A and Other Essays was organized in tandem with a mid-career survey of the work of Rachel Harrison called Consider the Lobster at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS). For this exhibition, six artists—Nayland Blake, Tom Burr, Harry Dodge, Alix Lambert, Allen Ruppersberg and Andrea Zittel—were invited to curate works from the Marilouise Hessel Collection, along with contributions from Harrison herself.

The result is a range of exhibition strategies falling somewhere between the respective roles of the artist and the curator in a blurring of the distinction between making and showing.

This fine-blurring is shared by Harrison’s exhibition, in which the diverse materials that comprise her work—objects, photographs and videos that are both found and made—are folded together in a way that plays with the conventions and apparatus of exhibition-making that extend throughout the CCS. In Harrison’s exhibition, gallery walls have been removed and integrated into her work, plinths are piled into a makeshift barricade/display system, wigs are arranged on the Franz West sculpture that sits on the lawn in front of the building, and so on. While A and Other Essays might appear to simply be a further extension of this all-encompassing methodology, or as a supplement to the main exhibition, it merits consideration as something more than just a playful addition.

The titles of these paired exhibitions are taken from a wide-ranging collection of essays by the late author David Foster Wallace, Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays. The transposition of essay and exhibition implicit in this titling scheme invites a reading of the formal connotations of the essay: of the essay as form. Here, I think of the writing of the scholar Graham Good. In his gloss on critical and literary reflections in the essay “The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay,” Good advances an interpretation of the essay as a form of aesthetic knowledge—a product of individual subjectivity rather than adherence to disciplinary conventions. Following Good, it can be said that the essay possesses a creative autonomy that is equivalent to the work it addresses and is a likeness of its producer as much as it is an object itself.

This framework seems to be appropriate for approaching the individual contributions to A and Other Essays, which offer differing approaches to the practice and responsibilities of the curator, with an emphasis on the status of the curators as artists. Allen Ruppersberg, for instance, includes his own work as a running commentary on the task at hand. In a new iteration of a work initially done as a series of prints in 1999 called “Honey, I Rearranged the Collection,” a series of LED signs hung in the doorways of the exhibition spaces, scrolls through countless variations on the title phrase, such as “...but you would never notice,” and “...because the appraiser is coming tomorrow.” The humour of this intervention sits somewhat awkwardly with his seemingly straightforward and careful arrangement of three artists well-represented in the Marilouise Hessel Collection—Rosemarie Trockel, Karlheinz Weinberger and William Copley—adding a degree of ambivalence to the task of attending to the potential collisions and connections between these disparate artists’ works.

Andrea Zittel, Alix Lambert and Tom Burr similarly position their own work in relation to selections from the collection. Zittel presents work that shares close formal and conceptual connections with her own, choosing pieces related to garments, weaving and the body. Furthermore, she modifies the walls of the room, giving over to her contribution with a tall band of dark green paint, effectively branding the space and setting it apart from the others. This forms the ground against which works by Rosemarie Trockel, Yayoi Kusama, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Morris and others are presented, alongside elements from a recent installation of her own work. Conversely, Lambert simply adds her own short, abstract interlude to her programme of cervical video art. By asserting the presence of the artist-curator in a much less forcible manner, these vignettes do little to shift or add to the reading of the works, or the exhibition. Burr, however, in a highly focused gesture, presents a newly commissioned sculpture, made in response to a series of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs from the collection that are displayed on an adjacent wall. Also sharing the same space is a large selection of Rachel Harrison’s Voyage of the Beagle photographs, which introduce a decidedly different attitude towards portrait photography in their egalitarian serial treatment of a range of inanimate subjects, generating one of the most direct moments of dialogue in the exhibition.

In contrast to Burr’s selective focus, Harry Dodge and Nayland Blake come closest to Harrison in their systematic playing with association and organization, attending to the structure of the collection as much as the works themselves. Dodge’s salon-style installation arranges 47 works from the collection according to formal and thematic connections, proposing idiosyncratic categorical groupings such as “Blot/Matter/Figure” and “Full Spectrum Synthesis.” Blake’s contribution is perhaps the most radical in its re-configuration of the collection, translating it into a new set of
images based on the metadata used to describe and categorize the individual works in the collection, which are displayed on a set of monitors near the entrance to the exhibition. Generating a parallel collection as a stream of images pulled from the Internet, Blake redirects the generalizing tendency of categorization towards the particularities of his own tastes and interests, remaking the collection for himself and in his own image.

As Boris Groys noted in a text published in *e-flux journal* in January 2009, “The Politics of Installation,” the indeterminacy between showing and making is a hallmark of exhibition in the post-Duchampian paradigm. However, for Groys there remains a distinction to be made between the respective freedoms of the artist and the curator as exhibition-makers. According to Groys, “the artist and the curator embody, in a very conspicuous manner, these two different kinds of freedom: the sovereign, unconditional, publicly irresponsible freedom of art-making, and the institutional, conditional, publicly responsible freedom of curatorship.” Furthermore, he relates the sovereign freedom exercised by the artist in taking responsibility for the design of an exhibition to the instalment of a political order, which for Groys always involves a founding act of violence.

Without making too much of this, Groys’ claims, the ambivalence of *And Other Essays* seems caught between these two “freedoms.” Whereas in an installation such as Harrison’s, one is assured of authorial control and a certain degree of coherence, *And Other Essays* presents something altogether more heterogeneous and undirected. Varying in the liberties they take with the collection, the individual artist/curator contributions are held together by their taking place within the same territory, but they work simultaneously to break it up into a set of independent installations/territories. In this way, *And Other Essays* takes shape as an exhibition where the expectation to cohere or communicate is treated with a kind of indifference by the participants. And so, because it lacks the force and single-mindedness of Harrison’s installation, it seems a fitting counterpart to the former. It is as much an exhibition of a collection as it is a demonstration of the ambiguous implications of the freeing up of responsibilities that is the privilege of the artist.