

GROUP-WORK 2.0

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INTRODUCTION: ON THE IDEOLOGIES OF GRADUATE EXHIBITION

In her 2011 essay, “On the Socio-Economic Role of the Art Exhibition,” art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann contends that the exhibition of art “marks a decisive point in the history of individualization.”¹ Artist, artwork, and audience alike enact an “increasing valorization of the individual,” which binds them to the processes of production and consumption that form their lives.²

For our contribution to the 2012 Graduate Thesis Exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *grupa o.k.* set out to test her premise. How and why we decided to carry out this project here, in the context of an institution and exhibition committed (as so many are) to the production of individuals, is the task of the following pages to describe.

Titled GROUP-WORK, our section includes twenty-eight artists, each graduating this year, in seven self-selected and self-organizing groups. Formed by students here at SAIC, these seven groups have different interests and social structures. Some came together on the basis of shared theoretical interests; some derive from the camaraderie of artists working in a single discipline or medium; others were based in friendships that have grown into generative conversations, if not shared opinion or form. Still others are new alliances: students who joined forces hoping they might preserve some autonomy by working together.

¹ Dorothea von Hantelmann, “On the Socio-Economic Role of the Art Exhibition,” in Juan Gaitán, Nicolaus Schafhausen, and Monika Szewczyk, eds. *Cornerstones*. Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Sternberg Press, 2011: 270.

² von Hantelmann, 268.

When Mary Jane Jacob and her team at SAIC invited us to contribute to this exhibition, visions of past student shows, juried exhibitions, and crowded art fairs flashed before our eyes. These disorienting scenes, over- and underwhelming at once, were what we sought to avoid reproducing here. But was it possible (we asked ourselves) to curate such an exhibition—the result of so many competing interests and ideas, hopes and cynicisms—without replicating the troubles of those past exhibitions? What room was there to work differently? We accepted the challenge in order to find out.

We began from the idea that angling for themes amongst the productions of the graduating students was more or less a doomed proposition. Gone are the days of the Bauhaus, where every student pursued the same principles, seen to be universal, amongst a well-defined range of mediums. The contemporary art school, and MFA graduate programs in particular, tend instead towards the highly specialized or individuated artist—and this is no less true of SAIC than any other art school. Any theme, especially one imported by people only slowly coming to know the works at hand, was bound to be specious in such environs. Instead we focused our attention on what the artists with whom we would work inarguably shared: they were students, at this institution, graduating in this moment, and each participating in this graduate exhibition and no other. These were no small likenesses.

What was clear to us from the start was that no valid effort toward achieving such a project could be made without considering first, historically and critically, the particular character of graduate education and graduate thesis exhibitions, and especially how those things have played out over the decades at SAIC. From what complex of conditions had we (all of us invested in the project of arts education) arrived at this spectacular, and yet so often incoherent, format of display? What were the criteria of its success or failure? And how might the decision at SAIC to include outside curators in this process potentially open that format to new possibilities and new realizations—not only for graduate exhibitions alone, but about the project of arts education in general?

Attending to those histories confirmed our intuition that dominant styles of (dis)organization and display in graduate exhibitions were not necessary but contingent. The form was historical, and not in the nature of things. Encouraged not infrequently by colleagues to recall that, “This is a graduate exhibition” (we hadn’t forgotten), we found ourselves thinking, in response, “Yes, but what’s *that?*” Absent a stable ontology of graduate exhibitions, we were left with a pure reproduction of their habitual forms, which is to say, ideology; this will come clearer in the second section.

Our research—which took the form of reading and digging through boxes, but also many conversations with students and professors at the school—also formed our curatorial approach, which aimed to assemble an exhibition against the grain of individualism (about which we will have more to say below), emphasizing instead group, collective, or collaborative work. A peculiar twist to this emphasis is that it meant hunting amongst the graduating students for complex images of our own collaboration and conditions of employment—we are two people, a curator and an art historian, working and producing as one for this undertaking.

The words that follow derive, with only a few changes, from a presentation we made at the school on December 8, 2011, in which we aimed to present our initial findings and ideas. After setting out a critical history of graduate exhibitions, we will summarize the exhibitionary proposals that resulted, as well as some consecutive thoughts on how those ideas have played out in practice over the last few months, in the studios and meeting rooms, if not yet in the grand space of the Sullivan galleries.

THE GRADUATE EXHIBITION

Postgraduate degrees in general belong to the long history of education: to studies in Law, Medicine, and Theology at medieval European universities, when it sometimes took twelve years to accomplish a Masters’ degree. The Masters of Fine Arts is by comparison quite young. The first MFAs were granted in 1940 at the University of Iowa

and at SAIC³—though schools like SAIC had provided informal credentials for exceptional students for years—and they spread quickly throughout the United States and elsewhere. The main significance of the postgraduate degree at that time was that they licensed the holder to teach, and this was the case at SAIC around the time of its accreditation by North Central Association (NCA) in 1936, and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) in 1944. Over the decades that followed the degree became, if not universal for working artists, at least the dominant path. In his momentous book *On (Surplus) Value In Art*, German critic Diederich Diederichsen writes, “Fewer and fewer professional artists are ‘outsiders’ who acquire their artistic education through romantic involvement in ‘life’ and then go on to invest that productive power ... Generally speaking, the curriculum vitae of artists increasingly resemble those of other highly qualified knowledge workers.”⁴

The graduate exhibition at SAIC is a more recent development than the degree. In the 1981-82 NCA/NASAD Joint Critique, the committee chided the school for its lack of exhibition space for graduates, and the absence of an exhibition requirement as part of degree qualification.⁵ They wrote, “The lack of exhibition space for the graduate program is a serious shortcoming. Master of Fine Arts Degree programs typically require a thesis exhibition in lieu of a written thesis in other disciplines. A suitable permanent facility should be found to allow for ongoing exhibitions of graduate portfolios.”⁶ In its 1991 *Self-Study Report*, the school responded: “A master of fine arts inaugural exhibition was held in 1984, and the thesis requirement was established in 1985. The exhibition is held each spring off-campus in a donated facility. Ongoing exhibitions of graduate work are held in Gallery 2 established in 1984-85. However, the lack of a permanent exhibition space sufficient to accommodate the annual MFA thesis

³ Annual Report, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1940: 40.

⁴ Diederich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value In Art*. Rotterdam: Witte de With and Sternberg Press, 2009: 34.

⁵ Self-Study Report, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1991.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 23.

exhibition and the final BFA exhibition, and the expectation that the School will be able to annually secure a donated space for the year-end exhibitions, remains a concern.”⁷

And in a section titled “Exhibitions and Events,” the School asserted, “With the inauguration six years ago of the MFA Thesis exhibition, the School began to address the need for a final assessment of student work at graduation as well as the need for students to experience exhibition procedures.”⁸ If such thesis exhibitions are typical amongst MFA programs, their import remains ambiguous—how does such a final assessment function pedagogically? Is it possible to fail one’s thesis exhibition? How does critique work at this late stage? And what about the queer overlay of educational aims and public display—do these things fit comfortably together?

Those were the questions on Julian’s mind in 2009, when, after seeing the graduate exhibitions at California College of the Arts and the San Francisco Art Institute, he reflected on the form on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s *Open Space* blog,

The end of the spring term at art schools is marked by multiple convocations—symposia, commencements, barbecues, brunches, et cetera—none more charged and peculiar than the graduate exhibition. A vast amount of effort, skilled thought, time and energy is expended on these events, by students, faculty and event organizers. And yet the exhibitions are as a rule ambiguous: grand, chaotic marketplaces where uneven intentions, practices and audiences converge upon one another.

What is a graduate exhibition anyways? Who is it for, and what status achieved by the artworks it includes? Its origin would seem to run very deep into the history of art education, to the moment when art study became the province of academies, rather than craft or guild apprenticeships.

It seems grad exhibitions reach back at least to the origins of the Salon, which began when the professors of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris hauled out the paintings of recent graduates of the École for a semi-public comparison at the Salon Carré in 1673. Such salons would become a vital staging-ground for public judgment in

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*, 301.

the 18th century, as well as an important counter-force to the museums and noble collections. (The very idea of a public sphere emerges from precisely these situations.) Compare the contemporary grad show to the engraving of this Salon of 1699—a grad show of sorts, after all—and a number of differences immediately appear.

Rather than a dense and cacophonous visual field, the contemporary grad exhibitions often hive their students into corners, zones or stalls, not unlike those of art fairs. This organization removes comparison from the visual field, and therefore obviates any possible, meaningful relationships among works by different artists. Artists too have increasingly insisted on determining the conditions of their exhibition, arranging works into constellations that aim to defy or compensate for their status as mere objects. An effect of this is that each artist is individuated, and exhibition is foiled as a frame for critical judgment; each artwork is defined by its intention to stand alone.

So too is critique assumed largely to happen anterior to exhibition, amongst the adepts in the studios. Public debate, such as it occurs, is baffled by the spaces of exhibition, funneled down hallways and scattered amongst cubicles. Charles Baudelaire cut his teeth in his twenties writing about the Salons critically. In contrast these modern Salon-like events—MFA shows—are largely ceremonial culminations, secular bar mitzvahs.

On the other hand, a curious visitor will discover that curators and gallerists do sometimes use grad shows to prowl for new artists. The demands of pedagogy dovetail too harmoniously at times with the logic of the market. Which is not to say that many succeed in getting shows or gallery representation from the event—but to say that this is the deceptive promise of the grad exhibition's fair-like form.⁹

Faced with the prospect of curating in this context, we revisited this piece with renewed seriousness. To summarize our criticisms: It is not the market as such that is the problem, or not the market alone, but rather what the market demands of art and exhibition alike: that is *individuation*, individualism. As Dorothea von Hantelmann has suggested, the exhibition of art as such is the machine for the production of the bourgeois individual,¹⁰ and perhaps (we might argue) the graduate exhibition has been this above all. Moreover, the descriptions above suggest that this individuation has

⁹ Julian Myers, "On Graduate Exhibitions," *SFMOMA | Open Space*, May 20, 2009 [<http://blog.sfmoma.org/2009/05/on-graduate-exhibitions/>]

¹⁰ von Hantelmann, 266-277.

historically created a politics of space and territory: each individual is accorded their studio at school and their plot of land in the thesis show; each in turn is “made an artist” by their possession and habitation of those spaces.

The apportionment of space is never far from the issue of money. The history of the school in the last five decades is the story of the real estate market—the changing exhibition spaces, studios, and student housing that form the life of the school and the experience of the students that inhabit them, decade after decade. So too does art education hinge on the issue of money. The birth and growth of the MFA follows closely along with the development of a culture of consumer debt and finance in the United States. Witness for instance the example of Fannie Mae: an agency created by the US Government during the New Deal to fund mortgages and student loans in 1968 became a publicly traded company, before playing their central role in the collapse of the housing market in 2008.¹¹ The nature of graduate study follows this privatization of student debt.

Diedrichsen summarizes this history as a shift away from the idea, established in the American New Deal, of artists as civil servants or government employees.¹² (This model still applies in much of Europe, he avers, though in the current atmosphere of austerity even this is changing rapidly, to one where students become defined by their participation in the market, as creditors.) In a market where many students have taken loans—essentially a wager against one’s potential future earnings—the issue of the value of an education is emblemized, among other things, by the apportionment of territory, in the forms of graduate studios and graduate thesis exhibition alike.

PROPOSALS AND CONTRADICTIONS

These circumstances have shaped the form and ontology of the graduate exhibition. It seems to us an open question whether SAIC’s drive to innovate this form, by developing

¹¹ Rob Alford, “What are the Origins of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae?” *George Mason University’s History News Network*, September 18, 2008. <http://hnn.us/articles/1849.html>

¹² Diederichsen, 34-5.

it into a curated exhibition, holds the potential of resisting this politics of exhibitionary space, or if it will just reorganize its operations of speculation, individuation, and territory in a different way. It's probably the latter, of course—and even if our project were completely successful, the episodic nature of the guest curator position limits the value of any achievement to a single instance, whereas any substantial reorganization of these dynamics would require persistence and elaboration over years. Still, we aimed to work against certain reflexes and assumptions, with the idea that, at the very least, it might serve the artists and practices better.

Our response to our understanding of the situation took three principal forms: 1) we aimed to pressure individualism by creating frames for collaborative, group, or collective articulation; 2) we endeavored to work against the hiving off of territories to individuals in favor of creating shared spaces, with the added benefit of the comparative visual fields so valuable to the Salon; and 3) we aimed (both for ourselves and the “curatorial fellows” with whom we’d work) to resist the habitual positions of curators as auteurs, or managers organizing from above, or (on the opposite end of the spectrum) as the facilitators for artists’ hallowed impulses, organizing from below.

The first proposal concerned the organization of the MFA students with whom we would work. Our selections—which drew on ongoing conversations in the studios, in addition to the students’ applications—focused on those who articulated themselves in relation to other students, and purposefully not on our own taste, or any perceived content, theme, or aesthetic. We emerged from the process of selection with seven groups that had more or less advanced their own candidacy for our section of the exhibition. These groups were then offered a certain collective autonomy within their bounds, with the conditions that individual decisions would be submitted to group discourse and critique. We also (following our second proposal) suggested that each group imagine its space as common and relational, rather than simply subdividing their territories according to the individualizing logic of the exhibition at large.

As we may well have expected from the argument we advanced above, the greatest struggles in the last months have concerned the prizes of space and territory. Wanting to preserve the integrity and self-organization of our groups, we frequently found ourselves in the unlikely position of needing to defend their territory from external incursions. In a confounding turn, the territorialization of graduate exhibition had indeed been recast at a different level; a softening of boundaries amongst individual students in the groups demanded a fierce hardening of those territories at the level of curatorial practice and negotiation. Yet we found ourselves bound in process to traverse the contradiction: we yielded the purity of our critical position to preserve (what we saw as) our students' democracy.

We defined our curatorial position (and here we move to our third proposal) in this process as equals, critics and co-conspirators; the curatorial fellows with whom we worked, Ionit Behar, Natalie Clark, Michaela Hansen, and Laura-Caroline Johnson, enacted a somewhat different role (which in December we conceptualized, in a way that now seems to us somewhat comically over-determined, from the anarchist anthropology of Pierre Clastres). Allied with particular groups, they acted both inside and outside their discursive operations, as both advocates for the groups' proposals in the greater exhibition, and as narrators of their process. The texts included in this volume portray this activity from their perspective. It has been no easy task in the last months to prevent this structure from slipping back by reflex into a sort of hierarchical and bureaucratic format, with the curators enacting the unhappy consciousness of middle management. But enacting some different curatorial position was our scheme, and we've stuck with it as best we've been able.

The research we conducted at the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection and Ryerson & Burnham Libraries is brought to bear in the exhibition in a few different ways, each intended to build connections among contemporary forms of group-work, and those from the institution's past. Two micro-exhibitions, curated by Michaela Hansen with *grupa o.k.*, draw inspiration and materials from the Flasch collection (see her descriptions on page ###). And interleaved throughout our groups' spaces will be

photographs drawn from the institutional archives at the Ryerson, documenting exhibitions, studios, pageants, parties, club activities, and protests from the school's last century, thereby binding group activity in the present to its past forms. In this way, we hope to make visible the elaborations of social life at the school as a rich and persistent counter-thread to the individuations demanded by the systems of art education and graduate exhibition alike.

In the pages that follow, the curatorial fellows' introductions to each group are followed by pages contributed by the artists themselves. For the last sections, we have compiled a set of excerpts from texts that drove this project and our thinking, and (though as we write the gallery installations have yet to manifest) we will include installation photographs that document how these groups have ultimately resolved the project of group-work in exhibition.