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## “Micro-Curating: The Role of SVAOs (Small Visual Arts Organisations) in the History of Exhibition-Making”

### „Mikrokurátorství. Role SVAO (malých uměleckých organizací) v dějinách vytváření výstav“

#### Abstract

The present paper discusses the emergence and development of Small Visual Arts Organisations (SVAOs) in various parts of the world from the 1990s to the present. SVAOs are structurally small, non-profit spaces that are dedicated both to the production and to the dissemination of contemporary art. They are characterised by their interest in the local community in which they are located, as well as in diverse urban issues ranging from new technologies to the social art practices in their cities. In spite of the potential practical and ideological similarities with artist-run spaces, community arts organisations, and New Institutions, I argue that SVAOs are a curatorial phenomenon in their own right and, as such, represent a missing piece in the recent history of exhibition making.

#### Abstrakt

Přítomná studie se zabývá vznikem a vývojem malých uměleckých organizací (SVAO – Small Visual Arts Organisations) v různých částech světa od roku 1990 do současnosti. Z hlediska struktury jsou SVAO malé, nekomerční prostory, jež se zaměřují na produkci a šíření současného umění. Vyznačují se zájmem o lokální komunitu v místě svého působení a o další problematiku městského života – od nových technologií až po praktiky sociálně angažovaného umění. Snažím se ukázat, že i přes možné praktické a ideologické podobnosti s prostory vedenými umělci, organizacemi komunitního umění a Novými institucemi se v případě SVAO jedná o specifický kurátorský fenomén, který tvoří chybějící článek v aktuálních dějinách vytváření výstav.

#### Keywords

Small Visual Arts Organisations – exhibition-making – contemporary curating – art institutions – collectivity – community

#### Klíčová slova

SVAO (male umělecké organizace) – vytváření výstav – současné kurátorství – umělecké instituce – kolektivita – komunita

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# MICRO-CURATING: THE ROLE OF SVAOS (SMALL VISUAL ARTS ORGANISATIONS) IN THE HISTORY OF EXHIBITION-MAKING ANA BILBAO

## 1 See

Hans Ulrich

OBRIST, *A Brief History of Curating*, Zurich: JRP | Ringier – Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel 2008; *idem, Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating But Were Afraid to Ask*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2011; *idem, Ways of Curating*, London: Penguin Books 2015; Paul O'NEILL (ed.), *Curating Subjects*, London: Open Editions – Amsterdam: De Appel 2007; Carolee THEA, *On Curating: Interviews with Ten International Curators*, New York: D.A.P. 2009; Bruce ALTSHULER, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History. 1962–2002*, London: Phaidon 2013.

## 2 An

exception to this is

*Afterall's* Exhibition Histories series, edited by Lucy Steeds and David Morris. The series has featured shows from the so-called global south, but has also looked into alternate exhibition typologies, including participatory experiments (*Exhibition, Design, Participation: 'an Exhibit' 1957 and Related Projects*), apartment shows (*Anti-Shows: APTART 1982–84*), or social installations (*Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–98*).

There is a tendency within contemporary art scholarship to map the history of exhibition-making according to its curators, its locations, and its international visibility.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this approach often overlooks other exhibition typologies, which are in tension with what has been championed over the last sixty years.<sup>2</sup> In consequence, quasi-institutionalised, collective, small-scale and locally-oriented exhibition spaces have received substantially less scholarly attention than, for instance, large-scale art institutions or biennials.

For better or for worse, the history of contemporary curatorship seems to have become equivalent to a history of the empowerment of an individual, the curator. Alongside individuality, globalisation, (large) scale, and quantity have become modes of addressing the public as well as central threads in the weaving of this history. There are, however, other ways of thinking, of organising, and of working around the exhibitionary complex circulating on a *glocal* scale that have fallen off the radar of dominant histories. What I propose here is that Small Visual Arts Organisations (SVAOs) offer a distinct set of threads to the ones mentioned above. As such, they are one among perhaps many other examples able to weave alternate stories of exhibition-making, providing us with a more kaleidoscopic-type perspective surrounding existing art historical narratives. Hereafter, I will refer to the history of curatorship as the history of the empowerment of the curator, given that the word “curating” has been understood in terms of a subject-centred rather than object-centred approach. It is only for this reason that I will use the term in this context. However, it is not



3 See

Beryl GRAHAM

– Sarah COOK, *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2010; Beatrice VON BISMARCK – Jörn SCHAAF – Thomas WESKI (eds.), *Cultures of The Curatorial*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2012; Beatrice VON BISMARCK – Rike FRANK et al. (eds.), *Timing: On the Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting (Cultures of the Curatorial 2)*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2014; Paul O'NEILL – Mick WILSON, *Curating and the Educational Turn*, London: Open Editions – Amsterdam: De Appel 2010; Ute Meta BAUER – Briggitte OETKER (eds.), *SouthEastAsia: Spaces of the Curatorial*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2016, among others.

my intention here to reduce contemporary curatorship to this type of discourse and practice. Although beyond the scope of this essay, efforts have been made to develop complex discourses around curating that go beyond scale, internationalism, and individualism and that focus instead on specific mediums, such as new media art; concepts, such as timing or education; or specific regions.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, I understand stories of exhibition-making as a plurality of narratives, sacrificing the centrality of the individual in favour of the space between a method of display and a public.

After offering a snapshot of the history of contemporary curatorship and a brief analysis of its central characteristics, I discuss the emergence and development of Small Visual Arts Organisations (SVAOs) in various parts of the world that emerged mostly during the nineties. My intention is to show how these characteristics, which constitute the history of contemporary curatorship, become blurred and lose centrality in the work of SVAOs, bringing to the fore alternate sets of vocabularies, values and working-methods.

## The History of Contemporary Curating – A Snapshot

It is no coincidence that the periodisation of contemporary curatorship often points to the 1960s as a starting point. Before this decade curators failed to strongly inscribe themselves on the history of art despite being influential in their own time. If we think about *Cabinet of Abstraction* (Hanover Provincial Museum, 1927) it is more likely that the name El Lissitzky will come to mind before Alexander Dorner. However, if we think of *Traffic* (CAPC Bourdeaux, 1996) or *Utopia Station* (50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial, 2003) it is more likely that the names Nicolas Bourriaud or Hans-Ulrich Obrist come to mind before the names of the participating artists, especially if we consider that the latter was named number one in the 2016 list of the art world's most powerful people.<sup>4</sup>

I argue that the history of contemporary curatorship with a starting point in the 1960s is no less than the history of the empowerment of an individual: the curator. As Bruce Altshuler teaches us, the idea of the “curator

4

“2016 Power 100: This Year's Most Influential People in the Contemporary Artworld”, *Art Review*, 2016, [https://artreview.com/power\\_100/2016/](https://artreview.com/power_100/2016/) (accessed 2 Dec 2017).



5

Christophe  
CHERIX, "Pref-  
ace", in: OBRIST,  
*A Brief History of Cu-  
rating*, p. 8.

as creator" emerged during this period, accompanied by the idea that the process of exhibition-making calls for more exhaustive documentation.**5** By means of experimenting with the exhibition space, among other reasons, figures like Harald Szeemann and Walter Hopps came into conflict with the institutions they worked for, emancipating themselves from them shortly after and giving birth to the idea of the ("nomadic") independent curator.**6** That also changed the relationship with artists, as now they had to negotiate power relationships directly.

At this time, curators were still working on the behalf of artists and gradually independent curators absorbed the task of the art critics. While in past decades artists wanted to be praised by the critics, after the 1970s they were more interested in being supported by well-known curators and being included in certain exhibitions.**7** Cura-

7

Jean-Hubert  
MARTIN, "Inde-  
pendent Curatorship",  
in: RAND-KOURIS,  
*Cautionary Tales*, p.  
41.

tors became relevant for the production of art and gradually influenced the art market. They became all-encom- passing, taking on the role of judge and jury, able to create and to criti.

8

See Elena FILIP-  
OVICH, *The Artist  
as Curator: An Anthology*, Mil-  
lan: Mousse Publishing - Lon-  
don: Koenig Books 2017;  
and Celina JEFFERY (ed.),  
*The Artist as Curator*,  
Chicago: Intellect  
2015.

The flip side of the coin is the idea of the "artist as curator"**8** that came about, at least in prac- tice, long before the idea of the "curator as artist".**9** A closer flirtation with con- temporary curatorial practices began in the early twentieth century, often overlapping with the pre-history of instal- lation art.**10** Examples include exhibitions or- ganised by the German Expressionist collective Der Blaue Reiter (1911-1912), the aforementioned Lissitzky in the late 1920s, or Duchamp's role as "generator and arbitrator" in the Surrealist exhibitions of the late 1930s and 1940s.**11**

10

See Claire  
BISHOP, *Instal-  
lation Art: A Critical  
History*, London:  
Tate Publishing  
2005.

11

Exposition  
*Internationale du  
Surréalisme* (1938)  
and the *First Papers of  
Surrealism Exhibi-  
tion* (1942).

The idea of the artist as curator of- fers its own myriad stories from the 1960s-1990s that started in- tersecting within, in tension with, and outside the art institution.

Examples of this are collec- tive practices in the late 1960s and 1970s in Europe, North, and Latin America;**12** ahistorical

6

David LEVI  
STRAUSS, "The Bias  
of the World: Curating After  
Szeemann and Hopps", in:  
Seven RAND - Heather KOURIS  
(eds.), *Cautionary Tales: Critical  
Curating*, New York: Apexart  
2007, pp.15-25.

9

There are ex-  
amples during the  
seventeenth century of  
court artists organising ex-  
hibitions that glorified the  
achievements of their  
monarch Louis XIV.

12 See

Gabriele DETTE-  
RER - Maurizio NANNUCCI  
(eds.), *Artist-Run Spaces: Nonprofit  
Collective Organizations in the 1960s  
and 1970s*, Zurich: JRP|Ringier 2012;  
Margarita TUPITSYN - Victor TUPITSYN  
*et al.*, *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982-84*, London:  
Afterall Books 2017; and Teresa RICCARDI  
- Valeria GONZÁLEZ *et al.*, *El pez, la bicicleta  
y la máquina de escribir: un libro sobre  
espacios y grupo de arte independientes  
de América Latina y el Caribe*,  
Buenos Aires: PROA  
2006.



13

Debra J. MEIJERS, "The Museum and the 'Ahistorical' Exhibition", in: Bruce W. FERGUSON – Reesa GREENBERG – Sandy NAIRNE (eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London: Routledge 1996, pp. 5–14.

exhibitions<sup>13</sup> such as *Ahistorical Sounds* curated by Harald Szeemann (1988), *The Play of the Unmentionable* (1990), and *Viewing Matters: Upstairs at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen* (1996) curated by artists Joseph Kosuth and Hans Haacke respectively; and artist initiatives, independent festivals and spaces in South East

14

David TEH *et al.*, *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992-98*, London: Af-terall Books 2018.

Asia in the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1980s, three elements acquire importance: experimentation, multiculturalism and scale, specifically large scale. According to Paul O'Neill, the curator's primary source of experimentation was the group exhibi-

15

Paul O'NEILL, "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse", in: Judith RUGG – Michèle SEDGWICK (eds.), *Issues in Contemporary Art and Performance*, Bristol: Intellect Books 2007, p. 14.

tion, which opened up a new space for discourse. Unlike the monographic exhibitions, the group shows generated a platform in which different interests could be engaged through one exhibit.<sup>15</sup> These different interests also included an interest in "the other", or less optimistically, an interest in what the other was considered to be. Geeta Kapur argues that, in the 1980s, "the rise of the curator as a key category in the exposition of art happens, coincidentally, in tandem with the third-world assertions of alterity".<sup>16</sup> Additionally, as large-scale exhibitionary models started proliferating around the world, the curator became the mediator of interactions between the local and the global, acquiring a greater visibility. Towards the end of the decade, there was already a polemical debate about the artistic role the curator was taking on, as Jonathan Watkins' 1987 essay shows.<sup>17</sup>

16

Geeta KAPUR, "Curating: In the Public Sphere", in: Seven RAND – Heather KOURIS (eds.), *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, New York: Apexart 2007, p. 58.

O'Neill traces how the rise of the independent curator, which coincided with the perception of curatorial practice as a creative endeavour in its own right, paved the way for so-called "critical curating". Art criticism that addressed artworks as autonomous objects seemed to have run its course in favour of a criticism that targeted both the curator as the orchestrator and his/her object of orchestration,

the exhibition as a concept or as a project. This conception of criticality culminated in what O'Neill and Mick Wilson describe as an "institutionalisation of the curator's function" fully operating since the 1990s,

17

Jonathan WATKINS, "Polemics: The Curator as Artist", *Art Monthly*, November 1987, issue 111, pp. 27–28.

which ostensibly led to an expansion of curatorial discourse and "a new generation of self-conscious and reflexive curators".<sup>18</sup>

It is this very self-conscious and reflexive type of curator who simultaneously

18

Paul O'NEILL – Mick WILSON, "Emergence: Curating Is a Very Corrupt Discourse", *ICA Bulletin*, <https://www.ica.art/bulletin/emergence> (accessed 5 Dec 2017).



curates private collections, blockbuster shows in art institutions, medium-scale exhibitions in more experimental spaces, biennials all over the world regardless of his/her familiarity with the local context. S/he curates *documentas* and *Manfiestas* and writes in every other edited volume about curating alongside his/her curator peers. It is also this one who is invited to critically talk about art at the fairs, who is the keynote at the symposium, and who gives public lectures at the university. These all-encompassing activities — writing and historicising included — with the figure of the curator at the centre, might be among the reasons why this type of curatorship and its narratives have become somewhat predominant, albeit not the only ones circulating. Yet, this particular conceptualisation of critical curating should not go unchallenged, especially in the version that champions the curator as an intellectual and as a messianic character who not only promises to reflect on the problems of the world, but will also solve them and write about it. The above raises doubts as to whether it is possible to talk about critical curating within the framework of what seems to be a totalising enterprise. In this context, the pressing questions becomes whether there are any other shapes that critical curating could take.

### **The Struggle Between Significance and Visibility**

What a snapshot of a certain strand of the history of contemporary curatorship teaches us is that behind the concealing label of “criticality”, some of its discourses and practices have been narrativised around four key main characteristics, namely: individuality, globalisation, scale and quantity. Individual curators occupying the number one position of the ‘most influential’ in the art world is only one superficial indicator of the importance that *individuality* has acquired. Since 1987, there has been an ongoing debate concerning curators usurping the role of artists to the point of acquiring a demi-celebrity status. In the seventeenth century, artists like Salvator Rosa were perceived as eccentric individuals, with extravagant lifestyles and other-worldly skills that led them to produce masterpieces. In the twenty-first century, it is the individuals comprising this “new generation of self-conscious and reflexive curators”<sup>19</sup> that have captured attention and that are perceived in a particular way — peripatetic, incurable jetsetters who are able to work non-stop on everything and everywhere, no matter the scale or the location, travelling first class and curating the third world.

<sup>19</sup>  
*Ibid.*



20

See Sabine B. VOGEL, *Biennials – Art on a Global Scale*, New York: Springer 2010.

21

Elena FILIPOVIC, "The Global White Cube", in: eadem – Barbara VANDERLINDEN (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-wall Europe*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005, pp. 63–84.

*Globalisation* and *scale* often go hand-in hand in the context of curatorship. Mega-exhibitions and biennials have proliferated worldwide and become a dominant curatorial model. They are the spaces *par-excellence* to experience first-hand and in one place what goes on in the international contemporary art scene<sup>20</sup>, seemingly threatening to overshadow the White Cube. In reality, however, some of them have instead merely co-opted it. Elena Filipovic, for instance, suggests that the White Cube model is now globally replicated, even in those events that still make use of the white-walled venues available in their cities. She points out a paradox in which, on the one hand, these events position themselves as apparently critical of the neoliberal model of globalisation, but on the other, they have homogenising strategies for presenting international works. She particularly refers to striking similarities in the main exhibition formats in biennials in Dakar, Taipei, or even in Venice two decades ago.<sup>21</sup>

Mega-exhibitions or biennials have also received the most scholarly and public attention in the articulation of current debates regarding the exhibition complex as a negotiator between the local and the global in contemporary art. As – to a lesser extent – happens in large-scale art institutions and museums around the world, these shows operate with substantial budgets that allow them to be large in size, to show a large number of artists, and to host or – ideally to attract – a large number of visitors, which takes me to the next characteristic: *quantity*. Large budgets and large spaces are often proportionally accompanied by large amounts of pressure. Established art institutions or museums are expected to produce one show after another, with expectations of meeting yearly targets for audience numbers. For example, Penelope Curtis, former director of Tate Britain, was subjected to harsh criticism in relation to a 10% drop in visitor figures.<sup>22</sup> Her detractors presupposed that failure and success are more related to quantitative measures than to qualitative engagements.

Art institutions are being overpowered by increasing levels of bureaucratisation and standardisation. This might be a plausible explanation for the characteristics mentioned above taking on a significant role in the ways in which we think, produce, and understand our spaces for exhibition-making. In relation to this situation, Nina Möntmann suggested in 2007 that what art institutions should do is “precisely to reduce the number of structures and

22

Mark BROWN, "Tate Britain Boss Attacked over Gallery's Direction", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/apr/11/tate-britain-boss-attacked-over-gallery-s-direction> (accessed 5 Dec 2017).



standards”, as she believed to be the case in several regions in the southern hemisphere. She referred to spaces like Khoj (New Delhi, India) and Ruangrupa (Jakarta, Indonesia) as follows:

**23**  
Nina MÖNT-  
MANN, “The Rise and  
Fall of New Institutionalism:  
Perspectives on a Possible Fu-  
ture”, in: Gerald RAUNIG – Gene  
RAY (eds.), *Art and Contemporary  
Critical Practice; Reinventing Insti-  
tutional Critique*, London:  
MayFly Books 2009,  
p. 158.

You often find collective and occasionally interdis-  
ciplinary activities by artists, sometimes together  
with curators, researchers, activists or new media  
workers. They start with a small space and very local  
programming, exhibiting their own work and that of  
artists they know, or using the space for other community  
activities such as discussions or parties. In the beginning there  
is thus a kind of community center or hang-out for friends from the  
art field. In the regions I am talking about these activities are assuming  
a quasi-institutional status that often goes hand in hand with an expan-  
sion of their activity. They then start to fundraise internationally, to  
set up residencies, offer research possibilities, invite foreign curators  
and artists, organize film programs, edit magazines and so on.**23**

**24**  
See FILIPO-  
VIC – VANDER-  
LINDEN (eds.), *The  
Manifesta Decade*,  
p. 13.

I call these spaces with quasi-institutional character Small Vis-  
ual Arts Organisations, hereafter SVAOs. They mostly emerged  
after 1990 as responses to diverse challenges that artists and  
publics alike were facing in a variety of countries in relation to  
artistic production and exhibition. As much as we want to think  
of this as a product of third world “relaxed” institutional infrastruc-  
tures, these spaces did not exclusively emerge in the southern  
hemisphere, but all over the world, the West included.

**25**  
Curated  
by Jean-Hu-  
bert Martin

As we will see next, each space emerged in response to re-  
gional and local socio-political challenges on-going during the “long  
decade”, to borrow a term from Elena Filipovic and Barbara Vanderlinden  
referring to the period between 1989–2015.**24** The year of 1989 saw the  
fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square protests and the opening  
of *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou at the Grande  
Halle de la Villette in Paris**25**, followed by a period of experimentation  
in exhibition-making and the shaping of certain curato-  
rial discourses, up to the death of Harald Szeemann in  
2005.**26** The end of military dictatorships in various  
parts of the world, as well as the perpetuation of oth-  
ers since the 1980s, mainly in Asia, Africa and South  
America**27** also played a role in the creation and dis-  
semination of contemporary art. In the best cases, the

**26**  
*Ibid.*,  
p. 17.

**27**  
Bolivia in  
1982, Argentina in  
1983, Brazil and Uruguay in  
1985, Paraguay in 1989, Chile  
and Bangladesh in 1990, Ghana in  
1993, The Gambia in 1996, Demo-  
cratic Republic of the Congo in  
1997, Nigeria in 1999, Indone-  
sia in 1998, Peru in 2000,  
among others.



28

Chikadibia,

„On the Art and Cultural Establishment“, *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, <https://nkajournal.wordpress.com/2011/10/11/roundtable-iv-on-the-art-and-cultural-establishment-karroum/> (accessed 21 June 2018).

socio-political changes of this decade triggered the desire to look for spaces and vocabularies to express renewed hope. In other cases, repression, lack of art institutional infrastructures, scarce opportunities for artists to display, or a mix of conservative artistic education or a lack of it outright, paved the way for the creation of these spaces. Koyo Kouoh, founder of Raw Material Company (Dakar, Senegal), claims that similarly to other like-minded spaces in Africa, RMC emerged out of necessity:

The necessity of putting forward ideas and methods that go beyond the usual borders; the necessity of exposing people (especially art students) to practices and other people that challenge their intellectual comfort and creative confidence; the necessity of questioning confiscation of the public arena by petty politics and phony religious fervour; and the necessity of re-polishing the image of the artist and the thinker in society.<sup>28</sup>

In his analysis of the decade, Hou Hanru takes the example of Asia-Pacific, where he attributes the emergence of alternative spaces to the rapid changes in the region in terms of its goals of the modernisation and democratisation of society to integrate itself into globalisation processes. This, he claims, “led to self-discovery and to a search for autonomous modes of living, thinking, and expression that stand in contrast to conservative and hegemonic political systems and social values”.<sup>29</sup>

These perspectives show that there are indeed other existing sets of threads: diverse values and ways of working that would allow us to weave alternate stories of exhibition-making. In what follows, I first contextualise SVAOs’ emergence and proliferation, and then turn to an analysis of their ways of working and some valuable aspects of their offer to their artists and their publics.

### What are SVAOs?

I define SVAOs as structurally small, non-profit spaces that are dedicated both to the production and to the dissemination of contemporary art. They are characterised by an interest in the local community in which they are located and in diverse urban issues ranging from new technologies to the social art practices in their cities. In spite of the potential practical and ideological similarities

29

Hou HANRU, “Time for Alternatives”, *NETTIME*, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-0302/msg00130.html>, (accessed 22 June 2018).



**30** By new institutions, I refer to those spaces associated with New Institutionalism, which became popular in European curatorial discourse from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.

with artist-run spaces, community arts organisations, and new institutions, **30** SVAOs share some common denominators that make them an exhibitionary phenomenon in their own right.

**31** There are some exceptions, such as the CCA (Glasgow, Scotland).

Their buildings are usually not larger than 1000m<sup>2</sup> of floor space. **31** Their organograms indicate that they have a very limited number of staff members and even more limited budgets or sources for funding. As a consequence, they are rarely able to store collections or to manage permanent exhibitions, although due to their interest in research and knowledge production, some spaces have managed to build physical or digital archives and libraries. **32** Most significantly, they all share a strong interest in engaging with the local communities where their buildings are located, as well as in tackling local urban issues, including social art practices or new technologies in their cities.

**32** There are also a few exceptions. TEOR/éTica, founded in 1999 in San José, Costa Rica, opened TEOR-Colección permanente in 2008. This is a different space that hosts a permanent collection of mainly contemporary Central American art. The collection has expanded to include some works by international artists through donations and exchanges.

As seen above, most SVAOs emerged worldwide after the 1990s as responses to different challenges that artists and publics were facing in relation to artistic production and exhibition-making. Some of them developed from artist-run spaces that needed to formalise their

**33** See <http://www.para-site.org.hkk> and <http://ruangrupa.org/15/> (accessed 23 June 2018)

**34** See <http://ashkalalwan.org/> and <http://www.raw-materialcompany.org/> (accessed 23 June 2018)

organisational structures in order to be eligible for funding opportunities, such as Para Site (Hong Kong), founded in 1996, or Ruangrupa, established in the year 2000. **33** In some cases, SVAOs were established with the aim of giving unknown local artists a space to make their work visible or to promote their work beyond regional boundaries by connecting them to a larger art international community, such as in the case of Ashkal Alwan (Beirut, Lebanon), created in 1993, and Raw Material Company, created in 2008. **34** There is a variety of other examples of institutions that aim to give visibility to overlooked regions, such as TEOR/éTica (San Jose, Costa Rica), founded in 1999 with a special interest in supporting artistic practices and discourses from Central America and the Caribbean. **35** Organisations such as Casco (Utrecht, The Netherlands), active since 1990, or Lugar a dudas (Cali, Colombia), since 2005, are mainly invested in creating spaces for critical thinking with respect to contemporary art and society at large. **36**

**35** See <http://teoretica.org/> (accessed 23 June 2018)

**36** See <http://casco.art/> and <http://www.lugaradudas.org/#/> (accessed 23 June 2018)

There are SVAOs that developed due to the lack of art institutions or artistic education in their regions, such as Khoj,





Lugar a dudas, Cali, Colombia



Lugar a dudas, Cali Colombia





Uriel Tincture-Ointment Workshop in ShowRoom,  
Photo: Dan Weill





37

See <http://khojworkshop.org/> and <http://theertha.org/> (accessed 23 June 2018).

38

See <https://www.theshowroom.org/> and <http://www.altpool.org/> (accessed 23 June 2018).

established in 1997, or Theertha (Colombo, Sri Lanka), established in 2000.<sup>37</sup> In other places, where art history and art institutions had had a stronger presence, SVAOs developed as *alternatives* to mainstream museums and galleries.

They often saw themselves as spaces that escaped commercial values and supported emerging international artists. Examples of this are The Showroom (London, England) and Pool (Seoul, South Korea), established in 1983 and 1999, respectively.<sup>38</sup>

Despite it being one of their central components, none of these spaces is exclusively dedicated to exhibition-making. They have hybrid agendas that shape their offerings, meaning that they all engage in a combination of various forms of artistic mediation. Apart from art exhibitions, they host screenings, concerts, NGO-like initiatives, performances, artist residencies, workshops, symposia, or open studios, among others. Their public offer is strongly influenced by the local community that surrounds them. In summary, these spaces emerged in various parts of the world roughly at the same time. Nevertheless, they emerged for different reasons and in response to a variety of local conditions. What is it, then, that allows us to identify these spaces as a phenomenon in its own right?

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„About Us,” Ashkal Alwan, <http://ashkalanwan.org/about-us/> (accessed 2 June 2018).

The stringent consistency encountered in their practices and the similarities in the discourses reproduced by their websites and by their staff members is merely one indicator.<sup>39</sup> It suffices to look at various SVAOs’ websites in which they state their interests. The words “critical thinking” are prevalent in these spaces’ mission and vision statements. Examples of this are Ashkal Alwan, “committed to facilitating artistic production in a way that fosters critical thinking,”<sup>40</sup> or TEOR/éTica, committed to “critical thinking around contemporary local and global discourses and realities from an artistic perspective.”<sup>41</sup> The terms “knowledge production”, “research and education”, “experimentation” and “collaboration” also belong to the shared vocabulary of these spaces. For instance Raw

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„About,” RMC, [http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/\\_2227?lang=en](http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/_2227?lang=en) (accessed 21 June 2018).

Material Company is involved with “curatorial practice, artistic education, residencies, knowledge production, and the archiving of theory and criticism of art”.<sup>42</sup> Sa Sa Art Projects (Phnom Penh, Cambodia) aims at facilitating “artistic knowledge production and sharing through experimentation and collaboration”.<sup>43</sup> “Collaborative and process-driven approaches

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Mai Abu EIDAHAB – Bina CHOI – Emily PETHICK (eds.), *Circular Facts*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2011 and “How to Begin Living in Trees?”, *e-flux*, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/53/59901/how-to-begin-living-in-the-trees/> (accessed 28 June 2018).

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„Arte + Pensamiento,” TEOR/éTica, <http://www.teoretica.org/front/PT4.php?ref=2> (accessed 21 June 2018).

43

„About,” Sa Sa Art Projects, <http://www.sasaart.info/about.htm> (accessed 21 June 2018).



to production”<sup>44</sup> and artistic practices that are ‘open to collaboration [to]... jointly contribute to the commons”<sup>45</sup> are quotes directly taken from The Showroom’s and CASCO’s websites, respectively. Also prevalent in their vocabularies are words that show their interest in working across disciplines, such as “trans-disciplinary” (Raw Material Company) or “interdisciplinary” (Ashkal Alwan).

A shared vocabulary together with the analysis of their practices allowed me to identify some of their common denominators, namely the interest of SVAOs in: *Processes over End Products; Networks and Sustainability; Engagement; and Research and Knowledge Production*. This means that they share an interest in process-based artistic practices, in research-oriented activities, in arts education and in fostering strong levels of engagement with their publics, mainly their local publics. Furthermore, all of these spaces belong to at least one network that connects them with other like-minded spaces in different countries.

**45**  
„Mission,” CASCO, <http://casco.art/about/more> (accessed 21 June 2018).

**44**  
„About,” The Showroom, <http://www.theshowroom.org/about> (accessed 21 June 2018).

### **Decentralising Efforts: Alternate Sets of Vocabularies, Values and Working-methods**

Individuality, globalisation, (large) scale and quantity are some of the main characteristics highlighted by the history of contemporary curatorship. Sets of vocabularies, values, and working methods that circulate in SVAOs—I argue—represent decentralising efforts that offer alternate narratives of exhibition-making. In what follows, I provide some concrete examples of these decentralising efforts.

**46** Francis MCKEE, “Interview with Francis McKee” by Ana Bilbao, 22 Apr 2016.

SVAOs’ turn away from individual-oriented activities is demonstrated by the extent to which words like mutual support, collaboration, and collectivity have permeated their vocabularies. This collaborative approach has not only become one of SVAOs’ main survival strategies, but also a way of working with their artists. For example, in terms of support, these spaces provide invaluable backing to emerging artists. Francis McKee, director of the CCA (Glasgow, Scotland) explains that one of their main aims is to support artists that collaborate with them: “we help artists to do practical things, such as creating a budget for the first time [...] we’re trying to introduce more professional practices in terms of administration for artists, structured learning for interns, and residency space for the development of new work.”<sup>46</sup> In our interview, he mentioned the case of Fielding Hope, a music programmer who was interested in learning how to organise a music festival. He did a placement for six months at the CCA, where he was mentored and gained these kinds of organisational skills. He currently runs



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*Ibid.*

the Counterflows music festival in Glasgow, which in 2017 celebrated its sixth edition.<sup>47</sup>

SVAOs have offered artists a space to produce, the opportunity to exhibit their works, and resources and platforms to develop their ideas. They also give artists a space to experiment with new media and new materials. In some cases, such as Theertha in Sri Lanka, SVAOs have provided education, skills, training and advice, and in all cases these spaces connect artists with the local, national, and international contemporary art scenes through their networks.

Most SVAOs belong to at least one network that connects them with like-minded spaces around the world. For instance, as of 2017 CASCO belonged to six networks. This includes a regional one—BK-NU (Beeldende Kunst Netwerk Utrecht)—connecting six institutions in Utrecht dedicated to contemporary art, and a European one called Cluster that links eight visual art spaces located in residential areas of European cities that are interested in their local surroundings. Furthermore, CASCO are associate partners of Arts Collaboratory, a translocal network that fosters exchange and collaboration between twenty like-minded spaces from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Networks such as Arts Collaboratory indicate the presence of these spaces worldwide. However, as opposed to the characteristics that accompany the so-called global, peripatetic, and jet-setter curator described above, one overarching concern of SVAOs around the world is their engagement with their cities and with the local communities where their buildings are located. For example, in 2013 in Videotage (Hong Kong), Peter Alwast, a cross media artist in residency, presented an exhibition inspired by his experiences and observations in the city. His work *Looking Down* is a video installation that combines 3D animation and drawing.<sup>48</sup> The artist wanted to explore the vertical distribution of space

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“Looking Down – An Exhibition by Peter Alwast”, *Videotage*, <http://videotage.ic.hk/project/looking-down/> (accessed 3 Dec 2017).

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*Ibid.*

50 La-na LAM, “Exhibition Invites Visitors to Take Sideways Look at Our Vertical City”, *South China Morning Post*, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1380724/exhibition-invites-visitors-take-sideways-look-our-vertical-city>, (accessed 5 Dec 2017).

in Hong Kong by analysing the relationship between wealth and altitude: “The richest people live with the most distance from the ground while the city’s poorest people literally occupy and sweep the ground beneath, with a conspicuous gap in between.”<sup>49</sup>After a long process of city exploration, the artist recorded scenes from skyscrapers such as Sunday reunions of domestic helpers. He also recorded a broomstick sweeping leaves to clear the streets, among other images.<sup>50</sup>

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Bitmapping is a technique for memory organisation that is commonly used to store digital images.

He used a bitmapping<sup>51</sup> technique and wrapped 3D objects with



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Lana LAM, "Exhibition Invites Visitors."

the video footage in order to create animations. These animations were played on four large monitors that were located in the ground, so the visitors could look downwards on the work. Alwast said: "To look down is a literal thing in Hong Kong—there are double-decker buses, elevated walkways, but it is also to look down on someone, and there is an experience of time and the ground as a universal common thing."**52**

There are other projects in SVAOs that are focused not only on urban issues but on concerns surrounding the local community or the neighbourhood where they are located. For example, in 2010 The Showroom set up a project called Communal Knowledge, mainly focused on responding

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"Penfold Medicinal Garden", *The Showroom*, <https://www.theshowroom.org/projects/penfold-medical-garden> (accessed 3 Dec 2017).

to issues occurring in their neighbourhood in Penfold Street and around the Church Street area in London. In 2016, in the context of Uriel Orlow's commission about plant stories, the artist worked for a year in collaboration with community activist and gardener Carole Wright and with the local community to set up the Penfold Medicinal Garden. Their

research focused on local medicinal plant use and led to the establishment of a multicultural medicinal garden. Through collective workshops, the garden has expanded its activity and its use.**53** Projects like this have shown SVAOs' capacity to engage publics that have never been in contact with an art institution before. They are often spaces where people have their first encounters with contemporary art, or even with art as such.

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See <http://khojworkshop.org/> (accessed 23 June 2018).

Differently from larger-scale art institutions or mega-exhibitions that have the pressure of fulfilling audience-number requirements and of appealing to international audiences, SVAOs values and working methods allow them to engage with specific communities and to work on projects that speak to their own contexts, often going beyond exhibition-making. Khoj,**54**

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For accessing all of *Khirkee Voice* issues, please visit <http://khojworkshop.org/publications/> (accessed 23 June 2018).

founded in 1997, is located in Khirkee Village, an area of the city of Delhi caught between rapid gentrification and diversity of inhabitants that include migrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, Cameroon and Guyana. With the intention of strengthening networks between the local communities, Khoj launched a quarterly newspaper called *Khirkee Voice***55** edited by artists Malini Kochupillai and Mahavir Singh Bisht. The artist-run periodical is available in English and Hindi, and fosters the inclusion of diverse local voices of individuals who are paid for their contributions. Features written by and for the community touch upon themes that range from the cultural life of the neighbourhood, everyday challenges faced

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Skye ARUNDHATI THOMAS, "Not the Gallery System", *Art-Review Asia*, [https://artreview.com/opinion/ara\\_spring\\_2019\\_opinion\\_skye\\_arundhati\\_thomas\\_on\\_khoj\\_projects/](https://artreview.com/opinion/ara_spring_2019_opinion_skye_arundhati_thomas_on_khoj_projects/) (accessed 22 June 2018).

by their inhabitants, or local economies.<sup>56</sup> This shows that it does not suffice to open up the space and wait for the community to automatically engage. Artists often go beyond SVAOs' walls to create a public by giving visibility to a shared interest. These community-building efforts make us think of a more compartmentalised and a more specific rather than broad notion of the public,

resulting in more focused activities. This tailor-made mode of addressing the public is primarily due to two reasons. Firstly, this is due to SVAOs' interest in long-term collaborations that unfold over time and their interest in giving continuity to artists that have worked with them in the past. Such is the case with Uriel Orlow's collaboration with the Showroom and with Malini Kochupillai's in Khoj. Secondly, it is due to SVAOs' scale: small physical space, small budget. Although smallness could be seen as a limitation, in today's context I think of it as a privilege, especially when thinking about engaging with the public. In 2012 Lugar a dudas started an initiative called *A la hora del té* (at tea time), in which the public was invited to hang out in the space with the possibility of exploring their audio-visual archive, of reading a book, or of finding out about new artist projects, including short film screenings. *A la hora del té* happened from Tuesday to Friday from 5pm onwards opening up an opportunity for rather informal encounters, yet with a designated time and space within the organisation dedicated to them. This initiative is a testament to the organisation's ethos. Lucas Ospina describes the atmosphere of Lugar a dudas as follows:

Lugar a dudas operates in Cali in a space that is not so big, a republican house with two floors, two *patios*, a terrace, a garage. It has the advantage of small things, such as organisations, or villages that, due to their modest dimensions and manageable communal problems, free up time and leisure for its inhabitants. Bureaucratic matters demand little energy, and the rest is dedicated to the active development of a creative existence.<sup>57</sup>

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Lucas OSPINA, "La Escala", *Esfera Pública*, 2015, <http://esferapublica.org/nfblog/la-escala/>, (accessed 8 Dec 2017). Translation my own.

In contrast to Ospina's description, conventional curatorial activity not only seems to be challenged by excessive bureaucratisation and standardisation, but it also seems to be evaluated according to quantitative parameters rather than by considerations of qualitative types of engagements with the public. The scale, the international scope, and the number of projects developed, as well as of artists they feature are certainly considered when including



curators in the lists of the most influential people in the art world. It suffices to look at the descriptions of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Adam Szymczyk produced by ArtReview's Power 100 lists when glorifying their curatorial contributions.<sup>58</sup> This takes me to the last characteristic that in my view SVAOs potentially counterbalance, namely quantity.

**58**  
 "2017 Power 100: This Year's Most Influential People in the Contemporary Artworld", *Art Review*, 2017, [https://artreview.com/power\\_100/](https://artreview.com/power_100/) (accessed 8 Dec 2017).

Quantity is a characteristic that also overlaps with previous ones. Thanks to networks such as Arts Collaboratory, which not only link like-minded spaces but also represent a source of funding for various SVAOs, these spaces have managed to circumvent notions of productivity that favour amounts of projects developed and number of artists featured. Arts Collaboratory accounts for SVAOs' contexts individually and does not implement number-based criteria to measure their

success and the continuity of their financial support. As seen earlier, SVAOs favour atomized public-making over attracting large crowds. Some SVAOs' residency programmes have no expectations or do not put pressure on the artists to have a final product or exhibition, yet they still have to engage with the public through a lecture or an open studio. However, there are other initiatives that run parallel to residencies that provide artists with time and space to think about their practices with no expectations of presenting the work to the public. This implies neither frustrations regarding number of visitors nor pressure on artists to convince family, friends, and publics to come and see their work while they bite their nails on opening night. Such initiatives run in opposition to audience number expectations that other types of arts organisations have to respond to. For

**59**  
 "Residencias", in: Fundación Casa Tres Patios (eds.), *Tránsitos*, Medellín: Fundación Casa Tres Patios 2013, p. 84.

instance, Casa Tres Patios (Medellín, Colombia) developed a strategy called Cubo X, which is exclusively dedicated to experimentation with artistic processes. Artist Ana Maria Macmaster participated in Cubo X in May 2013. This experimental residency had a duration of one month and allowed the artist to look more in-depth into traveling as lived experience. She was able to deepen some thought processes that she had had in mind before, as well as to advance new ideas that came to mind while she was at the space. The artist was mainly focused on trips that she made to China, Canada, and different European countries.<sup>59</sup> After finishing her experimentation, Macmaster described the importance of generating similar initiatives that go beyond the mere opportunity for an artist to present his/her work to the public. Referring to her own experience, she considers that the casual conversations allowed by the informal structure of the programme to have been

more enriching than it would have been to display her work at an exhibition.



These conversations allowed her work to develop by opening up new directions in her practice.<sup>60</sup> The whole space became the artist's notebook. She made notes on the wall highlighting important connections. Moreover, some notes were displayed on the walls as drawings. The place looks like a studio in which her materials are located all over without a specific organisation.

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"Cubo X:  
Ana María Mac-  
master", Fundación Casa  
Tres Patios, 2013, [https://  
www.casatrespacios.org/  
ana-mejia-macmaster](https://www.casatrespacios.org/ana-mejia-macmaster)  
(accessed 8 Dec  
2017).

## Conclusions

After providing a brief sketch of the history of contemporary curatorship since the 1960s, I have argued that this history has seemingly become equivalent to the history of the empowerment of the global curator. This history has been enriched through vocabularies, sets of values and working methods that spin around certain characteristics, including individuality, globalisation, (large) scale, and quantity. Exhibitionary typologies that favour other—and at times differing—types of engagements and ways of working with artists, publics, and like-minded art spaces have fallen off the radar of dominant histories. It was my intention here to explore the importance of the work that SVAOs have been undertaking over the past two decades, which I suggest represents one among other parallel exemplars for discussing exhibition-making and its histories. The main indicators of their significance include the vital role that these spaces have had in terms of engaging with their surroundings; the fact that they are spaces where some people have their first encounters with contemporary art or with art as such; the invaluable support that they provide to emerging contemporary artists; and their impetus for developing other types of values, vocabularies and ways of working around art and its publics. Collectivity and mutual support, the *glocal*, (small) scale and slow-type collaborations are some of the characteristics that potentially counterbalance more established curatorial behaviours.