01 2002

Services: A working-group exhibition

Andrea Fraser

1993 saw a sudden rush of exhibitions not particularly well defined or consistent except for the fact that they either called for artists to generate new work for specific situations or showcased the results of work undertaken in such a fashion. This form of artistic activity began, very loosely and at first only for practical purposes, to be referred to as a project; artists were being invited to "do a project for" a particular exhibition. Sonsbeek in Arnheim; Unité, an exhibition organized in the uninhabited half of a Le Corbusier public housing building in Firminy; Kontext Kunst at the Neue Galerie in Graz; On taking a normal situation, the exhibition for Antwerp '93 at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst; Sculpture Chicago; and Viennese Story at the Wiener Secession consisted entirely of "project-work", while the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennial included a number of artists working in along similar lines. At the same time, many of the artists participating in these exhibitions also felt an increase in invitations to do individual projects with organizations.

In the fall of 1993, I began meeting with Michael Clegg, Mark Dion and Julia Scher in New York to discuss the problems that we and artists we knew encountered while participating in the exhibitions of the previous year. These problems ranged from the

very practical "problem of getting paid" to experiences of censorship and concerns over the loss of autonomy. In addition to being expected to undertake site-specific projects for little or no fee, artists were routinely expected to design invitations, posters, advertisements and catalogs, write catalog texts or prepare sections of catalogs without compensation. Artists with policies not to undertake projects without receiving a fee, were treated as "difficult" and set against other artists in exhibitions. Sometimes artists were promised fees, only to be told after the exhibition opened that those fees were considered part of the project budgets and had already been used up in production. Artists' budgets were suspended when their process oriented projects took longer to complete than the duration of the temporary exhibitions they were commissioned for. Artists returned to exhibition sites a few weeks after the opening to find that their works were not maintained, not functioning, or even had been removed. Or, at the end of exhibitions, curators de-installed projects without consulting the artist, effectively destroying them. Or at the end of exhibitions, organizations refused to return de-installed materials. Artists undertook transitory projects to find out after the shows came down that they had no rights to the documentation produced by the organizations (or had to pay for access to it). Or, after clearly stating research requirements and critical orientation in the proposal, projects were canceled midway when the material became too sensitive or difficult. Or, curators claimed the right to review and edit material prior to presentation.

In addition to these specific experiences, there was a general problem: at the end of a very active year of producing work for well publicized and prestigious exhibitions, many of the artists participating found themselves exhausted and in debt. The institutional and critical support of which so many exhibitions

should be evidence not only did not translate into material or even adequate practical support, but in many ways functioned to limit such support. It was as if many of us were being expected to work in two jobs: one for compensation, the other on a voluntary basis. The work - both in the sense of labor and art products - we did for the specific sites and situations defined by curators often either could not be transferred to the art market or could so only at the expense of seriously misrepresenting the project's principles. Sometimes this was an intended effect of the nature of the projects themselves, particularly when the projects functioned to develop a process with no material form. Even when project results took a material form, the more specific the work was to its site or situation - and, thus, the more successful it was - the more of its meaning, relevance and interest would be lost outside of the context for which it was produced.

While many of these problems obviously stemmed from a lack of material support for project work, critical acceptance had created a demand for projects by cultural organizations, that was clearly not only a demand for particular individual artists. This demand provided project artists with the prospect of a certain leverage and for the possibility of acting collectively to use this leverage, to represent and safeguard our material interests as well as our interest in fostering conditions conducive to the development of what we believed was an important form of artistic activity.

The artists meetings in the fall of 1993 produced a questionnaire on preferred working conditions sent out to thirty-some artists who engage in project work. Our intention was to create a data-base that would provide artists with more confidence in making certain demands and which could also serve as the foundation of a general contract to be developed by a larger group we hoped to

convene. At the same time, Helmut Draxler and I began to develop our proposal for Services.

Services was conceived as an on-going project. Its manifestation at the Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg was to be the first of what we hoped would be bi-annual meetings sponsored by different contemporary art organizations. The meetings and its accompanying installation - which we called a "working-group exhibition" - would be the basis for a continuing forum at which artists and curators involved with project work could develop a framework for their activities that would integrate the practical and the theoretical, encompassing material and political as well as artistic concerns. The documentation of historical and contemporary activity collected to support these discussions, along with videotapes of the meetings themselves, would grow into an easily copied and distributed archive made available through the installations accompanying the working-group discussions - all of which were to contain photocopying machines - and afterward maintained by the various sponsoring organizations. The installation would also circulate by itself between working-group sessions and to organizations without the resources to sponsor meetings. In addition, we hoped a bi-annual publication could be generated containing summaries or edited transcripts of working-group discussions along with presentations of the related historical material collected for the installations.

After completing the proposal and confirming participants, Helmut Draxler and I wrote up a working group program and invited participants to select one session at which to make a short, informal presentation. These presentations were not to be complete descriptions of projects, but were to focus on the problems or solutions a particular project posed for the conditions indicated by the session's topic. Participants were also asked to

bring documentation of projects they intended to discuss as contributions to the installation. A few artists who were not able to participate - Mark Dion, Group Material, Louise Lawler and Julia Scher - also contributed material. Instead of complete documentation of particular projects we requested specific materials: the letter of invitation or initial proposal; the contract or letter of agreement; and summary documentation of the project itself. The aim of this selection was to put the project in the context of the relations under which it was undertaken, so as to be able to consider how either those relations may have determined the development of the project or, conversely, how the project influenced the relations in which it was produced.

Like this contemporary material, the historical material collected in the installation was oriented toward a re-integration of the issues and strategies developed by artists with the conditions and relations of artistic production. The historical material focused primarily on the activities of the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) in New York between 1969 and 1973. The AWC was probably the most significant post-war American attempt by artists to collectively redefine both the material conditions of their practices and its social function - particularly in terms of relations to public and private art presenting organizations. Many of the policy changes the AWC pressed museums for - free admission, equal representation of artists, museum professionals and patrons on museum boards, royalties paid to artists when their work is exhibited, and substantial representation of minority artists in collections and exhibitions were never realized. The AWC did however spur the development of community cultural centers, artist-run exhibition spaces, and political and activist art practices - particularly institutional critique. It also, through a resistance to feminist issues, contributed to the emergence of an independent

women's art movement. Guidelines for museum presentation, contracts for commercial art galleries and the re-sale of art work developed by the AWC were presented as possible models for project contracts. The possible influence of the AWC's demands on the emergence of the artist's fee - and thus on the development of art practice as service provision - was also considered.

In addition to the material on the AWC, the historical portion of the installation also included documentation of the conciliation of Hans Haacke's 1971 Guggenheim show; documentation of the groups Artists Meeting For Cultural Change, Fashion Moda and Internationales Künstlergremium; and texts and documentation of works by artists such as Michael Asher, Christian Boltanski, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren and the Guerrilla Art Action Group.

The working-group meetings and installation in Lüneburg were to function as a model, not only for Services as an on-going project but also for the role of exhibitions and art presenting organizations relative to project based practices. In this sense, Services was motivated both by a critique of exhibitions and symposia and by the project work itself for an alternative to art organizations defined by their functions as exhibitors of art objects.

The problem which many artists engaged in project work are confronted with when invited to participate in exhibitions is that many projects do not exist as objects or as installations possible to reconstruct. Services addressed this "problem" as a problem, not of projects, but of exhibitions as such. To the extent that exhibitions demand objects (or environments) to be encountered in a physical form, they marginalize practices which are not production based. Given the fact that more and more artists profess to be engaged in issue based work, there seems to be an increasingly insupportable

contradiction between the concerns of artists and the objects they produce for display in art exhibition spaces.

What can art exhibition be if not an occasion to encounter works of art in their physical or temporal form? While video tapes provided Services with a temporal dimension that "justified" its existence as an exhibition (rather than just a publication), our interest was in trying to introduce a physical dimension which would revolve not around art objects but around the social interactions the space would become a frame for. The table around which the working-group met remained in the space for people to use while reading and talking about the documentary material they could take down from the pin-board walls. In this sense, we hoped that the working group sessions and the video tapes of them would function to initiate continuing discussions among those using the space during the course of the installation.

From conception it was clear that Services would only be appropriate for organizations established to serve artists and other art professionals - cultural constituencies - and not for organizations addressing themselves to the "general public". Introducing this distinction as a consideration in artistic and curatorial activity was one of the underlying premises of Services.

Most contemporary art exhibitions, regardless of their sponsoring organizations, tend to conceive the function of purveying information about contemporary artistic activity to a "general public" more or less as an end in it itself. Beyond this level of information, the question of what, specifically, particular artists or works can provide particular audiences is rarely addressed. When it is addressed, it is often on a level of content which misrecognizes the fact that the knowledge of contemporary art codes required to apprehend that content is not distributed equally and may not be a

possession of the very people who are supposed to be served by the work. Many of the artists and curators involved in Services try to deal with this problem either by attempting to by-pass art sites and art codes (along with art objects), or by addressing them reflexively, as such - in either case, taking the site of the work rather as a means to intervene in a range of social experiences of immediate relevance to particular audiences. If these strategies become the mode of addressing the "general audience" of such organizations as municipal museums and public art commissions, or the specific communities accessible through them, what of the cultural constituencies' institutions such as ICAs and Kunstvereine are founded to serve? Services offered one response to this question: turn the exhibition into a forum for addressing issues of immediate practical concern to the art professionals and art students who constitute the primary audience of cultural constituency organizations.

In proposing this function for cultural constituency organizations, Services also, implicitly, constituted a critique of the group exhibition and the public symposium as mechanisms through which such organizations attempt to fulfill their mission. The misrecognition of specialized audiences inherent in programs conceived as purveyors of information to a "general public", effectively limits those programs to functioning as sites of symbolic struggles among producers. To the extent that programming is not determined by immediate concerns for particular audiences, that "general public" is reduced to no more than adherents, subscribers and investors that art professionals compete for in struggles for legitimacy and prestige. Every public juxtaposition of individual artistic positions on panels and in shows which invites viewers to compare, contrast and judge artists against each other reinscribes artists and works in this competitive structure, reducing them at

the same time - regardless of intended effects - to their formal or strategic differences.

What did Services accomplish? Re-reading the proposal, what appears most obvious is what Services did not accomplish. Services did not result in any particular resolutions on the practical problems encountered by artists engaging in project work. Nor did it produce a general contract, a policy, or an association which could lobby for the interests of project artists. Services did not come to any conclusions on questions of the threat posed to artistic autonomy by professionalization or by the construction of cultural organizations as "clients". Nor did Services get to the root of conflicts among artists, curators, cultural organizations and audiences. Services was not, through the material collected for the installation, able to provide a coherent history of the transformation of relations among artists, curators and cultural organizations; of the professionalization of curating; of the artists' fee or of the role particular phenomena played in such developments. Finally, Services did not establish the meaning or relevance of the concept of service provision for contemporary artistic practice.

Were these the aims of Services? In a retrospect which maybe influenced as much by revision as by reflection I would say they were not, at least, the projects' primary goals. The goal of Services was finally much more simple and in my mind fundamental; something which is, further, the condition of the accomplishment of all these other aims. More than a forum for any of the specific issues introduced in the proposal, Services was conceived as a model for an alternative to what appeared to us to be the available sites within the field of art. I would say now that the creation of such an alternative is not external to the issues introduced in the proposal. Rather, it is the condition for their accomplishment.

Above all, Services was a response to what I see as a very basic problem: almost all of the available sites in the field of art, both physical and discursive, are fundamentally oriented toward the production of belief in the value of various forms of cultural production - artistic and critical; that is, toward legitimation. One could say that all exhibitions, whether in commercial or non-commercial spaces, construct their visitors as potential collectors. More precisely, they construct their visitors as people who will or will not invest their economic, cultural or social capital in particular practices. Similarly, the addressees of art magazines and symposia tend to be constructed as subscribers or potential subscribers, not of publications or events, but to the positions taken by writers and speakers. The point here is not to construct an opposition between promotion and critique. The point is that there are almost no sites within the artistic field in which producers address each other as producers according, not to the intellectual or artistic positions they take on cultural issues, but to the positions they occupy within a field of cultural production as determined by the social conditions of that field and the social relations which structure it. The absence of such sites has the effect, not only of ensuring the atomization of producers in competitive struggles for professional legitimacy, but also of limiting the development of a framework in which the function and effect - not only the symbolic value - of artistic practices can be evaluated.

In a certain way I would say that the fundamental ambition of Services was to create a forum in which participating artists and curators, as well as visitors to the installation, would reflect on project work specifically - as well as art practice generally - not only in terms of symbolic systems, thematized or formalized, but also in terms of the conditions and relations which determine them and

which they may resist or reproduce. The practical problems which arise as a result of project work, and the clear relation between those problems and the strategies of individual works, created a basis for such reflection. And that reflection, in turn, would be the condition of achieving a meaningful resolution of practical problems.

It may seem obvious that any effort by artists and curators to resolve their practical problems would require that they address each other as producers according to the common practical problems they endeavor to resolve. What may be less obvious is that many of those problems themselves stem from, not the absence of such forums as such, but from the structure which prevents them from developing the orientation of artistic sites toward the function of legitimation. The reluctance of organizations to provide adequate fees, for example, can be seen to stem from the fact that most cultural institutions still see their role as being one of identifying, publicizing and consecrating artistic tendencies - a service from which artists should later profit, with the help of gallerists, through the sale of thus legitimized work.

The project Services had two basic motivating circumstances. One was explicitly stated in the proposal and dealt with in the working group discussions: the practical and material problems encountered by artists engaged in project work. The other was never explicitly stated but was, perhaps even more fundamental, determining the form of the project as well as the material collected for the installation: that is, the absence of sites within the artistic field in which cultural producers address each other as producers. Most of the aspects of the project introduced in the proposal may not have been developed or accomplished. The historical material gathered for the installation may have been inconclusive. The concept of Services itself was never really even discussed. Yet despite all of

these apparent failings I would say the project was a success. It exists as a model for a forum which is, I believe, the condition of possibility for the accomplishment of these other aims. In retrospect I would say that this could only ever have been its objective goal.

[from: Beatrice von Bismarck, Diethelm Stoller, Ulf Wuggenig (eds.), *Games, Fights, Collaboration. Das Spiel von Grenze und Überschreitung*, Stuttgart: Cantz 1996]