

DIALOGUE

Conversation on Experimentality

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Editor: In the publication on the occasion of *Experiment Marathon*, you talk about a situation of homogenizing forces because of the effect of globalization in the system of visual art. Experimentation would be an adequate answer to that situation. What would today be the most experimental and strategic method of working in order to ensure the survival of 'difference' in visual art?

HUO: The experimental idea of permanently producing new formats, of course in dialogue with artists, comes to the fore in the book *Talking Contemporary Curating* edited by Terry Smith. Here I state that the crucial question of the 21st century is how to foster collective action in the age of the Internet. The potential of sharing is there and we live in an exciting moment where we are close to an entirely different, new generation. When we think further about the idea of new formats, the exhibition *Laboratorium* is an example of that, because it positioned itself on the scale of a cd; a compact disc as a new space with new temporalities. More recently, the project *On the Edgware Road* (2010–2016) was a similar endeavor, where we basically engaged in an 'educational' study project at the Serpentine Gallery for the purpose of exchange between Beirut, Cairo, and London. That amazing street, the Edgware Road, shares many layers of history with the Middle East. We had artists in residence, artists from London to Beirut, and we also worked with Christine Tohme and William Wells. The goal was that the project would develop over six years, so it is still ongoing.

One works on projects in different ways both spatially and temporarily by attempting to do them in different formats. Here in London, the Edgware Road exhibition was on the scale of an entire road, but the temporality was not a month, not the usual time of an exhibition, but six years. We sometimes somehow succeed in breaking through formats. Yet, there are only a few formats in the art world, so they are repeated over and over again. You have an opening, then an exhibition that lasts a month or two, during the exhibition no substantial changes are made, then the exhibition comes to an end, and then you move to the next exhibition. However, the art world is still the best of all worlds for inventing new formats – and therefore we work in the art world rather than in other worlds. Ultimately, even if an exhibition format can be somewhat rigid, it still has a more open format compared to, for example, a film context, where you need to make a movie which is more or less 90 minutes. That is why nowadays so many filmmakers escape the homogenization of the film industry and come to the art world, where they are free to make films with entirely different temporalities. Thus, the exhibition has indeed the potentiality to invent new formats of display, of temporality or spatiality. Obviously, it tends to be quite repetitive and that is what we need to resist within visual art.

For me, all of that is inspired by the thought of Edouard Glissant and a conversation I had with him called *Utopie de la ville et du musee. L'espace et le temps*. Glissant said what we call mondialization is in fact uniformization from below; it is the rule of multinationals, of standardization, of ultra-liberalism. For him, that is the negative reverse of a reality which he calls a mondialite giving us a necessity to change how we see, live, and react in the world. Glissant's notion of mondialite is actually a very important toolbox for me. I read his work regularly and even the question of whether *Experiment Marathon* was based on *Laboratorium* has been answered in his work. The *Marathons* are examples of *Laboratorium*. Since each of them lasted 24 hours and brought many practitioners in a contact zone, they are shortened versions so to speak of an exhibition. Still, artists are mostly given a specific space rather than a specific time. But we did a 24-hour show with Parreno, whereas many exhibitions last a month or two, and then we also do projects like Edgware Road lasting six years.



Figure 1: *Experiment Marathon*, Gloria Friedmann, Serpentine Gallery, London, 13–14 October 2007.
Credit: Alastair Fyfe.



Figure 2: *Experiment Marathon*, Olaf Blanke, Serpentine Gallery, London, 13–14 October 2007.
Credit: Alastair Fyfe.

Ed.: What actually then is the current state of experimentation? And do we need to call specific attention to experimentality at this point in time?

HUO: The notion of experimentality is a very urgent one, since today a major point of discussion deals with how to liberate time and be able to experiment. Experimentation has the capacity to defy the urge of immediate result. In an exhibition such as *Laboratorium*, experiment was at the core of its definition and its premise and connected with thoughts about liberating time for experimentation, for making mistakes and learn from these mistakes. Clearly we now live in a moment where what Glissant would refer to as standardizing and uniformizing forces not only affect space but also time. We have less and less time so to speak to experiment and, therefore, it is extremely important to stress again and again that experimentation does not have to lead to immediate result. Experimentation is basic research, and that idea of basic research is in danger nowadays. For example, in the academic world, there is always that pressure for people to constantly produce papers. Thus, there is an increasing pressure on immediate output. Conversely, for me there was no pressure of immediate output until I was 25. People always tell me how young I was when I started being involved in the art world – and it is true that I began when I was 18. But the other side of the coin, the flip side, is also true, and that is that between 1986 and 1991 when I was 23, I resisted any form of production. I was just on a grand tour like a novelist in the 18th century and I toured through Europe on a night train and visited many, many different cities. It is the notion of a grand tour, of experimenting with ideas, of experimentation that laid the basis for my entire work for the 25 years to follow. Indeed, none of my projects would have happened without these five years of grand touring, because it was a form of nurturing, a sedimentation. We are often far removed from the thought that young adults could possibly need time to do a grand tour. Unfortunately, the same phenomenon of missing time is now true for art schools: there is an immense pressure in art schools on reaching immediate, concrete results, whereas the notion of immediate result is exactly what we have to be aware of. Life is a marathon, but life certainly is not a sprint. One cannot work for 20 or 30 years and keep on producing: it leads to early burnouts when you do not have metaphorical or real types of grand tours in-between. I do believe that we need to liberate time for experimentation, not only when you are a student, but also later in life when time becomes increasingly precious and less disposable for moments of experimentation. Again, we must keep in mind that the question of experimentation does not have to lead to immediate result in one field. In his series *Vision + Value* (MIT press), Gyorgy Kepes said that we have to experiment in such a way as 'to go beyond the fear of pulling knowledge.' And Kepes' conception of experiment points to going into zones where one has never been before. Thus, it is even more interesting to facilitate experimentation in various fields and between different disciplines.

Ed.: Reflecting further on experimentality: *Experiment Marathon* suggests the temporarily 'bringing together' of the academy, the studio, and the museum. In this era where research-based practices are regularly discussed in art education, how could that be achieved most adequately?

HUO: The Staedelschule in Frankfurt I know well; I grew up with it so to speak. However I was never an art school student. I studied economy and ecology with Binswanger, since my great passion as a young adult was to bring economy and ecology together. Clearly, that topic has become even more urgent now as we can notice in the current climate changes and climate change conferences. So, when I started working with Kasper Koenig on *Broken Mirror* in 1993 I was self-taught in terms of art. For about two years I spent quite a lot of time in Frankfurt and the Staedelschule and that was my education in terms of art. The school was the place where it all happened also in a discursive sense. Cedric Price and Peter Cook were there, the school had an incredibly dynamic architecture department, it created the notion of self-organized gatherings and meetings, artists had their studios in the building, there was the inspiring shared space of the cafeteria, and there was Portikus, a lab where ideas could be experimented with and students could work on exhibitions. The school was not a huge machine, it operated on a human scale and all students could get attention. The only thing that is still missing at the Staedelschule is that it is not embedded in a university. Therefore, you could say that the ideal situation would be a Staedelschule embedded in an academic institution where it could serve as a temporary autonomous zone with its tentacles reaching out into all other forms of knowledge. That is my utopia.



Figure 3: *Experiment Marathon*, Marcus Coates, Serpentine Gallery, London, 13–14 October 2007. Credit: Alastair Fyfe.

Yet, in Europe, there is currently a crisis in art education. There are many artists who no longer want to teach because of increasing bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is a great obstacle, because artists, but also leading practitioners of all kinds such as curators, scholars, architects, designers, theoreticians, and scientists used to be most willing to transmit their knowledge and experience to a next generation. You can see this very strongly in England where teaching artists such as Susan Hiller or Michael Craig-Martin had a huge impact, whereas now a younger generation of artists such as Ed Atkins and Philippe Parreno decided to no longer be engaged with the bureaucratic art school system. By now the bureaucratic system employs only professional full-time teachers, rather than the active part-time practitioners who used to teach and develop studio-mentorship on the job.

At the same time, it is not possible to assess the results of art education similar to how you could measure market outcome. What you obviously can do is set up the conditions for art education and develop an educational model. I still think that the Black Mountain College was the most successful art school model ever. Different from the *Staedelschule*, the Black Mountain College had a utopic dimension with really all disciplines brought together in the educational program. So the reinvention of the Black Mountain College could work as a magnet not only for students/participants, but also for artists and all kinds of other practitioners to teach. We do need functioning art schools. So the critical issue right now is how the prevailing systems in art academies with their measuring of success and research results introduced in the European Union in the last decade, can be averted for the sake of art. Currently, those systems destroy both art and art education.

Ed.: The project *Laboratorium* (Antwerp, 1999) more or less ushered us into a decade characterized by research. What is the current relevance of the concept of laboratory in an era characterized by artistic research?

HUO: We all know by now that the so-called Bologna discussion leads to homogenizing forces. In order to beat such a homogenization – and the artistic research discourse is part of that homogenization – we need to somehow find ways of going beyond instant gratification, beyond the immediate result we discussed above. So the issue today is how to get out of the vicious circle of instant gratification and immediate result. Put differently: how can we slow things down? How can we actually invest time and energy to create slower processes?



Figure 4: *Laboratorium*, Provinciaal Fotografie Museum, Antwerp, 1999. Credit: Provinciaal Fotografie Museum.

What *Laboratorium* addressed was also how the lab and the studio are changing in the digital age and how they might come under other network conditions. Those topics are still relevant for artists born after 1989. Thus, digital technology plays a crucial role in that regard, but notions of the laboratory and how we experiment remain relevant as well. We constantly need to come up with new formats allowing laboratory conditions to flourish. Today, we live in a specialized culture, where contemporary art has become an industry and also cinema and literature have become industries. Maybe one of the few disciplines that isn't an industry is actually poetry. It is very interesting to see how many visual artists and architects from the 1989 + generation currently gravitate towards poetry. Basically the turn to poetry relates to the desire to engage with something that is not also an industry. As Rem Koolhaas once said, the mechanisms of an industry often produce something that diminishes intelligence. That is also why interesting things often happen in-between. Today, where most disciplines have become industries, the key role of the laboratory is to focus on the in-between of disciplines. The *Marathons* are sketches for that: last year we addressed topics such as 'extinction' or 'transformation' through all kinds of different disciplines, and that created a spark, which hopefully will last.

However, the turn to poetry is not only about slowing down, it is also about injecting different temporalities, sometimes slowing down, sometimes accelerating. The digital age with Twitter as a medium produces a new form of poetry. That was initially underestimated. In the public opinion, people no longer write and it is true to say that handwriting is about to disappear. But people now write more than ever before. Everybody is a writer, and there is much more writing in the world through digital media. As a consequence, the format of poetry has also been reinvented. But there is still another reason why new generations gravitate towards poetry and that has to do with how the Internet made the boundaries between disciplines become more porous. So there is more openness for a new Black Mountain College in the world, and that is what the Internet has produced. The Internet connects all kinds of different fields and forms of knowledge. Obviously, the Internet risks entering into a very commercial phase – or already is in the middle of a commercial phase right now – but the World Wide Web related to the Internet could still be a free mode of research – after all, the initial name for the World Wide Web was Inquire.

Ed.: In line with Bruno Latour's thinking, the laboratory project demanded much attention for making the experiment public. 'When do experiments become public and when does the result of an experiment reach public consensus? Is rendering public what happens inside the laboratory of the scientist and the studio of the artist a contradiction in terms?' How would you answer those questions now, fifteen years later?



Figure 5: Laboratorium, Provinciaal Fotografie Museum, Antwerp, 1999. Credit: Provinciaal Fotografie Museum.

HUO: The question of the contradiction in terms is obviously something from before social media. But I think it is still true that it somehow is a conundrum, since artists often need time for their work processes. That means they cannot immediately publish what is interesting. For example, Marcel Duchamp worked for years and years on *Étant Donnés* without telling anybody about it in order for him to create a free space for thinking, developing, and doing research. In doing so, Duchamp said, the artist has to go underground. Today, everybody is connected and few artists de-link completely. There are some hermits who don't have telephones, but that is becoming rarer and rarer. As Paul Chan says, today the idea of de-linking is fascinating; that there are periods that we don't look at our phones, switch everything off, not only on the plane, but also during conversations and studio visits. There are moments when we link, and there are moments when we delink, so we oscillate in that regard. Within that mix, the idea of de-linking becomes increasingly important for artists, so the studio sometimes is a solipsistic space, and another time it is a network condition.

Ed.: In the sixties the concept of experimentation had a clear, political dimension aiming at a society that could be understood as a huge laboratory engaged in developing a modern form of subjectivity. Does the concept of experimentation still have similar ideological implications? And how would these implications relate to contemporary art?

HUO: Clearly in a world driven not only by results, but also by forces of the market those are interesting questions. We did the exhibition *Take me I am Yours* in 1995 and we redid it 20 years later in Paris. There was a catalogue published where we had a conversation with two young sociologists who worked with Luc Boltanski on these specific questions. Of course much has changed, but there are still many artists who work on dissemination or on finding other circuits than just the system of the art market. The possibilities of art to travel and of exhibitions to disseminate into hundreds of thousands of households is still very relevant. However, it has a different meaning now, because the world is much more commercialized. In 1995 there was barely Internet so 'take me I am yours' as an act where you actually take works away is nowadays less the physical act of taking or giving, but rather dissemination through apps or clicks on the Internet. In a way, it changed and it did not change; it was interesting to see that *Take me I am Yours* actually worked again. There was a great euphoria among visitors, like in 1995, so it was not a categorical change.

The other thing is I am always optimistic, and even if all these things are difficult now, I never think the laboratory years are over. We need to invent vectors which actually allow us to prevent the laboratory idea from stopping, and that is why Julia Peyton-Jones' invention of the pavilion was such good work: a new wing every year at the same time as the *Marathon*. Together that created an inspiring spark and a laboratory in the Serpentine: every year there is a *Marathon*, and every year there is new pavilion.

I am also optimistic since after Glissant's passing away I found a new intellectual mentor, Etel Adnan. She has been an immense source of inspiration over the last ten years. She is a Lebanese poet, architect, and activist from Beirut, living now in Paris. Adnan once was a Nobel prize candidate, and as a writer she is a principle of hope. She deals with very dark sides of the world and specifically in our current time with its many wars, her work opens up possibilities of hope – for me the hope is that it is possible to be between many worlds. Adnan is not part of any industry; she can be in the art world, and even be part of the art market; she is also part of the poetry world, the music world, the political activist world. Thus she has many parallel realities and the possibility of a shifting identity is a choice we recently addressed in the 'transformation' *Marathon*. To embrace that, makes me very optimistic.

Ed.: In *Experiment Marathon* a lot of importance is attached to the archive. What would an archive for artistic experimentation look like? And how would the archive have a stimulating and/or catalyzing effect on maintaining experimental practices?

HUO: The archive of *Laboratorium* is now in ZKM in Karlsruhe where one can find all the information on the project. Obviously exhibitions produce archives, there are many videos, there is a lot of footage, and in the case of *Laboratorium* there are almost 100,000 pages of catalogue material, including a daily newspaper produced by Bruce Mau at the time. It is relevant that such an archive is made accessible, since the exhibition's photographs document just a small part of the show rather than the many layers it contains. As a form of protesting against the limited life span of exhibitions, the possibilities of archiving exhibitions are very important. In addition to photographs documenting the exhibition surface, there is also the layer of oral history with testimonies of visitors, people who participated, interviews with artists, and the sound scape of the exhibition. Margaret Mead, the great American anthropologist, once said in a text on *Art and Reality* (1947) that we have to take into account that the Western ritual of the exhibition is extremely limited, since



Figure 6: *Laboratorium*, Provinciaal Fotografie Museum, Antwerp, 1999. Credit: Provinciaal Fotografie Museum.

it appeals only to the visual senses. That explains why people spend so little time in front of artworks, even only a few seconds in the case of the Mona Lisa. That leads to the question of how we can create a more holistic approach with rituals appealing to all the senses. My exhibitions intend to do so, but how do you document such a model of an exhibition. How do you document the smell of an exhibition, how do you document the sound of an exhibition? You can never reconstitute an exhibition, you can only try to archive a combination of all its different aspects.

The *Marathon* experiment is evidence for my curatorial methodology as an ongoing timeline where I work on the same theme for a very long time. Although many people think that speed is my medium, paradoxically all of my projects have to do with slowness. Take for example, *Laboratorium*. In 1998, research started together with Barbara Vanderlinden, then *Laboratorium* came about and lasted two months, after that we did the *Laboratorium* book with Bruce Mau, next the *Laboratorium* archive went to ZKM and then it came more or less to a conclusion. Yet, the laboratory idea always accompanies me in whatever I do, so there are still many links to it. In 2006, when I became co-director of the Serpentine Gallery, I discovered – after Rem Koolhaas' initial marathon about the city as a laboratory, specifically the city of London – that the concept of marathon is able to connect and investigate. A year passed, but then the Reykjavik Festival invited me to do an experimental marathon as an exhibition. Suddenly the marathon grew into an exhibition and even had links with the original *Laboratorium*, since we showed its archive in the exhibition. After a story of 10 years, how will the *Laboratorium* be 20 years later? One can never plan how a project will continue, but I do hope that all its ideas and reflections will come together once. If that is going to happen, it means we will be engaged in rebuilding the Black Mountain College institution. That for me is the unrealized project.

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