

Arguments, Generously Arranged

Wilfried Kuehn and James Voorhies
on shaping relationships between
object, idea, setting, and viewer



Detail of *Episode 4: A Report of the Committee, Curtain*, Martin Beck, *Program*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Massachusetts, February–May 2015. During a two-year residency at the CCVA organized by Voorhies, Beck developed installations, interventions, and programming drawing on the institution's history and outputs, often directly engaging Le Corbusier's architecture.

JV Wilfried, in looking at your work, which often involves designing spaces that have a precise curatorial aim, a few themes come to mind. Narration is one. Also choreography, as it relates to the positioning of bodies or audiences.

In many ways I see your work as an open form where spectators often possess a high degree of agency—agency is another theme. But I would argue it's a kind of agency with subtle direction by the design of the space.

And then these ideas lead me to think about the word *convene*. I like the concept of convening an audience because to convene means to guide or to instruct, to lead a gathering of individuals for a specific purpose. Your work doesn't only corral an audience into a space. Your design has a level of intentionality around it that doesn't press too much onto the body, leaving room for agency with intention. A person can create their own narrative beyond the scripted path of architecture.

WK Spaces are not simply there. They need to be produced by human action and perception, which involves physical interaction of bodies in space. As El Lissitzky noted, space is that which cannot be seen through a keyhole. The perception producing space is happening along a subjective time axis. We consciously use time as a design generator, as a way of conceptualizing space based on a subject experiencing it rather than it being a geometrical container. The political dimension of space lies precisely in this conception of agency, in contrast to abstract concepts of program or form. Both program and form are still central to our design. But the specific way in which we interweave them into spatial narrations makes them concrete from the point of view of the subject.

This choreography is the opposite of being scripted. In our design for Documenta 11, we purposefully interlaced two spatial typologies, the enfilade and the corridor, in order to achieve hybrid, subjective patterns of visitor movement. The narration is an interaction between the design and the use of a certain space.

I like your idea of convening, as it produces generosity. It seems important that this convening is not happening in an overly formalized way but draws on forms of the everyday, on very accessible experiences.

JV An important part of what I've been thinking about is how a museum or exhibition site can convene its publics through consumer forms. I know that you're interested in the spaces of marketplaces and even airports. I like to think about how these familiar consumer spaces can be put to use in an exhibition or museum context to convene a public.

While I was director of the Carpenter Center, I initiated a collaboration with Motto Books to open a bookshop. It's obviously a bookshop, like other bookshops, although it has a special collection of hard-to-find publications. But it's also a way to ease the space between the art institution and visitors. Anyone knows how to engage with the rules of shopping, of consuming. As a curator and in my practice, Bureau for Open Culture, I like to explore and push against how the familiarity of certain forms, such as the exhibition, can be leveraged to create new and different encounters among art, exhibitions, ideas, and spectators. Design is often essential to this work.

I appreciate your design of exhibition spaces—they take on this quality of a marketplace. It seems that an effort to give inhabitants their own agency is inherent in this model.

WK I'm very mistrustful of elitist institutions and the exhibition as a secluded event for cognoscenti. I think claiming a very low-entry-level playing field is good for an exhibition. But then the next question is how not to be populist, how not to just use the vocabulary or the scenography of the marketplace, but instead to channel the usability of it.

The approach has to move from scenography toward engagement. How to do that is a tough question, because most of the rules of engagement in a museum are based on observation without touching the object—on critical distance. Of course, there are art movements that broke down this distance, which we have always been drawn to but are difficult to re-exhibit, like Fluxus, which involves things that you actually had to take into your hands, replacing objects with procedures. Re-exhibiting the remaining Fluxus objects today like relics under glass, you can hardly activate the procedure anymore. The museum display really disables the play—it literally becomes a dis-play.

JV Yes. Things that were once animated become completely neutered.

WK At that point you ask yourself why you even exhibit them. Rather than exhibit them under glass, as objects—basically a testimony to the fact that they are out of place, out of order—wouldn't you want to find a way of engagement that updates Fluxus?

This is challenging because then you take the risk of staging an interaction in which the original act of production easily turns into its consumerist replica. You start thinking about making a replica that people can use, but then it becomes—

JV A performance of the thing removed from its historical and social contexts.

WK Yes. And then do you stage that interaction as a curator, as an architect, or as an artist? It makes a big difference. If an artist today does this, as an appropriation, let's say, you could say, "This is a piece." If you do it as a curator, it becomes very kitsch, and it falls apart quite easily. It's an intellectual exercise and it will not work.

This is an interesting moment to step into for us as architects, to look at the objects starting from questions of spatial relations. At the mumok in Vienna in 2006, we designed an exhibition featuring Fluxus, Pop, and Nouveau Réalisme as a very dense archival arrangement, consciously in contrast with the staging you would expect from a museum. We called the spatial model a "magazine," making reference to the narrative created by scrolling through a periodical but also to the French *magasin*, meaning store and storage alike. So there was the notion of the Fluxus object being part of the archive today.

Then, more recently, we designed an exhibition on German Capitalist Realism in Düsseldorf and at Artists Space in New York, for which we proposed an opposite but equally anti-museum approach: instead of showing the original works by Richter, Polke, Lueg, and others, we had all the paintings reproduced as prints.

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Ideally, museum architecture would be invisible, producing spaces without exhibiting itself, producing relations rather than yearning to be center stage.

This allowed us to show them in full daylight and without glass displays, producing a closeness between visitor and artwork that was in line with the 1960s concept of realist art being embedded in everyday life. We worked with extremely well-made prints, but in a down-to-earth way. It worked very well, I think, because it was not falling into this trap of trying to animate. Then in another section, in darker rooms, we showed the original documents of the time. The only originals in that exhibition were the written letters, the documents—things that would be in an archive, usually.

JV This reminds me of a challenge that I read that you faced for Documenta 11. You were asked to design a space that was open and fluid for the eventual placement of objects, not all of which were known. You were choreographing a future spectator to experience an unknown catalogue of objects in the space.

But before we go into that, I am curious to hear more from you about designing exhibitions in relation to not only the objects, but the changing institutional expectations today regarding the assembly of people in exhibitions for displays and social activities—a combination that is often integral to many exhibitions and institutions.

WK When you say social activity, what exactly do you mean?

JV Social activity could mean a group of spectators who gather on the floor or on some kind of seating for a reading group, to hear a talk, or to watch or participate in a performance in the same exhibition space that holds objects. These are instances where an exhibition space needs to shape-shift. The combinations of work—time-based and static, ephemeral and material—are all in the catalogue of what an artist might produce, you know?

WK Right, but there's also an inherent contradiction between the needs that you express, because the spaces needed for these activities are quite different. What you say is interesting because it takes away the neutrality that's often an assumption of the "white cube." But when a space has to transform, it is not so easy to transform a very specific space into something else. You can't all of the sudden convene a meeting in an Isaac Julien installation.

In that sense, this development could bring us to understand the whole idea of the art exhibition differently. I agree with you that maybe being more open to transformative spaces is the way forward, and maybe that also means we have to understand the installation as something that can be somehow more temporary in nature.

At Documenta, as you said, we didn't know exactly what was going to happen in the spaces because the participating artists were developing their installations at the same time we were designing the spaces for them. We approached this situation

thinking of our work in terms of an urban layout, where you provide a spatial concept that needs to be precise without designing the architecture of a single building, because that would prevent too many things.

JV The viewer could move toward whatever caught their attention. There wasn't a specific narration that the institution laid down.

WK Exactly. Following the overlap of enfilade and corridor circulation, each visitor could produce their subjective parcours, linking the spaces in a specific rhythm and thus producing relations between the single installations. If you followed the enfilade exclusively, it led you like a red thread through all spaces one after another. At the same time, the rooms were detached from one another by a corridor's width, and you could at each entrance turn away from the enfilade into the intersecting corridor system. You could cut. People went in and out of the enfilade, so basically I think no two people experienced the exhibition the same way.

JV That reminds me of IKEA. You can cut through, across the children's area, for example, to get through the thing faster than if you followed the path.

WK But at IKEA there is a beginning and an end. At Documenta 11 there wasn't. But of course we were aware of the manipulative spatial layouts store displays follow. That's why the shortcuts through the corridors were so important to establish subjective narration and agency.

And then for relating and linking different installations, the question of the media came in. Okwui Enwezor, who curated the exhibition, wanted to show many time-based works that required precise spatial conditions. So we learned as we went that we had a number of cinematic spaces that were standing in the middle of a fluid parcours. And that was a challenge. It had to be confronted step by step, turning the more generic urban layout into a very specific architectural design, without completely solving the inherent contradiction between the idea of fluid movement and the requirements of cinematic spaces.

JV This sounds challenging, and problematic. The exhibition as a thing is an argument, and just to throw the combination of objects, space, and people into the air is where the argument could be lost. You lose the opportunity to guide the spectator.

So, to understand better, are you offering a form of engagement that is understood visually—the parcours, the snaking kind of atmosphere—that is then interrupted?

WK The biennial-type exhibition oscillates between a constellation and a competition. It is curated, but since the participating artists each concentrate on their own piece, they focus on being protected from rather than related to the neighbouring works.

1
Focus 03: Concept. Action. Language. Part 2,
mumok, Vienna, 2006. Curated by Achim
Hochdörfer and Susanne Neuburger. Exhibition
design by Kuehn Malvezzi.

2
Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002. Curated by Okwui
Enwezor. Exhibition design by Kuehn Malvezzi.

3
Kuehn Malvezzi. House of One installation,
Le Centquatre, Paris, 2017. The spatial distribution
of the House of One, a building in Berlin that
houses a synagogue, a mosque, and a Christian
church, is translated into two dimensions in the
open central core of Le Centquatre.



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JV Do you mean that artists do not want their works next to one another?

WK It's not about being against other artists, but about making sure your installation is not affected or even impaired by the environment. An artist who produces new work for group exhibitions tends to focus on their own space and often blocks out the rest while preparing their piece.

So as a curator you walk a fine line between producing a narration by way of relating the works and giving each artist the necessary importance in and of themselves. Maybe you have also found specific strategies to deal with that.

JV Well, a curator really needs to communicate to artists the conditions in which works of art will be exhibited.

Gaylen Gerber is a Chicago-based artist I've worked with who creates what he calls "backdrops." These are essentially large, stretched canvases that take on the precise dimensions of the wall on which they are installed. They're often painted a neutral color, such as grey—they are paintings that in themselves acknowledge the power of display and the important role architecture has in the exhibition and reception of the work. While I was director of exhibitions at Columbus College of Art and Design, I commissioned a twenty-foot-long, twenty-two-foot-high backdrop for a group exhibition I curated called *Exact Imagination*. The exhibition was about display and the institutional factors that influence the reception and exhibition of art—institutional critique plus. The single canvas by Gaylen was installed on the wall, and then a video by Christian Jankowski was projected onto that surface. Then works by other artists, such as Andrea Fraser, David Ireland, BANK, and Louise Lawler, were all presented against the backdrop, which visually absorbed the works. Gaylen's titles for his backdrops include all of the other artists and their works that are part of the exhibition. So there is a kind of invitation where they understand that the wall, that backdrop, envelops every activity in the space of exhibition, the space of display.

This was a single artist making a decision for the group about the content of display. Your decision in the Capitalist Realism exhibition to not show the originals reminded me of Maria Lind's 2002 Moderna Museet exhibition *What If? Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design*. This is another example of an artist, or singular figure, making a significant decision about display that affects the way the other works are experienced. In this case, Maria deployed Liam Gillick as an ambassador, or what she called a "filter," to arrange the works in the space of the museum. Together, they created a kind of atmospheric urban plan-cum-marketplace. Works by Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Apolonija Šušteršič, Sylvie Fleury, Superflex, Rita McBride, Martin Boyce, and others were situated in close proximity and in strong dialogue with one another. Lighting for the exhibition was a continually changing cycle simulating morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Twenty-four hours of light were compressed into half-hour rotations.

WK I think that there are artists, like Liam Gillick or Heimo Zobernig, who have really invested in the context of display and the exhibition, and have made displays for other artists and invited them in. I've seen interesting works developed as exhibitions, where the installation is actually the work, and where it's not the object that is being exhibited but the exhibition itself that becomes the formal result of an artistic practice.

JV Do you believe artists have more agency over display than curators, or even architects?

WK I think the border between artists, curators, and architects can be broken down sometimes, and I'm very keen on experiencing that, both in exhibitions and also outside of the exhibition. I've worked with Heimo

Zobernig twice on real architectural projects, both realized—a museum and a church. We broke down the professional distance between our practices by contributing equally to the design of spaces. This is quite liberating.

JV That sounds like your current project here in Montreal, at the Insectarium. You've spoken about how enjoyable it is to work in collaboration with the entomologists.

WK Yes. But you need partners in this, and you need not to be afraid of losing authorship. The curatorial to me is an interesting model of authorship, because it is based on an authorship that invites others in. That's why I find it interesting to think of the curatorial as a new and more contemporary technique of design. This is my thesis, but maybe that's more playing the ball to you now. What is the curatorial as authorship?

JV I also appreciate the collaborative nature of the curatorial, that and the way context is the primary force when organizing an exhibition—context being social, political, spatial, and institutional conditions, and the question of how to create something together that will mean something to spectators and the community. There are curators who definitely want their ego to be visible in the work. I tend to recede and create a framework that is open enough, but where I still take responsibility for the exhibition or the program, like at the Carpenter Center.

The most interesting things are happening in institutions where there's guidance, yet there's a porosity in what transpires, meaning that a number of different publics—even from different social and economic backgrounds—can find something potentially at stake in the institution. That balance is not easy to achieve. One must still lead the thing. That means one must define the thing, raise money for it, and build audiences by building the institutional character.

WK What role does space play for you as a curator, for instance when you think about the Carpenter Center and its spatial context?

The space was everything.
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a beautiful problem.



JV The Carpenter Center was a challenging space. The entrance does not present itself so easily. One is unsure how to move through it. The concrete walls cannot be punctured in order to hang anything. The walls are coloured. Nothing can be secured to the concrete floors. The space is full of floor-to-ceiling windows. And light pours through, creating issues for loans and conservation. Alas, I always thought the building was a beautiful problem—one doesn't just install objects inside that space; you choreograph them in relation to architecture and the movement of viewers. The concept of display in this case is much more expansive, not unlike your work for Documenta.

WK So would this mean that you start from these very strange predicaments or constrictions in doing your curatorial work, or do you ignore them because it's basically too much?

JV You confront them. The first thing I did was hire James Goggin, who's a graphic designer teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design. He developed a new website, a new graphic identity, new wayfinding. Our hours of operation were not even on the doors. This choreography of the visitor is really important because part of my charge, in this case, was to bring audiences to Carpenter Center, to make it a pulsating and living thing.

WK And you worked on this wayfinding with a graphic designer? Not with an architect or an artist, for instance?

JV Yes. But James also designs exhibitions, so he thinks quite spatially and comprehensively about the spectator.

WK And then in your exhibitions, you also started from the architecture?

JV Yes. Always.

WK The idea of the backdrop then becomes quite interesting. What is the physical interaction between an exhibition made there on purpose and the space? Does the space influence your curatorial choices?

JV Yes. The space was everything. The exhibitions were organized with artists who would see the space as an interesting challenge, a beautiful problem.

I am attracted to work by artists who like to utilize space as an integral part of the work. Shahryar Nashat, for example, has a keen ability to engage with space quite expansively and claim it as part of his work, so all the different pieces arranged in the

exhibition space, including sound and video, are choreographed in relation to the spectator. Viewers don't need to read anything. They walk into and out of his exhibitions and have a sense of what he's working on. Through the sensuality of the space and the works he makes, he makes viewers feel that our bodies are fragile, our skin tears, we bump against things and break.

Shahryar wanted to install pink linoleum across the entire ground floor as a means for him to claim that space from Le Corbusier. That plan was completely unaffordable. We then began to shift through different scenarios. We ended up with a pink translucent window film installed on all the large plate-glass windows. It was still quite expensive. But when viewers walked into the Carpenter Center, they knew that there was something else happening. He aggravated the space in the best of ways. Visitors' familiar understanding of the space was suspended, and therefore they had an experience where they were required to stay longer. We are so hyper-mediatized; as an audience, we know how to interpret and read images very quickly. I believe that art's big challenge today is how to hold attention in this culture where attention is short and experience with many kinds of images is so common. One must hold the visitor through the physical implication of their body inside a spatial experience.

WK Still, to me, architecture of this kind appears very patriarchal, in a way. You could imagine becoming tired of always engaging with the found space as a somewhat neurotic presence of the past.

JV But I believe parameters are really good. Parameters—like budgetary constraints, a spatial limitation, geographic dispersions—all allow an extraordinary level of creativity to come to fruition.

WK I would say the same about architecture in general. When we have a client with no limits, it doesn't work.

JV Has any institutional or museum space influenced your practice?

WK Ideally, museum architecture would be invisible, producing spaces without exhibiting itself, producing relations rather than yearning to be center stage. That is rare. There are a few structures I really appreciate as typologies or spatial models. One of them is Dia: Beacon, which explicitly followed a non-architectural approach. I always found the generous invisibility of the intervention very good there.

A different sort of invisible architecture is present in the Schaulager in Basel, not so much in the exhibition space, which I don't care for, but in the

Episode 1: Removed and Applied, Martin Beck, Program, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2014–16. Beck coordinated both the removal of sheet-metal cladding from the outside walls of a Peter Rose—designed gallery and its replacement with painted gypsum board.



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1
Shahryar Nashat: Skins and Stand-ins,
Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 2015.
Curated by James Voorhies.

2
*What If? Art on the Verge of Architecture and
Design*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2000.
Curated by Maria Lind.

3
View of VES student exhibition at the Carpenter
Center for the Visual Arts, ca. 1970. Le Corbusier's
building requires curators to develop a position
relative to its spatial and material qualities.

The object on display was a vehicle through which knowledge about the world emerged.

Schaulager proper. There you can schedule a personal showing of a specific installation—so it's like a library of spaces, not just objects. Architecture plays a very important role, without much drama.

Of course we've been very influenced by Cedric Price's Fun Palace, the ultimate invisible architecture. The Centre Pompidou broke down the idea of the museum into a big, commercial-like but truly non-commercial place where you would just go and not necessarily have to see an art show.

JV It can breathe and expand depending on what's in there.

WK And when we had an exhibition of our House of One project at Le Centquatre in Paris last year, I thought, "Wow, the Centquatre now is really what the Pompidou wanted to be forty years ago." It's really an inclusive place used by people from various backgrounds—people do yoga, they play and perform. They also go to exhibitions, but they mainly go there to meet. Pompidou is an upscale place for tourists, but Le Centquatre breaks down the institution as an elite product. This is why we maybe have to look for institutions not in the centres, but more where the majority of people live, the fringes.

What kinds of spaces matter to you?

JV In the summer of 2017, I visited Maria Lind at Tensta konsthall in Stockholm. I was there to have a public conversation with Carsten Höller, who figures prominently in my book *Beyond Objecthood*. On the evening of our talk, Maria organized two other artist's talks and a cookout. The konsthall was open late, and there was such a conflation of people together in one space. Everyone seemed to have something at stake in what Maria created.

WK The idea of spaces that can transform from theatrical spaces to exhibition spaces to other forms is hugely interesting. It's something we should be all much more engaged in. But usually, when you read the brief for a museum competition, this is not the case. There's the so-called polyvalent space, that's basically not as open as it sounds—it's just generic. And generic is not open. Generic means basically it's like a fair-trade hall in which anything could happen, but also nothing happens, really.

JV Well, this is the crux. If a space is everything, it's nothing, and this is why I believe—again, going back to the question of authorship—one needs to take responsibility for what the space is and how it should function.

I'm surprised to hear you appreciate these different open spaces, such as Dia:Beacon. They have the potential, if not handled correctly, to be too open and useless. I think it is difficult if the curator or those who are designing the exhibitions—the architects—aren't aware of that challenge.

WK But if you look at it more pragmatically, you can ask how any particular situation or condition will actually be dealt with. You have a curator, you have an exhibition. Then it happens that conventional museums are the best, because they provide clean and good spaces and not much can be wrong—like, for instance, at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, where all the exhibitions look good because each space is different but well-proportioned, and you have a parcours. Almost every

curator or artist has made good exhibitions there. But it's also kind of absurd, because it doesn't challenge you. I think it boils down to the challenge of making an architecture that is at once open and specific.

And it relates to how people experience the spaces and what they encounter there. I think this is a very important shift: to take responsibility for also involving the visitor, to think of the visitor not as someone who watches for pleasure or understanding, but as someone who's involved, as a user who also has responsibility.

Using means someone taking something in their own hands. And this potential of the exhibition is something—again, Fluxus is very important for this—that needs to be explored much more.

JV Which also goes back to the original concept of the public sphere. People came together to look at an object and slowly discuss its aesthetic qualities in order to gain more knowledge about it and the conditions in which it was produced. The object on display was a vehicle through which knowledge about the world emerged.

WK Yes. It's instrumental, then. The object is not there only for itself, but it acts as a vehicle.

JV And, extending that concept, the exhibition is the object today. The cohesive orchestration of objects inside a space, placed next to one another in concert with the spectator, makes an exhibition that is an articulated and legible thing—an object.

WK I would agree with that. The exhibition as an object is a very interesting development, because that makes sure that we don't just say, "Yes, objecthood has been overcome." Because you cannot overcome it. It's really *finding* it that's interesting. What is the object, actually?

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