

## At the Coed Dance



Everyone does everything, or so we're reminded. We are all in each other's space. The borders of disciplines are collapsing. All the while, however, the academy heads to narrower silos (*interactive game art that focuses on Critical Mass bike rides...yes, we have an MFA in that too!*). Propelled by such energy, there is constant crossover from making artwork to curating: Wrong Gallery as curator as artist; Sukhdev Sandhu from academia to sound art; Amitava Kumar's text repurposed into Jee-yun Ha's sculptures; Jesal Kapadia curating works into the formerly humorless pages of *Rethinking Marxism*; 16 Beaver collating dissonant responses to *October* magazine; Emily Jacir, Prerana Reddy and others melding into South Asian/Arab film festivals.

In earlier, underfunded times, some of this was necessity in order to carve out our own spaces. At the end of the nineties, I was making

videos and cocurating *3rd-i*, the South Asian underground film series at Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg (with Prerana Reddy, Saba Waheed, Anandaroop Roy, et al.), except no one used the "c word" back then—we were just organizing, showing, screening, selecting—pulling things together with spit and tape. No one was asking the question, *what exactly do you do?* Although we laid on experimenta that could be at home in a gallery or a screening room, the crowd was refreshingly *dowahdiddy-diddy*, many of them spillovers from the Mutiny Asian Underground club: a crowd with energy, receptiveness and very few definitional hang-ups.

Valentin Manz of London's Vision Machine was very persuasive in such areas. Somehow he swayed a SoHo gallery not previously known for patronizing political work to host a group show in 2006. There was no curator so Valentin took over that role, inviting other artists and

commandeering the space. “I don’t understand,” I asked, as we started installing. “On what basis did they give you the gallery? Did they see the title? *Rule of Law*...what do they think it’s about?” According to Valentin, the gallerists had seen his exhibition of glass pieces in Williamsburg and that was enough. They didn’t comprehend the gnarled glass shards as exploded Iraqi heads. Perhaps the labels were hazy enough to pass off as illusionist. (Huzzah for ellipses...!)

As we put up photocopied statements by Alberto Gonzales, neatly labeling them with artist, media, year, I wondered if there would be a freak-out moment before the opening. I’ve been there before: everyone all smiles until a few hours before the opening when a museum director makes the rounds and actually reads labels. Then comes frantic scuffling, a quiet meeting...then the junior curator comes over and with maximum, tortured, circuitous prose explains that, *well, you see, I don’t quite know how to say it, but, um, there’s a slight problem, no nothing big, but we were just wondering if...that is, would you consider...*

But somehow, this time around, the entire install goes off without a hitch. But I’m not entirely delusional. It is August—dead time for most galleries. Everyone is in the Hamptons, after all. The opening of this show was clearly overrepresentative of the activist community. The same faces I had been seeing at Action Wednesday meetings, an anti-war group, were out in force. The staff at the gallery seemed a bit nervous. Nobody looked like they had money, nor did they manage that neo-Factory, almost-famous manner. Meanwhile, I was wondering about conflict of interest. Valentin and I had *sort of* curated the show, but our own work was in it. That felt unkosher. Now I wished we had given A. Gonzales (b. 1955) the front room. He needed it; he would be out of a job soon.

The woman serving drinks grew increasingly jittery. Very soon there was no more wine. Valentin was puzzled—he had also bought a case of wine...that couldn’t be gone too! Then one of the gallery assistants informed us that because it was summer, they had to close the place early. “Sorry, the opening is not until 8 pm after all.” It was all very rush rush, almost as if someone broke wind and the room needed to be cleared. As I walked towards the exit, I spotted one potential source of trouble: one of our friends had assumed—well, from the name of the show—that this was an appropriate venue and left copies of *IndyMedia* at the front desk. This was a little too much of a reality intrusion, like Linda Blair’s possessed Regan walking in on the party, peeing on the carpet and blurting out: “You’re going to die up there!”

Galapagos with *3rd-i*, SoHo with Valentin: these were all unheralded experiments. Things were low-key—chill, even. Then, very soon, things became more concrete. Suddenly, a certain seriousness was in the air. Lorenzo Fusi sends an invitation to cocurate a show at Palazzo Papesse in Siena. *Er, you know I’m not a curator?* “That’s ok,” he says, “that’s why it will be fun for me.” Lorenzo relishes the productive (we hoped) act of mixing it up. Over a few drinks, we cooked up a title and theme: *System Error* (cue time bomb of Apple reboot screen circa 1995 and Chris Hedges’ analytic blockbuster book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*). Liberated

from having to worry about fitting my own work into the theme, I went off to pursue a network of artists whose work influences me, whose work I look at up close and at a distance. From bloggers doing (sigh, yes) Net art to the Star Trek costume-wearing School of the Art Institute of Chicago grad who is the sole subscriber to my YouTube feed. In some cases, being a “curator” brought the direct benefit of having an excuse to talk to elusive people like Lebbeus Woods. (He famously prefaced a presentation with a tirade against all the creators of Photoshop, which also reminded me of Jennie C. Jones’ comments, “Hi, I make works on paper, with a pen. You know, like in the old days. Paper doesn’t crash.”) And here was Lebbeus’ ravaged cityscape, fitting into the Siena building. That moment seemed to be making it worth it.

But gradually, over the months of preparation for the show, things became very serious. Galleries wanted this work. That piece was already showing elsewhere in Italy. So—and-so refused to have his video shown on a monitor. The budget was too small. The space was too big. The sound was bleeding over. This artist doesn’t want to be in the catalogue...this, that and the other. It’s banal to list any of this because curators deal with this all the time, right? And I don’t want to add to the narratives that tend to infantilize artists as crybabies. Sounds like your average mega-show with forty artists, and since there was only one Italian artist in the show, everything was being shipped from overseas. Such headaches are sort of standard issue.

This is when I first started to think that artist-as-curator is not always a healthy construct—at least for me it no longer was. Being that close to the decision-making process, seeing up close all the calculations and permutations and equations, burnt a hole in my head. The unhealthy result for me was that you tend to become self-conscious about your own work. Instead of messing around, you start to walk in a straight line. Of course, no one is living in a hermetic bubble where they have no idea how decisions are made. It’s about the work, it’s about the budget, it’s about the mandate, it’s about the theme, it’s about the recommendation. Sometimes it’s also about the check box, and when you are in an identifiable race/nation subgenre, navigating the check box is a challenge. But to become overly conscious of this process 24/7 is opposite to the isolation and thinking space that is healthy when dreaming up worlds, projects and ideas for one’s own practice.

A friend sounds a contrarian note in an email: “Well, I don’t think becoming self-conscious about my own work is an unhealthy thing. The agenda for me as an artist is organizing, having a larger conversation, a research activity.” So this is not a cautionary tale. There are many possible outcomes: no need to lament! Raqs Media Collective is one of the best at this—at ease with hybrid foray. An amazing flow between their own work and the curating of *Manifesta 7* indicates the shape of many things to come: from *The Reserve Army* to *The Rest of Now*. For those who want to keep crossing the floor—to mix it up at the sock hop—their trajectory provides a hopeful example.