Tania Bruguera, Generic Capitalism (2009), medium: disruption of public space; technique: interrupted conference; materials: former Weather Underground members, planted performers in the audience, interruption of speech by the audience, which takes over. Photos: Rainer Ganahl, ©Tania Bruguera, 2009, courtesy of Studio Bruguera.
Hanging Out, Crowding Out or Talking Things Out: Curating the Limits of Discursive Space

Abstract
This article considers recent curatorial gestures that draw attention to the limits of institutional discursive space. Focusing in particular on the strategies of formulating discursive structures in UnitedNationsPlaza (2006-09) and of audience alienation in Our Literal Speed (OLS) conferences (2008-), this article explores the possibility of critical engagement with the limits of discursive procedures.

In an unlikely moment during the 2009 Art Chicago fair, an assembly of patrons, academics, students and others gathered in the Merchandise Mart shopping and convention centre for a panel discussion featuring former members of the American radical left group, the Weather Underground. Soon after Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn began speaking, a number of audience members stood and interrupted — variously questioning or celebrating the use of radical tactics, and voicing concerns about the state of present political struggle. The room erupted into heated conversation.

How did an art fair become host to such an explosive dialogue? The panel discussion, known subsequently as the artwork Generic: Capitalism (2009), was incited by artist Tania Bruguera, who that same year produced actions that included distributing cocaine to a Bogotá university audience and performing Russian roulette at the Venice Biennale. While the precise conditions for her Chicago panel discussion

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will be explored in detail below, Bruguera’s very production of a radical conversation environment in an art fair context marked an experiment with the constraints imposed upon interlocutors within institutional space. Such constraints around discourse have been a matter of long-standing interest for art and museum theory; in many accounts, their very existence has been grounds for museum scholars to characterize the institution as a monolith. Danielle Rice (2003), for example, has traced the sense of Foucauldian disciplining of a public that haunts accounts of museum operations in scholarship from Duncan and Wallach (1980) to Sherman and Rogoff (1994) and others. Where Rice rightly challenges the impulse to position the museum as a dominant producer of knowledge imposed on a vaguely defined audience, there is value in attending to the ways that institutional agents influence the exchange of ideas and negotiations of meaning that occur through relational assemblies. To this end, Foucault’s use of the term ‘discourse’ to encompass a complex entanglement of statements, exclusions, power relations and regulations, a shifting term referring sometimes to the general domain of all statements, sometimes to an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes to a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Rice 1972: 80, elaborated in Mills 1997: 6–7), is a productive means to consider today’s socially-based art practices, as well as the curatorial and museum strategies surrounding them.

Since Rice published her appeal for greater focus on a differentiated audience, a widespread emphasis on the discursive attributes of art and museum practices in art theory and criticism of the last decade suggests a renewed consideration of the art institution’s role as a host for public discourse, along with very honest an appraisal of exactly which publics are in fact engaging in it. Grant Kester’s ‘dialogical aesthetics’ (2004), Jacques Rancière’s active spectator (2004), and the advocacy for Mouffian agonism (Mouffe 1999) in writings by Claire Bishop (2004) and Simon Sheikh (2006), all variously explore interactions between members of an assembly, along with their poetic and political efficacies and even their degrees of accommodation by those who produce and maintain the art institutional mainframe. Discourse is increasingly understood as a critical container of art’s dissemination: the 2005 RAND Corporation survey of United States visual arts defined academic and critical ‘discourse’ as one of three major and interrelated mechanizations that circumscribe art (the others being the museum and the market) (McCarthy et al. 2005: xv). RAND’s authors imply that the diversifying and expanding number of participants in art discourse might serve to distribute previously consolidated power. The debates over dialogical inclusions, situings and motivations are often premised on the notion that structures for discursive exchange comprise the constraints within which power and ideas are produced. Mindful of these stakes and taking the liberty of equating all intersubjective occasions as opportunities for the perpetuation of discourse formations, this article will explore the curatorial production of discursive space, focusing on two recent case studies: the strategies of formatting publics in unitednationsplaza (2006–09) and audience alienation in the Our Literal Speed Chicago conference (2009). By focusing on procedures that directly call into question the utopian
foundations of the museum as a dialogical commons, this article tightly frames these cases, at the peril of omitting their many other notable attributes and motivations. However, these particular gestures deserve focused attention for their capacity to both reveal discursive limitations and instrumentalize them to productive effect.

The formatting of a discursive framework — structured through procedural regulation, spatial order, or other governing directives — is historically intertwined with art's production, presentation and pedagogy. Before the institution of the public museum was established, the seventeenth-century French Academy literally reconfigured seating arrangements of its public lectures (called 'the Discourse') to move academician Charles LeBrun's detractors to more remote locations (Bryson 1981: 33). The conception of the museum itself as a place where ideas (not objects) would be arranged as a curatorial operation is a longstanding one. Smithsonian Institute arts administrator George Brown Goode, who worked on all major United States exhibitions of the nineteenth century from the Centennial Exhibition onwards, opined that 'the people's museum should be much more than a house full of specimens in glass cases. It should be a house full of ideas, arranged with the strictest attention to system' (1891: 433). In 1947, as mid-century modernism advanced the white cube as sensorial compartmentalization chamber, removing, for example, vocal utterances (and hence, interpersonal dialogue) from the (assumed visual) aesthetic experience (see Jones 2006: 5), curatorial innovator Alexander Dörner instead elaborated on the notion that the museum would be a place for idea exchange and experiential interaction, by suggesting that the museum build itself as a platform for idea production with his oft-referenced postulation that

The new type of art museum must not be only an 'art' museum in the traditional, static sense, but, strictly speaking, not a 'museum' at all. [...] The new type would be a kind of powerhouse, a producer of new energies.

(Dörner 1947: 232)

Throughout the twentieth century, studio art practice has in various ways assimilated the form of language in practices from Cubism to Dada to dematerialized processes. Historian Howard Singerman (1999) has traced some of the motivations for the academic shift towards language-dominate in studio art programs, including the move to credentialize art disciplines with the research and publication metrics of science, leading to a tremendous output of language-based art production since the 1960s. As art itself has become more interaction- or conversation-based (for example, in the 1960s Happenings of Allan Kaprow, the mid-1990s conversations between police and youth in Oakland, California, organized by artist Suzanne Lacy and collaborators, and the 2006 and 2010 conversational perambulations produced by Tino Sehgal for London's ICA and New York City's Guggenheim Museum), institutions have shifted to accommodate, with varying degrees of success, artworks taking form as dinner parties, research laboratories, and assorted hang-out constructions such as tents, forts and risers.
While Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991) does not treat the museum directly, it looks to the eighteenth-century cultural sphere as a platform for public discourse, and the notion of public enlightenment through such discourse is telegraphed via Kant. Later in the text, when Habermas moves into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'publicity' degenerates into advertising, and cultural objects are treated as market commodities. Cf. Barrett (2011).

Simultaneously, a growing number of curators attend directly—without an artwork as a necessary catalyst—to the physical formulations of the discursive museum forum, literalizing the metaphor of 'discursive space' by integrating congregation forums as features of their exhibition productions. A notable but by no means exhaustive list of such practitioners includes Maria Lind, Ute Meta Bauer, and the curatorial triad of Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and artist Rirkrit Tiravanija who oversaw the *Utopia Station* platform, designed by Tiravanija with artist Liam Gillick, for the 50th *Venice Biennale* (2003). A second example is the 2008 *Berlin Biennal* which Elena Filipovic was invited to co-curate with Adam Szymczyk. Filipovic explicitly called for more experimental and thoughtfully structured spaces for congregation and discourse in biennial exhibitions, writing that 'Curatorial discourses [...] increasingly distinguish the biennial as larger than the mere presentation of artworks. They are understood as vehicles for the production of knowledge and intellectual debate' (2005: 66). Her desire to reconcile the 'extraordinary promises they seem to offer and the conventions through which they frame the artworks on view' (2005: 67) played out in *When things cast no shadow* (2008). The project provided both opportunities for the traditional viewer-object dynamics in the static exhibition sections (the 'Day' component of the exhibition) as well as 'Night' events, which were more experiential, durational, congregational platforms (such as a workshop with Theater of the Oppressed founder Augusto Boal), organized under the title *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours* ('My nights are more beautiful than your days'). Many of those events happened outside of the type of institutions commonly associated with high culture: for example, they were sited in the streets or at the planetarium. A third example is Maria Lind's *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, which was a 2005 exhibition that took the form of a roundtable symposium. Michael Beutler's *jasperbenke* ('jasper benches'), made with colourful fabric, were placed in a transverse seating arrangement with flanked wings around the main conference table, such that the audience faced each other during any given presentation or conversation. The curatorial endeavours of Lind and Filipovic/Szymczyk confront the challenges of engaging an institution's public through spatialization of the discursive concept (here, by building both physical and temporal spaces for assembly and interchange, within or beyond the museum arena).

This twenty-first-century moment finds a widespread endorsement of social artworks and museums as discursive spaces and sites of mutuality in producing meaning, in the spirit of Gayatri Spivak's consideration of the audience as 'coinvestigator' of a presenter (Rooney and Spivak 1989). But none of these theorists or curatorial practitioners would advocate for broad-stroked participatory dialogue alone as a critical act. As political and cultural theorist Nancy Fraser has argued, it is impossible to produce a 'bracketed' public sphere of democratic discourse and equivalences (1990: 64). While a vision of the museum in the service of a Habermasian enlightened agora for the practice of public reason may be leveraged towards certain practical utility today—especially in cases where funding metrics privilege the size of an audience in attendance (a factor notably less influential in Western Europe where many of the cited curatorial experiments took place), no amount of curatorial intentionality produces
the museum as a truly open forum of dialogue, where all voices have equal opportunity to speak. These particular conditions are addressed by curator and critic Simon Sheikh when commenting that “[p]erfect representation is a logical impossibility, and instead, the postmodern condition of politics and representation becomes a process of articulations, an inscription of essentially empty signifiers with historical and hegemonizing content” (2006: 144). Citing Chantal Mouffe (2002), Sheikh thus encourages art institutions to move away from their empty, imperfect welfare-driven aspirations and instead to become platforms for ‘agonism’.

This is a very different notion of ‘the institution’, not just the art institution: not as the pillar of tradition and a stable social order, but rather as the producer of a certain instability, flux and negotiation. In short, a conflictful rather than consensual notion of democracy, and one that is directed towards process rather than endgame. If we want to address the problems the art institution is facing, without reverting to a historical and unusable model and rhetoric, I think that it is paramount to emphasize the democratic potentials of the art space.

(Sheikh 2006: 149)

For Sheikh, operating at the centre of European New Institutionalism, it is the curator’s role to bring critique, conflict and dissent into institutional practice as a democratic project. In this thinking, the various publics, constituencies and interests of a museum are inherently conflictual, and this conflict may be rendered productive through a kind of postmodern self-criticism operating through a distributed self, directed at its own enmeshed, heterogeneous institutional body. But do all (or even most) museum publics know that they are being invited to enter a space of intended conflictful democracy? Another way of ‘emphasizing the democratic potentials’ of art spaces is precisely by confronting their shortcomings in rendering these limits legible to their publics, and it is to two such gestures that this text will now turn.

Abandoning the pretext of exhibition design as a means of producing space for audience engagement, Anton Vidokle’s ‘exhibition as school’, unitednationsplaza (2006–09) (UNP), comprised a series of direct attempts to structure a public. The art school that the curator and artist had originally planned for the (infamously cancelled) Manifesta 6, was opened instead as a cycle of projects in Berlin, New York and Mexico City. Vidokle collaborated on developing this premise with artists, architects and theorists Boris Groys, Jalal Toufic, Liam Gillick, Martha Rosler, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Nikolaus Hirsch, Tirdad Zolghadr and Walid Raad, many of whom presented seminars and workshops. The original unitednationsplaza building was in Berlin, where the project earned its name after Gillick placed this title upside-down on an otherwise nondescript structure, home to the initial seminar series, library and bar (Vidokle 2011). As an ersatz school and meeting grounds, the problematic of discursive relations between participants – along with the curatorial formulations that structured these relations – were available for experimentation from the outset, and seminars were conducted in many forms by different guest facilitators. Vidokle, who never hosted a seminar himself, saw his role as

being that of a facilitator of a framework wherein every participant could ‘define the degree to which they participate for themselves’ (Vidokle 2011). The audience/student structure that he endeavoured to create was one characterized by porosity, open for individuals to penetrate more deeply if they desired.

Curator Tirdad Zolghadr’s multi-day seminar for unitednationsplaza, ‘That’s why you find me in the kitchen at parties’, addressed art’s ‘discursive rituals’ (unitednationsplaza 2011). The seminar included a launch for Frieze editor Jörg Heizer’s book Plötzlich diese Übersicht: Was gute zeitgenössische Kunst ausmacht/Suddenly This Overview: What Constitutes Good Contemporary Art (2007) with scripted critical responses from moderators, a lip-synced enactment of a conversation by the artist group Art & Language performed by another artist group (the Jackson Pollock Bar), and an audience-choice wildcard event that took the form of speed-dating networking. According to Zolghadr (2011b), he introduced this array of discursive formulations as a response to UNP’s specific limitations against discursive openness: ‘It’s a setting where everyone feels watched. [...] It was very visible and everyone knew it was visible. So trying to turn it into [something] radically democratic [with] no speaker/audience divide would not have been honest’. Instead, Zolghadr said, he led his audience through a number of discursive formats in order to ‘reconsider matters of infrastructure and/as art, as well as discourse and/as curating in more complicated ways’ (Zolghadr 2011a). In this sense, Zolghadr’s UNP project was one of structuring discourse as a self-critical experimental procedure.

unitednationsplaza’s second iteration appeared at New York’s New Museum in 2008-09 under the moniker Night School. Here the organizers again aspired to confront the obstacles to public engagement in the museum commons, as Vidokle indicated in his introduction to Boris Groys’s opening lecture: ‘Audiences are perhaps groups of consumers of leisure and spectacle. They have no political agency and no necessary means or particular interest in effecting social change. [...] While the audiences for art became enormous there is no public among them’ (Vidokle 2008).

In its school-as-an-exhibition premise, the full cycle of projects in unitednationsplaza interrogated the extent to which a public might be formulated in an exhibition or art space, but Night School was the only iteration of the cycle that defined a model group to play that role. Vidokle, along with artist Liam Gillick and New Museum Director and Curator of Public Programs Eungie Joo, selected a ‘core group’ of official enrollees from an application pool in order, according to Vidokle, to ensure continual access and more dedicated engagement. This constituency, reportedly numbering 28 official students (with a smaller group of approximately fifteen who attended regularly) enjoyed such privileges as free admission to all Night School events, New Museum memberships, and private meeting times (in and outside of the museum building) to engage with invited speakers (Vidokle 2011).

Despite efforts to place a core group into central engagement with Night School, spatial and procedural impositions challenged the ‘penetrative’ intentions of unitednationsplaza. Whereas in Berlin people could smoke pot in the bathroom and argue until 2 a.m., the New Museum events were
subject to that institution's existing rules and constraints. Aside from the Thursday night sessions, the events required paid admissions, lengthy seminars were held in rooms where food and drink were not permitted, and conversations were predetermined to end by the museum's closing time (Vidokle 2011). Zolghadr similarly attributed the differences between the two instantiations of the project as relating to differences in temporality, space and degrees of access:

[unitednationsplaza's] temporal factor is a very important one, but linked to that is the fact that there was an actual building which is set apart and which is there for the space of one year. That creates in turn a particular kind of atmosphere [and] gathers, shall we say, an identity that people recognize, pick up on, and talk about and revisit during the course of the year. This creates a particular kind of small milieu of its own: its own weird rules and understandings and gossipy hysterical reactions and all manners of things.

(Zolghadr 2011b)

Comparatively, the New Museum was not purely dedicated to the Night School project and every participant - whether a presenter, organizer or an accepted student - was a guest of the hosting agency, which, according to Zolghadr, affected the mood of the project:

The New Museum has the vibe of the king of the hill. As you walk in the very design of the space and the vibe that the staff gives off is very much that of, you know, you're a visitor here and you have a particular role and once you fulfill it you can leave again. This is not really singling out the New Museum, this is a museal atmosphere that predefines your sense of entitlement, it cuts it down to size, let's say. The UNP was different. I'm not saying the discourse fully lived up to its radically democratic/experimental promise, it wasn't quite as level playing field as that, there were a lot of tensions and contradictions. But at the end of the day it did create something a little more unpredictable where people felt like there was a margin of maneuver [ ... ] Anton [Vidokle] did a good job of fine-tuning this particular tone.

(Zolghadr 2011b)

Night School's restrictions were also reported by core group member Taraneh Fazeli, when she expressed anxieties about the onus and viability of being an active participant in a museum space that 'purports' to be a 'nonhierarchical, centerless system' despite its essential structures that hierarchically situate and inscribe the procedures of subjects and objects alike: The ease of critique within the museum setting smacked of an indulgent pseudorebellion; for many of us, the palpable suspicion of being leveraged as cultural capital undermined the potency of the project (2009: 132).

To illustrate the frustrations of being inserted into the role of participant within the delimiting institutional frameworks of both UNP and the New Museum, Fazeli referred to an artwork by Chris Evans that occurred at unitednationsplaza in 2007. Entitled I Don’t Know if I’ve Explained Myself, this work physically separated presenters, placed in the kitchen, from the
audience, seated in an adjacent room with an artwork (RothStauffenberg's 2004 Amsterdam 1992) and a video feed connecting them to presenters discussing the work. As discussants Michael Baers, Tirdad Zolghadr, Natascha Sadr Haghighian and Annika Eriksson began their conversation, the inscrutability of the sound feed provoked a mood shift in the audience, from 'perplexed to agitated' (Evans 2011). Some audience members placed Nikolaus Hirsch's stacking cubes, designed specifically as flexible seating for UNP, across the kitchen door in a 'blockade', while a second group remained seated, turning their chairs to face and address each other, as described by Evans:

They demanded that an assistant at UNP who had been filming the event from within the audience's room, stop filming as they did not want to be part of someone's cultural capital - someone's artwork. At one point they decided to put together a list of people they would invite themselves to UNP and of ways that they might bypass UNP's structure.

(Evans 2011)
Rebecca Uchill

Evans describes a group that, like Fazeli, feared having their conversation leveraged for another practitioner's project.

To read this work simply as an articulator of dissensus does not adequately interpret its engagement with specific spatial, institutional and historical referents. The suspicions revealed in Fazeli's rebuttal to Night School, about being co-opted through engagement, precisely mimicked concerns that were intentionally and structurally incorporated into the physical structure of Evans's UNP piece. Placing presenters in the kitchen referred on the one hand to Seth Siegelaub's 1970 Halifax Conference, which similarly separated presenters and spectators on different floors of a building (Zolghadr 2009); simultaneously, the actual UNP kitchen was preloaded with its own cultural significance related to issues of access and exclusion. The UNP kitchen was intended as a 'green room' open for anyone to use, but one had to first discern if one was welcome to enter and join in drinks and other kitchen use (Zolghadr 2011b). 'Core' Night School participant Fazeli, in principle designated to have enhanced access and autonomy, also felt palpable constraints based on institutional hierarchies, whether actual or existing in the common imagination.

The unitednationsplaza projects described here reveal participants' desires to interrogate and experiment with co-investigative audiences through various methods of structuring of discursive formats: participant selectivity, spatial configuration, invention of an autonomous institution, and attempted integration of that institution into another. In these respects, these projects of UNP and Night School marshalled numerically and spatially delimited publics to point to the limits of open engagement in knowledge production: practical, imagined and self-imposed. What is polemical about this demonstration is the acknowledgement and intimated acceptance of such limits, forcing both producers and produced publics to determine their willingness to operate within them or, perhaps, a desire to find other possibilities for engagement.

Where unitednationsplaza events may have formatted audiences at the edge of discursive limits, the Our Literal Speed conference détournements have addressed a relatively unstructured ensemble of participants, creating an environment of destabilization and even alienation. With artists and art historians Abbey Shaine Dubin, Christopher P. Heuer, Matthew Jesse Jackson, Andrew Perchuk and John Speiman as core members, the OLS group describes itself on its website as 'a series of events in the vicinity of art and history in Europe and North America' (OLS n.d.). What this amounts to is a series of conference and exhibition-related interventions and manifestations, ranging from a 3'33" performance at the 2010 Whitney Biennial that was pressed into a 45 rpm record to a 2008 installation at Karlsruhe's Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie featuring the Jackson Pollock Bar performing an imagined panel discussion between the Utopia Station curatorial protagonists discussed earlier in this article.

Many of Our Literal Speed's activities critique the norms of academia through actions that could be termed 'conference remixes'. The group's work in this vein has involved incorporating music, lighting schemes and banners into lecture hall addresses; planting artist Theaster Gates...
The quote was taken from Cavell (1971: 114). (reading a script co-authored by OLS) as an unannounced presenter at the 2010 College Art Association’s Contemporary Art Historians panel (thus interrupting that prestigious conference’s business-as-usual), and hosting a reading by artist Mary Ellen Carroll of a paper by David Joselit to a University of Chicago audience (which included Joselit himself), taking questions as his avatar. The discrepancies in knowledge enforced by these tactics of remixing and even inscrutability, undermine any aspiration to a knowledge commons that might be assumed of conference attendance or participation. The actions referenced above had the dual effects of frustration (audiences asked Gates why he had not been introduced) (Gates 2011) and novelty (people attended to and perhaps addressed Carroll in a more playful way than they would have had Joselit himself appeared at the podium). The 2009 OLS conference in Chicago – the second in an intended series of three – was staged throughout the city, and included an exhibition, a commissioned music CD, and a May Day march through the streets of the city. The conference program bore the heading: ‘A Discursive Altamont for a Nameless Decade’, invoking the name of the 1969 California concert marked by discord and violence. With these spectacular tactics, OLS introduced ruptures and forced awareness of presentational, conversational and interpretative norms that prevail in academic discursive environments. One reviewer of the conference demonstrated that this ‘undigested, unfixed, inconsistent and collectively produced palimpsest’ had indeed pointed her attention to the conventions and physical structures of the ‘pedagogical parergon’, as she assessed the unsuitable contexts of ‘bland’ papers and gargantuan conference halls (Kryczka 2010).

The perplexity cultivated by OLS’s gestures served at times to highlight the limitations surrounding access to knowledge. Art historian Darby English responded to this circumstance with a silent slide show containing material he had presented weeks before at a Harvard University conference on Clement Greenberg. In Cambridge, English had spoken about the ‘performance of modernism’ in the 1971 DeLuxe exhibition in Houston’s black Fifth Ward neighbourhood, with protagonists including the Menil family, Peter Bradley and Clement Greenberg. In Chicago, his slides and on-screen text were more suggestive than narrative or historical, stripped of identifying captions and presenter overview. A DeLuxe installation-in-progress image was accompanied by the words ‘No doubt such art will not repeal the enclosure acts, but it seeks to annul our spiritual-biological-political accommodations and attachments to enclosure.’ The slide show proceeded with textual calls for liberation from enclosures written by English himself, appended to the bottom of a dark gray screen and shown for a full fifteen seconds: ‘An encounter with form that changed yours; ‘Your freedom to do something with it.’  Neither the sources of the texts nor the images were revealed to the OLS audience, in a presentation favouring audience sense-making over presentation didacticism. As English (2010) reflected on the event, ‘Unlike at Harvard, there was no subject to illustrate at OLS. In fact, apart from linkages established (imagined/projected) during and after by audience members between the explicit art historical content and the explicit political-historical content, there was no subject’.
While English's presentation quietly entreated its viewers' projective imagination, artist Tania Bruguera provoked her audience's vociferous engagement through a more disruptive contribution to OLS, described at the beginning of this article. Her panel, featuring Dohrn and Ayers, was the second that Bruguera had organized for OLS. The first, in Karlsruhe, focused on the past; the third, proposed for Los Angeles, sought to confront the future. In Chicago, the panel was intentionally derailed by four audience plants, who were instructed by Bruguera to intervene with their own sincere responses to the panel discussion. By activating the audience in such a way, Bruguera unsettled conference expectations for all concerned— not even the panelists had been forewarned.

Bruguera's project ensured that no member of the assembly had full access to the mechanizations of the project. The effect was to move sentiment in the room away from irony or in-jokiness and lead instead to an earnest sense of urgency in the conversation. As an organizational method, Bruguera's intentional obfuscation ultimately produced an environment where interchange and discursivity prevailed, but also a sense of having been misled on the part of participants, most accustomed to being privy to organizational knowledge, who in this case were not. On the next day of the conference, Bruguera's piece became a launching point for a conversation about degrees of access: artist Rainer Ganahl expressed a feeling of betrayal, Bruguera asserted that the piece was sincere, and artist Sharon Hayes questioned whether Bruguera's strategies actually levelled the spectatorial power dynamic. In both the panel event and its pursuant conversation, Bruguera's provocation shifted the group away from certain norms of spectatorial reception. By immersing the entire group in the experience of outsider status, the conference crowd confronted their concurrent—but-disjointed experiences in a rare transparent reception process.

Art historian Christa Noel Robbins suggested that this collective experience of outsider-ness had a productive effect:

OLS did a good job on the first evening of marking out who was and was not in-the-know—or at least of creating the illusion of such a marking. You had to know who [Joselit and Carroll] were in order to know that what you were watching was a performance by Mary Ellen Carroll and that what you were hearing was an actual paper written by Joselit, who sat silently in the second row. [During the question/answer session,] whatever demarcation of togetherness had initially been achieved quickly disintegrated. For one began to wonder, as Gregg Bordowitz stated, who exactly was the target of this gag. The tone was set that first night as tense and cautionary, though there was an excitement too. People were talking and perhaps with more freedom than they would have if Joselit had been at the podium. As the days progressed I began to wonder whether the kind of community forged out of that initial pulling-apart wasn't actually something very like togetherness after all.

No one said that togetherness was supposed to feel good.

(Robbins 2009)

By positioning everyone as an outsider, Our Literal Speed produced a kind of shared experience. Like UNP, OLS exposed the limited availability of an
open, level ground for communicability and collective interchange. In the
case of OLS, this demonstration was produced using curatorial strategies
of exaggeration and play with the conference format, leading to an experi-
ence of knowledge disjuncture and alienation.

Curators and art program organizers are certainly not the only agents
that shepherd social practices or attend to their dialogical structures.
However, to the extent that the expressive, historical and discursive prac-
tices of art are channeled through systems of preservation, exhibition,
pedagogy and assembly — and that these systems, even at their most expe-
rimental, have regulating capacities — investigating the curatorial
motivations and methods for producing discursive space with attention
to their contextual systems can be a revealing process. Indeed, and contra
the RAND study’s conclusion that enhanced participation in discourse
will expand power, the curatorial motivation to organize spaces of discur-
sive transactions and negotiations may threaten to contain and consoli-
date power, rather than to enable and open up new opportunities. Or, the
inward-facing conversation about art discourse may become so recursive
that it no longer addresses most publics in a relevant way. Understanding
the particularities of curatorial approaches to discourse production is there-
fore all the more pertinent. As Shannon Jackson suggests, confronting the
operations of social art practice are aligned with the process of critically
navigating public life: To reckon with the complex experience of social
work means reckoning with its force as both support and constraint. What
a pleasure, what a pain’ (Jackson 2011: 247). In all of the pleasures and
pains of their procedures, unitednationsplaza and Our Literal Speed take
up the call to ‘reckon’ with the opportunities and limitations that discourse
avails, both as infrastructure and as medium.

To what effect were audience and participant regulation or aliena-
tion deployed in unitednationsplaza and Our Literal Speed? By expressly
revealing particular architectures of discourse, and experimenting with
them, these projects called attention both to discursive enclosures and the
possibilities of their expansion. They also highlighted the dead-ends that
foreclose such expansions. While those latter are hardly uplifting revela-
tions, the exaggeration of discursive constraints in these projects was more
poetic than maniacal: there was no insistent structuralist paradigm being
imposed, and the participating subjects of UNP and OLS were positioned
to make individual assessments about how or whether to participate.
What does one choose to do in an environment such as UNP or OLS?
Accept the revealed limits of a discursive commons? Ignore the project’s
perceived co-opting or sideling procedures and walk away? Imagine
other means of transforming the given field? The questions posed by
these projects make moments of limited communication or disjuncture of
shared knowledge into productive opportunities.

As experiential discursive spaces, unitednationsplaza and Our Literal
Speed revealed their own enunciat limits and opened them up to active
critique. Whether intentionally or inadvertently, these curatorially inflected
conversations effectively called attention to the production of art discourse
not as a matter of individual agency, but rather through common practice —
making all participants to some extent complicit or subsumed in its structure
and efficacies. Foucault outlined discourse as being comprised of the set of
conditions in accordance with which a practice is exercised, in accordance with which that practice gives rise for partially or totally new statements, and in accordance with which it can be modified' (1972: 208-09). While united...

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