

# FEATURE



## Artists call the shots

When Gustave Courbet organised an exhibition, it was a radical act – but now artist-curators are everywhere. By **Pac Pobric**

“I conquer freedom; I save the independence of art.” So Gustave Courbet, the self-proclaimed “proudest and most arrogant man in France”, described his decision to skirt participation in the French state-sponsored Exposition Universelle in 1855 and install, instead, an independent tent full of his own paintings just outside the expo’s doors on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. For 20 sous, visitors could enter Courbet’s “pavilion of Realism” and browse 40 pictures hung to the artist’s liking, without the interference of troublesome state curators.

But Courbet’s pavilion was a disappointment. The crowds never came. Critics took little notice. Ticket prices were halved by the time Eugène Delacroix came to see the show in August. It was not, even, strictly speaking, the first self-organised show. Jacques-Louis David had already put together a show of his own work in 1799. Yet Courbet’s exhibition, in hindsight,

was foundational. Courbet’s unwillingness to collaborate was, as the art historian Yve-Alain Bois once put it, “the first avant-garde act”. It was the first deed of curatorial refusal: meddling bureaucrats be damned.

### Something to talk about

The issue of the artist as curator is under scrutiny in Miami this week. As part of the Art Basel Miami Beach Conversations programme, panellists including the Beijing-based artist and curator Liu Ding, and the New York- and Berlin-based artist Rirkrit Tiravanija will examine the phenomenon on Sunday, 7 December.

Indeed, artist-curated exhibitions are everywhere, from expansive biennials (in November, Christian Jankowski was named the curator of the forthcoming Manifesta 11); to commercial gallery shows (“Peter Blake: Slide Show”, at the Paul Stolper gallery in London until 10 January 2015, is organised by Blake himself); through to institutional exhibitions (the Museum of Modern Art in New York has

had nine offerings in its “Artists Choice” series since 1989, the most recent edition organised by Trisha Donnelly in late 2012).

At the Hayward Gallery in London in February, seven artists including Richard Wentworth and Hannah Starkey will curate a section of an exhibition focusing on British history in the past 70 years, covering topics such as feminism.

**“Artists have the benefit of being influenced by work that is not mainstream”**

The show is part of a trend at the Hayward Gallery; in 2009, the Turner Prize-winner Mark Wallinger organised an eclectic exhibition there called “The Russian Linesman” (above).

Artists as unlike as Ellsworth Kelly and Glenn Ligon are even organising shows of their own art, just as Courbet had done 160 years ago. Kelly recently put together “Monet Kelly” for the Clark Institute in Massachusetts (until 15 February

2015), which pairs his work with pictures by the French Impressionist painter. Ligon is currently at work on “Encounters and Collisions”, which includes his art and that of contemporaries like Chris Ofili and Robert Gober (at Nottingham Contemporary in the UK, opening in April 2015).

How did artist-curated shows become so widely accepted? The first step was the collapse of central

art institutions like the one that Courbet had to contend with in his day. Today, there is no organisation that has anything near the governing power of the French Beaux-Arts regime, which had the unilateral ability to arbitrate and display art. Instead, we have just the opposite: a commonplace sensibility that no single authority has a monopoly on art history. No one institution can tell the whole story; there is no longer a dominant “grand

narrative” for us to appeal to.

“I don’t think there is a definition of high art,” says the painter Eric Fischl, who organised “Disturbing Innocence” at the Flag Art Foundation in New York (until 31 January 2015). “There are just well-executed and creative things.” His show speaks to the prevalence of pluralism today: it includes work by 50 artists as diverse as Roy Lichtenstein and Alberto Giacometti, and each piece in the show includes figures of dolls, toys or mannequins. (Fischl’s art is also on view.) Today, “artists have the benefit of being influenced by work that is not mainstream, or that is not considered high, great art”, Fischl says.

Shows like these generally emphasise an artist’s individual sensibility, rather than a supposedly objective historical chronicle. Artist-organised exhibitions tend to be “clearly editorial, as opposed to reportorial”, says Ann Temkin, the chief curator of painting and sculpture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. “All curatorial work is

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subjective, but with shows curated by artists, the subjectivity of the choices is foregrounded," she says. And though, today, seemingly all ideas about art carry some legitimate currency, academic curators still face institutional constraints that artists can simply shrug away.

"I've seen shows that artists have put together that seem to have a liberatory force, where things are arranged without obedience to certain categories that I carry with me as an art historian," says Helen Molesworth, the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. This is true of politically inclined shows, says Jens Hoffmann, the deputy director of the Jewish Museum in New York. "I cannot express my own personal political opinion through an exhibition," he says. "But an artist can do that."

That raises some questions: do the restrictions faced by institutional curators lead to more historically accurate exhibitions? Does the pluralist attitude that fosters artist-curated shows also open the door to curatorial misconceptions? Are artists simply more likely to get it wrong than academic curators? Most contemporary thinkers are dismissive of the idea. The only important question is whether an exhibition is intellectually productive, says the art historian Bruce Altshuler. "The problem is, what would 'misconstrued' mean?" he asks. "Is the show illuminating? Good exhibitions can be done by professional curators, or they can be done by artists."

#### Taken for granted

The freedom Courbet demanded 160 years ago is taken for granted today. Porous boundaries between artists and curators; an exponential increase in legitimate cultural perspectives; the lack of a central guiding institution against which to rebel: these conditions form a landscape in which practically all distinctions are easily collapsible.

**H.A. Schult's *Biokinetic* at Documenta 5, in 1972. But is Documenta itself a work of art?**

**"More and more, the subject of an exhibition is the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art"**

"Maybe there isn't a black and white division between an artist's [body of work], strictly speaking, and the rest of the creative things the artist does," Temkin says. So if artists can be effective curators, it is only a short jump to the idea that curators can be compelling artists, and that curatorial work is itself a kind of art-making.

Robert Gober's current retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (until 18 January 2015) includes two galleries arranged by the artist of work by Anni Albers, Robert Beck, Cady Noland, Nancy Shaver and Joan Semmel. Each was included in a show Gober organised for the Matthew Marks gallery in 1999, which Marks hoped to sell as a whole to the Art Institute of Chicago. As he later recalled in the catalogue for Gober's retrospective, he pitched the idea to the museum curator James Rondeau, telling him that he would be buying not only work by five separate artists, but that Rondeau would "always have the option to show them together in one gallery and then you'll have a Robert Gober installation as well".

Nicolas Bourriaud, the director of the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, says that recycling is the condition of contemporary life, so that it should come as no surprise that artists are organising shows to develop new artistic ideas. "We are becoming

more and more conscious that you cannot invent something from scratch," he says. "There is nothing *ex-nihilo*." Many artists are now "producing new pathways through culture and history, and that's very close to curating".

Yet even in a pluralist world, the idea of a curator-as-artist rubs some the wrong way. "I think that's completely foolish," says the US art critic Dave Hickey. "You're a lot of things, but you're not an artist. It's just another way of 'social relations art' making the party into the art. It's a sign of the times, of course, but I don't think any serious artist would ever propose that."

#### Crafty curators

Indeed, some artists have actively fought the idea. In 1972, the French artist Daniel Buren censured the curator Harald Szeemann for his handling of Documenta 5. Buren felt that Szeemann had confused curating and art-making and that Documenta had become one big art piece. "More and more, the subject of an exhibition tends not to be the display of artworks, but the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art," Buren wrote. In the hands of crafty curators like Szeemann, art became "nothing more than a decorative gimmick for the survival of the museum".

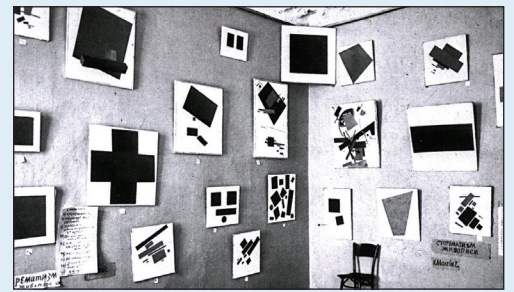
Buren wanted to take back the narrative, something that the artist Dara Birnbaum says is still a concern for many. "A lot of artists try to curate shows to get back some of the power of contextualising their own work," she says. "I think many artists feel strongly that the curatorial position of predominant shows like Documenta have become so strong that the artist is almost subsumed."

The institutionalised artist-curator exhibition – and even the idea of the curator-as-artist – is not likely to disappear. "It is a serious responsibility," Courbet wrote to Bruyas, "to provide the example of liberty and personality in art." Artist-curators inherit Courbet's legacy in a radically different world.



**Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liu Ding will join the conversation on artists as curators at Art Basel Miami Beach on Sunday, 7 December, 10am (Hall C auditorium)**

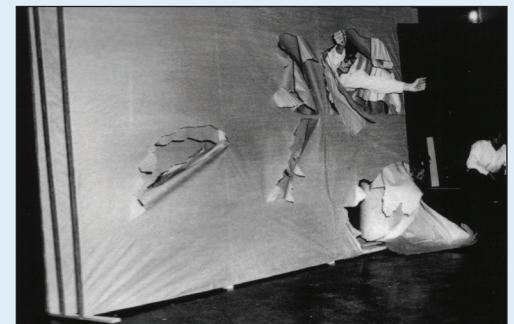
## ME, MYSELF AND I



#### **0.10: the Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures** **Dobychina Gallery, Petrograd, 1915**

**Organised by Ivan Puni and Ksenia Boguslavskaya**

Around 6,000 people paid one rouble each for admission to this show, which organisers grandly boasted was the "last" of the Futurist exhibitions. In fact, there was still much left to discuss. The ever-warring Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin split the 12 other artists included in the show into two factions: on the one side, those who grouped around Malevich's pursuit of ineffable spiritualism; and, on the other, those who followed Tatlin's insistence on hard, physical, earthly materiality. For at least one critic, both artists were at dead ends. "It makes no sense to describe this drivel," he wrote. "Suffice it to say that the insolence of the artists knows no boundaries."



#### **The First Gutai Exhibition**

**Ohara Hall, Tokyo, 1955**

**Organised by Jiro Yoshihara and the Gutai Art Association**

Three years before the American artist Allan Kaprow wrote "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock", where he argued that Abstract Expressionism led naturally to performance art, a group of Japanese artists led by Jiro Yoshihara had already made the connection. At "The First Gutai Exhibition" (which was, in fact, the second), Kazuo Shiraga crawled through mud for 20 minutes while, in another piece, Saburo Murakami tore through layers of packing paper (above). Inspired by their New York School counterparts, the 16 artists in the show also exhibited abstract pictures, all in the service of "direct emotion and direct connections between the spirit and the material", as Yoshihara explained on the show's invitation card. In the exhibition catalogue Sadamasa Motonaga offered observations about the work of Yozo Ukiya that could apply to the show as a whole: "There is something very strange about this work."

#### **Freeze**

**PLA Building, London, 1988**

**Organised by Damien Hirst**

Damien Hirst was just 23 years old and a second-year art student at Goldsmiths College when he launched his career with this exhibition in 1988. Even then, Hirst was an entrepreneur. The artist cut through red tape to get permission from the Port Authority of London to transform a disused gymnasium into an art gallery. He managed to secure funding from the property developers Olympia & York for the show's catalogue. He even made sure that important visitors like the curators Norman Rosenthal and Nicholas Serota and the collector Charles Saatchi saw the exhibition (he supposedly sent taxis for all three). "Frowned on in the same way as self-published poetry, wistful attempts at exhibitions by friends and co-students have normally failed," wrote one critic in the *Guardian*. Yet there was no way of getting around it: Freeze, the writer concluded, "is a success". P.P.

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