

## Approaching Art through Ensembles

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### 1. The Ensemble: A Retrospective

An approach based on modes of existence might lead to a situation in which museums acquire not only 'works' (sculptures, paintings, drawings, installations) but also ensembles. Relations between constituent parts of ensembles might be specified, as well as the possibilities of exhibiting fragments, separate elements or one single element, the possibilities of including an ensemble in a more extended context or the possibilities of concentrating and dissolving it. We would no longer be thinking of a standard framework with permissible deviations, but instead of a network of relationships that might be realised but does not have to be. Small peripheral elements, which for instance often appear in works by Mark Manders, would be considered desirable rather than problematic. Artists would, in the future, be able to permeate the museum's 'permanence' with a desire for change.<sup>1</sup>

It is remarkable how not only the status but also the vitality of words can change. The meaning of the term 'ensemble' should be obvious after two decades of fuzzy logic, rhizomatic thinking, processual and performative action, 'change management' and the dematerialisation of the Self and of our common heritage. In the early nineties 'ensemble' was still a fluffy notion, used as a non-definition to hint at other possible approaches to art, different from the static structures arising from the compelling idea of the artwork as the central unit of art. Just as *This Is the Show and the Show Is Many Things* in 1994 was in a certain sense a naïve exhibition, it was in a certain sense a naïve act to promote the term 'ensemble' as a hypothesis at the end of the preparatory text. The text acknowledged an insight that was up for grabs, and tried to observe it rather than formulate a critique of the system that eclipsed this insight.

*This Is the Show...* itself arose from the observation during Documenta IX that there was no public space for some of the relevant young artists of the time. Gabriel Orozco, who at that time still worked in the street, Mona Hatoum, whose work seemed to be more about process than slides of her work were able to show, the fascinating oeuvre of Honoré d'O that had not yet surfaced in the art world but already flourished in his studio and in various alternative locations, the dancing proposals of the Austrian ManfreDu Schu; all these were ultimately left out, although the young Documenta curator would have desired otherwise. The work of one of their peers, Eran Schaerf, which was there, slotted between two Aue-Pavilions, remained practically unseen at this Documenta. The specific complexity in the approach of artists like Jimmie Durham and Cildo Meireles was barely noticed as such within the well-constructed exhibition that Documenta IX nonetheless was. A construction that, moreover, consciously sought to attain diversity in terms of the artworks presented and thereby a more intense composition of the exhibition.

*This Is the Show...* is now seen as one of the first process-based exhibitions, but was actually derived from the intuitive notion that the space for art could be addressed in a radically different way, i.e. as a modulated 'time-space' where a sense of eternity might be juxtaposed with the singular moment and where art would not proceed from the isolation of fragments to the composition of a whole, but where it would become manifest as mobile encounters of divergent behaviours, and thereby help define its own space through relations of distance and proximity in a tense and ever-changing continuum. The endeavour was to discover a possible experience that might accommodate an absolutist 'stack sculpture' by Donald Judd just as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Bart De Baere, 'Joining the Present to Now', in *Kunst & museumjournal*, 1994-1995, Volume 6, double new year issue, p.70.

gestures and conversations – or, more specifically, Louise Bourgeois's *Liars* and the motocross bike that Jason Rhoades drove round inside the museum. Simultaneously. Articulating each other.

The notion of 'ensemble' appeared from around the corner at the end of this line of thinking. Whereas *This Is the Show...* expressed the intuition for a different possibility to show art, the term 'ensemble' expressed the need for a different insight into what artists do. Neither the spatial presentation, nor the conceptual approach felt revolutionary. They simply felt more close to art. The impression was that the art world had for a whole century already – the then not quite finished twentieth century – ignored the complexity of art and of artists' approaches to it. The early avant-garde was part of this, although the project focused primarily on young artists who appeared to be offering something urgent, with a *raison d'être* that had not yet found its visibility. The project tried to create this visibility, scantily or not at all justified in terms of philosophy and art history and even less supported by the interest in process and the relational aesthetic that were still to come. This visibility was instead negatively determined – by the unacceptable reduction of art to products of a Bonfire-of-Vanities-style yuppie-ism, with its new money, its applied technologies and its short attention span.

We are now far away from the moment of *This Is the Show...* and the initial use of the 'ensemble' notion. We can now see – or hope – that the surge of object-based art, from the *Neue Wilde* to the neo-minimal sculpture that was to oppose it, was at the same time the beginning of a new phase and the end of an era.

That era of Americanism had extended art history to beyond the bourgeois period in which it was created. It had already appropriated the early avant-garde and stripped it of its intractability. It had reduced Malevich to painting and Rodchenko to sculpture. The early avant-garde was celebrated after the Second World War, but it was as if its body and soul had become separated. The body of the classical early avant-garde, its study of form, had delivered the material for building a bridge from older art to the post-war market system. This bridge made it possible to present the Surrealists without their mad spatiality; it reduced Schwitters to a collagist with an interesting background story and turned Duchamp into a producer of multiples. The art market, but also the museum system and public presentation *tout court* – they were all based on the work of art.

Since then we have built a somewhat more complex public awareness of what art was proposing in the course of that inspired, passionate twentieth century. Russian Constructivism has been liberated from the American reduction it underwent after the Second World War and the surrounding situation has been restored in its polemical complexity. Dadaism has acquired the classic status of a grand public discursive exhibition in Paris. Presentation practice has become a research field in itself. The elusiveness of Situationism has become a cult phenomenon. The big Anglo-Saxon museum machines have endeavoured to appropriate non-Western traditions, Post-colonialism has provided an intellectually substantiated diversification of views and the former Eastern Bloc, Yugoslavia and South America have re-evaluated and marketed their radical post-war avant-gardes with all the intellectual capacity at their disposal.

All this is partly because artists, more than ever before, have managed to let the complexity of art infiltrate a market that is becoming less monolithic. On their side there have been sympathetic intellectuals, who are thematising this complexity, and people in the curatorial niche that has emerged in the meantime, who are reformalising it. The market, taking guidance from this newly apparent complexity, has established countless new niches and sales opportunities.

## 2. The Broadening of Art

The bourgeoisie likes contradiction, but in moderation. That art museums have remained museums of artworks for so long has much to do with the avant-garde artists and their

uncontrollable passion for reigniting the art tradition. The opening up of the area for activity in visual art could be seen as three major movements:

#### (a) The Early Avant-Garde Wanting to Take on the World

After a determined start at the end of the nineteenth century, the early avant-garde presses forward to create a new world. Visual art plays a key role; it is a platform for development and a reference for a new grammar and it seamlessly moves on into reflecting and shaping this new world.

Artists at that time often stood with one foot in the traditionally formed patterns of art and the other foot in a much freer area – one pillar on land and one in the sea, like the Angel of the Apocalypse. Futurist manifestos shared a moment with flat paintings, ready-mades with studies of nudes. We might see this as a split, but it is probably more accurate to interpret it as an ambition to hold onto artistic tradition and to imbue it with life, in one broad stroke, to give it a new social meaning. Even the formal French schools stress this ambition to offer a new outlook for society. It is certainly present in Futurism and in Dadaism, which wanted to combine art and life in a Cabaret Voltaire; in early Abstraction; in de Stijl, where fine art, applied art and architecture perfectly slot into place; in Russian Constructivism, which wants to be part of a revolutionary society; in schools like Bauhaus and Vkhutemas that want to connect the new vision with industrial production processes. There, in all sorts of ways, structured or informal, clumsy or flawless, art wants to march out into the world. So the lure of the art museum is doomed in advance: its files become populated by an endless amount of monstrous hybrids that are still – completely, or partially, or perhaps actually – art, but no longer artworks. Instead they are spaces, actions, propaganda designed by artists.

Very much like the Pre-Modern artists of the fifteenth century, their Modernist counterparts also make work for specific spaces, contexts and small audiences. For other people, to be sure, for new clients: they can no longer count on the support of the nobility and the church but must create it themselves, since the days of Courbet with his *Atelier* and the Impressionists with their pastel-coloured *Salon des indépendants*. The Modernist artists want to take over the art scene and let art do the work. They construct their own spaces and connections, at first often working for small groups of sympathisers. As a collective, artists in fact become their own commissioners, and their task is to reinvent art so that they can become an engine for society. You can only ever be avant-garde if the masses want to follow in your footsteps.

#### (b) The Neo-Avant-Garde Cultivating the Art Space

The neo-avant-garde will have more limited ambitions from the late fifties onwards. They will try, in different ways, to create an autonomous space for art and thereby articulate a number of alternative possibilities to make art visible for the public. New categories of form are established as genres in their own right with their own distribution channels: performance, video, artists' books, mail art... Socio-political engagement is one possibility – with Joseph Beuys's commitment to the Green Party as the most visible expression – but no longer an inherent, integrated ambition for all art. Jimmie Durham becomes disappointed, despite the rapidly growing appreciation for his work when he makes art again in New York in the eighties, after his years of political activism. His works do not provoke serious discussion but are only seen as 'representation of engagement'. Art strives to become a field of values unto itself, which in some segments enter into critical alliances with the market and elsewhere forms alternative networks, such as the Situationist International and fluxus. In some cases, like that of 'visual poetry' in Western Europe, it even remains outside the art world.

Artists request and are granted a place as actors. Again they write manifestos or publish, with the people that surround them, their own magazines and books that in words, images, design and packaging become a radical foundation for what also is happening with their work. 'The book, consisting of photographic statements and written testimonies, bases its critical and editorial assumptions upon the knowledge that criticism and iconography only give a limited view of and a partial feeling for how artists work [...]' is the fundamental attitude that Germano Celant formulates in his seminal text *Arte povera* from 1969.

The European powers that negotiate with the market and play its game – from Beuys, Broodthaers or Polke to the Italian *arte povera* artists – play on the duality of object and mental social space, but their thoughts are still mainly disseminated through artworks. To the extent that other forms of expressions are collected, this until recently occurred in the archival half of the museum. Curiously, such things were not regarded as art.

For many decades after the Second World War the hegemony of the once provincial New York market system is almost total, dominating not only the media but also the art education system. Yet this also allows havens for art to exist in the margins, in places where art detaches itself from the market through internationally networked alternative scenes, the 'immer emigration' of meditative artists or the political activism of others. Such contexts allow the spirit of the early avant-garde to stay alive.

This has re-emerged in recent years with the renewed public esteem and increasing commercialisation of the Neo-Avant-Garde, from French fluxus to Moscow Collective Actions, from the American outsider James Lee Byars to the Belgian outsider Jef Geys, from Constant Nieuwenhuys's *New Babylon* to Helio Oiticica's *Parangolés*.

### (c) Freedom as an Element of Commercialisation in Recent Decades

When the post-war structure of the world begins to fall apart in the eighties, the entire range of possibilities for artistic expression pass into collective ownership and artists must no longer work in niches but can create their own mix of broad exhibition platforms and marketing operations, with or without the initial efforts which lay behind these twentieth century traditions. The painting of the *transavanguardia* is an expression of this space that was suddenly open, but this is just as true of the new formatting of photography to match the scale and scope of painting, and of the countless hybrid forms that artists are using.

This can be seen as a third stage. It took the art scene a hundred years to absorb the expansion of art into a wider range of activities and formal possibilities. Seen as positively as possible, it can be called an integrated space. The walls and sluice gates of the old system have been torn down. Anything is possible, but therefore perhaps also nothing. The market and event culture are flourishing. What remains most difficult is the value judgment that is really at stake here: one that is cultural rather than economic. This is not about convertibility and appropriation in the economic sense, but about non-convertibility and public domain. The limit – the nearly un-thinkable – is above all in the articulation of the intrinsic value of an artist's proposal, that which can give art sustainable impact. The freedom of the artist has become more obvious today, and therefore also more problematic. This might be a stimulus for institutions to approach the recent past differently.

### 3. The Inevitability of Own Topographies, Trajectories and Finalities

These three movements of the twentieth century – taking on the world, creating a space for art, playing with a mix of possible expressions – correspond with three major areas in which we may now formulate a concept of art that leads on to ensembles. From this renewed focus of the present, we may approach the historical avant-garde differently and realise that the challenges that have become explicit today were actually on the agenda throughout the twentieth century.

## (a) The Nature of the Social Impact

Artists have been recasting the most divergent phenomena in the world as visibility – sex, their own bodies, the mass media, politics, the everyday, the landscape, urban incidents, language, music, architecture, rumours, and it goes on – long enough to create a collective awareness that *everything* can be art. That nothing can be excluded. Conversely, any action performed by an artist effectively, inevitably and continuously becomes part of an art proposal. The refusal by artists to cultivate their own public persona is as much a part of their practice as doing so; the non-appearance at your own opening is as much a part of the media mix as courting collectors.

Artists today are doomed to define their own social impact themselves. While the early avant-garde saw society as its target (with art at heart) and the neo-avant-garde targeted art itself (thinking that this would eventually make society move), no such determined effort can be noticed today. The prevailing criteria for success in the commercial and media markets are not persuasive enough to become valid goals for artists. Focusing purely on them will always lead to a generic product. Such success no longer stands for difference, as before, but for variety marked by a fundamental lack of difference.

What that difference might be is no longer quite clear. To understand this also becomes the task of the artist, who must now not only define his oeuvre and his space but also his production of meaning, his patterns of movement in the most fundamental way: he must determine his own route and the sense it is supposed to make. The *arte povera* hero Michelangelo Pistoletto invests his capital in a foundation at Biella in northern Italy that literally wants art to energise society, while the young Antwerp artist Vaast Colson opts for ephemeral gestures at the edge of visibility to enable art to continuously become one with society.

Slovenian museum director Zdenka Badovinac has advocated the study of the history of regional intellectual contexts alongside local art history, and rightly so, because they form a context that resonates with art proposals, enabling us to better understand how they come together and are brought forward. We can see the intellectual context in the classical sense, as the concrete social and metaphysical insights that feature in an artist's surroundings, how they are justified or challenged and which thinkers create change and when and how.

At the same time there is another context, more difficult to detect: the setting of insights within which artists make their proposals. Art must often – especially in the crucial initial phase – contribute to creating its own environment, the space where it can exist. So artists become symbolic stakeholders, from the very beginning, of the situation which brings forward their art and with which they will remain linked. If we consider this setting for art a constituent part of the intellectual context, Badovinac's approach becomes really interesting. Then we can value the contribution of artists to how social and existential problems are approached at a given moment, and understand that the difference that they make stays relevant beyond that moment, just like the achievements of philosophy and theory.

## (b) A Space for Art

It has become customary for artists to at least intervene in those locations that the neo-avant-garde preferred to cultivate in their efforts to create their own space for art. Publications, invitation cards and other printed matter surrounding a public project, whether it is an exhibition or something else, are natural components of the framework, just like the picture frame and the colour of the wall already were for the Impressionists.

Artists are all but obliged to compose their own space for art. They do this by sketching out their own history through actions that accord them special status within the meshwork of traditions that constitute the art scene. The production of artworks as such, and the market that appropriates them, is sometimes just a minuscule part of the total of their activities. They build

their own organisations for themselves, and later perhaps their own foundations. They choose their galleries and exhibition spaces not just for their technical qualities but also for the kind of value they embody as setting.

Artists help decide the exhibition title and campaign image, which function as a summary of the project. The title and the basic image are inevitably just as much a part of the art as the works they announce, and not only in project such as the collaborative work realised at M HKA in 2011 by Lawrence Weiner and Liam Gillick, two artists who explicitly position themselves at this limit.

Today it is in fact expected of artists that they shall manage the intellectual circumstances around their work. Also this they have already been doing for long, at least to some extent, and now it has become an everyday practice that is often also consciously formalised. Artists govern initial information and reflection on their work, commissioning writers and providing them with input. Such interventions do not amount to the gathering of laudatory speeches to serve as glorified sales pitches. It initiates points of views, modes of approaching the work... When an artist like Luc Tuymans masterminds the content of his catalogues and even controls access to his visual sources in detail, it is something he considers himself obliged to do. With excessive openness he seeks to disarm the anecdotal and content-orientated approach and make it a harmless, perhaps even liberating measure for conveying anything that concerns him, rather than allowing viewers to interpret the work at their own leisure. This kind of activities in no way turns artists into manipulative charlatans without belief in the intrinsic value of their own work, like the travelling tailors in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Artists undertake this because they are aware of images in a sophisticated way; they know that each small part of an image contributes to determining its reception.

In an increasingly discursive world artists are also expected to be discursive, and they obviously wish to intervene in the discourse to benefit their art. They take the stage as speakers or become curators to mould the broader view of the art scene according to their perspective. Sometimes, as with Jimmie Durham, who is also an important essayist, discourse is a complement to the work; sometimes, as with *Agency*, which M HKA presented as part of the *Textiles* project, it is a core component.

### (c) Composing the Oeuvre

Last but not least, the composition of the oeuvre is just as relevant as what the individual works express; they exist in this setting and are articulated by it. It is therefore important to view artists in the light of their entire production and understand how it has come about. Works are often created and presented in series. Paintings may aspire to their own pictorial finality, but they may also become vehicles for processes that wash over them, or else just a working medium like any other, with which any technically capable painter can work, like a photographer who makes a photograph for another artist or a carpenter who executes a sculpture. In his exhibition at Stella Lohaus Gallery in Antwerp in 2010 Bjarne Melgaard showed self-portraits that M HKA would have gladly acquired had it had the means. He is a gifted painter but he left the painting of the portraits to an assistant and then made adjustments to them; painting in itself is not what interests him.

Artists communicate mainly with the totality of their actions. They know that individual elements will inevitably be incorporated into the whole, often literally the moment they appear in a solo exhibition, and in any case implicitly. Members of their initial and (for the artists) crucial audience – whether it be essayists, gallery owners, collectors, critics or other decision-makers – are always aware of artists' broader activities and will assess them accordingly, perceiving and valuing the work against the background of previous knowledge. Much of today's art even relies on this and is only easily accessible with such a context in place. Accidental spectators without prior knowledge must try to grasp an entire process through their experience of the moment, where the broader picture might not always be very apparent.

Artists compose the diversity of their oeuvre and situate each element of it within a broader framework, of their own history as well as the history of their chosen medium. It is not only painting that has a broad tradition in which each choice carries weight; the numerous alternative media that have emerged also have it. Prints, artists' books, videos, actions and their documentation, none of these exists in themselves but rather as phenomena in the field of media traditions where recognition continually reverberates. The decision to sign up for one of the many versions of the neo-avant-garde, which developed into genres, is motivated by convention, but inevitably also plays with it. Artists may now oscillate back and forth between media that previously seemed irreconcilable, between various manifestations that used to be seen as either avant-garde or reactionary. Sculptures morph into installations that invade space and are subsequently reformatted to become sculptures again. Performance artists may also make paintings; painters may produce videos.

M HKA, just like many Flemish private collectors, possesses three paintings by Wilhelm Sasnal, in addition to a video work that he himself considers important and a long series of drawings. Each of these is a work unto itself and could have been sold as such, but at the Gwangju Biennale Sasnal showed them as a single coherent work with four interlaced storylines. The M HKA also has a comic book and a board game made by this artist. The passage inside traditions is a role that artists choose for themselves, a casting of themselves that becomes part of their proposal. It lends sharpness to a scene in which interdisciplinarity has become the standard. The same material can simultaneously lead to a giveaway publication for Agnès B and to costly photographs in low quantities for the market. Whereas multiples were long considered derivative material and the uniqueness of the work still remained an implicit basic condition, the basic condition is now the multiple, even in painting, where seriality has become commonplace. The edition is determined as much by practical circumstances – what works best in the market, how much time the maker wants to spend on something – as by the fact that it has become a decision in itself for artists. One still remains a valid option, because this number meets the viewer on an equal footing – that of uniqueness – but five is also almost one in our overpopulated world.

#### 4. A Respectful Relationship with Contemporary Art

When art claimed its independence from the avant-garde by breaking away from the social consensus it also made itself homeless, displaced. Art is no longer about something that is, but about something that might be. The nineteenth-century salon painters were promptly incorporated into the museums. With avant-garde art came a disconnection between the production of art and its societal acceptance, which we might call 'museumisation'. For a long time the best cases were exceptions, from artist-driven early modern art museums such as MoMA in New York and Museum Sztuki in Łódź to that moment in the sixties when the museums' dams were temporarily broken by now legendary exhibitions.

In the last two decades it has finally become common for artists not only to receive a place but also to be able to make their own space in museums. Collecting practice still does not always know how to deal with this. The tendency is still to identify a collection with artworks. If collecting practice wants to retain the context of those artworks, then it expands into collecting installations and stiffening situations into monolithic, quasi-sculptural arrangements of diverse elements in a correct and fixed context. Yet at the same time artists use these same museums as an integral mobile space. Can collecting practice accommodate not only the form but also the spirit of artists' interaction with museum space? Thinking in ensembles might be a beginning.

Currently, an institution's ready-made knowledge of the works in its collection is often limited to an A4 summary provided by its mediation service. This is accompanied by a similarly short text on the artist's biography. Various members of staff keep overviews of roughly the same order in their heads. These are the people who 'know the collection'. Encyclopaedic thinking is a long-lost ambition – in the meantime we have learned that surveys are not feasible,

that they at best produce only a crude map – but the synthetic *modus operandi* of this mindset has lingered. The immediately available information of works in the collection is of the same nature as the information that fills the Internet or other mass media: good syntheses with accidental areas of depth, but without organic connection to more profound insights.

Yet such insights do pass through the institution. When a work is purchased more information becomes available and it is possible to find proof of it in the archives. Perhaps a member of the museum's staff is in contact with the artist at a moment when some problems occur or when a text is being prepared, and sharper insights may therefore remain in his or her personal backpack; perhaps an exhibition with the artist in question is being organised that more thoroughly reveals the consistency and setting of his or her work.

For such things, however, institutions increasingly rely on external specialists: they let external writers write for publications put together by external publishers. Perhaps this seems more professional and efficient, but in practice it means that afterwards the institution itself may not even possess the final digital version of the text. Indeed, final corrections are made in the PDF that is filed with the publisher, graphic designer and printer. The communication with interested parties is not necessarily connected with institutional intelligence. The mediation system may sometimes be interactive and diversified, but it is also a professionally structured instrument that is self-reliant and, in addition, was often created by external partners.

Since the seventies museums have kept themselves obsessively busy with completing surveys of their objects, a task they never seem to be able to complete. They have coupled this survey with an ever more perfectionist conservation and management apparatus. Additional information and insights can be appended to more sophisticated databases, but this is not the core task of the inventories.

The central ambition could also be to gain an understanding of the artists for whom a museum is engaged – a purchase at least gives the impression of engagement – that is in-depth and based on their qualities. It would seem natural that this stimulates further engagement, but it does not always happen. Among its various assets – artists' books, books edited or designed by artists, invitation cards, photographs for which the museum may or may not hold the rights, fragments of stories – the museum could find possibilities for presenting an artist's oeuvre more fully.

The essence of ensemble thinking is that it addresses questions that are otherwise bubbling away at the perimeter of what can be managed and controlled. This is actually what good researchers would do anyway: asking themselves in which setting the object of the research is to be found and to what extent that setting is necessary for the research. Ensemble thinking is a form of mindfulness and self-criticism.

It really should be standard procedure to ask questions about how artists give stature to their oeuvre, how they articulate their own space with the many resources available today or how they aspire to making a social impact and perhaps also consciously enact this beyond what is traditionally seen as their work. The possibility of developing a collection with the kind of images that give tentative answers to those questions will only tighten the focus on the artwork that might have been the point of departure – unless that work was really not a work but a documentation of something else; then the focus will consciously shift away from the mutilated piano by Ben Vautier or Wolf Vostell, which then ceases to be a work of art and becomes the documentation of a fluxus concert.

With this method, artworks are very likely to accrue a broader and more sustainable base of insights. It differs substantially from what is called 'contextualisation', which was a popular way of differentiation in the past through which as yet non-valorised oeuvres were brought to attention, from the standpoint of how they achieved something in a particular situation. This is a relativistic attitude: something derives its meaning from its surroundings, not from its behaviour (which, of course, is informed through interaction with that environment and may also be more easily read from there).

Ensemble thinking is precisely about finding a platform that is as precise as possible and helps focusing on the particularity of such individual behaviour. It asks whether an institution's



assets are optimal for the purpose of understanding artists and their work, and if the presentation and framing of these assets reflect their qualities in an optimal way. It seeks significance not only in individual assets but also in their consistent internal interaction and their 'outward' consistency. This is the opposite of contextualising. It is about the potential 'outward' effects that are embedded in artistic practice and therefore might influence future appearances of a given work.

The ambition is certainly not to make a shift from the presentation of artworks to a documentary space, as often happens nowadays, or from a *catalogue raisonné* of artworks to an extended version where prints and multiples, invitation cards, public statements, exhibition titles and other such things are added. Yet ensemble thinking does question how and to what extent elements from that long list of possibilities come into play, and how much weight they carry.

Sometimes the resulting image is panoramic; sometimes it is just the conscious renunciation of important options, a strict refusal, an understatement that articulates a relaxed way of dealing with things. We can be sure that where an artistic practice itself searched for concentrated forms or syntheses, these will be prioritised anew after all the meandering. Such a reflective glance, which constantly searches for both focus and frame, will turn artists into respected actors. Their actions continue to set the tone, even if questions and discussions about that tone will continue. The task is to always find new connections with artists' activities, a complexity that remains uncertain but that can never be replaced by the most eloquent opinion of the day.

## 5. Responsible Image-Making: The Art Hypothesis

The institutional application of ensemble thinking implies that databases that are rather different from the typical cataloguing software for museums and libraries will become central to the organisation. It might seem as if this approach to art, if realised by the institution, will be just another version of extensive archiving. This is not so. In a certain sense it is even an anti-archival approach. Indeed it does not want to look objectively at everything. It wants to immediately sustain what appears to be especially urgent, necessary and meaningful. It is pro-active and based on choices. It relies on subjectivity and cultivates it not as arbitrariness but on the contrary, as an alternative to the actual arbitrariness and loss of meaning in objectifying methods. It is thus a possible answer to the deficits of encyclopaedic collecting practice, which it considers unnecessary (in a time of pervasive visibility), impossible (in a time of over-capitalisation) and meaningless (because it now seems wrong as a project).

Ensemble thinking in the contemporary art museum relies on engagement and effectively takes the consequences of this. It concretises engagement into 'items' or points of appearance that it finds important. These will often be artworks, but can also be (artists') texts or tools, photographs or moments. It aspires to discover meaningful relationships between the points of appearance of something in which it is itself engaged. It aspires to add 'assets' to each of these points of appearance. These contain formatted possibilities for insight. Sometimes they appear to be informative – what an artist says about an item, in which specific circumstances it appeared for the first time – and sometimes essayistic, for instance describing which insights were formulated by the institution where the item was presented.

Every time an engagement is resumed we search for new insights from the new moment, but at the same time we gather more insights as possible alternative approaches. These are also continuously offered to anyone who wishes to enter into an engagement, becomes interested in an item and wants to further think about it. Ultimately this is not about 'content management' – the managing of a 'content' that is seen as a fact – but about the continual revival of a quest for insights, and about a methodology and discipline through which bridges can be sustained for this purpose.

This has been about inter-subjectivity from the beginning. Institutional engagements must always be sustained by more than one person. It is assumed that this institutional support for ensemble thinking may be extended to many more people far beyond the first setting, those who are called the 'public', 'audience' or 'stakeholders', and thereby to society as a whole. A public cultural institution produces proposals that only make sense if people in the community make them theirs, consider them in their own way, and are involved in them for their own purposes. And, moreover, if the institution presents itself as accountable to them and is open to changing its proposals. It can achieve this through expressing as specifically as possible why and how it once entered into an engagement and how it perceives it at the given moment. This also makes the institution approachable; it is interested in related items and assets that may be added to existing items. It can welcome these and give them a place.

Intersubjectivity is the goal. The institution will therefore ask of researchers working inside or outside it to not only submit results – a text by a writer, an exhibition by a guest curator – but as far as possible also share the more meaningful aspects of the research, so that to begin with the museum itself can be involved, with the people who work there and are in charge of the project, and then society at large. This can create an ecology. Now the same basic information often has to be brought together time and again. With a new system members of staff can share more of their internalised knowledge with their peers, and external researchers can leave behind more of the content in their backpack for the institution that engages them. Also literally, because as authors they can avail themselves of all that material at a later date without having to archive it themselves in ever new electronic formats, and they will be recognised and respected as authors, if even their research, through a creative commons license to which the institution aspires, is in the public domain for non-commercial purposes.

To be able to achieve this the institution must first realise the consequences of its new attitude and not only list what it presents but also motivate why and tell what it has understood in the process. It can only fully live up to this if its actions and thinking merge and if it also tries to formulate the intensity that arises from this double move. Ensembles aspire to be faithful to art projects, but at the same time realise that they are only a continuous attempt at approaching them. They have no ambition to settle into one definitive story. On the contrary, they provide the cross-link for diverse engagements at diverse moments. It is out of this diversity that an evaluation grows. Ensembles are not just aimed at singular art projects but will equally find connections between them, because their meaning is also, and perhaps especially, in such connections.

This leads to an art hypothesis. The institution makes proposals, time and again. Its collection is fuelled by these proposals and by the response to them. Its collection is essentially the connections between these proposals, which gives meaning to its elements, situating them within a broad yet concrete image of what art can be; it consists of insights but also of experience.

We may perhaps compare the art hypothesis, as an alternative to encyclopaedic thinking, with how a landscape painter paints a landscape. He does not bring all the trees of the forest together, but tries to achieve enough 'forest-ness' to infuse the image with enough 'bushiness'. To this purpose he focuses on specific trees in a specific landscape, and still it is for him about the landscape as a whole, the world in which we live.

In contrast to museums in the past, which told a master narrative that proffered itself as being definitive and comprehensive, the art hypothesis of the contemporary institution – more or less conscious and articulated – will always be temporary, because it is only sustainable in its variable continuations, and it will always be partial. The art hypothesis consists of choices that open the horizon onto a broader whole, but are anchored in the here-and-now and depart from the focus of past and present engagements. Through these, a consistency is created from which we can think ahead.

The big structural change is refocusing from an ownership-orientated view of things (that our items must be catalogued) to a commitment to public domain (to how we can fulfil our public function effectively). The museum is thus no longer a place that has to have, or should

have to have, a representative amount of what is 'most important' (and thereby will fail ever more tragically in this world of ever more multiplying and economising); it is a space that strives toward a respect for intensities and the complexity associated with them. For its ensembles, this space will search for anchor points in materiality, but it may also envisage memories or references as items. The ensembles may be a phantom body, of which first a pinkie, then an elbow touches the beholder, a fragment that as *pars pro toto* hints at the whole.

In this way, the institution becomes a potential partner for all the other actors, possibly also for those that deal with property rights, and certainly for the authors, who often benefit from the further insights and memories developed around their items. It is possible for the museum to do this without conflicts of interest; it respects holders of rights and simply looks at where and how its engagements can become part of the public domain. It views its own insights, and those of others who continue to contribute, as much as possible from a Creative Commons perspective, whereby non-commercial use is automatically allowed, provided that proper reference is made.

The institution can also stay much truer to what it can actually handle in its collection, to the presentation of an artistic proposal in its complexity. The possibility of social embedding crucially depends on the insights that can surround items. The institution stands behind UNESCO's thinking regarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. For things, too, it is about the experience and further continuation of the engagement; this is not only true for heritage phenomena such as processions or carillon playing.

The basis of the museum's engagement is then the characteristics of people and societies that cannot be privatised, of insights and memories. That is what the museum focuses on. While the Internet offers an opportunity for interest to grow *bottom-bottom*, without any more talk of the 'up', of a system that should put a value on this interest and put it to work, the museum provides for the sustainability of such 'bottom' ratings. It does so through the magnetic attraction of its engagements, but as a listener rather than as a speaker. It seeks engagements that demand to be tested against the insights that it receives and wants to capture these insights and keep them in circulation to fuel further engagements. It wants to preserve insights and be included in significant relationships. It can only do this by departing from restrictions, however hypothetical and therefore changeable. These are positive constraints, engagements that it finds it must assume; it bases itself upon the same sort of intensities as those to who it gives attention.

The museum is by no means the only actor in this. In an art world where more and more collaborations take place or are even being outsourced – research, curatorship, production and image-making – it is less of an actor than ever, and the commitment translates into attention for what is happening and into respect for what other parties do and understand. It is editor and subeditor, and knows itself to be a service provider, not a content supplier.

This essay was written for *L'internationale*, published by JRP | Ringier in their 'Documents' series, 2012.