons having to do with both finances and ideology, an artists' work will have to become successful in the commercial market - the private art world - before being offered access to the public. As institutions and other channels of support increasingly depend on private funding, the collector and dealer also look more like the curator, the director, and perhaps collaborator as well. While many public institutions purport to support the work of unestablished and unrecognized artists, their increasing reliance on private funding often requires them to focus their programming on projects by artists already approved by and successful in the market, thereby creating a sort of vetting process for measuring the probability of a profitable return, both literally and figuratively. This is especially the case in the United States, which is an art economy operating almost entirely on private funding. According to workshop lecturer and economist Olav Velthuis, collectors are now responsible for promoting artists' careers and the discourse around their work, thereby also assuming the voice of the critic.

The entropic nature of these relationships was approached in Andrea Phillips' and Suhail Malik's workshop "The art market affects us all: a demonstration of money mapping," which had participants assume various roles and negotiate a hypothetical scenario in which an artist is asked by a curator to produce a work for a foundation that they are ethically opposed to. The dilemma became exponentially more complex once the roles of the artist's dealer and a potential collector enter, and we learn that the foundation's exhibition will be *the* event that convinces the collector to buy the artist's work, thereby ensuring that the dealer will stay in business and the artist will make a living. The artist's complicity was necessary for cementing good relationships between all of these satellite figures of the foundation curator, collector, and public council, all of whom had to



convince the artist to bend or burn their ethics, and in essence, forsake the very message of their practice.

The exercise revealed the unspoken economy of entanglement in the art world, the delicate balance between each of these figures and the precarity of the very notions of pleasure, dependency, and artistic intent. Working in small teams the workshop participants presented numerous solutions, most of which hinged on the artist re-configuring their project to yield a tangible gain for those outside of this closed set of actors, thus shattering a circuit of co-dependency. Tapping into the importance of audience experience and an interest in the wider-reaching gift economy, the 'artists' tended to solve the dilemma by negotiating a "practical" element to their project, such as cooperating with the local council to provide a new space for public use or demanding the funding of other community resources, thus folding in a conceptual and political act that would benefit those outside.

There are enormous and wide reaching philosophical problems yet to be discussed, including the major issues of the ethics of the secondary market and auctions, and just how the framing of a commercial context effects how an artwork is created, presented and received. The biggest question raised by the workshop is found in the title itself, forcing us to ask what does curating in the gallery field really mean? What are the real dynamics of presenting or encountering creative and intellectual work in a financially driven setting? Is it possible here to make value judgments outside of financial motives? Are the two ever independent, and do they need to be independent? The total cynic would answer that the commercial gallery is merely setting up a shop display. The optimist would say that the commercial frame has no effect; the art and exhibition stand on their own. The middle ground is begrudgingly left with the conundrum that since the not-for-profit or institutional worlds are already so enmeshed with the commercial, the question is simply too difficult, or worse, doesn't matter. Of course, these problems do matter, and as the badge wearers, paycheck collectors and title bearers of any position in the art world matrix it is part of our job to wade through these complications and least work towards an understanding of that philosophical and ethical knot.

While the gallery may in itself be a creative and artistic gesture, it is still at its heart a business. This is why the artist and the gallerist are different roles – even when the same person plays them interchangeably. This is a key distinction to the credit of both art and business. Art, in its most basic sense, is about a kind of self-determined lawlessness, the point of the game is that you make your own rules; in effect, it has no real consequences, only theoretical or aesthetic gain. Business on the other hand, especially once the high prices of much of the art world are considered, does have very real consequences, and therefore demands agreed upon and enforceable rules.

These issues will most productively be answered when discussed with the forces in the field itself, and when raised by professionals entrenched in gallery practice. The weight and complexity of these questions alone merits a lengthy investigation, which may finally find a platform in The Gallerist Programme. It is apparent in art professional, academic and institutional realms that there is a great inner conflict regarding the profound ways both non and for profit modes of working have proven bound to be bound to each other. Yet such irresolution will never be satisfactory, and may even be irresponsible. There is no choice for professionals, theorists and practitioners but to begin unpacking these glaring dilemmas, despite how awkward, clumsy, certainly taboo and occasionally offensive the necessary conversations may be.

Lauren van Haaften-Schick is an independent curator, writer and gallery professional, based in New York. She has worked with Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery and BravinLee Programs. Van Haaften-Schick was invited by de Appel arts centre to reflect on the two-day workshop "Curating in the Gallery Field" under a personal title.