

"Conversation: Kathryn Andrews, Gaylen Gerber, Alex Klein," *First Among Equals*, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2013

Conversation

KATHRYN ANDREWS GAYLEN GERBER ALEX KLEIN

KATHRYN ANDREWS: For me the starting question is one about the degree to which through the exhibition you were trying to construct an idea of collaboration or cooperation that is somehow unusual in relation to traditional constructs of those terms.

ALEX KLEIN: One of the reasons that Kate Kraczon and I were particularly interested in including you in the exhibition is that we wanted to address questions of autonomy with regard to artistic practice. In a sense one might ask, "At what point is any work produced by a single author?" So, "collaboration" was one of many terms we used in the exhibition to describe the ways that artists come into contact with each other, but at the same time we were also trying to avoid focusing on it. We were wary of its connotations and saw "collaboration" as just one way to describe and think through how artists meet and produce works, and the ways they absorb, acknowledge, and lay claim to their influences and peers.

KA Why did you want to avoid the idea of collaboration in particular? Do you feel like it doesn't inherently call into question the independence of its participants?

AK Don't you think that collaboration implies a reciprocal relationship? We can't assume that all of the ways that artists work together are so dialogic. Wouldn't you agree?

KA I agree. I do feel that collaboration suggests some kind of entity that closely resembles the singular author—an entity that functions as a contained unit that basically sanctions whatever happens within it. And where there can be a tension between authorial parties or some kind of play between their gestures that is oppositional or even identifiable as from two sources, this gets dampened in collaborations by the fact that there are multiple names joined by an "and." Or there is a new singular name. This is extremely different than works that set up dependencies between artists without explicit permission. I'm referring to a different kind of dynamic, one that by nature is more aggressive, and that can allow for a reconsideration of the idea of the artist as some singular all-powerful, contained force. What you've been saying alludes to this.

AK Yes, absolutely. It was important to us to push against an uncritical understanding of artistic relationships that at its worst could have risked portraying an overly idealistic or quasi-utopian vision of collectivity. We were hoping that the exhibition would allow for other kinds of dynamics—aggression, antagonism, competition, etc.—and that these would be part of the conversation and unfold over the course of the show, which they have in fact ended up doing in unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable ways. *Serial Killer* in particular resists and

Conversation

Kathryn Andrews

embraces the dilemma posed by the framework of relations at play in a group show. Because it doesn't have a permanent home in the exhibition, and instead moves when and where you determine it, Kate and I end up losing some of our curatorial agency. Likewise, the other artists in the show don't have a say where the piece is installed, so it's kind of a rogue operation within the context of the exhibition that simultaneously riffs off of and pushes against the initial curatorial gesture.

KA Why did you decide to include artists mostly from Philadelphia and Los Angeles?

AK We knew from the start that half of the artists were going to be from Philadelphia—it was important that the exhibition be in dialogue with the immediate context of ICA and the community of artists in this city. So with me being a newcomer from Los Angeles we decided the best way to go about it was to curate out of our own communities, to start thinking about the group of artists that are around us and the group of artists that are around them. It was definitely not a compare and contrast scenario.

KA It seemed to me very unusual, that insertion of your personal identities as curators. The decision to include artists from your respective hometowns seems like a very personal move that is not typical of curators.

AK There are two reasons for this. First, and on a basic level, we thought it made sense to draw from our own communities and to be up front about it because we were asking the artists in the show to think about their own relationships and milieus. And second, I think it's interesting that this show is coincidentally on at the same time as something like the Whitney Biennial and the New

Museum's Triennial, or even the Hammer Museum's *Made in L.A.* We wanted to open up the exhibition so that it would be possible for the artists in the show to assert who is important to them and who they would want to see included with them in the space of the exhibition. It was up to the artists to decide who they included in their projects, how they proceeded, and how much control they relinquished to other artists.

KA So you saw your gestures as somewhat doubling how the artists were constructing networks?

AK And also letting go curatorially. We worked intensely with everyone to develop their projects, but at a certain point we felt like the honest thing to do was to curate in a manner that reflected the way we were asking the artists to pursue their own projects. How do I disrupt my own curatorial agency? How do I keep it open?

KA Did you think about that in advance before the artists began to work in their ways?

AK Absolutely, but we could never have predicted the outcomes—I'm going to flip this back to you though. One of the things that I like about the work you produced for the show is that it manages to be both aggressive and adulatory. In *Massacre (Selection)* you excise Al Ruppersberg's original signature while at the same time obsessively redrawing his handwriting—"I love you. I love you. I love you." And in *Serial Killer* your fence could at first be seen as a friendly gesture, almost a kind of caress or wish to be integrated into another person's work, but it's also an obstruction or competitive move within a group exhibition. In both cases they feel like a strong hug that leaves you with bruises.

KA With both pieces I was trying to do the opposite of what you were doing, sprouting a show from personal context. Typically a curator’s gestures are cloaked in terms of how they stem from the curator’s personality. Those gestures exist under the framework of an institution that functions in relation to some notion of objectivity.

AK There’s a thesis. An exhibition provides a context for artworks whether through historical, conceptual, or formal associations.

KA Yes. In my works here I was attempting to do something different. I wanted to dislocate the subjects suggested by the work. In an extreme way, I wanted to take the idea of the artist and say, “we can imagine an artist when we can identify his work in relation to a rubric—the artist’s name—but what happens when we can’t figure out where a work begins and ends or who it belongs to?” I wanted to lessen my presence in the work and in the exhibition, to somehow make it invisible, blend in.

AK How did you come to work with AI, for example? I know you’ve done a work with a Ruppertsberg before, but how did you single him out? Does it have to do with him as an artist, or with the piece?

KA: It does. It wasn’t random. I’m very interested in how he’s interrogated the idea of the artist as a subject in relation to the artist’s output and the degree to which the signs of the artist’s hand are present in the work.

AK The quintessential Ruppertsberg question: “Where’s AI?” That seems too perfect.

KA I bumped into AI the other day and for the first time chatted with him about the work I made. We talked about the source of his

newspaper clippings and mine. His came from the *LA Times* in the 80’s when the newspaper was very thick, filled with items about gruesome business at large. In my recreation, I didn’t have easy access to those kinds of resources, and I didn’t know what they were, not yet having spoken to AI. So I had to go to other places to find similar types of articles that could be used, the Internet, the library. I was too lazy to go to the latter so instead I Googled articles, which I then redesigned and reprinted as if I’d clipped them from newspapers of the same era. I spent a lot of time studying common newspaper fonts and layouts, attempting to make something that matched AI’s clippings, that could pass as his. The print is full of events, which are about taking things and translating them into formats that reveal or hide the presence of an agent. AI painstakingly retraced news clippings from a mechanical source. He then goes to great lengths to put those hand drawings through another mechanical process, which transforms the presence of his hand.

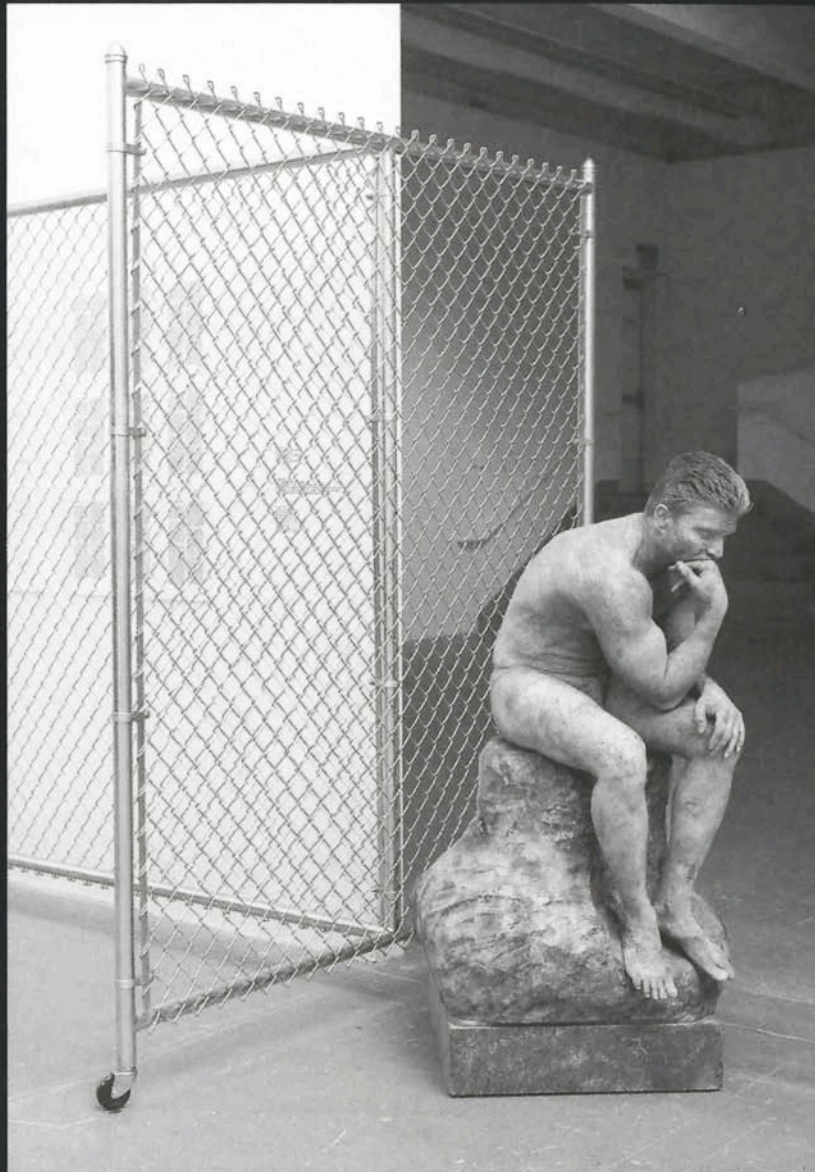
AK And the “I love you”?

KA AI drew them in there himself! And they are presumably his handwriting, not tracings of another source.

AK Then you had to go back and meticulously mimic that handwriting. It’s a kind of forgery.

KA Basically what I’m talking about is what it means to be an agent that’s only a tiny cog in a greater whole, that doesn’t have the same kind of political presence that exists when you say “so and so made this work.” In *Serial Killer* the performer is alive, he or she draws the viewer’s attention in a way that is different than, say, what a sculpture or painting would do. The performer is active

"Conversation: Kathryn Andrews, Gaylen Gerber, Alex Klein," *First Among Equals*, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2013



Conversation

Kathryn Andrews

Kathryn Andrews
Serial Killer (Thinker)
(performance), June 9, 2012 (RC)

like the viewer, yet trying to mimic the stillness of a traditional statue. And the fence somehow frames these differences. Usually the statue is on one side of the fence, the viewer on another, and the other artist's work on another. So all of these subjects are coming into play. The entire thing becomes a stage.

AK To have another work in such close proximity to someone else's work also breaks the autonomy of viewing. And the fence has wheels, which implies a movement in the space. It would have been one thing if you had just gotten a length of chain link fence. But you made the piece so that it has an alternative purpose; it has formal properties that are unique to it—a T-shape. As much as your work frames or responds to another artist's work, it also has the potential to get absorbed by the other work. When we first started talking about it, I envisioned that your work was going to block and obfuscate other works, but in some instances the opposite happened. That ups the ante.

KA Yes, some sort of linguistic demarcation that says, “You're looking at this, and you're also looking at this,” becomes very important. The wall labels are critical to understanding what's what. When everything is together it becomes a big hodgepodge, total confusion. Delineations cease to exist. Even the language of the wall labels gets assimilated into the materiality of the work. The labels are there, functioning no longer just as information, but more overtly as necessary cues or even actors. When you see it and read the wall label, you understand that you're not seeing an artwork in its entirety; you're seeing some residue of it or its components. I like this rupture. As a viewer it makes me wonder about that choice and what I'm missing.

AK And that's assuming that all of the visitors read the wall labels, which they don't. So there's also a kind of formal experience. The fence becomes a screen through which people see the other object, especially in the instance of some of the smaller works. That said, while *Serial Killer* operates in relation to other objects in the exhibition, it exists on its own terms and adapts itself to the other works. One thing we can say for certain is that it will attack again, no matter who else is there—it's still going to go in for the kill.

KA I've thought about it like that, but not literally! Both of those pieces were about presenting an absurd scenario where another artist's work was present, but my work came into such proximity that the ability to see a division was no longer possible. You could say the other artists' works were blocked or denied, or even eradicated.

AK Many museum visitors didn't see the performance aspect of *Serial Killer*, they only saw the fence in front of another work and they perceived it all as one thing.

KA When an artist makes and exhibits a work, so many things come into play—things the artist can't control—that affect the appearance of the work. But it all exists under your name. For me that always feels false. I'm interested in calling that “authority” into question.

AK As curators we had to decide what level of transparency, or what kind of permissions were asked of the other artists in the exhibition. So maybe you can also speak to how the subject moves, both with regard to your specific choreography and staging, and then also those moments of letting go and seeing what happens in terms of the relationships in the space.

“Conversation: Kathryn Andrews, Gaylen Gerber, Alex Klein,” *First Among Equals*, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2013

KA To some degree I think I'm trying to talk about how exhibition constructs are always in flux. But the irony is that when you make a work that really shakes things up it can produce the opposite effect. People need to really assert and really pin down how everything around it isn't in play. I think my work functions in a way that's not so different from what happens in normal exhibition situations: the video player is broken, the gallerist has not had time to fix it; a viewer drops her sweater on the floor; the museum guard informs one person it's fine to touch a piece, but then another guard says it's not fine; on a given day you have a headache, you come to the show, everything looks blurry and uninteresting, but then you see it three weeks later and it's the best thing you've ever seen. This work is dealing with all of that in an overt way versus a covert way. It begs certain questions, like "Is it okay that the curators put that piece two feet away from that one? Is that permissible?" So you have to start thinking about these subtleties, these choices that are being made by the "officials," the "authorities."

AK Right. I'm also curious to hear about the formal decisions that you made. Here I'm thinking of the great lengths you go to mask your hand so that objects have a found look to them, or the specific decisions that informed your selection of the human statues.

KA Yes, I tried to place the human statues that were selected by works where there would be a visual resonance. So for example, with Wu Tsang's work, there was a bit of gold, so I put a golden jester next to it. When the viewer comes to the work, this slows down the rate at which they can discern that there are actually two works.

AK How does this fence piece operate in relation to the stationary fence piece you made for the show that Michael Ned Holte curated in Los Angeles at Cottage Home, *Support Group* (2010), with yourself, Mateo Tannatt, and Gaylen Gerber? Did some of that thinking contribute toward the decisions you made in this work?

KA I think that this piece is very similar to the earlier one. In a very literal way—the *Support Group* work—people could walk around it, but their movement was dictated by the fence's perimeter, which kept them from getting close to its contents. And in *Serial Killer* the human statue is quite like the contents of the work in *Support Group*, two walls with painted images of bears, which were actually copies of nearby street graffiti. The bears were these empty subjects—their eyes were hollowed out, they were smiling, much like a smiley face, they represent a type of subjectivity, but they lack affect.

AK What is your relationship to this humor? As much as these are aggressive or competitive acts, they're also comedic. The statues have a kitsch quality to them—they're silly. In *Support Group* there was this big fence that pushed everyone else out and then there were these smiling bears. Is that meant to soften the blow?

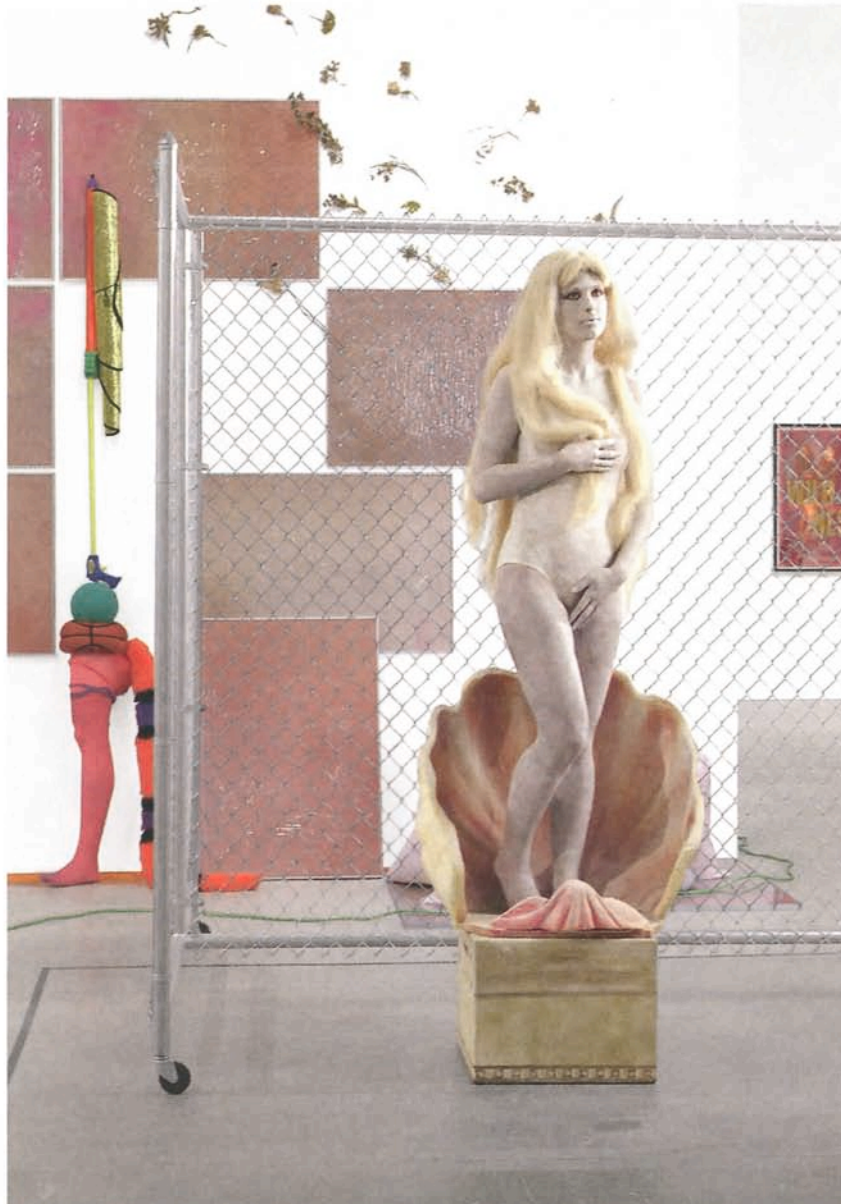
KA Yes... softening the fence structure that took over the entire gallery. I did not drive that move entirely. It was encouraged by other people participating in the exhibition—artists, gallerists, the curator—but yes again, the whole thing existed under my name and I allowed it. I think that there are certain qualities of things that are enticing to viewers, let's call them "desire triggers," that invite the viewer to go to an uncomfortable place. Some of the absurdity

Conversation

Kathryn Andrews

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First Among Equals



Institute of Contemporary Art

Kathryn Andrews
Serial Killer (Venus)
(performance), April 4, 2012 (AI)

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of these objects is to lure the viewer to participate in abnormal situations that are enjoyable though compromising or conventionally frowned upon. So these absurd works are an attempt to foreground those politics that are already in play within systems of exhibition making, individual practices, and perception.

AK This is actually a perfect moment to bring Gaylen Gerber into the conversation. And while we are on the subject of the Cottage Home exhibition I think it is worth noting that while you foregrounded your actions, Gaylen literally receded into the background by removing his discrete works altogether. That is especially true in light of the huge sign you created on the exterior of the building that read “it’s all about... gaylen gerber...”

At this point we adjourned and invited Gaylen Gerber to join the conversation.

GAYLEN GERBER: Your discussion about artists working together is not unrelated to the way that I’ve dealt with so much of my practice. Generally in my work there is a straightforward exchange of use for visibility. I ask other artists for the use of their work in making mine and in return I give them the lion’s share of visibility. One of the reasons I’m interested in engaging with other artists is that it’s a way of breaking down categories without losing individuality. There’s something appealing about the potential for using other artists’ work and transgressing boundaries in a way that opens up our thinking and understanding by shifting the frames of reference.

KA How do you see your own work in relation to “collaboration” as it is or isn’t set forth in the conversation that Alex and I had around the term?

GG Expression in our culture benefits from the strength of an individual author. I guess my solution is pragmatic; I bring together a work of mine with the work of another artist in a single situation in a way that retains the character and distinctions of each but also raises the expectation that the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts.

KA It would be interesting to hear your perspective on the history, firsthand or beyond, of artists working with other artists’ work in ways that exceed the format of collaboration.

GG History is full of interesting examples; one that comes to mind is *Short Circuit* (1955), an early Combine by Robert Rauschenberg. It’s a model of one artist using their work as a platform for the exhibition of other artists’ work. In the mid-1950s Rauschenberg recommended four artists for inclusion in an exhibition of new artists at the Stable Gallery in New York. The artists were his wife Susan Weil, Jasper Johns, Ray Johnson, and Stan VanDerBeek. As I understand it, when the gallery wasn’t interested in exhibiting any of them, Rauschenberg attempted to incorporate a work by each into his own artwork. I think in the end only Johns and Weil were included but this kind of gesture often happens between artists, especially early in their careers.

KA Do you think that in order for this type of dynamic to be effective it needs to be exhibited in situations where it’s not the norm? What do you think about exhibitions where multiple works are trying to break traditional constructs of autonomy in artworks? How would you (or we) define those traditional constructs?

Conversation

Kathryn Andrews

GG It depends on the situation, in bringing similar things together you're as likely to create a ghetto as a utopia and while there may be benefits to it, like seeing the nuances of similar expressions, homogeneity has its downside too. In an attempt to see something I've often situated it against an unrelated ground. This usually has the effect of making both elements more visible and surprisingly distinct.

KA As someone who teaches younger generations of artists, how do you see your own thinking on these questions affecting them?

GG I try to keep my practice separate from my work with young artists. Any advice I give is always tailored to the situation; what's good advice for one artist is not necessarily good advice for the next. The thing that also must be apparent is how much we invest in the process and how often that pushes the conversation in unexpected directions.

KA If the type of practice that we've been discussing was assimilated into mainstream exhibition making would that be indicative of a new realm of art making, one of collective authorship where art is no longer understood in relation to the individual?

GG I don't know. As a young artist I was interested in an idea of artistic activity that was popular before the Renaissance and was later reengaged by artists like Ad Reinhardt in which artistic activity associated discipline and repetition with expression rather than individuality. My early production may be read as a continuation of this ideal. It functioned as a stand-in for an archetypal body that reflected categorical questions of completeness, balance, labor, normalcy, framed by similarity rather than difference.

AK I think that's very interesting in relation to the title of the exhibition: *First Among Equals*, which poses precisely this kind of problematic, these kinds of situations that on the surface are deemed democratic or collaborative enterprises. In reality the political structure of those kinds of relationships is actually far more complicated, and usually swings towards one individual in the group who has a particular agenda within that structure.

GG It's useful to remember that we don't live in a direct democracy, we exercise power indirectly through representatives. I'm an advocate of representative systems in politics and in art.

KA I'd like to take the question of the individual and the individual's influence back to the construction of the artwork itself. I think there is something odd, Gaylen, about the question you're asking; how the individual exists in relation to the collective, and how we read artworks. I see the latter as a process that is perhaps irreconcilable with the establishment of a collective author. The artwork itself is traditionally conceived of as a singular gesture that has, if not a singular author, a driving force that has been united through some form of agreement. As a construct, the work always comes into being through some contract.

AK Even just at the basic level of collaboration there's still an authorial gesture there, or at the very least a person who instigates the relationship.

KA Yes, exactly. What would an artwork be without a group of people that engineer it? Such a thing can't exist.

“Conversation: Kathryn Andrews, Gaylen Gerber, Alex Klein,” *First Among Equals*, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2013

AK So, how one gets to that other place turns out to be a very complicated question.

KA Well it becomes a theoretical proposition versus a real one.

GG Are we talking strictly about contemporary and Western art?

KA Any kind of artwork. What I’m talking about is not historically based as much as what it means to have something defined, how, in order to have something with definition, that very definition coming into being depends upon an agent.

GG Well, but that agent could be collective.

KA It could be, but we can only imagine that. An artwork that is truly a collective production exceeds language. I’ll give you an example that will make this less abstract. What would a work be that didn’t have a concept and a driving force that acts as a control mechanism?

GG It would be normal.

KA Yes, it would be anything that we see in the world. But we don’t call that art.

GG Well, we call it vernacular.

KA Yes, that’s true. We call it culture.

GG I don’t know.

KA But it doesn’t exist under the rubric “art.”

GG It exists under the rubric of “vernacular art.” I’m going to use architecture as an example. Whether you think of this as the trickle down of a few practitioners’ work to the many, or bubble up from the many practitioners’ work to the singular,

it’s difficult not to see this spectrum of expression as continuous. If you drive down Sunset Boulevard there are exceptional buildings, but they’re far and few between. In any neighborhood most of the buildings share similar qualities, it’s possible to distinguish them from each other, but not easily. I think of this as a collective expression. They’re what most people in that area wanted and expected from buildings most of the time, a normalized form. There are people who actively pursue this as an expression but we usually consider them developers and not architects.

AK Most architecture has a very strong authorial voice. The architect puts their stamp on things and then there are a bunch of worker bees.

GG You’re talking about named architects.

AK Okay, so you’re talking about vernacular architecture and the kind of functional stucco buildings that you experience most of the time.

GG Most architects seem invested in what they do, but naturally they also want to get paid and the building that can be built is the one that is built, they’ll do as much as they can but within limits. That’s another criterion altogether.

AK So let’s take that into the space of a gallery, or the annex of a gallery. I’m curious to see how that plays itself out in that space.

GG You’ll have to ask something more specific.

KA What I am trying to say is yes, Gaylen, I understand what you’re saying and I agree with you, but I don’t think that it’s commonplace to think of those aesthetic amalgamations as “art” that purposefully exists and can be attributed within a

Conversation

Kathryn Andrews

"Conversation: Kathryn Andrews, Gaylen Gerber, Alex Klein," *First Among Equals*, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2013



First Among Equals

Institute of Contemporary Art

Kathryn Andrews
Serial Killer (Court Jester)
(performance), March 14, 2012 (AI)

system that relies on connecting those gestures to individuals and locating them in order to historicize them.

GG If you think about John Lautner, Ed Ruscha, and Robert Venturi among others, that’s a part of the question that they were interested in. The thing that wasn’t visible, the normal, became visible and became part of the discourse of contemporary art.

KA But now we understand those things through the rubric “Ed Ruscha,” or “Venturi,” versus an exhibition about all the gas stations on “whatever” boulevard.

GG That’s true, but you’re using rubric as a general heading and that also points to its relative character. You’re right to suggest that with time innovation becomes the norm and that we often attribute it under a consolidated name for organization’s sake.

KA I think we’re talking about the need for frames when asking questions.

GG Okay.

KA If you say it depends on how you frame the question... I think the question is to what degree must the question be framed? Can the question exist without the frame?

GG I’m not sure that you can have a question without a frame of reference, but for me it’s more a question of how flexible the frame of reference might become without losing its distinction and usefulness. One of the things that I’ve found valuable in art is its uncertainty. When you go back to something, because of life, because of the way we are, things look different today than they did yesterday. I’d like to think that there are ways to engage the world

that feel fresh and accommodate this fluidity. This seems at the core of both questions, both perceptions.

AK One thing that came up in the conversation that Kathryn and I had was this question of reciprocity. I’m curious how this fits into this larger question about the individual in relation to collective authorship, or with regard to questions of democracy within these larger bodies or frameworks.

GG Yeah, Kathryn, I want to hear this.

KA I think if you want to have a conversation about what exceeds the definition of art making, there are all kinds of things in the world that come into being that are made through reciprocal gestures. In terms of art making, and the production of works that are dealing with that as a question, I think both Gaylen and I turn to gestures that are intentionally not reciprocal in order to force a point around where cooperation is typically perceived as existing and where it doesn’t.

AK Maybe you can unpack this term “cooperation” a little bit. You often use this term to describe the actions in your work.

KA I think “cooperation” is not extremely distant from “collaboration.” There is an allowance that exists in “cooperation” that requires the participation of multiple parties. That allowance may be a passive one rather than an active one. For example, if I make a fence sculpture that blocks another artist’s artwork, that requires two parties: me and the other artist. That artist’s work exists in that relationship through a gesture of passivity. I’ll give you an example: you as the curator inform the artist that this might happen to them. The artist could have chosen to not be in

the exhibition if they were averse to that, but they chose to remain in the exhibition. So they didn't know if their work would be blocked or not, but by choosing to remain in the exhibition, they are passively agreeing to be a part of that work. They do not put their name to that new event as if that's something that they've purposefully caused, but they allow their name to be used within it.

AK But then how does Al Ruppertsberg's work fit into all of this? Because there was no passive agreement on his part, was there?

KA Well, yes there was. His passive agreement was to produce a work that sold into the market, thereby allowing the market to have its way with that work. He no longer retains ownership of it and he's passively agreeing that this object can now have a life of its own.

AK So he agreed to that?

KA By selling the artwork he did, yes.

AK That seems far removed from individual agency. At that point it becomes about the sort of structures that revolve around the individual artwork itself. In this case, once the artist lets go of his or her work, and that could be either in the context of an exhibition or into the flow of the market, at that point it's up for grabs. It becomes a kind of passive agreement because the individual has placed their work in that context.

KA Yes, and it's complex because the artist's name literally follows along. But I want to return to a final question for Gaylen. I felt like you were saying that you don't really make a point about the singularity of your individual presence, and I would disagree, I think you

heighten that to an extreme, in order to produce the opposite effect.

GG Actually that may be true. To some extent I'm playing devil's advocate. For me the larger, unspoken expectation is that if we respect things, they'll survive and retain their integrity and my understanding of the world is that they won't. Even if the object can be preserved, its surroundings change and so we are continually refreshing the ground against which it's seen and there's no way to secure perception of it. One of the things that my work does is to make a point of this.

Kathryn, you and I have done similar things in our work, which is metaphorically to be the grain of sand in the oyster, we're hoping for a pearl, but sometimes the oyster just gets annoyed. There's humor in this, but it's not necessarily funny. I don't know how people react to your work, but I assume they get a little annoyed and assume that you're being obstinate. I'll bet that's pretty close to accurate. I know that's close to the perception that people often have of my practice, but over time they often come around, even if it's belated and grudgingly.

KA That takes us to the conclusion of my conversation with Alex, which is that, yes, these “cooperative gestures” may come off as slightly irritating, but for me the end goal is to make a point about how all contexts, when perceived as fixed or neutral, are irritating. When that's not acknowledged, it's somehow a disturbance to the object in question being placed in those contexts, and a misunderstanding of how that object can easily have many different meanings.

GG I wouldn't disagree.