

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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PERFORMA MAGAZINE

Catalyst Artists

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<http://performamagazine.tumblr.com/post/51745384090/catalyst-artists>



The works of many contemporary artists—Jochen Dehn, Aurélien Froment, Dominique Gilliot, Louise Hervé & Chloé Maillat, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, **Gareth Long**, Benoît Maire, Olivia Plender, Julien Prévieux, Benjamin Seror, Nathaniel Sullivan, Raphaël Zarka and many others—involve library research, essay writing and lecture-performance as well as more tangible objects. Indeed, the 2000s saw the emergence of a trend in current art practice towards methods resembling those of academics rather than visual artists. The temptation is strong to call these artists “researchers”, but they do not see research as an end in itself, and allow themselves considerable freedom of methodology. As a result, the presentation of their findings is often unconventional in form due to deviations, improbable connections, even deliberate mistakes. The resulting art is therefore discursive in more ways than one: it is a reasoning, chiefly expressed through speeches and words, yet paradoxically untrammelled by strict continuity and tending to proceed through digressions. These artists work as what Elisabeth Wetterwald calls “connectives,” using analogies and subjective associations, building an entirely personal continuity between the facts and anecdotes they have assembled. These materials thus function as ingredients for use in “artwork-laboratories” designed to test their possible combinations. Consequently, the artists modify the connections between data without changing the latter’s nature, just as catalysts work in chemical reactions.

The relationship between these “catalyst” artists and those known in the United States as “research-based”—whose works are inspired by research—is not so clear. Moreover, this American neologism is itself ill-defined as it refers both to historic figures (most of whom taught or studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, such as György Kepes, Piotr Kowalski, and Antoni Muntadas) and younger artists whose research is more in the nature of investigation. Moreover, the catalyst artists in question here have moved away from the age-old art-science debate, and do not confine themselves to investigation. As there are similarities between these movements, it seems necessary to develop a fresh analysis of the influences behind this new trend. It probably owes its origins to reflexive and critical practices in which narrative, or even fiction, plays a major role; as these are recurrent issues in the works of Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, or Philippe Parreno, and of their predecessors Robert Smithson, the conceptualists and General Idea, this seems an interesting path to pursue.

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Narration and discourse have constantly grown in importance since the era of Conceptual Art, with its artist-theorists; over the same period, the questioning of the border between fiction and reality has shifted into a questioning of truth. Jean-François Lyotard proclaimed the “end of great narratives” in the late 1970s, and Nicolas Bourriaud promoted relational aesthetics almost two decades later. So, what is the explanation for these contemporary tales that function primarily through the creation of links?

One avenue worthy of exploration is the methodological borrowing from science, but also from the Internet—whose hyperlinks foster serendipity—and from the humanities, notably postcolonial and cultural studies. These programs of study—and the artistic practices under discussion here—are characterized by the use of all data, regardless of whether or not they come from the art world or an elitist culture. Moreover, these new approaches to knowledge, which challenge its underlying power relations, are central to the questions inherent in this discursive trend and are sometimes even advocated, by artists such as Mathieu K. Abonnenc. This art appears to take a deliberately political stance with its rejection of positivism and promotion of knowledge, and poses a challenge to historians precisely by stepping outside the conventional artistic framework. Finally, at a time when the Bologna Process requires Fine Art students to write an academic thesis, how should we understand practices that lie between research and visual output? The “catalysts” appear to question their own legitimacy to claim artistic status when extending their field of activity to extra-artistic disciplines. However, by conceiving of their work as a work-in-progress, every piece of which represents a step, they actually exhibit their own creative process as a work in its own right. Catalyst artists: artists squared?

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Images, from top:

1. Gareth Long, Bouvard and Pécuchet's Invented Desk for Copying, 2007-2011. Materials and dimensions vary. Image courtesy of Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein.
2. Gareth Long, Bouvard and Pécuchet's Invented Desk for Copying, 2007-2011. Materials and dimensions vary. Image courtesy of Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein.

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