

# FUTURES: EXPERIMENT AND THE TESTS OF TOMORROW

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In 1999 Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara Vanderlinden organized the exhibition *Laboratorium* in Antwerp, Holland. Taking as its premise the frequent association between the artist's studio and the scientific laboratory as workplaces of invention, *Laboratorium* linked art and science in terms of a common zone of practice. Rather than merely replicating either space — laboratory or studio — the curators of *Laboratorium* self-reflexively posited the museum as the key venue of laboratory practice.<sup>(1)</sup> Within the exhibition sites, throughout talks, and on accompanying panels, they invited interdisciplinary collaborations between scientific researchers and contemporary artists. For example, the artist Luc Steels partnered with artificial intelligence researchers from Brussels and Paris to test robots' mimicry of human interactions in cyberspace. Also working in conjunction with scientists, artist Mark Bain wired nearby medical and chemical laboratories for hyper-sensitive sound recording, providing an alternative document of the activities of the research lab.<sup>(2)</sup>

So too did the subsequently published catalogue emphasize interdisciplinarity, interspersing theoretical and practical writings by artists and science scholars with an intentionally fragmented and open-ended compendium of documentation of projects in the exhibition.<sup>(3)</sup> With almost 100 contributors to the Bruce Mau design, the catalogue was itself an experiment in production, its creation process charted as

1. That is to say that in doing a show about laboratories, the curators' felt they should adopt the methods of their object of inquiry in a self-reflexive move. Pierre Bourdieu theorized "reflexivity" as a necessary condition of any act of social commentary. According to Bourdieu, one cannot consider the social world as the object of one's analysis as one is inescapably, subjectively, and reflexively bound up with the presumed "object" of study. Reflexivity also points to the ways in which power flows unequally within knowledge claims — that the "object" of inquiry is often disadvantaged by a lack of access to the concepts and categories governing its representation. Please see Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

2. Not all artists collaborated with scientific practitioners. Rather, some artists used the exhibition as an opportunity to question the epistemological suppositions of science — particularly the overemphasis on empirical findings that encourages positivism — in much the same way that historians of science such as Paul Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn have challenged the presumed methods of scientific discovery. For example, Francisco Varela's "Portable Laboratory" reduced the space of research to a small cushion on which the viewer was invited to sit. Radically reducing the accoutrements of science down to the human capacity for thought, viewers were encouraged to meditate on their conditions of experience and to note "the specific manifestations of the mind as if they were data." In Carsten Höller's "Laboratory of Doubt" the reliability of experimental "results" were questioned, with Höller speculating that results may cease to be experimental when they are represented as finished outcomes. Höller proposed instead experiments in stasis, in which the "aim is not to intervene" and to "do less."

3. Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara Vanderlinden, eds., *Laboratorium*, exh. cat. (Provincial Museum of Photography, Antwerp, Belgium, 1999).

an ever-changing performance in the gallery. In typical Mau fashion, the typography and organization of the volume actively compete with the content. The latter half of the published catalogue, where artists' contributions are assembled, features pages cut into two halves, with identifying information and short project descriptions clustered in the upper section, overlaying images and artists' statements that continue through the bottom portion. Attempting to coordinate the pages to examine one project at a time requires beginning at the first entry and turning both top and bottom sections simultaneously, and continuing to do so for nearly 300 subsequent pages. Here it seems that the chaotic presentation of the laboratory "findings" emphasized processes of discovery that occur as works are juxtaposed — however difficult to read such incongruous contrasts are in practice — rather than an easily legible final product.

*Laboratorium* continued what is Obrist's signature curatorial style — information-heavy projects that saturate a single, loose idea with a surfeit of visual information and scholarly resources.<sup>(4)</sup> Creating archives around particular nodes of inquiry — laboratory, utopia, "do it yourself" production — the accretion of great volumes of information substitutes for advancing a single argument. As the curators' statement of *Laboratorium* queried, "*Laboratorium* is the answer, what is the question?"<sup>(5)</sup> Yet with so many people from various disciplines contributing, how can one be sure that they are asking the same question(s)? By siting experimental practices in the museum rather than in the artist's studio or the scientist's laboratory, did the curators themselves intend to be the principal researchers or the creative producers? Pinning down an important concept often invoked in *Laboratorium* — "experiment" — can set these questions into better relief.

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A primary goal of *Laboratorium* was to use the idea of the experiment to rethink some underlying assumptions that position various disciplines into realms of discreet specialization. If the studio/laboratory are the sites of production, however dissimilar their physical

4. For example, Obrist's continuing online exhibition "Do It" has had over 30 incarnations and currently consists of over 100 contributors exploring the notion of a viewer making a work on an artist's instruction. Obrist's "Utopia Station," a collaboration with Molly Nesbit and Rirkrit Tiravanija for the 2003 Venice Biennale, archives 160 posters by an ever growing selection of contributors.

5. Obrist and Vanderlinden, *Laboratorium*, 13-14.

incarnations, *experimentation* is taken to be the shared practice. In making this connection the curators were mining a deep vein. From Da Vinci's emphasis on experimental verification of the formal and structural constitution of nature, to Buckminster Fuller's proposal of a field of "comprehensive design" to reason inductively from "generalized principles into unique experimental control patterns," the notion of experiment as a procedure transcending seemingly disparate fields has long held attraction.<sup>(6)</sup> What these attempts to foster interdisciplinary connections argue against, of course, are notions about the total autonomy of certain fields of practice.

As I have written elsewhere, "experiment," whether it be in the context of science or art, has been generally treated as a generically positive appellation — as indeed it frequently was in *Laboratorium* — lumping diverse practices under a single category that comes unproblematically to signify interdisciplinarity, avant-gardism, cultural improvement, and often, political progressiveness.<sup>(7)</sup> Yet the concept of experiment to which *Laboratorium's* curators and others appeal is in fact deeply contradictory. In large part this contradiction reflects the compound meaning of experiment, and its historically shifting relation to concepts such as innovation and tradition.

Experiment shares with *empirical* and *experience* a common root in the Latin *experiri*, "to try or to put to the test." Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "experience" and "experiment" were interchangeable in English usage, though subsequently *experience* came to indicate that which has been previously tested, a past accumulation of knowledge or skill — "lessons as against innovation or experiments" in the words of Raymond Williams.<sup>(8)</sup> Yet *experience* continued to carry a second meaning, that of a full and active consciousness or awareness, an experimenting with, testing, or trying out of something. The complexity in the definition of experience as either the past (tradition), or that which is freshly experienced (innovation), had the effect of splitting the meaning of experiment to include both "testing under controlled circumstances", and "innovative acts or procedures" more generally. Although exper-

6. Buckminster Fuller in James Meller, ed., *The Buckminster Fuller Reader* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1970), 43.

7. See my article "Experiment, Expression, and the Paradox of Black Mountain College," in *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, Caroline Collier and Michael Harrison, eds. (Bristol & Cambridge: Arnolfini and Kettle's Yard, 2005).

8. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976 and 1983), 126.

iment is sometimes associated with systematic procedures such as the scientific method, which imply previously formulated hypotheses under test; experiment is also invoked in trials of new or different experience in which results are not forecast beforehand. Discussion of the degree of innovation or control inherent in, or permitted to, experimental practices as debated in art and science turns on this ambiguity in its etymology.

If experiment is posited as a methodology of practice shared by both art and science, undoubtedly certain distinctions undergird this comparison. Perhaps the most common is that science has an intrinsically empirical basis in contrast to the speculative nature of art. Yet just as often it seems, tests by artists inform understandings of the material constitution of reality, whereas science in heavily theoretical fields such as astrophysics often deals with empirically unverifiable postulates. A further distinction is between inductive and deductive practices; the former in which experimentally verified "facts" lead to theoretical conclusions or, conversely in the latter, hypothesized claims are empirically verified or refuted. Putting aside for the moment assumptions about the methods respective to art and science, the attribution of a common experimental basis to both fields stresses their shared desire to change present conditions. Experiment as testing the past or as moving toward fresh experiences is nevertheless a quest for new, more adequate understandings of the world. One would not experiment if the current state of affairs — the status quo — were satisfactory.

If we can think of the test through the range of meanings, from planned hypothesis to trials of experience more generally, it is indeed a fertile term. As this expanded definition of experiment is being rethought as a model of artistic practice that connects activities occurring in various disciplines, similar models are being generated connecting art practices to one other historically.

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In a recent article in *October* Tim Clark set forth what he termed the two "central imaginings of modernity." The first aspiration was one of playful freedom, bodily pleasure, and consumerist abundance promised by spectacle culture, the second the physical comfort of a well-ordered, technologically rational and mechanized

society.<sup>(9)</sup> According to Clark, the proposition of modernist art with respect to these dream-extremes was a putting to test those social desires through investigations of the form and material conditions of perception and representation. And as Hal Foster has noted of the conventionalization of the "testing" operation, "The purpose of the modernist work is to test the limits of its meanings and the understanding of its viewers over and over again."<sup>(10)</sup>

Invoking the test as the primary procedure of modernist art underscores the central role played by experimentation to, according to Foster, "ride the dialectic of modernization in a way that might keep these projects [of modernity] alive for the future."<sup>(11)</sup> Not necessarily rupturing or transgressing the symbolic order, rather the test forces the limits and adequacy of representation to depict or inform the conditions of society.<sup>(12)</sup> In this sense testing connects art to its public — and is a means of linking historical understandings of what has been and currently is intelligible as art to contemporary audiences. The test is also one of possibilities, of testing in material form what are frequently the most abstracted desires, for a different present and for a better future, thereby providing a concrete visualization with which to agree or argue.

Foster has recently isolated an "archival impulse" in recent art in which artists "seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" by reorganizing bodies of "alternative knowledge or counter-memory."<sup>(13)</sup> The impetus is to galvanize the past in service of the present and future: "to probe a misplaced past, to collate its different signs... to ascertain what might remain for the present."<sup>(14)</sup> The artists he draws together, Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant, could be joined by a slightly earlier generation of artists whose interventions in museums involved a careful study of repressed or unrealized aspirations of the past. Fred Wilson, Mark Dion, and Andrea Fraser's projects in museums activate historical and archival materials in similarly

9. T.J. Clark, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam," *October* 100 (Spring 2002). The formulation of bodily pleasure as opposed to physical comfort is also found in Susan Buck-Morss' *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).

10. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and other Diatribes* (London: Verso Press, 2002), 121.

11. *Ibid.*, 60.

12. Or perhaps to test the manner in which appearance increasingly becomes the condition of society.

13. Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 4.

14. *Ibid.*, 21.

probing ways, testing the adequacy of representation to render into image the often abstract forces and relations of history.

If the archive is the object and outcome of study, then experimental research can be said to be the process. The experimental drive in art production is matched by a similar imperative on the part of curators and art historians. Much as *Laboratorium* sought to disrupt categories separating the work of artists and scientists, common ground between the work of artists, curators, and art historians can be found in the complex notion of experiment I am proposing. That is to say, if experiment can be understood as *both* a test of tradition and as a search for innovative outcomes more generally, we can begin to see the work of curators and art historians organized on an axis of practice, of which experiment is the hinge.

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A rare pleasure is an art exhibition that mixes relatively recent and more historical work. Rare, that is, for how often has one visited a gallery in which the latest “emerging” art is stranded in an ahistorical present, silently crying out for dialogue with prior practices mining similar concerns? Conversely, too frequent is the historical exhibition in which current practices loom so large that their excision forecloses the possibility of thinking the historical in and through present practices. The greatest attribute of large survey exhibitions and biennials is the combination of the very recent with the recently past, but this is also their most arbitrary feature. The criteria for inclusion is less often the relation of works to one another, than loosely amalgamating a series of one person shows.

A key challenge facing a historically sensitive contemporary curatorial practice is the sometimes-distant relationship between curators and art historians — remote in terms of different professionalization tracks, and more importantly in terms of practice.<sup>15</sup> Art historical work is concerned largely with mapping a temporal, diachronic axis, one

15. Of course, some of the confusion is due to the ambivalent associations of the word “contemporary”. In debates that checker the last century and continue today, contemporary is often opposed to historical modernism, that is to say avant-garde art practices of the pre-WWII period that had a strong utopian and or political slant. Contemporary is often the catch-all category that denotes the present but also connotes a break with past practices. I am using contemporary to indicate artists from approximately 1960 to the present, that is to say living generations of artists currently practicing in the field.

in which the relations between works of art are positioned with respect to tradition and historical precedent. In contrast, curatorial practices are principally transacted on a synchronic axis of relations between socially coexistent, spatially synchronous practices. For a future practice that enriches both “camps,” curatorial and art historical work cannot be viewed as differential, but as mutually informing and determining in their investigation of art practices.

In order to create speculative solutions about possibilities for a better society — solutions that can be activated strategically when opportunities arise — these solutions must be tested with a foreknowledge of both previous tests and those that are currently emerging. To mobilize for a future that is more informed, therefore, art historical work and curatorial work — diachronic and synchronic axes — must be constellated together in present practices. *Laboratorium’s* arguments about experimentation and its relation to science and art can be pushed further, in order to understand experiment in its fuller meaning of testing the past in the present. In order to create conjectural solutions about possibilities for improving society, we must first develop settings for well-informed speculation. Applying an enriched concept of experiment facilitates this.

Experiment and the notion of the test describe a variety of practices in which artists engage, from the various research methods of the archive through the attempts to find common methodologies between artistic practices and other disciplines. As experimentation in artistic practice is inflected by both an emphasis on tradition *and* innovation, so too can art historians and curators relate it to their work. This sense of experiment, as a central way to organize thinking about the present and the future, yokes the projects of curators and art historians in a united pursuit: parlaying the knowledge of history into a better-informed horizon for the future.

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De Appel is supported by the  
Ministry of OC&W and the City  
of Amsterdam.

# CURATING SUBJECTS

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First published in London 2007

ISBN 978-90-73501-71-3

Printed and bound in Europe

Søren Andreasen & Lars Bang Larsen

Julie Ault

Carlos Basualdo

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Irene Calderoni

Anshuman Das Gupta & Grant Watson

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