

The aesthetically gluttonous may eat with their hands

By Jeroen van der Hulst

At its core, the Networked Collective is a comprehensive exercise, with a large group of people, in interplay and collaborative effort to find the space between making art and displaying it. Individual authorship dissolves in a greater, more or less organised, whole — though, in various ways still relying on more or less specialised labour from each participant. Everyone's traits and talents are churned together and push a production process further. Over the course of five weeks, artists, makers, theoreticians, performers and the like have been coming together every week to work from Thursday to Sunday, and at the end of every day, an exhibition with different and new works has been curated by members of the collective, the gallerists and guest curators. The Networked Collective plays with the question posed by German/Russian theorist Boris Groys, who states that making art is the same as deciding on what is to be displayed as art. And if there is no longer any real difference between making art and displaying it, how is it possible to differentiate between the role of the artist and that of the curator?

In this respect, a gallery space like Dürst Britt & Mayhew is very fitting to be used by a collective such as this one: what is practiced in the back is to be displayed in the front, not unlike, say, a bakery or pastry shop. One could also make the comparison with a traveling circus of changing acts in every town they call on. After all, the Network Collective, initiated by Bas van den Hurk and Jochem van Laarhoven, brought their own circus, figuratively speaking. They landed in The Hague with a wide range of materials — a printing press as the beating heart, tables fashioned from home-made trestles, paper and fabrics galore, and as is tradition with all their on-site projects: a sofa. Comparisons, however, might either overcomplicate or oversimplify what has been taking place in the gallery space — a collective endeavour to produce and to show the decision-making process of getting to an artwork and, subsequently, an exhibition. They make 'network posters', compiled/assembled by those present and willing to participate, for instance. It shows how letting go of certain rules and frameworks requires holding on to others or putting still others into place.

The name Networked Collective is borrowed from Nigerian critic and curator Okwui Enwezor's text 'The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis'. In it, Enwezor delineates how collectivity, both as praxis and a state of being, causes a shift in traditional artistic production: artistry, authorship, and the authenticity of a work of art no longer have to be attributed to an individual, but emerge from collective act(s) across disciplinary lines. Enwezor goes on to define different types of collective formations: first, the fixed groups that work together for a prolonged period of time, which can be considered a single entity — also in terms of authorship. Second, the *networked collectives*, which "tend to emphasize a flexible, non-permanent course of affiliation, privileging collaboration on project basis than on a permanent alliance". In the Networked Collective, different artists leave different traces across the whole. What is made in the first week, may, in part, return in works made and/or exhibited far further down the line. Echoes of authors, in the way that stories and storytelling also relies on retelling and reshaping existing tales, which is not a caveat on authenticity. It is the practice of it.

As Van Laarhoven says, the protagonist in this exhibition project is the printing press they have installed in the back space of the gallery, which serves as an engine room. The apparatus made its way to the collective seemingly by coincidence. During a residency at Frans Masereel Centrum in Belgium, the collective had worked with a printing press and Van Laarhoven remembered an uncle who owned the same model. The collective were offered to take it into use ever since. Many facets of the Networked Collective seem deceptively coincidental, but it requires planning and dedication to allow things to emerge as if from nowhere. Note the selfmade trestles. They could have been bought, instead they made them specifically for their own ends.

Any collaborator uses the press to print on paper, card, fabrics, scraps of old books, other images, flowers, to name but a few — I ventured to list all the objects and materials I saw when I was in the space, but that proved futile. This very printing press was part of the reason I have been enamored by the project from the outset; the printing press is a forebear to the information age, allowing a

rapid-fire dissemination of information and images — though one can wonder whether this printing press is more akin to capturing and holding in place, rather than dissemination. In its current form it is unmistakably playful, simple, and just about anything can go through its mechanism. The Looney Tunes character of Foghorn Leghorn is a recurrent image across the floor of the gallery space. “A reviewer once mistook one of our prints as bearing the image of Foghorn Leghorn. It didn’t, but we decided to start using it from then on out, so here we are.” The Networked Collective make their own rules.

Prints are used and reused by whomever, and the collective does its best to keep track of who has made what, and they also keep a photographic record of all the goings on. For instance, Katerina Sidorova, one of the collaborating artists, decided to use the printing press to make tank tops, while others worked on floating paper kimonos.

I join a session to make a set of network posters and to exhibit them in an exhibition at the end of the day. I find a few sheets that have been imbued in the printing press with flowers that were picked along the street. I have neither picked the flowers nor have I put them through the printing press. It reminds me of a medieval tapestry and I offer it up to be used in the network poster, my contribution was the mere selection of that sheet of paper.

“I do use scissors. The network means letting go of doubt”, Van Laarhoven says as he kneels down to cut a semi-circle out of a big print. It is a statement that sticks with me, as the pair of scissors began to symbolize an unscrupulousness that is worthy of envy. This lesson in doubt and letting go is one of the keystones of *Envision this is part XXXVII of an ensemble that is no longer necessarily ceremonial*. The only way to decipher any meaningful difference between making art and displaying art is to distinguish individual parts of the mechanism. Sometimes that means cutting out a semi-circle, and showing other participants that that, too, is allowed.

And the works are for sale — we are, after all, in a gallery. One might wonder if working towards sellable works could be counterintuitive for a collaborative effort to make for the sake of making. Though, I think that in itself is an oversimplification of the project. Yes, this collaboration concerns labour that should be remunerated. “Selling the artworks means the project can be circular, allowing participants to break even first and foremost,” Van den Hurk explains. The point is that the project is also an experiment in opening up the processes that lead artists down the path of deciding when something is ‘finished’ or able to be displayed, an interplay of serendipity and decisions. This is also a political space. If anything, that is the labour that the artists exercise here: sovereignty over the decision-making before and after the act of display. Puzzling together the posters is an exciting process, reacting on one another as if in a jamsession. We end up with three posters, one of which is unanimously deemed to be “rubbish”, and a triptych is selected from prints found in the back space, which, again in a deceptively coincidental way, are stunning.

On my last visit, I drop in as several visitors are also in the gallery space — some at work already, others on a tour of the space. The line between visitor and collaborator seems blurred all the more, or rather, the keen visitor might automatically want to participate. “I’m aching to make something now,” one visitor exclaims. “And I insist you join as well!”, she gestures towards me.

The collective has been at work making books from the materials formerly strewn across the floor in the back space of the gallery. To create these books has a bifurcated effect: a new work is made each time, sensuous objects that serve as open invitations to be held and leafed through. Or, as a fellow visitor put it: “These books have the same effect on me that record stores have. You see someone flipping through a box next to you and you’re anxious for them to leave so you can swoop in to rifle through the same box.” But aside from being lush objects for the aesthetically gluttonous, the books also serve as a document to the work and exhibition experiments that have taken place, traces of activity, of aesthetic choices and musings, of presence. “That back cover, because it has been touched by ten hands, gains meaning. Something that is formerly just the back of something now becomes something in its own right,” Van den Hurk mentions.

A week earlier, the Networked Collective spent the whole day working at a collaborative performance dinner, conducted by chef-cum-artist Loran van de Wier. Tablecloths have become literal canvasses, for flavours, textures, colours, fragrances, all smeared, applied, served, touched, tasted and eventually rolled through the printing press. Van de Wier made an effort to let people taste The Hague, briny and salty flavours, foam reminiscent of the sea. Mousses and cremes formed three-dimensional works on the table cloths and sheets as the food was served, a salute to Romanian artist Daniel Spoerri, perhaps. The traces from that Sunday's performance are carefully placed along the walls of the workspace at the back of the gallery. "We're not quite sure what will happen if we hang them on the wall, they've been laying here to dry."

I am struck by how the uneaten food is now drying into a tablecloth. Groys says: "The artistic installation does not circulate. Rather, it installs everything that usually circulates in our civilization: objects, texts, films, etc." Or, in this case, bits of radishes, perhaps a colourful salty mousse. To install means to freeze-frame that which otherwise flows outward, inward and across. The elements that have allowed *Envision this is part XXXVII of an ensemble that is no longer necessarily ceremonial* to breathe and flow all have to do with the parameters of what is allowed to dry up and be fixed, and what gets recirculated into the mix. It is an exercise in frolicking in existing frameworks, contorting them, smashing them, but only if need be. "To install a law is to break one," Groys says. Meaning, that to put rules into place, first, you have to find yourself outside of some other rules.

Sometimes the final act is letting moist smudges dry to see what comes of it at the other end. Over the past five weeks, Dürst Britt & Mayhew has been the site of remixing a plethora of elements that appear when making and displaying art, a look behind the scenes in the artists' studio, allowing authorship to breathe between makers and works to emerge as pleasant, active, stunning, and also rubbish. Because to make is to move into the unknown, to act without knowing what comes next, and to sift through the traces each time. The gallery space has been performed to its full potential by the Networked Collective, look at all the traces left behind. Whether to then display them is another matter entirely.

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