

You Talking To Me? On Curating Group Shows that Give You a Chance to Join the Group

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Shortly before beginning to write this essay, I asked an artist what he thought curators needed to take into account in order to organize engaging and stimulating group exhibitions. "Well, that's a no-brainer," he replied. "All you have to do is show some really good works of art together."

It is an answer that, initially at least, seems almost impossible to disagree with. How often, after all, have you heard anyone complain about a group show including too many outstanding artworks? Yet for curators the task of selecting compelling works for an exhibition is only a first step (albeit one that often proves more difficult than it sounds). While a lineup of stellar works will no doubt provide an audience with a series of rewarding experiences, it will not necessarily make for a memorable exhibition. A show featuring an unrelated succession of artworks, no matter how good they are, is always going to be a bit like listening to Top 40 radio: it gives you nothing else to do, in the end, but stand there and admire how marvelous it all is.

A great group exhibition, on the other hand, asks its audience to make connections. Like an orgy, it brings things together in stimulating and unpredictable combinations. It immerses us in an experience of shifting yet interlinked viewpoints, and multiple climaxes. It juxtaposes works whose overlapping concerns resonate in ways that transform our experience of them. And it invites us to explore a seemingly newly discovered territory of art that contains within it more than we can hold in our heads at any one moment. Providing us with a context that enhances and abets our ability to appreciate the works on display, it complicates, amplifies, and enlivens our encounter with each object while encouraging us to seek out the ways they fit together as pieces in larger puzzles. In short, it thickens the plot in a fashion that gives us, as viewers, something else to do besides simply look and applaud.

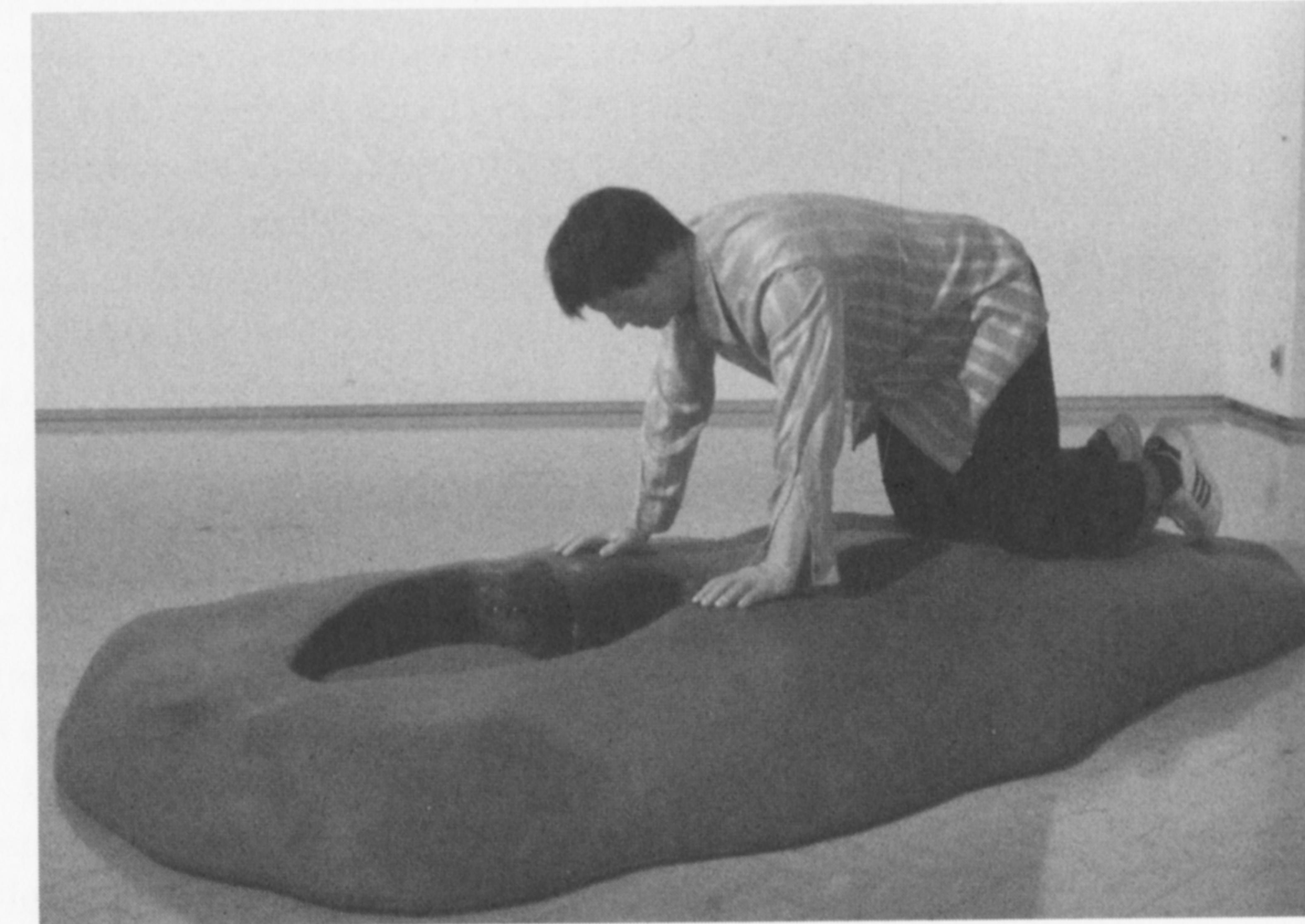
So while a show that is littered with wonderful art can, oddly enough, be less than satisfying, it is possible to make a remarkable exhibition that includes some less-than-brilliant contributions. One of the common hallmarks of a well-curated show, in fact, is that it seemingly elevates and enriches our experience of all the art that it presents. It provides lesser works with a setting in which they shine, and in which their most interesting, and sometimes neglected, aspects are lucidly illuminated. (A potentially perilous consequence of this phenomenon for curators is that we may be led to make an overly gen-

erous, or even misguided, appraisal about the worth of a given work when we come across it in a provocatively curated group show.)

None of this is to suggest that curating is an arcane science, or that a good group show needs to rival the complexity of the novel (as Okwui Enwezor, curator of Documenta11, once suggested). Instead, I think that the closest analogy to what curators do can be found in the field of consumer packaging. I offer this comparison not to belittle the work of curators (although I think we can certainly do with a less high-falutin discourse around curatorial matters), but, on the contrary, because I have a profound respect for our vulnerability to packaging of all kinds. Far more effectively than the noodlings of speculative philosophers, the consumer research industry has demonstrated the ways in which our experience of an object, and our subsequent interpretation, is shaped by the context that frames our encounter—even if that context is no more than the label on a bottle and all the associations it conjures. (In one of the consumer research industry's classic experiments, unwitting test subjects routinely assigned vastly varying qualities to the exact same brandy when it was poured from differently designed containers).

For better or worse, our experience of art is not exempt from our susceptibility to the power of packaging. And a themed exhibition is ultimately a type of packaging. But it is a form that, unlike the packaging of commercial products, is not solely concerned with grabbing our attention or arousing our desires (though if exhibitions do neither of these they are clearly failing us). While the themed show inevitably influences the way we make sense out of the works that it packages, it can also provoke us not to simply consume but to question the experience on offer.

Making a similar point, Vito Acconci has spoken about the unavoidable "fascism" of architecture—that despite a designer's liberal



Olaf Nicolai, *Portrait of the Artist as a Weeping Narcissus*, 2002, installation view in Sydney Biennale, 2002.



Miguel Angel Rios, *Toloache: Mapping with the Mind #1*, 2002, installation view in Sydney Biennale, 2002.

intentions, the spaces we inhabit tend to shape our perception and behavior. Yet Acconci also maintains that an architect can nevertheless provide us with instructions on how to escape that delimiting of our experience. I think exhibitions can likewise provide us with loopholes and escape hatches from the packaging they impose on our encounters with art.

To do so, group exhibitions need to be packaged in ways that include significant roles for their visitors. A truism of curating holds that the different works in a group show should engage in a dialogue with one another, but what is often neglected is the question of how your audience can engage in conversations with your exhibition. Instead of seeking to make a statement through a given show, curators would do well to remember that while an artwork may be an act of communication, their exhibitions are essentially structures for communication, as well as arenas of experience. An exhibition is not, in the end, a *fait accompli*, whose work is done once it is installed in a gallery; on the contrary, that is precisely when its work begins. Rather than presenting a predigested cultural experience, a stimulating group show conveys a sense that it is reinventing the way we think about art, on however small a scale, in a negotiation in which each visitor participates. In short, group exhibitions can aim to remind us, as Marcel Duchamp insisted, that the viewer is responsible for half the work in creating art's meaning.

In this respect, curators can profit by following the lead of artists. One of the very valuable gifts that artists offer us is their talent for making unexpected connections. They do so largely by asking questions, rather than taking things for granted. Likewise, exhibitions need to ask interesting questions, even unanswerable questions, instead of handing us tidy answers. A successful group show never insinuates that the exciting work of discovery has already been carried



Susan Hiller, *Witness*, 2000, installation view in Sydney Biennale, 2002.

out by the curator, and that all that is required of the audience is an ability to read and comprehend the wall labels and point our eyes in the indicated direction. Instead its own interrogatory spirit imbues visitors with a sense of permission to explore and chart their own route through the assembled works of art, and to freely ask the questions and pursue the connections that they find most intriguing.

Over the past decade, however, these kinds of concerns were largely overshadowed by the rise of the international biennial as the dominant model for large-scale contemporary exhibitions. (That Francesco Bonami chose to subtitle his 2003 Venice Biennale "The Dictatorship of the Viewer," is an irony that I still am unable to fathom). Typically, international biennials in this period have been based around an assumption that showcasing a universalist ethic, or representing the world of art in the fashion of the United Nations, is the only credible *raison d'être* for any truly serious exhibition of contemporary art. Proceeding from this conceptually unwieldy starting point, such shows have often presented themselves as being too grand in scope to be limited by singular themes; instead, they span a diverse array of concerns and issues. Increasingly, they have served as platforms (a term used to describe some of the preliminary events leading up to Documenta11) for complicated and abstruse curatorial pronouncements on world politics. And as a general rule, they seem less engaged with considering the experience of individual viewers before specific works of art than with constructing a global profile.

Compared with the expansive ambition of the international biennial, the single-themed exhibition can seem unnecessarily reductive or restrictive. Part of the argument against such shows, which has been fashionable at times in the last decade, is that they reduce our possible interpretations of a given artwork by forcing us to examine it through a specific (and limited) thematic filter. In other words,

this line of thinking maintains, theme shows tend to make the theme itself more important than our consideration of the art they include.

This criticism is mainly valid, however, only when applied to group shows that are “about” a particular subject or issue (genetics, war, human rights, etc.). In such exhibitions, the art is reduced to merely serving as an illustration of a broader theme. Shows that are “about” a subject—rather than about the connections among the different artworks they bring together—also tend to be dismally disjointed. All too frequently the works in these shows have no relationship to one another, but are only linked by the fact they all address a given topic. Consequently, our possibilities for being surprised by the art on view are severely diminished: as soon as we read the exhibition’s title, we already have a clear idea of the limited territory that we are meant to consider.

It may be true that themed shows almost inevitably create pre-existing expectations in their visitors, as do most international biennials. But the type of criticism described above—which takes theme shows to task for diminishing the interpretative context of the viewer’s encounter—is predicated on an idealist myth that we can approach a work of art from a position of complete openness. Which is, of course, absurd. Our encounters with art are never innocent of expectations and presuppositions, or of our knowledge about how different genres of art have been historically categorized and classified.

And most types of successful theme shows do not, as a general rule, delimit the potential range of our responses to the artwork they present. On the contrary, even while following a focused curatorial agenda, these exhibitions usually develop by examining variations on a theme, proceeding with twists and turns, and elaborating multiple subcurrents that ultimately open up our readings of individual works. Such shows set up resonant echoes within the progression of works on display, so that each new art object we encounter informs our understanding of the one we just saw as well as the one we see next. In this way, group exhibitions can create a powerful accumulative effect, immersing visitors in an experience that seems expansive and also responsive to the viewer’s own desires to explore a new world. The best group shows thus take on some of the qualities of installation art: rather than a chance to contemplate isolated objects, they involve us in an implied yet elusive narrative that we end up putting together ourselves as we move through the exhibition.

Finally, and most importantly, good theme shows take risks in how they address their audiences. Part of my definition of a memorable exhibition is that it leaves me slightly confused at first, yet not in such a way that I simply feel excluded or left out of the picture, as though my confusion was merely a result of ignorance. Instead, such an exhibition encourages me to actively seek out uncertainty, rather than simply remaining unsure. And it is precisely when we are unsure of something that our curiosity is aroused, and that we then

tend to regard it more closely, consider it more carefully, and in the end, experience it more intensely.

I had precisely this kind of encounter when I visited the 2002 Sydney Biennale “(The World May Be) Fantastic” (for which I served as a very incidental adviser). Curated by Richard Grayson, it focused on art practices inspired by the hallucinatory and fantastical aspects of quotidian cultures and belief systems. In gallery after gallery, artists served up visions of alternative histories, imaginary societies, invented cosmologies and biographies, dissident theories of physics, and evidence of inexplicable phenomena. The cumulative effect was overwhelmingly persuasive. Organized as a set of propositions, rather than a diagnosis of the current state of art, the exhibition encouraged me to suspend disbelief, and this extended to suspending some of my habitual ways of responding to art. Above all, perhaps, it prompted me to see the world at large (including the world of art) through the lens of uncertainty; to see, in other words, the elements of “play”—of contingency as well as creativity—in things and discourses we normally think of as “objective.” It is one thing to speak in theoretical terms of “the end of master narratives,” but in viewing this exhibition I had a very visceral experience of the consequences of this postmodern cliché.

It reminded me, in this regard, of what remains the most marvelously disorienting group show I have seen: “Clown Oasis,” a 1995 exhibition curated by the artist Jeffrey Vallance at Ron Lee’s World of



The Reverend Ethan Acres, *Adam and Eve as Clowns*, installation view in “Clown Oasis,” Ron Lee’s World of Clowns.



Jeffrey Vallance, *Praying Clown*, installation view in "Clown Oasis," Ron Lee's World of Clowns.

Clowns, a museum just outside of Las Vegas. Vallance presented the contemporary art in the show—which included clown-related contributions by Terry Allen, Jim Shaw, the Reverend Ethan Acres, and Vallance himself, among others—in such a way that it slyly blended into its surroundings. Within galleries teeming with pewter clown statuettes, clown murals, and professional clown memorabilia, he curated what essentially amounted to a kind of stealth exhibition. Admittedly, a few of the more idiosyncratic pieces might have raised the eyebrows of the average tourist, but taken as a package (and I use that word in the best possible sense), the show looked right at home in its garish milieu—so much so, in fact, that the boundary between art objects and their surroundings effectively dissolved. The status of the work on display seemed uncertain, almost clownish, and consequently, my attitude towards it also began to waver. It was as though I had caught the art in the act of becoming something else—*but what?* Vallance's approach created a radical, and fertile, space of doubt: When I left the exhibition, it was with a head full of questions about how—or under what circumstances—variously classified artifacts are designated as art. Those questions formed the most intensely enjoyable part of my experience, and in the context of Vallance's exhibition, they seemed to be on an equal footing to the objects in the show (many of which were memorably disturbing and provocative in their own right).

In their very different ways, both these exhibitions managed to achieve the crucial task with which curators of group shows engage: namely, providing a context for works of art so that they can catch viewers off guard, jump-start unexpected thoughts and insights, and trigger moments of surprise and pleasure. An imaginatively conceived group show can do this, in part, by derailing our expectations, and pulling the rug out from under our assumptions and accepted ideas

about what art is or does. It can help us to see art with fresh eyes by illuminating an emerging aesthetic model that makes new sense of the work of seemingly disparate artists. And by allowing us to confront each work in a novel context, a group show can also highlight key facets of an individual work that we might easily overlook in a one-person survey. In short, rather than shut down the range of our possible responses, a group exhibition can create a context that prompts us to re-imagine and rethink what we already know about art.

For this reason, I tend to conceive of the curator's role as a caretaker. We attempt to provide a meaningful environment in which the objects we work with can thrive—in which their significance can be fully explored, even amplified. We also seek to construct situations in which our audiences can thrive as well—not always an easy task given the inhospitable and intimidating nature of most museum spaces. One way of doing this, however, is to create exhibitions that encourage visitors to recognize that their questions can be aesthetic acts in and of themselves, as well as ways of extending and elaborating their experience of art. When all is said and done, the labor of individual artists in a group show is transformed, through its public display, into a cultural endeavor in which we all participate. That is why our group exhibitions can be truly successful only when we succeed in making our audiences feel that they, too, are an essential part of the group.