

Exhibition as Pile

Kathrin Böhm Making Use of Exhibitions

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Abstract

The role of exhibition within Kathrin Böhm's expanded artistic practice—a practice that is not primarily predicated on production for display—is considered within the context of a larger process of public review arising from within the terms of the practice itself. In reviewing the role of exhibition, certain dimensions of the practice are foregrounded as warranting some form of reproduction or transfer into future practice. These characteristics are described as: 1:1 scale; usership; and the publicness of decisions. A key trope identified is that of the compost heap, and with it the process of composting as a figure through which to consider the public review of a practice within a projected exhibitionary process at the Showroom London in summer 2021.

Introduction

This contribution comprises a review of the specific dynamics of exhibition-making within Kathrin Böhm's practice, accompanied by a short visual essay on aspects of that practice. This is followed by the edited transcript of a conversation between the three curators Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide, Gavin Wade and Franciska Zólyom, moderated by Mick Wilson, which took place online on Tuesday 20 October 2020. This is part of a wider consideration within "On the Question of Exhibition" on the interchange between expanded practice and the relays of exhibition.

The short overview presentation by the artist of her collaborative exhibition practice preceding the conversation included reflections on the inventory of exhibitions realised over the last three decades, and a foregrounding of certain principles and tactics adopted within these shows. The making of this inventory, and the setting up of this discussion were organised within the process of developing a major exhibition at The Showroom in London. This exhibition was projected by Böhm through the figure of composting, of gathering the remains of practice, to process and produce new material that might serve different purposes and thereby circulate within a broader ecology of practices. This process of composting comprises moments of reflection and transformation, and unfolds within the changing conditions of publicness amid the pandemic. The material gathered here in this journal comprises one part of that larger process.

“I want to make a pile”

For some time now there has been a desire on my part to reflect on what I have been doing as an artist over the last three decades. The *PARSE Journal* invitation to consider the role of exhibition within my practice came to me in 2020 around the same time that I had declared that I did not want to do another *project*. Rather, I wanted to make a pile. I wanted to re-read and forward-process my work. A lot of the groups and works and initiatives I am involved in had become long-term and the term “project” just didn’t quite apply anymore. In addition, there is also the critique of the project as an economic unit and neoliberal tactic, as a form of repetitive production on demand, in contrast to sustained reproduction. My desire is to stop perpetuating this productive mode. I started to construct a perspective on my practice that would be both retrospective and prospective. This desire to construct a perspective emerged first of all as a simple impulse to pile things up, to put them on a heap together. As a result, the compost pile emerged as an organising image or device with which to materially think through the accumulation of the tangible and intangible parts and actualities of the practice.

This figure is interesting to me, because compost is not a random pile: it is a layering of particular ingredients. Composting also has this aspect of duration, with often shared work over a period of time you pile compost together or add onto the same shared pile. Compositing is also a kind of partly predictable though not fully determined way of transforming one thing into something else. So I formulated the idea to do a composting of work to date, in some kind of real-time process, to see what would “rot” out of the things accumulated across the arc of my practice. This entails constructing different inventories and considering the various ways in which the work and its material traces may be grouped, ordered and (re-)articulated. It is also important that the question is one of reproduction rather than one of extending the practice further in a project-by-project accumulation of production. Considering my practice through the making of a pile is a way to think about what to reproduce in the further development of work.

The question of exhibition from PARSE is perhaps not something that I would have framed my practice through myself, because I don’t think of myself as an artist producing towards exhibition. However, unsurprisingly, I have done a lot of exhibiting, but I often distinguish between a standard mode of exhibition-making and the use of exhibiting within my work. Thinking of exhibiting, I think about anticipations dynamically unfolding in a space. The exhibition is the place where you want something from a more private place, whether that’s the studio or the home, to be brought into the public eye. Both expectation and tension come out of this transfer between spaces. I often use the idea of usership in art versus spectatorship to describe this dynamic. In talking about exhibition-making there is a certain use of the spectator as a moment to make something public or make it publicly available. In thinking about exhibiting I also want to think of the uses of spectatorship. I think of this public moment, of bringing private choices, private decisions into the public realm, and into the space of public opinion. There is a pull here, or tension, between individual and collective moments in the process of showing and exhibiting.

As a first step in the inventory process of my exhibition practices, a rough split can be made between two groups “art” and “non-art” in the sense of exhibition realised within dedicated art spaces in contrast with exhibitions formed through spaces not typically used for the display of art. This distinction between non-art and art spaces is not really so important to me, however, it allows for a simple and clear categorisation to emerge: exhibitions in galleries and those that take place everywhere else, for instance in neighbourhood venues such as community halls. Another easily read distinction within the practice is that between the self-organised or self-initiated and the invited or commissioned exhibition. The majority of my exhibitionary practice is self-organised and exists alongside the curated or commissioned exhibitions in the more normative professional model of the

artist being invited into a group or solo exhibition. In doing this inventory process, I realised that although my predominant characterisation of the practice is self-organised, in fact a significant part of the work has been curated and commissioned; indeed, a larger part than I had perhaps recognised previously.

Developing this simple typology further I then came up with a simple division into four types of exhibition. Within the recognised art spaces there are shows or exhibitions in spaces that I have initiated and set up; then there are “career spectrum” shows, in settings and venues that have a pre-established professional currency and reputation within the art system. Within what may be designated as “non-art spaces” there is another distinction between situations where, like in my collaboration as part of the art and architecture collective Public Works, we specifically design display structures for operating exhibitions, and other situations where I simply organise showing things without producing a new or specific infrastructure of display. These are four simple categories that presented themselves in terms of the different forms of exhibition and exhibition-making within the practice.

In reviewing these forms, certain features or characteristics seem to me to propose themselves as “fertiliser” or “for future use”, in the sense that these are features that mark where the format of exhibition seems to have worked most effectively in realising the specific terms and ambitions of the practice without distortion through display. These characteristics can be nominated as: “1:1 scale”, “usership”, and perhaps something like “the publicness of decisions.” By 1:1 scale, I am referring in part to the architectural scale at which things are specified and produced in their actual dimensions. However, I am also referring to the way that Stephen Wright has glossed this term. He argues that

Art and art-related practices that are oriented toward usership rather than spectatorship are characterised more than anything else by their scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale. They are not scaled-down models or artworld-assisted prototypes of potentially useful things or services (the kinds of tasks and devices that might well be useful if ever they were wrested from the neutering frames of artistic autonomy and allowed traction in the real). Though 1:1 scale initiatives make use of representation in any number of ways, they are not themselves representations of anything. The usological turn in creative practice over the past two decades or so has brought with it increasing numbers of such full-scale practices, coterminous with whatever they happen to be grappling. 1:1 practices are both what they are, and propositions of what they are.^[1]

I would say that this 1:1 scale, and these other two key features of “usership” and “the publicness of decisions”, are especially prominent within the following three collaborative exhibitions: “When Decisions Become Art” at the Kunstbunker forum for contemporary art in Nuremberg (2019), an exhibition that I realised in an exhibiting venue that I had co-founded as a student in Nuremberg some twenty five years earlier^[2]; “Trade Show” at Eastside Projects (2013-14) co-curated with Gavin Wade^[3]; and “The International Village Show: All villages in one place” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Leipzig (2015-16) realised by Myvillages together with Wapke Feenstra and Antje Schiffers.^[4]

In relation to “When Decisions Become Art”, there is a kind of double reference to how I engage with exhibition-making. On the one hand, the invitation to exhibit comes from this space that I helped establish as an exhibiting platform. On the other hand, when the invitation came to exhibit at the Kunstbunker, I responded by proposing that we try something else besides exhibition-making. We then worked to open the space for an extended consideration of how particular decisions shape different conditions in art, and this idea of the freedom or autonomy of the artist to decide upon the terms and conditions of an art practice. This meant considering the making of decisions about who you make art for, how you produce it, where you show it, how you use exhibition

spaces, and what role exhibition plays. This question of decisions becoming art drove a whole public programme that then filled the space as a form of display event, but not as a stabilised exhibitionary occasion as such. Certain predictable elements emerged, including formatting the space as a social space of informal encounter, the display of process, the group of student invigilators proposing to furnish the space, and some people moving their studios into the space. Essentially what emerged was a public space of enquiry as to how individual artists and art groups decided what to make or do, who to do or make it with or for, and so forth. The walls became spaces for publishing materials, for example questions about transparent budgeting and about labour conditions the “dark matter” analysis of art world precarity and value creation unfolded there. In consequence of this, the exhibition dynamic became one of usership rather than spectatorship. In one image you see that a dog moves into the space and this small detail somehow underlines how the space became one of inhabitation rather than “spectation”. It became a space of multiple operations and functions.

“Trade Show” emerged from a decision made together with Gavin Wade at Eastside Projects to make a show that wouldn’t represent trade through artistic practice *about trading*, but that would show artistic practice that *is trading*. Again, there is the 1:1 action of the exhibition operation: practices *being* something rather than practices *representing* something. As I remember it, in 2013 there were a lot of exhibitions around art and the economy, many of which were dependent upon a distinct Marxist language. We sought to distance ourselves from that particular level of abstraction and rhetorical mode, and rather to focus on the specific dynamic of trade as art that was perhaps not adequately reducible to those well-rehearsed analytics of capital. We started by calling the exhibition “Trade Show” and by creating a new trade entrance to the space. We then initiated the first trade within “Trade Show” by a swap based on the re-design of the image of an iceberg used by Katherine Gibson and the community economy group to talk about diverse economies. A new image of the iceberg schema was produced in exchange for a new essay from Gibson outlining this analysis of multiple economies. We also gathered a lot of artist edition works created by artist-run spaces throughout the UK as a means to support themselves. In one sense the exhibition was a showcasing of forms of trade that exist within the wider art system. However, each exhibit and exhibitor was trading on their own terms, which were highly varied and ranged from Kate Rich’s Feral Trade coffee processing and trading in situ in the gallery^[5] to Casco’s presentation together with Aimée Zito Lema of *Sitting is a Verb Rietveld for (Un)usual business*, which included a DIY Rietveld crate chair workshop.^[6] The show also circulated and travelled to become a kind of advisory resource or tool for thinking and engaging in alternative trading systems.

The third exhibition I am focusing on is “The International Village Show: All villages in one place” by Myvillages, an ongoing collaboration that I am part of in which we address cultural production within rural settings. Here again the exhibition had a slightly different function, which was to allow the different places with which we work to interconnect through the central relay of the museum. We worked with a specific building, the former garden house of the museum, for two years. We used this as a space to explore a practice of exhibition that was not a retrospective showing of what Myvillages had been doing for more than a decade at that time. Instead the exhibition was a distributed and simultaneous operation in different rural settings, and their interconnection and relay through the museum. The exhibition was structured around multiple instances where two places were brought into encounter with each other and the space hosted multiple activities. In one way it was a space of representation where we brought two places together, and where a physical connectivity was being proposed between different sites. The show also brought people to the museum, to the openings and events, and they encountered each other in the space of exhibition, so that the museum was not only a space of art world sociability but also the place where different groups and individuals across the Myvillages network encountered each other. The exhibition had many different moments and functions; it was a space of storytelling, of documentation, of making and of trade. It was a space of a wide range of uses that connected realms of the

rural everyday with and through the contemporary art space. It was not a matter of a zone of production the rural being represented through a zone of display the gallery. Importantly, the exhibitionary site was a re-configuration and networking of disparate geographies.

In these three instances of exhibition, the characteristics of 1:1 scale, of usership and of the publicness of decisions were operative and these are aspects of the practice that I see as having a potential to fertilise further practice rather than simply re-iterate project working. In considering the inventory of my exhibition practice, I again come back to the proposition of an exhibition that would be a piling up and a composting of all of these things that I have described so far. The idea of making this compost, and of turning things over and working them through with others, is something that we are to a certain degree piloting here and testing out in the conversation that follows.

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

The slideshow is based on a presentation made as a part of a discussion of the role of exhibition within Kathrin Böhm's practice in October 2020. All drawings and taped posters by Kathrin Böhm. Exhibitions documented include: Myvillages, Setting the Table: Village Politic, Whitechapel Gallery, 2019, Mobile Porch, with Andreas Lang and Stefan Saffer, Westway Flyover, 1999, Public Works, Folk Float, Egremont, 2007, When Decisions Become Art, Kunstbunker, Nürnberg, 2019, Trade Show, together with Gavin Wade, Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 2013, Trade Show at R-Urban, together with aaa, Paris, 2014, Myvillages, International Village Show, GfZK Leipzig, 2015-16. Images courtesy of the artist, Myvillages, and Public Works

A Conversation on Composting

Gavin Wade (GW): I would like to play with this idea of “the compost pile” for a moment. Could we put this in relation to the idea of place, connecting it to the social space in which things come together? The compost heap needs to accumulate in one place. It needs time. It needs to create its own ecology. It needs worms. It needs layers. It needs people tending to it over time. The way that Kathrin spoke about these things, felt similar to the way I was thinking about setting up Eastside Projects. The question I faced then was: how do I as an artist-curator, who wants to deal with context, with place, and to work with many different people, operate? How can I, or we, do all this? What was needed seemed simply the continuity of having a place: a place where you can invite people; a place that can in itself be the invitation to people; a place that allows things to build up and to get messier; a place, and an unfolding of time, to accumulate and change. For me, Kathrin's image of the compost pile echoes all this.

This might also link to an idea of the institution the role of reserving space and time, the responsibility of turning things over. Who has the responsibility to reserve the space and time of the compost heap? Who has the responsibility to turn over the pile? And then after all that, who has the responsibility to distribute and re-use the composted material? Is the artist proposing institution as the agency of composting? Or is there another way of thinking this? I guess that's how I come to this question: what can that pile really mean?

Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide (YZZvdH): I have a similar question about what the pile means. Speaking to this as someone who is relatively new to Kathrin's practice, I want to stand next to the heap, consider how it is

set up, look at how it is constructed, really lean into it and consider what this means before going towards the end product of compost, to the fertiliser that emerges feeding into production again. I think Kathrin is one of the first artists that I have come across who is consciously working out in the current context of the pandemic what the terms of practice are, and instead of producing online is taking stock and re-evaluating practice. Another consideration that I would like to introduce is the role of the different communities that are gathered or that collect around these different projects. How do these different constituencies factor into, or have agency within, the post-composting or fertiliser or “whatever comes next” phase?

GW: There is this thing about composting that is never-ending. Even when you produce a really successful compost, you still keep making more. Perhaps more than just standing next to it, there is this need to keep returning to it, to be involved with it regularly. Making use of the compost eventually engenders a self-sustaining cycle. I see this as an image of a place where you can work. Whether it is the studio where people can come and work with you, or whether it is about exhibiting. Working with this rhetorical figure of the pile and making compost, I think it's important that we are still talking about making *exhibition*. Because, actually, in truth Kathrin is brilliant at exhibition-making. Listening to Kathrin present her exhibition practice, I kept thinking about this. In the images of the Myvillages exhibition, “The International Village Show: All villages in one place” which was at the Museum of Contemporary Art Leipzig (2015–16), I was struck by the way that little hut in front of the museum was made to appear. I saw this bench that ran along the outside of the hut. I saw the awning that came out over the top of this, and then the screen that hung down just so. This configuration was so precise. Kathrin understands how to exhibit, and how to co-curate. She understands how to make things present, how to make things happen with materials and with people, each working upon the other. This doesn't particularly need to rely on language to capture it or explain it. It needs to be looked at. It needs to be seen, not necessarily *spoken* as such. But more than just seeing all this, it needs us to do something. Kathrin's practice seems always to want us to do things, to make things, to act in some way.

Mick Wilson (MW): I find it interesting that this figure of the compost pile that Kathrin uses to project forward her practice has really captured the conversation. Working with this metaphor has to some extent obscured what Gavin has just brought back into play: there is a very considered and accomplished exhibition-making thread that runs consistently through the work. Yet this is a practice that is not primarily about making objects for exhibition. The mode of exhibition-making that Kathrin indicates as having been most generative is one in which the proposition that is set in play by exhibition and the actual process of exhibiting are somehow congruent. They collapse into each other. This isn't an act of representation. This is a performative *production of something*, rather than a display *about something*. Gavin, you are suggesting that one thing left out in the account of Kathrin's practice was a certain facility that she manifests with exhibition-making. Maybe there are other things in the arc of three decades of exhibition-making within this practice that haven't been named or registered yet?

Franciska Zólyom (FZ): In the Myvillages exhibition in Leipzig, “The International Village Show”, we had sequences where people, products and stories from two specific places met, places where Kathrin, Antje or Wapke of Myvillages had worked. There was a sequence of exhibitions and in keeping with the compost metaphor we had this series of layers, these different materials and material qualities combining, layering and turning over in time, just like in the compost pile. The visitors to the exhibition were the organisms changing this pile of compost, bringing and taking away things, leaving traces, stories as to why they had taken interest in certain things and not in others. From these and all the other shows that she produced with others, Kathrin now has this collection of things, these parts of exhibitions that were display structures or exhibited items. These encapsulate things or no-longer-active processes. They are both initiators and traces of processes. It is useful to

think of this pile and of moving it so as to enable the interaction of these different materials and agents. One aspect of the exhibition, as Gavin mentioned, is that it is time-based. If you allow this pile to stand for a period of time, allow visitors to manipulate it, to become part of it, to change it, to turn it around, to create new connections, then it can produce different agencies and pathways than those initially projected by the artist.

Yolande van der Heide (YZZvdH): In a sense this is a compost of *tools for usership*. It makes me think of the exhibition “Museum of Arte Útil”, co-initiated by Tania Bruguera, at the Van Abbemuseum (2013–14) which also made use of Stephen Wright’s definition of usership. He produced a lexicon of usership that sat alongside that exhibition. I say this to bring forward other modes of exhibition that have operated similarly. However, here the difference, as I understand it, is that this projected compost-exhibition is initiated by one artist, right? This makes me wonder whether it’s like an instituting of the institution that’s housing all of the different projects within which Kathrin has been involved.

GW: To my mind the “Arte Útil” show had more of an archival quality to it, whereas Kathrin’s work precedes that archival moment. While these practices come out of the same wave of thinking, as it were, I don’t think that Kathrin’s practice is affected by “Arte Útil”. For example, if Kathrin operated continuously in a single dedicated space, I don’t think it would operate as an archive. It would be a social space where she would make things, where people would come and collaborate with her.

MW: Might it be useful to think of two complementary directions of movement? There is one movement whereby certain practices that operate in other zones, beyond the display of art, make use of exhibition as a device. There is a counter-directional movement whereby exhibitionary institutions attempt to platform practices that operate in these other zones, beyond the display of art. This is not to prioritise one over the other, but to note two different trajectories: one that takes hold of the exhibition to use it in some way beyond the protocols of the white cube; another in which the exhibitionary institution tries to disclose these practices of usership without denaturing them. In this second operation, it seems important that the aim is to exhibit practices of usership without imposing on these the form of the autonomous work. This is providing a relay from one zone to another.

FZ: This brings me to the question of value and of how the value of things changes according to where they appear and how they are framed. Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (2017) might be usefully connected here to the idea of compost that creates something valuable out of leftovers and out of what is discarded. Kathrin does not propose to present rubbish as such, however, if I understand it correctly, she wishes to get rid of certain things, to abandon certain repetitions. So maybe, if you put things in a place out there all piled up as a compost, or as leftovers, then their meaning can also change through this displacement and through the manipulation by others that it solicits.

This question of redundancies that still have effects is also interesting. We currently produce a lot of data and digital documents that we retain, we deposit, we forget about, and that we mostly never use again. We even reproduce these redundant files, copying them again and again. We keep copies of copies, as if doing so is somehow without consequence. Of course, there is a huge consumption of energy to store all of this forgotten information for which we have no real use. This is perhaps an interesting model with which to think. How might we think of these vast quantities of storage and redundancy in opposition to what art does? What are these kinds of production that on the one hand seem repetitive or redundant and inconsequential, and that on the other hand also have agency, acting upon others or reactivating themselves differently at different times? Can we use this model to think about different activations of practices both within the exhibition and beyond the

exhibition?

GW: This reminds me of Kathrin's observation that she's been invited to participate in more shows than she has self-organised. That's an important indicator of a success in these operations. It means that this accumulation of approaches, skills and perspectives that she has brought together creates a desire for this gathering together to happen again. Other people want her to bring those skills and invite her to use them in other situations. A problem emerges perhaps when their interpretation of what they want from Kathrin clashes with what she wants to achieve. There is still then a need for these self-organising skills even with these invitations. The invitation does not mean that the host organisation will have everything set up. There will be an initial set of conditions, but this is typically not totalised. I think Yolande was asking a question earlier about whether there are a set of rules or a protocol within these situations.

YZZvdH: Yes. I was about to revisit that point, and to riff off what you said earlier about the differentiation between "archival" materials and, let's say "tools", using "tool" as a term to mark their active nature. There is still a sense of the repository in play. The space that hosts these tools and the conditions set up around them have a sense of storing and reserving. It's important to flesh this out if they are to be activated in a different site that is perhaps at odds with Kathrin's idea. In the "whatever" phase that comes next after the compost pile, maybe it will be a matter of shelving, captioning, organising or refining things. There will be a distinction made at this point between things that are to be kept versus things that are to be discarded. I see this almost as Kathrin's call to reform her practice, not to get rid of things altogether but to tweak, to affirm what works or to trim what is less useful.

FZ: She speculates about getting rid of many things altogether. Kathrin indicated she might eventually give up her studio space. Yolande, you have made this very interesting link between the archive and the compost heap. While compost is the accumulation of discarded material, the materials Kathrin gathers in exhibition have already been selected and retained, they are things that she has kept in the studio. Rather than think of the archive as the repository of documents of the past, if we think of it as the reserve of things that are seen as important and constitutive for her practice in the present, then it seems important to have this moment of looking at those things in exhibition.

GW: This is why I think making the studio public might be a better solution than getting rid of the studio. Making a public studio releases her from the behind-the-scenes, private decision-making moments, which seem to be, for her, the least exciting aspect of practice. She is excited by being in a space with other people, inviting people and spending time with them, and in turn being invited by people, and yet still having a place where things can accumulate and the unexpected can happen. The type of studio that she has kept has been a private studio that she shares with a couple of other artists, but still, it's effectively a closed-off space. I think it might be a better solution to take the responsibility of making a space that people come to...

MW: It is interesting, and perhaps typical of Kathrin's charismatic agency, that we are drawn into this question of the future of her practice. We are drawn into the particular rhetorical frame that she uses to set this in play. When talking retrospectively about her use of exhibition, there were three moments that she underlined. There was the 2019 exhibition "When Decisions Become Art" at the kunstbunker in Nuremburg, where she was invited back into a venue that she co-initiated decades earlier. It is interesting that, having finished her art education, the first thing that she set herself to doing was establishing a new exhibiting space. The second show that was foregrounded was the "International Village Show" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Leipzig, cited earlier by Gavin. This was a two-year long exhibition emerging from the extraordinarily complex undertaking of

MyVillages. This project entailed a decade-and-a-half long arc of collaborative activity and exchange. Finally, the third instance Kathrin underlined in her practice, was the “Trade Show” (2013–14) at Eastside Projects, where she operated as curator and artist, and in which there was another set of equally complex dynamics in play as the space of display became a space of actual trading, exchange, barter and commercial negotiation. In these three instances, the artist emphasised that there was a realisation of a one-to-one scale of exhibition as performative production rather than representation or documentation.

Part of what characterises the space of exhibition in the contemporary art system is that it is often a space of retail that seems to disavow the operations of retail, a space of buying and selling that somehow often feels an impulse to conceal its specific economy. The exhibitionary strategy of “Trade Show” foregrounded operations of trade, but in a very different register than commercial art retail. Similarly, with the “International Village Show” there was a whole set of retail operations the museum shop that were centrally set in play. In all these cases, the art process consisted of working through the generation and exchange of goods by, and between, the villages and publics networked through the project and manifested in the display and commerce of the museum shop.

GW: What stands out in these cases is not wanting to be bound by certain conventions of art-making or representation. It’s wanting to spend time with people who have the impulse to make art but not necessarily adopt museological traditions or established gallery functions to structure the time spent with them. I think it is correct to speak of a “one-to-one” scale. If you are going to do a show about trade, do it for real.

FZ: I am a little cautious with respect to this suggestion that artists are invited to fix things. Returning to these invitations and commissions mentioned earlier: what are the possible ways to think about these? Is it that the institutions address a certain constituency or a certain issue with the help of an artist who comes up with an unconventional solution? Or, is it the artist who thinks “this collaboration really informs my practice and helps me to understand the nature of exhibitions better”, or “this helps me to understand how I want to work with exhibitions in the future”, or “this collaboration allows me to reach answers in a different manner”? As I indicated, I very much believe Kathrin’s practice is about mediation between different institutions, between different actors: it is a very sociable activity. To return to this idea of *Arte Útil*, in which an artistic idea is presented in an institutional setting so that it becomes very much *a tool*. But we know that it cannot fix things. We can try to interact meaningfully or try to get into a process of meaningful exchange, but there’s nothing being fixed. There are still the institutional hierarchies, there are still the exclusions.

YZZvdH: I agree with you to a degree. We try, in vain perhaps, but it’s important to keep trying. Precisely, if you are in some sense as you say “not included”. My question is, what would an open studio do differently than, say, a museum? Perhaps in the open studio there is the possibility to achieve conditions of display that are closer to the intended ethics of the work. This may be contrasted to a museum, where, at worst perhaps, the institution is not practising any of the values that are being propagated through the work. The exhibition cleanses the museum, by not embodying these ethics, but only representing them. But if this is the analysis of how the museum might be operating, how could the space of the open studio be encoded to operate differently?

GW: There are not many instances of a museum that commissions a project that proposes institutional change and the museum then adopts and implements this. Perhaps the open studio’s intention is, then, to take on that role of exhibiting in these one-to-one terms, in ways congruent with the terms of the practice, because museums can’t do this. It’s about an infrastructure of practice that enables and sustains. There’s a sort of beauty and an energy at the start of a new organisation or institution where things get done, people give time, and things are always possible. But then, after some time, it gets a little harder, because you can’t quite sustain that energy.

I am sure a museum would like to work in that way as well to have that energy and to sustain that flow. Idealistically, perhaps this pile, this making of compost would make that energy sustainable in some sense.

MW: There seem to be three different registers or themes interacting in our conversation so far. One is the question of social or expanded practice as readily instrumentalised with the artist-as-fixer and models of practice that attempt to resist this while not retreating into the rhetorics of autonomy and of modernism. Another question is what the act of putting something on display *does*. Whether exhibiting in the mode of the open studio, the museum, or the self-organized show in a newly emerging space, what is the grammar of display doing in each case? While the protocols of showing, looking and speaking are modified, is it possible that an underlying structure of relations persists in the basic protocols of exhibiting? Or is there a realisation of very different affordances and energies in these different set-ups? Perhaps Yolande's question as to what exactly is different in the open studio or the compost pile exhibition as opposed to the museum underlines this. Thirdly, there is a question specific to the future horizon of Kathrin's work process: what is at stake in this reflexivity of using the operation of exhibition the compost pile as the means to review the practice? What might be possible when the expanded terms of practice, termed "social practice" for convenience rather than perspicacity, and exhibition-making are re-negotiated and refocused through each other?

It seems notable that Kathrin has proposed that sometimes in conducting the operation of exhibiting, she is in some way modifying the typical relations of viewership. This is presented as a departure from business as usual in terms of many different aspects, including the agency of co-production and sociable encounter that might be contrasted with the address to interiority via contemplation; the positioning of different personnel as experts or non-experts within the apparatus of the exhibition; the positioning of certain things as already having use value that valorises the exhibition, rather than the show as the mechanism for conferring value; indeed, proposing that value in the space of exhibition itself can be a matter of use value. What do you make of this claim that in these exhibitions, on occasion, the grammar and rules of art exhibition are being re-ordered in important ways?

YZZvdH: This is a structural question, but also a question of duration: how long does it take to infect a site in such a way that the value system and ways of evaluating are shifted? There is also the question that for me is especially interesting: what happens *after* the exhibition? I am interested in the question of keeping relationships across time and across the different projects and processes set into play.

MW: We have mentioned previously the risk of a certain tokenism in how different constituencies are mobilised in the space of exhibition...

YZZvdH: Absolutely, this is important. I find myself currently involved in a lot of discussions around diversity and inclusion and one way in which this being presented is by posing the question as to whether or not you are inviting the "targeted audience" to the next thing. For example, after the exhibition on "decolonizing X, Y or Z...", do you invite people into the next exhibition that is not made to target them in the name of inclusion? It's a question of sustaining relations beyond the zone in which contact has been initiated. This also challenges the exhibition-maker, the curator, the host or whatever role it may be in the institution, to consider what modes of address are being used in exhibitions, and that these may engage these different constituencies beyond the occasion of the first invited moment or targeted encounter.

GW: I think that this is a matter of informality, and it also is a matter of the grammars of exhibition. One of the things that a museum really struggles to do, but that Kathrin accomplishes within these works, is the realisation of a really deep and meaningful *informality*. If a group is invited into an exhibition because they are understood

to have a specific connection to it, and then that same group is invited into subsequent projects with which they do not have the same presumed intrinsic connection, and if that invitation is successful, then you have achieved an informality that is no longer based on the formal terms of the initial encounter. For example, two of the terms that Kathrin has used in her gathering of people together within the practice are “picnics” and “haystacks”. Both of these are about a wonderful informality and a gathering together in a moment of joy. It’s there already in the practice.

MW: Returning to the “International Village Show”, I wonder Franciska, if the invitation to different constituencies into that exhibition process was conceptualised as a matter of the institution diversifying audience or was it something else that was at stake?

FZ: We spoke about the little hut in our garden earlier, and you may see in the images of the show that the main space of the activity was actually the museum’s garden, this open space that is used by lots of different people. It can be accessed at any time, it is not limited by the museum opening hours. Early in the morning you may see people walking their dogs, then, a little later in the morning, different sports groups come and work out in the garden. Later on, there are people who walk through the garden just on their way to work. There is a lot of ephemeral use of the space, a large floating population of passers-by. We also have a lot of animals in the garden who inhabit the space. The idea, then, was to work with MyVillages in this space, because it is already accessible without the museum even being mentioned. The windows of this garden house, the hut, were used as display windows, as a way to look into the space, and as screens. There was audio material that you could listen to day and night. We used vending machines in a similar way. This was subverting the opening hours of the museum, but we were also speculating as to whether or not the garden and the garden house could become the new entrance to the museum.

The garden house was also a shop where you could buy products from Myvillages, you could eat and drink there, you could meet people. Whenever there were events or encounters in this space, it was not necessarily always clear who was in which position as artist, as host, as audience etc. What was important about the space also was there was a counter top, as in a bar or a shop, a space of encounter for the trading of values. This was also a very subtle and playful exercise in all those things that institutions do and frame and *formalise*. However, it was done in this very generous and friendly manner, so that you could ask questions about the commodities for sale, you could ask your way around the show. Many things could happen there. It was set up so that there was no specific expectation on you to act in one particular way or another. It could be parents with their small children who came to buy orange marmalade made by Spanish nuns. Something they might have discovered once in the garden, and then they kept returning. There were also people who came to collect the many different items produced from Myvillages and available for purchase during the show. This simple, spatial infrastructure of the countertop and the vending machines created so many different situations. Therefore, it was a very important decision not to work with Myvillages in the white cube, in the formal exhibition spaces that we have, and rather use the informality of the garden and the hut, and this simple spatial device of the shop counter.

MW: This brings us very clearly to the critical spatial practice aspects of the work, the way Kathrin’s practice often operates as architecture by other means. Typically, when people talk about the exhibition as a spatial practice, they often point to the set of internal relations set up within the space of exhibition, whereas it seems that when Kathrin is talking about exhibition as a spatial operation, her account extends far beyond the “immediate” local site of exhibition.

GW: This is what I was trying to indicate earlier in describing Kathrin's facility with exhibition-making. In my interpretation, exhibition is making things function in space in a way that enables social encounters and other activities to happen. This is part of the fundamentals of exhibition. In "Trade Show", one of the aspects of this spatiality were the underpinning networks. It was important to understand where materials and resources were coming from, to see the expenditure of energy and the processes of people's lives that spill out from those networks and distributed positions. The iceberg image that Kathrin uses is very useful here. In exhibition you often see one bit of what is going on, however, there is all this other stuff under the surface that allows that bit to happen and to appear. Kathrin's practice is very good at attending to that other typically submerged material and process. "Beyond the gallery" is perhaps another metaphor for this.

FZ: Robert Filiou has this statement in which he says something like "art is what makes life more interesting than art." When we talk about the physical exhibition space as a container, one of the problems is that what happens within becomes unrelated to contexts beyond. What we as institutions try to do, as Gavin describes it, is get back into the contexts, involving many different people, interests and needs. Kathrin brings contexts into the exhibition space; she uses the space not for individual production but brings in the context of people working together, interacting with each other, not understanding each other, but collaborating nonetheless. In all these processes, where she looks for locally embedded traditions and revitalises or reactivates them, this is what she does when she presents them in exhibition. Through the collaborative dimensions, she presents these contexts and dissolves these barriers that the exhibition space otherwise creates with the "outside".

YZZvdH: It seems to be that the key term is precisely "collaboration". I am thinking about for want of a better phrase what we can achieve *working together in difference*. I am reminded of what the artist Ola Hassanain says about spatial discourses being often attached to state ideologies, like for example in the built environment, and the need to work outside the state-centred discourse. I suppose that Kathrin proposes to operate in a similar way with respect to the gallery space, and to exceed or decentre the spatial logics typically inscribed in art exhibitions: to operate in terms of "commoning", as opposed to the typical neoliberal proprietary terms within which we often find ourselves gridded. In this way there is a proposition as to what is happening at large, and a testing of an alternative to it, by means of the exhibition space.



Art on the Scale of Life, tape on paper, 100x120 cm, installation shot from Compost. Kathrin Böhm: Turing the Heap., The Showroom London, June 2021, Foto: Dan Weill Photography, courtesy the artist and The Showroom

Footnotes

1. Wright, Stephen. *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, 2013, available at <https://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> (accessed 2021-06-13).
2. See <https://kunstbunker-nuernberg.org/when-decisions-become-art/> (accessed 2021-06-13).
3. See <https://eastsideprojects.org/projects/trade-show/> (accessed 2021-06-13).
4. Myvillages was founded by artists Kathrin Böhm (UK/DE), Wapke Feenstra (NL) and Antje Schiffers (DE) in 2003, to advocate for a new understanding of the rural as a place of and for cultural production. See <http://www.myvillages.org> (accessed 2021-06-13).
5. See <https://feraltrade.org/cgi-bin/courier/courier.pl> (accessed 2021-06-13).
6. See <https://unusualbusiness.nl/en/activity/sitting-is-a-verb—rietveld-for-unusual-business/index.html> (accessed 2021-06-13).