

**EMPTY
STAGES,
CROWDED
FLATS**

**PERFORMATIVITY
AS CURATORIAL
STRATEGY**

**EDITED BY
FLORIAN MALZACHER
& JOANNA WARSZA**

EMPTY STAGES, CROWDED FLATS
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PERFORMING URGENCY #4

Edited by
Florian Malzacher & Joanna Warsza

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CURATING AS ONE DREAMS



RAIMUNDAS MALAŠAUSKAS' Oo (2013)

In the press release announcing the opening of the exhibition for both the Cypriot and Lithuanian pavilions at the Venice Biennial 2013, titled *Oo*, one could read: 'An exhibition curated from its middle starts as a dream'. The text continues, following a long, almost never-ending cataloguing of thoughts:

Or with 5 artists walking into the Internet (one of them meets living sculptures on the streets of Venice), runs the test of childhood or writes

a new obituary for a long-time dead illusionist, steps into TV gymnastics or moves along the lines of furniture and cinema, flashes with dog's eyes or lights up neon in Maya, brings a motorcycle closer to modernist architecture or freezes, stays frozen or triggers electric currents, shoots for the last time or wonders like a star on a screen-saver, turns into a cross-sequence of walls or flips even and odd pages at once, walks the passage

between two people in different cities or tunes the building to a heartbeat, plays an algorithm for the future or sinks into an orchestra pit, (sing-back or asks the reader), sounds like a palace in someone's mouth or joins the book of future children, tastes of the beginning and end simultaneously.

The text recalls the infamous Borgesian Chinese Encyclopaedia brought forward by Michel Foucault in the introduction of *The Order of Things* (1966). Through this implicit reference, Raimundas Malašauskas hinged his curatorial project *Oo* on multiple acts of enunciation rather than a single narrative, and explicitly positioned the curatorial act not at a point of origin but rather situated in the middle.

Oo took place in a Venetian modernist building, the Palasport Giobatta Gianquinto, a site ordinarily used for the practice of different sport activities. Malašauskas explicitly exposed his desire for the exhibition to inhabit this building in close relation with its habitual activities, such as children games and sport competitions. He notes that the exhibition 'takes place in a building that has its own rhythm, character and schedule: the favourite venue of physical exercise in Venice. It will be witnessing a simultaneous co-habitation of art and sports for the entire summer'. The notion of cohabitation found an explicit echo in the arbitrary pairing of two distinct countries, Lithuania and Cyprus — who coincidentally both invited Malašauskas to curate their pavilion for the biennale — while implicitly approaching the relationship between art and sport from a political perspective in the form of an 'exercise' — 'of cosmopolitanism', as Malašauskas described it. The

title of the exhibition *Oo* — or *oO*, or *oo* — as a combination of signs reflected on multiple forms of organisation and emphasised the need to have at least two elements to constitute an organisation; two elements whose relations are constantly changing. *Oo* thus proposed a specific exhibition situation, exploring the field of possibilities in combining two national pavilions, and two different types of organisation, a sport facility, and an art event.

Oo multiplied the forms, spaces, and temporalities of enunciation. The exhibition split itself across two physical spaces: the Palasport as well as the video preview of the exhibition in the form of an online book. In the context of the Palasport, the exhibition appeared as a constantly transforming entity, adjusting its material elements in relation to the activities, artistic or otherwise, taking place within its walls. The spectator of the exhibition was somehow lost in the immensity of the building, and the works of the artists — including ephemeral events and performances that took place at specific moments throughout the duration of the exhibition — did not compete with the building but rather unfolded within it. The exhibition addressed the visitors' relationship to both space and time. The works that artists contributed for the exhibition seemed to blend into the architectural fabric of the Palasport, such as Gabriel Lester's *Cousins* (2013), an installation constituted by walls recuperated from various museums, which were arranged according to different configurations over the duration of the project. Other works could be purposely confused with the functional activities of the building, confronting the gestures and choreographies of performers with the movements of



The installation *Eleven Hosts, Twenty-One Guests, Nine Ghosts* by Phanos Kyriacou and the live installation *Intermission* by Maria Hassabi in Raimundas Malašauskas' exhibition *oO* (2013)

gymnasts or basketball players. The sharing of the space allowed for multiple and rich interferences and accumulations, between artistic and sport activities, as well as between different artistic contributions, such as Maria Hassabi's *Intermission* (2013) consisting of dancers slowly and continuously moving through the bleachers, where there was also an ensemble of vertical supports for ordinary, domestic objects gathered by artist Phanos Kyriacou in *Eleven Hosts, Twenty-One Guests, Nine Ghosts* (2013). The exhibition staged continuous slips of time, appealing to different senses at a time, conjuring images of other spaces and other experiences, for examples with Jason Dodge introducing fragments of wood from apricot trees in an entrance-way and dispersing pines on the

ground of the space resulting in the persistent circulation of a particular smell.

The video preview, which consisted of a book whose pages are turned by multiple pairs of hands to reveal a complex distribution of pages, opening inward and outward, presenting different combinations, played with symmetry and asymmetry, repetitions and doublings. The hypnotic voice-over accompanying the turning of the pages — performed by hypnotist Marcos Luytens, who previously collaborated with Malašauskas on the 'Hypnotic Show' — further echoes the exhibition's experience of losing oneself in space and time, and attempts to induce an altered state of consciousness in the viewer of the video. Certain works in the exhibition mirrored the idea of the labyrinth,



Opening of Raimundas Malašauskas' *oO* (2013)

forcing spectators to abandon some control under the guidance of the artist, or performer, such as in the work of artist Myriam Lefkowitz. *Walk, hands, eyes* (Venice) (2013) consisted of taking individual visitors on a walk across the building and its neighbouring streets, with the request to the visitor to keep their eyes closed. Lefkowitz, or one of the performers she trained to replace her, guided the spectator's body almost solely through touch; constantly adjusting the manner of their approach depending on the situation. Sometimes they only touched the tips of the person's fingers, other times they gently pressed the person's back, and sometimes they put their whole arm around the person's waist. At specific moments, the artist or performer took hold of the spectator's head and asked them to open their eyes for a very short amount of time perhaps a couple of seconds — as though isolating single images like photographs. Such a walk in the dark produced an enhanced embodied experience of sound, smell, touch, and vision that shared some similarities with the cinema experience; although Lefkowitz's work explored urban space in a way that cinema cannot. The immersive quality of *Walk,*

hands, eyes anchors the experience of the work in a relationship between two human beings and requires that the spectator relinquishes some control, let go of the conventional distances that separate his or her body from the body of others, and accept a form of passivity on which the work depends.

Through these explicit forms of fragmentation of the exhibition experience, whose outcome is deliberately postponed by keeping the video online, curatorial practice demonstrates its refusal to be an end point as much as it negates the possibility of uniqueness and origin. In *Oo*, Malašauskas could be compared to a dreamer who cannot keep control over the events occurring in his dream; as if *Oo* was an organism, alive and self-organised, giving the artists as much space and freedom to act as possible. In *Oo*, Malašauskas challenges the positions of knowledge and leadership that the figure of the curator habitually occupies. The relationship of the exhibition to the production of knowledge is one of ambiguous fictionalisation inscribed by the timeline of the exhibition that went from the exhibition's present right back to 1972, referring to a sequence of events big and small and ranging from Cypriot and Lithuanian national politics to Venetian local news. Malašauskas describes the organisational form of the exhibition as floating and compared it to the experience of life and to plankton. The video preview stages multiple pair of hands pointing to an idea of collective statement and refusing identification through the absence of an identifiable face or name. A form of disidentification with the figure of the curator becomes explicit in Malašauskas's curatorial practice, allowing for the production of fabulation: it works as

if Malašauskas intended to produce a fictional matrix through which he could orchestrate a multiplicity of spaces of enunciation and distribute roles and responsibilities across many different actors — artists, collaborators — in order to detach himself from a position of authority that the institution such as the Venice Biennial demanded him to fulfil.

Malašauskas's practice hinges upon a contestation of authorship that does not take the form of traditional critique but rather inhabits the ambiguity inherent to curatorial practice's claim of authorship. Malašauskas playfully moves between the multiple figures of the curator, the author, the dramaturg, the storyteller as well as the artist, ceaselessly undoing the possibility of assigning himself a role, a function, or a place. I do not believe however that he ever contested the name of 'curator' as such.

Malašauskas undoes the link between curatorial authorship and the definitive formats through which curatorial projects are made manifest. He takes stock of the density of his practice, as a proliferation of figures, modes of operation and forms of thought. In his work, concepts of metamorphosis and of absence of origin, or destination, appears crucial. He is a host, the one who receives or is received by others, alternatively giving or taking away; the one who disrupts, and who betrays. The figure of the curator withdraws from disciplined identities and professional templates, and makes the demonstration of a fundamental plasticity and performativity that instils into the figure of the curator the potential of transformation and self-determination.

The exhibition Oo (as the joint Cypriot and Lithuanian contribution to the Venice Biennial in 2013) did not take place in one of the city's many palaces, but was set by curator Raimundas Malašauskas in a modernist building that usually is overlooked by the tourists and is a site ordinarily used for sport activities — the Palasport Giobatta Gianquinto. Taking place in a building that had its own clearly defined character and schedule, Oo was thought to be a simultaneous co-habitation of art and sports. The exhibition constantly transformed, adjusting its material elements in relation to the activities, artistic or otherwise, taking place within its walls. The visitor was confronted with the task of orientating him/herself within in the impressive immensity of the building; the artistic works blended into the architectural fabric of the Palasport or sometimes could even be confused with the functional activities of the building, confronting the gestures and choreographies of performers with the movements of gymnasts or basketball players. The sharing of the space created multiple interferences between artistic and sport activities, as well as between the manifold artistic — sculptural, choreographic, musical, installation, and architectural — contributions.