

Witness report "Curating in the Gallery Field", 28 & 29 November 2011

By Giovanni Majer

Photo's: Cassander Eeftinck-Schattenkerk

The first thing I thought when I heard about the Gallerist Programme was probably something about the word itself, "gallerist", one of several neologisms created to map the ways contemporary art works. The noun, of course, suggests some relation with a gallery: a gallerist could be the founder, the keeper, the assiduous visitor of a gallery. But not all those who work in a gallery are gallerists, even if we restrict ourselves to the meaning the word has in continental Europe (where public galleries are called museums, art centers, kunsthallen). We know, for instance, that dealers also have their own galleries, and that being a gallerist is somehow more modest, more concentrated, less glamour-oriented than being a dealer. Being a dealer is selling; a gallerist is a critic who happens to sell art, a processing machine transforming raw data into art history in the making.

How do people turn into gallerists? In a world where almost every conceivable job has a related degree, being a gallerist is still something you learn but aren't taught. Maybe because it requires many different competences, something that can also be said of curators (exhibition makers in a profit or non profit sector resemble each other), that do benefit from academic training. Maybe because dealers (and possibly some gallerists?) are self-conscious when it comes to revealing the tricks of the trade. Maybe the art world is simply too much about networks, ad-hoc solutions and silent conventions, to function in an academic setting. Maybe because it is more a life than a job. The fact is that, if you want to become a gallerist, you still do what every aspiring musician does: you look for gigs, start working for a gallery, then another, until at some point the job you do starts growing on you and the rhythm of visits, fairs and dinners is something you are so used to - you and most of the people you hang out with by then - that your overriding passion for transavanguardia has really turned into something else.

The Gallerist Programme's preliminary workshop, "Curating in the Gallery Field", organized by de Appel and The Fair Gallery* and held in a large room under the roof of Amsterdam's Rijksakademie, intended precisely to answer this question, or at least to open the field to creative discussion. A first point was made by the participants themselves and the fact that the requirements were motivational rather than formal or academic. Participants had many sorts of backgrounds: some were curators, some artists, some something completely different, some worked for a gallery or had their own.



During the two days, activities were as diverse as them: they included seminars more or less structured like a university lecture, speeches by art fair directors, a discussion on personal experiences of the market and team exercises. Jennifer Flay (director FIAC) brought the perspective of a seasoned gallerist reviving one of the world's major fairs. Olav Velthuis (economic sociologist) debunked a series of notions about how the art market is quickly transforming itself in a secondary-driven commoditized marketplace, destroying the old gift

relations and personal network model. Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips (both connected to Goldsmiths College) set a compelling case for the impact of the marketplace on aesthetics and - in short - what will eventually become art history. Francesco Manacorda (director Artissima) gave the perspective of a curator transforming a niche fair into a city-wide cultural event, and on how to discover and nurture young galleries. Richard Flood (curator at large, New Museum) gave a personal account of his own career in galleries, a wide-ranging reflection of the specificities of being a gallerist compared to other figures in the art world, and a long series of fabulous anecdotes. Finally, Jonas Zakaitis (Tulips & Roses) gave away precious tips on how to thrive at art fairs from a young gallerist's perspective.



Likewise, in the two workshops, participants were required to confront themselves with near-life situations and react quickly in a way that underlined the gallerist's relation to a series of other stakeholders and the interplay of creative, social and financial pressures in the way galleries function. The resulting presentations gave a very exciting view of creativity, critical thinking and some stereotypes at work. Before and after the workshop, there were plenty of opportunities to exchange ideas, develop contacts and

exercise networking, that mana word of our time. The sense of hierarchy was limited throughout and barriers swiftly melted away, giving the impression of a dedicated community intent on negotiating a common ground of meaningful experiences. Perhaps the only regret was that the workshop was short.

Can you actually be taught how to become a gallerist? Is there a shortcut to developing an eye, if not a vision, for the elusive object people call great art? That is still early to say. Can the Gallerist Programme function as an effective platform for exchanging and possibly generating of new ideas? If that's the intention, then the workshop was a great start.

Giovanni Majer has recently joined Jan Mot in Brussels. Prior to this, he was part of the editorial team of Kaleidoscope Magazine, Milan. Majer was invited by de Appel arts centre to reflect on the two-day workshop 'Curating in the Gallery Field' under a personal title.

* The Fair Gallery: gb agency, Paris; Hollybush Gardens, London; Jan Mot, Brussels; Raster, Warsaw