

The Making of 'Once is Nothing'

How to Say No while Still Saying Yes?

Charles Esche, Maria Hlavajova

Essay – February 6, 2006

Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova were invited, as representatives of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and BAK in Utrecht respectively, to contribute to the Brussels Biennial. With 'Once is Nothing' ¹ they tried, from their position of institutional responsibility, to find an answer to the fleeting character of many biennials and their economically motivated quest for modernization.

'Just say yes ...' Isn't this rubric the motto of our post-1989 age? The 1990s generation grew up to say 'yes', or at least 'yes, but ...' because it seemed there was no alternative. With no possibility of an effective oppositional movement, how could anyone know what, if anything, to refuse, and why? If you were to say a defiant 'no', it would appear self-serving and fanatical – an empty gesture or inexplicable failure to try to make use of what might always be a real opportunity. In the past, refusal seems to have been easier. At least when combined with a more general resistance to submit to the forces of state or market that occupied much of the political and economic time before 1989, refusal appeared to have more justification and purpose – it could even be heroic. After the neoconservative declaration of the end of history, the angry young dogs didn't have the same bite; it just seemed easier to agree and try to make the system work in the best way for those with whom it engaged. Yet along with the myriad 'yes's' that punctuated the 1990s and continue up to today, there were also a multitude of small-scale, modest resistances to specific exploitations and attempts to turn an empty invitation to participate into an agonistic expression of what might be (better).

Suddenly in autumn 2008, political economy burst back onto the world stage as if it had never really been away. The downturn had arrived, proving that the pattern of free market boom and bust was not broken but just dormant for a while, only to return with a more aggressive vengeance than we thought possible. Amid the rapid deflation of bank credit and overblown management egos, we could suddenly perceive with a new clarity the manoeuvring of our democratic representatives busy holding up a system they told us obeyed the laws of natural selection. Just at this moment, purely coincidentally, a new biennial opened in Brussels. It was the umpteenth international contemporary art festival designed to occupy our cultured leisure time to emerge in the non-historical years 1989-2008. However, alongside the rather pedestrian if still intelligent references to urbanism, modernity and the complexity of twenty-first-century regionalism, there was a twist to the Brussels Biennial's construction. In addition to inviting relatively high-profile individual curators to participate, the organizers of the Biennial invited public, state-funded art institutions to select and produce different chapters of the exhibition. Given the fact that half the world's financial system is now in public hands, this move could be seen as remarkably prescient. ²

At the time of the invitation, however, it already called upon us as institutional curators from BAK, basis voor actuele kunst and Van Abbemuseum to think about our contributions in very different ways from the traditional roles of selecting, commissioning, building and

presenting that provide the basic structure for most large-scale curatorial endeavours. Individuals and institutions are different organisms with different priorities, and both of us felt an overwhelming need to recognize this in our actions. The project 'Once is Nothing' – which we developed as a joint contribution to the Brussels Biennial – was therefore conceived as a direct response to the challenging and original invitation that we had been given. It is, in a hopefully layered and not overly directed way, also a reaction to what we saw around us. In early 2008, the globalized contemporary art context in which we were working as institutions was one of a successful art market and active commercial gallery scene that saw little value in public institutional approval or support beyond a few key global institutions. The commodification of art objects had reached an unprecedented level of effectiveness, with biennials often being the test sites for developing new market products. It was, however, also a context in which the general public's appreciation of modern and contemporary art was at an all-time high. Critical discourse and social engagement had appeared as omnipresent tools for understanding art's role and made people more sophisticated viewers of art, not to mention that these very tools had been developed together and shared across both public and private initiatives.

It was thus with this broad and somewhat paradoxical situation on our minds that we approached the task of making a project for the first Brussels Biennial. Although BAK and Van Abbemuseum work in their own distinct ways and with different mandates – that of a contemporary art centre and a modern art museum – both institutions share an interest in exploring art's agency in our time and place. We are also both concerned with the question of memory and the preservation of what has existed, whether we refer to the objects in an art collection, the archives, the discourse or the forms of knowledge that we each seek to produce. Without the survival of such projects and products, our activities make little more sense than every other phenomenon of our transient spectacular event culture, where each production tries to outdo or erase its predecessor. Beyond our own activities, these questions span further concerns about the value of exhibition making in general – its rapidity, continuity and often pseudo-originality. The way we allow projects of significance to be subscribed to memory, and the modes in which the discourse develops around exhibitions that we consider of key consequence are also ongoing considerations. The publication of Bruce Altshuler's new book on the history of exhibitions up to 1959 and the forthcoming *Afterall Exhibition Histories* series both point to the fact that there is increasing agreement that the history of art itself is to a large extent written by exhibitions.

³ Yet what survives of these exhibitions is often little more than shards or trophies, to use archaeological or ethnographic terms. The phenomenon of the exhibition is dissected by traditional art historians who subscribe certain activities under the names of individual artists while excluding others to the archive and the margin – a process that is of enormous aid to the varied agents of commodification that have consolidated power over the last decades. As we already know, the majority of art museum collections consist largely of objects that have been through this process and are already detached from the circumstances in which they were realized and contextualized. They are often removed from their own archival setting as well, which is housed elsewhere in the documentation centre of the museum or sold independently as part of an artist's estate, destined for organizations such as the Getty Museum.

Yet, in contrast to this at least partial inscribing of histories, global biennials – exhibition machines, as it were – are by their very definition geared towards the event logic, erasing their own past in order to frame the incomparable newness of the next project in line. This state of affairs is even worse if we remember that many biennials provide one of the few access points for contemporary visual culture to states outside the former West. Here, the biennial is largely confirmed as an event spectacle *pur sang* in the expectations of its publics and this only serves to reinforce the transitory (and therefore manipulable) nature of contemporary culture in general. If you cannot access the records of the past, you cannot rewrite the fictions of a particular self-interested history and cultural expression is restricted to the service of those who write its first accounts. In light of this, it is

encouraging to see that the oldest biennial of all, Venice, is just waking up to the value of its own archive, but the fact that it has taken more than 100 years to do so points again to the gaps between the functions of fixed art institutions and the protocols of festivals.

Our joint response to our perception of the current conditions and to the parameters of the Brussels Biennial had to be uncompromising. 'Once is Nothing', an exhibition based upon another exhibition from another biennial, was the (logical) result. Early on in our deliberations, the exhibition 'Individual Systems' curated by Igor Zabel came to our minds as one of the most precise curatorial statements on the issue of modernity in recent years. It was articulated from the perspective of the beginning of the twenty-first century and took into consideration the major shifts in the world's global political (and thus cultural) geography that 1989 had brought about. The show was also part of a Biennale⁴ project – the 2003 Venice Biennale – which was conceived as a patchwork of relatively unrelated exhibitions put together by the multiple voices and visions of a number of curators. In this innovative context, Zabel's unpretentious exhibition was somewhat lost in the cacophony of the spectacles that surrounded it; those who visited Venice that year will likely remember the volume of works and the formal differences between the exhibition installations better than the works of art (or exhibition narratives) themselves. In contrast, 'Individual Systems' insisted on an older set of exhibition-making conventions that, in the name of the works of art it encompassed, required time, space and concentration of the viewer. Our project, 'Once is Nothing', attempted to reconstruct the effect of the exhibition 'Individual Systems' by reproducing aspects of its physical and informational structure. Or perhaps we rather tried to capture the very qualities of time, space, concentration and even dry wit that it represented. While based upon the show's embodiment in 2003, 'Individual Systems' appeared in Brussels as an interpretation of the exhibition's architecture without the physical works themselves, letting the voids on the walls speak for the art that is absent in a physical sense but hopefully very present in its absence. A reference catalogue that visitors were free to take with them contained information about both exhibitions and the individual works, as well as a new project by Belgian artist Patrick Corillon, helped us to construct a space and time for reflection, for the art and the audience alike, where one could pause to consider the questions of exhibition making, institutional responsibility, continuity and memory, and engage with the key element of individual empowerment that art has on offer: the subjective imagination.

From 'Individual Systems' to 'Once is Nothing'

'Individual Systems' brought together fifteen artists and artists' collectives to reflect on the concept of modernity, and that to which it is essentially connected – the idea of artistic and cultural autonomy – today: Victor Alimpiev & Marian Zhunin, Paweł Althamer, Art & Language, Josef Dabernig, IRWIN (Dusan Mandi, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, Borut Vogelnik), Luisa Lambri, Yuri Leiderman, Andrei Monastirsky, Pavel Mrkus, Roman Opalka, Marko Peljhan, Florian Pumhösl, Simon Starling, Mladen Stilinovi and Nahum Tevet. Zabel wrote: 'Actually, modernity in art is often understood as the confirmation of its autonomy. And as it seems that we have to ask ourselves again about the potentials of the autonomous art and art as an autonomous system, it also seems that we have to return to the idea of modernity and the variety of concepts of which it is constructed.'⁵ We need to return to these ideas in order to, if only fragmentarily, address the dilemma of how art is still possible and meaningful in relation to the major social and political conflicts we witness in the world today: 'What role or meaning can art have at all, compared to such events and processes?'⁶

With Adorno's dictum that 'politics has migrated into autonomous art' in mind, Zabel turned to the 'ideas of ordered systems – in technology, knowledge, society and culture – [which] make an essential part of modernity'.⁷ With the motif of 'individual systems' read through multiple artistic positions in the exhibition, he presented artists who 'have developed their own, often strictly defined, but nevertheless quite individual or personal

systems, constructed new conceptual frameworks and paradigms, or used the existing systems in an individual, uncommon way. Artistic autonomy is an essential determination of their work. Even when [it] seems that they are dealing with social and other 'external' realities in a direct way, they remain essentially distanced from them. External elements that enter the artists' systems are transformed and adapted to a new, different context. But this makes it possible for them to reflect upon the issues of modernity, modernization, systematization, as well as dissent, resistance, and search for freedom, dialectically connecting the compulsory and freedom, the general and the personal.'⁸

With the understanding of autonomy not as an absolute disassociation of art from society, but rather the autonomous as political in art, we can think of modernity as 'not merely a utopia, project, and rational organization, it is also tension, struggle and conflict',⁹ and acknowledge it as an unfinished project in the context of the global reality in which we find ourselves. If Zabel suggested that it is useful to reoccupy the position of autonomy in this sense – or perhaps a version of 'engaged autonomy' that we have written about elsewhere – it is precisely to assign to art the task of continuity, if not perseverance, in addressing the urgencies in the tensions and conflicts of today's world. And this notwithstanding the palpable proofs that the possibility of a controlled, better future has slipped out of our hands in the same way as did the option of reconstructing in full the optimism of the era in which these ideas were born.

The architecture of the exhibition 'Individual Systems', while respectfully accommodating the art works, can itself be seen as an 'individual system' of sorts, provoking a sensation of forced perspective in viewers as they walked in a corridor formed by five 'cubes' distributed at intervals between the columns of the Arsenale in Venice. Developed by artist Josef Dabernig, the structure consisted of: 'Five more or less communicating exhibition spaces [that] are arranged longitudinally on both sides [of the corridor-like space]. The dimensions of these were conceived in proportion to the linear arrangement of the windows, pilasters and main pillars: on the side at the end of the area, the length of the spaces, made with plasterboard walls, reduces progressively by half a unit in synchrony with the gaps between the pillars, while the entrance side remains constant. The height of the spaces, however, changes in both aisles as you gradually proceed towards the main corridor. As you move through the area, the correspondence between the left and right sections of the exhibition area moves by one column, so that the overall number of spaces is uneven.'¹⁰

The structure clearly borrowed some modernist clarity in the way it envisioned and enclosed its world, yet the diminishing height and shifting coordinates of the architectural units introduced disturbance that suggested the need for reconsideration and even reorientation. It is an adaptation of this structure to the venue of the Brussels Biennial 1 that we chose to present in 'Once is Nothing'.

'Once is Nothing' was therefore relatively blank at first sight. In this sense, it confronted the expectation that visitors going to an exhibition require a form of site seeing. There was not so much in the way of a visceral encounter with material or, at least, that is how things appeared. This superficial refusal – this 'saying no' while still taking action – had a very clear intention. It was in part a way to signal resistance to the demands of the spectacle, but it must be much more than that if it is to be useful. For what was placed in the space – walls, labels, texts as artworks, light – was the infrastructure of exhibition-making that the work of art as commodity or visual symbol often seeks to mask. Yet it is this very infrastructure and its conventions, drawing on the familiar spaces of art whether museum, art centre or biennial, that are crucial to any consideration of the institutionalized status of art and the beginning of an address to other forms of production and presentation. 'Once is Nothing' should ideally be seen, at second glance no doubt, not as an empty space but rather as a series of white cubes inside a raw, unaltered industrial space looking out on a modernist cityscape of transportation through windows that are located near Corillon's additional narrative of art's failed shipment through space. This work was commissioned

by us in order to provide an extra contemporary and yet historically responsive artistic contribution that would highlight anew the deliberate absence of the other works. This turn that we made from work to base was already apparent in Zabel's original intentions as he battled with the tolerated autonomy of modernism. Rotating it further required a more overt foregrounding of the conventions of that toleration in order to put them into the field of discussion, and not just as a theoretical game. Instead, the building of these spaces was an attempt to provide a lived, tangible experience of relative refusal, in order to deliver something else than what is awaited – a detour for the attention that lands on what literally supports and lies behind the works of art themselves.

Einmal is Keinmal¹¹

The questions that Zabel posed with 'Individual Systems', and the way he asked them together with the artists in the show, resonate powerfully with some of our key concerns beyond the immediate opportunity of the exhibition. As institutions we seek to advocate continuously for the meaning of art in the public sphere, while at the same time we defend a meaningful autonomy for artistic practice – meaningful in the sense that it is circulated, contested and disapproved. Unlike in other fields of artistic expression – theatre, music, or even literature – the possibility of repetition is not naturally built into the practice of exhibitions. The exhibition happens once; its afterlife depends on related ephemera, on how well it is archived, catalogued, written about or how it is spread through the personal memories, informal anecdotes, rumours and fantasies of those involved in one way or another. If we believe the adage *einmal is keinmal*, thematized by the novelist Milan Kundera, that the lightness of the one off decision renders it meaningless in any wider scheme of values – that if an exhibition happened only one time it is as if it never happened, to put it simply – then repetition is crucial to any sense in which the autonomy of art can become a agonistic sphere, a place where symbols are fought over and not just fleetingly presented. This has to be true for all exhibitions and appearances of art, and that is why we determined to try to reconstruct an exhibition of inspirational power; to make it happen another time. Yet, we know from the work of Gilles Deleuze¹² that time forms neither a cycle nor a straight line, two models that would arguably allow us to fulfil the ambition of bringing back the identical, or a faithful copy, of what already was. In fact, in Deleuze's view repetition is intimately bound to difference, and thus only when an exhibition is 'repeated as something other' can its distinct qualities be revealed.

Here is the dilemma at the heart of any possible political project (or 'neo-political' project) that might be available to the biennial as a form. Only by recognizing the need to repeat as something other could a potential political charge be effectively actualized. Yet this fights against the economic imperative of innovation to which the funders and viewers of biennials generally respond. New commissions, new countries, new venues, new audiences are the governing mantras and they have proved effective in delivering a broader and more geographically distributed discussion about contemporary cultural expressions than ever before. We do not want to lose the possibility of newness; indeed societies, especially in the former West, are in rather desperate need of new political imagination, especially given the economic events of this autumn. How to resolve this paradox, or perhaps more usefully how to live within its tensions, is the field on which the strategies for our times need to be built. 'Once is Nothing' was our singular and context-determined attempt to provide a way of addressing the issue. Neither affirming the values of new exhibition production nor cynically turning away to declare that we know better, the exhibition sought to politicize the occasional visitor through a mix of understandable frustration and the sparking of curiosity. We are saying no while still saying yes here, as probably we all have had to do since 1989, although the blankness and whiteness of this intervention is intended to balance the positive and negative and visualize them in the three dimensions of the exhibition space.

Instead of a Conclusion

As art institutions, both BAK and Van Abbemuseum have in their own ways adopted a position of criticality, questioning those occasions in the world of art that lend themselves to spectacle, entertainment and the economic demands of today's capitalism. And although this project is undeniably a contribution to yet another biennial, the Brussels Biennial 1's own initiative to rethink the basic conditions of its format, as well as the fact that we felt the need to contribute to a critical exploration of global modernity of this particular region in Europe, encouraged us to lend our voices and speak along. As a biennial exhibition, 'Once is Nothing' cannot be more than a modest attempt to contribute to the discussion about the responsibilities of curating in our time. This not least because, to invoke the words of Igor Zabel once more, 'If one is aware of this situation one cannot simply go on producing, presenting, or describing art, as if nothing has happened',¹³ be it in the art world or the world at large.

This project was realized in memory of Igor Zabel.

This is a revised and expanded version of the text 'Once is Nothing', published in an insert to Artur mijewski: 'The Social Studio' in *Newsletter 2008 #1*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, October 2008.

Charles Esche is a curator and writer. He curated various exhibitions and biennials, including the 2nd Ramallah Biennial (2007) and the 9th Istanbul Biennial (2005) with Vasif Kortun and Esra Sarigedik Öktem. Together with Maria Hlavajova, he curated *Once is Nothing* at the first Brussels Biennial in 2008. He is co-editor of *Afterall Journal and Books*, based at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in London. Since 2004 he has been Director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.

Maria Hlavajova is artistic director of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht since 2000. In 2007 she curated the three-part project *Citizens and Subjects* for the Dutch Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale. She has also edited and contributed to a variety of publications on art, theory and curatorial practice. Hlavajova lives and works in Amsterdam and Utrecht.

Footnotes

1. 'Once is Nothing' was the joint contribution of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht.
2. Even one of the Biennial sponsors, Fortis Bank, was itself briefly nationalized by what remains of the Belgian state before 75 per cent was resold to BNP Paribas with 25 per cent remaining in public hands.
3. Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial, Exhibitions that Made Art History, Vol. 1, 1863-1959* (Londen: Phaidon 2008); the series *Exhibition Histories* (Afterall Books, MIT Press), will be published in late 2009. See also: Walter Grasskamp, 'For Example, *Documenta*, Or, How is Art History Produced?' in: Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions* (Londen / New York: Routledge, 1996), 67-78.
4. 50th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2003, entitled 'Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer', artistic director: Francesco Bonami.
5. Igor Zabel, 'Individual Systems', in 50th International Art Exhibition, *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer* (ex. cat.), ed. Francesco Bonami and Maria Luisa Frisa (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2003), 152.
6. Ibid., 151.
7. Ibid., 152.
8. Ibid., 153.
9. Ibid., 152.
10. Josef Dabernig, in: *ibid.*, 160.
11. The title of our exhibition, 'Once is Nothing', comes from a German adage *einmal ist keinmal*, an expression that describes an imagined condition of life in which any decision is of no consequence because it can never be repeated and therefore judgment of its effectiveness or otherwise is impossible. This troubling unaccountability was thematized in Milan Kundera's seminal 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.
12. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995 [1968]).
13. Zabel, in: 50th International Art Exhibition, *Dreams and Conflicts*, op. cit. (note 5), 151.

Tags

Art Discourse, Autonomy, Capitalism

This text was downloaded on May 16, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/the-making-of-once-is-nothing