
RED HOOK JOURNAL

Press Releases

Artists Without Art?

Peio Aguirre

On e-flux

A Prior #18, featuring Nico Dockx, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Anton Vidokle, is a fully “spoken word” experimental issue of this magazine, consisting of transcripts of conversations with artists. The issue draws largely on *New York Conversations*, a discussion that took place in June 2008 at the e-flux space in Manhattan. Significantly, the presence of Anton Vidokle marks the setting even without his participating very much. When he is queried on his work as an artist during the Brussels session, the moderator joins in:

Monika Szewczyk: Anton, would you like to respond?

Anton Vidokle: Maybe not. Maybe it would be more interesting if somebody else did.



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The passivity is telling; although he insists on presenting himself as an artist, he makes no large claims about his practice. Sometimes there is no better position than to leave all categorizations open, and delegate responsibility for ontological dilemmas to others. Indeed, Vidokle the artist is indistinguishable from the accumulated symbolic and knowledge capital of the group of collaborators that surrounds him.

But at a time when even filmmaker David Lynch is “collaborating” with various partners to release a dance album, it might be important to clarify what collaboration can mean when framed as the key part of one’s practice. As the co-initiator of many a project, Vidokle is not unlike the Italian impresario of past centuries who financed operas, concerts, and plays, for which the figure of the artist emerged as a side effect, or a mirrored reflection, of initiatives the impresario funded. It is ironic that Vidokle is suspicious of the “overreaching” curator encroaching upon the role of the artist (“Art Without Artists?” *e-flux journal* # 16), but does not map out the problems in the kind of work he himself represents, a circular structure combining the very features that make the “curatorial” a site that is at once privileged and conflicted.



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It’s useful to recall the theory that the flow of information and the marketing of goods in circulation have today reached a point at which consumers buy products not as objects but as narratives. *A Prior* #18 does indeed uphold an art of the conversation as a paradigm on which the discourses (or “discursivization”) of art currently rest—something far removed from older traditions, which strive for a pedagogy of long-term exchange. Today the discursive functions only within the communication frameworks conceived specifically for it (amounting to something Brecht used to call the “apparatus”). It reaches operational value only if previously announced, scheduled, shaped, then registered, recorded (witnesses required) and, finally, broadcast. Three years later, Vidokle presents *New York Conversations*, a film reminiscent of both the documentary essay genre and the grainy underground recordings from the heyday of conceptual art.

When authorship, artistic authority, curatorial agency, and institutional backing all mix and overlap, then the category of *artist* as we know it becomes outdated. But without doubt, it is in the consolidation of a global public sphere that the artist-run-initiative *e-flux* reaches a forceful conclusion. This is where the struggle for publicity and the growing conflicts between operational agents (curators, artists, critics, galleries) are brought to a point. The art world’s public sphere is caught between two great forces: on

the one hand, the print industry and on the other, galleries and museums needing exposure through advertisements or reviews. No one escapes this tussle; artists, curators, and critics all need the publicity that the exponential repetition of their name generates, in order to achieve and maintain some form of standing within the field.



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It would be unfair, of course, to accuse e-flux of generating such tendencies—today, information is the main form of productive capital. Karl Marx wrote that the first freedom of the press consisted in its not being a trade, when he clearly knew (and later did say) that it was. Today, for the art critic and art criticism as such (as critical exercise and as exposure), quantity comes to override quality; what matters is that something is written, whatever that may be. Which is why there's little point in moralizing about whether e-flux is an artwork or a business, or about how much money is made from this struggle for publicity, or even about the Robin Hood attitude. The latter is an important point: through numerous projects and channels, e-flux returns to the public domain what was previously collected through advertisers, and the e-flux journal itself is widely seen as a metamagazine dedicated to pure theory, free of any market interests, which in psychological terms fulfills this symbolic payback to the public sphere.

What really matters is that e-flux mirrors the system better than anything else. To organize the antinomies of the current situation around the binary of good/bad is ineffective, due to the dialectical nature of capitalism itself. Even the critical, antimarket reactions are typically ambivalent: you may be against it, but you use it and you want to be in on it.

Two more texts on e-flux: *Give & Take* by Sarah Demeuse and *The Amateur Collector* by Thomas Lawson.

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Posted August 28, 2011. © Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

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