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BILL VIOLA:

“The work is always about  
life and death, and of birth,  
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“ We live in a system of relationships of power. It’s important how you define and how you integrate that definition into your life and into your practice. For me power is the ability to make things happen, rather than dictating the occurrence of things”

*Eva Grubinger, 'Black Diamond Bay', 2015.  
Installation image of fig-2 exhibition at ICA Studio,  
week 36/50. Photography by Sylvain Deleu.*



CURATOR'S CORNER

By Aina Pomar

## FIG-2, AN EPILOGUE

**2**015 was probably the most dynamic year ever for the eclectic ICA Studio, going through a total of fifty metamorphoses that have changed the space completely every week. The project behind all these transformations was fig-2, which presented fifty projects in fifty weeks combining different art disciplines in one room. Challenging the boundaries of space and time intrinsic in exhibition formats, fig-2 brought an exceptional energy to London's contemporary art scene, engaging with an increasing and heterogeneous audience.

We visited the ICA Studio during the fiftieth (and latest) show to interview Fatoş Üstek, the curator of the project. With a special interest in themes related to time-presence, the intersection between art and science and experimental exhibition formats, Üstek has extended her practice as a curator and writer internationally. We talked with her about her curatorial approach, the experience and challenges of curating fifty projects on the trot and about the last contribution of fig-2, a special publication with commissioned texts by renowned art personalities like Louisa Buck, Caroline Douglas, Mark Francis, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Gilda Williams and Catherine Wood.

“Whenever I felt like the programme was preceding towards a coherent space I wanted to take a U-turn and make something that people would not expect to happen”

**Artdependence Magazine: fig-2 integrated fifty projects in fifty weeks throughout 2015. There was actually an antecedent project, fig-1, developed by Mark Francis and Jay Jopling in 2000. Can you tell us more about fig-1 and how the two editions established a dialogue, if there was any?**

Fatoş Üstek: fig-1 was a seminal project in the year 2000 with a line-up of artists that became the prominent figures of the UK and the international art scene. What Mark Francis did fifteen years ago was showcasing a single work for the duration of one week by one artist. That was the formula.

In its revival, fifteen years after, I wanted to respond to the currency of London. Showing a single work by a single artist could be something that I could continue, but instead I wanted to create a situation after a situation that sometimes needed a single work by a single artist, but sometimes it necessitated three artists coming together making one work, or one scientist and two artists coming together making several works. So, I kept the formula of the 50 exhibitions in 50 weeks, but the way it was composed was more of a mirroring of our times. In a way that was reflecting on what's happening in the artistic practices and how artists are producing their works, which is not solely based on thinking in the domain of visual arts, but expanding borders and territories and, not only being influenced, but drawing influences and highlighting those influences from other disciplines such as literature, dance, science, physics or music.

**AD: Could you explain what was your main objective when starting a project with this unusual structure, what did you think it could occur in these fifty projects?**

FÜ: It was the first time that I started a project without knowing the whole of its entirety so, in that sense, it was a very important thing to acknowledge the fact that these projects necessitated taking risks and evolving around uncertainty. I've been curating as we went along, and also I had this ambitious drive at the beginning of the year wanting to connect all the exhibitions to one another. This is perhaps a second iteration from fig-1 that was fifty different positions in the same room, whereas fig-2 it is again fifty different positions, but they are all leading to another. So it's almost like there are sequential narratives or threads that are intersecting or crossing throughout the programme. In a way, there were different wavelengths and sometimes that wavelength could be a medium, for example the medium of performance being explored in different weeks or in a parenthesis of a month or six weeks, but sometimes it was about a concept that kept recurring in different exhibitions. In that sense, I was very much interested in allowing things to happen, but also there was always a balance of controlling and not controlling. Controlling perhaps is providing a structure. We had a very solid structure here, also a very dedicated team that worked with me very closely and with the artists to make the weeks happen, in the sense that it was about unfolding their passions and dreams they had been keeping aside. Ninety per cent of the programme were new commissions so, of course, there's a dichotomy between a description and the work itself. The artist could say, "I'm thinking about this and that", that could give you an idea, but it doesn't give you the feeling or the experience of the work itself. We only sometimes saw the work first time in its entirety at the opening. This was a very interesting experience, making sure that it happened when it needed to be happening, but at the same time, without rigid control and allowing the work of the week to take its own space.

**AD: fig-2 challenged various aspects about time. It was a very long project divided into very short displays. How did this influence your approach to curating each exhibition and your relation with each artist?**

FÜ: We literally had eleven hours to turn over one show into another. There were times that I invited artists to come and do a show ten days before their show would open.

There were also some projects that I knew I wanted to do, but because of the artist's schedule or the scale of the project I needed to schedule on the later months of the year.

When I look back, working with all these artists that I've invited less than two-three weeks before the show it has been so rewarding. There's something there, there's a kind of synergy in there, almost like being asked "can you jump with me from this bridge, but we'll make sure that we won't hit the floor and it's going to be a thrilling journey". That has been something. With the artists that we've been working for something like six months on their week, the energy has been very different. It's not about preferring either one or another, but I think that fig-2 needed some of that unknowingness, embrace that and invite the artist on late notices to enhance that energy and dynamism that I hope the programme brought forward.

**AD: Somehow this demonstrates that both spontaneity and very structured projects work equally well, but address the works in different ways. The role of the curator and the curatorial practice itself were of great importance in fig-2. Alongside the artists' projects you organised eight curatorial seminars to discuss different topics.**

FÜ: In a way, for me fig-2 is a project, but it is also an institution in the sense that it complies with several of the requisites of what an institution should be. It has a structure, a team, a vision, but at the same time it doesn't have continuity. It's a temporal project, so that gives you a lot of freedom to move around and play around. And for me to show that in its visual manifestation was as important as allowing a discourse and intellectual engagement with the curatorial position that I am taking. So for me it was important to have a discursive production.

Artfund supported my position as the curator and the initial idea was that I would do a talk, introducing an exhibition to a public, per month. And I thought, "maybe we need something more than that, not an artist talk or an exhibition tour, but something that is actually more substantial". I'm always interested in the dialogue, now it's activated by the 'public programmes and education department of museums', this kind of outreach where you directly assign knowledge production as your motto. It was also important for me to not only share with an audience what I am exploring as a curator, but I also look into various different curatorial positions and models on the large scale of institutions, biennials, and galleries where art is made visible.

In that sense I gathered eight themes that I find they play a significant role in proliferating a curatorial output, from having a sort of responsibility (not only a responsibility to the artwork or to the artist or to the audience or only to art historical canon).

As AJ [Dehany, fig-2 blogger] said in the last seminar, when exhibitions happen that work in there becomes historical, because it becomes part of that history. Beyond that there's also another responsibility, which is the way in which when we are making shows we re-contextualise artworks, so we have to be responsible and aware of that too.

And also there is the aspect of contemporaneity, so that when you are saying something or making a statement, there is a possibility to open up to engage with a statement that allows



(above)  
 Karen Mirza,  
 'The Ectoplasm of Neoliberalism', 2015.  
 fig-2 week 27/50.  
 Photography by © Sylvain Deleu.

other people to investigate it. Those statements can surface in exhibitions or as speeches, workshops or any kind of tangible output.

I am taking it abstract, but that was my main drive to have a seminar series where I explored what was happening at fig-2 on a thematic level...and I love talking as well, so that was easy!

**AD: Well, when I attended the seminars I noticed that you were also asking questions to the audience, trying to create a discussion, which is not always easy...**

FÜ: Yes, I think it's a very important component. Seminars for me are a production zone and there was also a line-up. I talked about responsibility on the second one because I was looking at Roland Barthes seminal essay "To the Seminar", where he positions "the master", the seminar giver as the most fragile component. He says that the knowledge production can only happen among the seminar participants, but the knowledge isn't encapsulated by the master of the seminar or the leader, and I truly believe in that. Of course, I would introduce an idea and give a perspective, but then ask all the attendants to join in what has been cooking or explored.

**AD: When I first heard about fig-2 I was fascinated about the idea of the project, but also about the website, which works both as a very visual platform to follow the project and as an archive. What do you think was the role it played in the whole project? Does any curatorial project need a platform where to integrate all the information nowadays?**

FÜ: Yes, definitely. Having a digital presence is a must today, because it is also about your visibility and your connectivity and accessibility. For me it was really important that the website would be the archive of the whole project, because so many things happened in that space, not only fifty openings, but also 142 collateral events and we had been collaborating with 500 additional people: speakers on Marjolijn Dijkman's week [22/50] to musicians who came to Darren Bader's [39/50]... It's a giant family of collaborators and colleagues. It was important that the website would record it on its entirety and on its timeline. It had to be very

clear, on a sequential line up. So we operate between the first and fiftieth project on a lineal basis, but if you go up you would see the seminars and if you would scroll down you go in depth to the content of the project you were visiting.

I started doing interviews with each artist quite early on and I think I was really happy about it because allowed me to have a one-to-one conversation with the artist to really go deeper.

Sometimes it was about not knowing what the work would look like, so you can't write a long text on it, because you haven't seen it, so in a way, those interviews helped me and the artist to explore what really happened. It was also important that this was stored on the website as an archive and what I wanted to do is to switch roles. Now that I am working on the fig-2 publication [expected to be released in June 2016], I don't want it to be an archive, I want it to be something else, another dimension to fig-2. Of course, commemorating what happened in the place, but saying something more. I'm still cooking ideas about it, about how to do it so it's not a hard print of the website pages.

**AD: Let's go through some of the projects to take a close look at the content of fig-2. I think it's important to mention Laura Eldret [1/50, '3 | The Juicers' and 50/50 'The Juicers], who was the first and last one.**

FÜ: That was also a response to fig-1, because it started and bookended with Richard Hamilton. The first show at fig-1 was Hamilton's polaroid photographs that he was just starting a painting of and on week fifty there was the finished painting. I really like that structure, so I wanted to do the same with an artist that I could start with a work in progress exhibition, working throughout the year to finalise into a completed artwork. I wanted to start with a female artist who had never had a solo show in London.

**AD: The evolving aspect of some exhibitions was really present in fig-2. Visitors who came to see the opening on a Monday and visited the same project on a Thursday might not have found the same display. Other pieces were defined by its changing nature. What displays would you highlight that reunited these characteristics?**

FÜ: There were desires and dreams; many artists were interested in having a durational experience of their production. In a way, I think seven days is a very good time, it is short and it is very demanding because some of our artists really lived in the [ICA] Studio for seven days, pausing their every-day live for it.

I could highlight Karen Mirza [27/50], who almost transformed the space into her studio, but she solely work exploring what could mean 'The Ectoplasm of Neoliberalism' (an intriguing concept). Bruce McLean [42/50] interviewed himself over and over again throughout the week; or Jacopo Miliani [16/50], whose exhibition idea was creating a choreographic score that was unfolding day by day, so the audience had to come every single day to actually have the experience of this score. Otherwise it was an abstract and incomplete image.

The thing that was really important for me was that we were not only showing works that were polished and ready to be disseminated, but it was about really creating the space as a sequence of situations. And sometimes those situations needed a still place; sometimes those situations needed a continuous triggering of affect by its artists or by the work itself. Anna Barham [30/50], for instance, wasn't here the whole week, but her work was everyday

evolving. You would read a text into a software and then the software would print out what it would think that you might have said.

It was also about encouraging and opening up when we talk about the process of production. This process is not only the manufacture of the work or what does it happen when the work itself is always in its becoming, like Anna Barham's, always renewing itself, but still itself. For me those are very important, quite abstract questions, because I'm very much interested in perception and the encounter with the work of art and what happens in that moment. Why is it that the encounter with the work of art is different to an encounter with a bus driver at a bus stop? What does it make something a mundane experience or an uplifting, challenging, shifting experience?

**AD: In that sense, an important part of the projects demanded the participation of the audience: Simon Welsh's [4/50] project, for which he did poetic portraits, or Wright and Vandame [38/50] that transformed the ICA studio into a gym for a week. Was there any other that you think enhanced public engagement?**

FÜ: The gym was actually a very strong engagement. With Marjolijn Dijkman we had thirty-two hours of talks of a replica of de LUNĀ talks accessible to public, but on a more discursive way. While with the gym, you had to bring your body and see what would happen.

**AD: fig-2 was developed in the ICA Studio and a great part of the projects, challenged the conception and the way we understand space. Tom McCarthy [12/50] transformed his last novel into a gallery installation, or Broomberg and Chanarin [31/50] who installed a green screen studio, and Eva Grubinger [36/50] who brought a big black fender.**

FÜ: That's a nice gathering of the three projects. One thing that was really important for me was that I demanded a lot from my audience, but I also demanded a lot from myself in that regard, because whenever I felt like the programme was preceding towards a coherent space I wanted to take a U-turn and make something that people would not expect to happen, such as the giant ship's fender from China. That was a massive undertaking, but at the same time very rewarding as well, because it really punctuated how our perception of space can differ from what the relations are set forward in that space. I could not do this programme in a room where nothing moves. That's why we needed to have the mobile walls, and why we moved them every week, just to freshen up our entry to the space. We lived there, my team and me, it was our office and we lived with the artwork.

It was also very important to provide freshness and continuity to the audience. That was also the last seminar's idea, the coherency and incompleteness. How can you still have a feeling of continuity within the whole programme, but at the same time leave it open so that there could emerge other relations forming outside of your control? Having that fender there was that in a sense. And we didn't count the smell, for instance. It smelt so heavy! Or the fact that people would come in and immediately say "What is this!?"

With Broomberg and Chanarin, when you looked at the screen it was all images that you are familiar with: the horse guards parade, the change of guards or Buckingham Palace. But you don't have such a black humour embedded on it that alters your reception of all those places.

For me the notion of space is so significant and I have a very intimate relation with it.

Sometimes for an encounter you just need a very small space and sometimes you need to explore. For instance, with POSTmatter [29/50] we had so many pot plants and five artworks. It felt like fig-2 became a big garden.

**AD: There were a lot of performances and projects based on a performative structure, for example, a collaboration with the festival Block Universe, and performances in either the studio or ICA Theatre.**

FÜ: It was not in my initial intentions; I didn't know that this project would be super performative. One thing that came up is that, because of the structure [of the space] again, which is a bunker, a box, and at the same time it's white, it could be a white cube, but it's not. This, of course, affected me programming the whole year, but also the artists' response to it, because it's also a studio, a workshop in its nature. It had been used for the production of art on site and I think that triggered people to come up with ideas of performance.

Even with Oreet Ashery [32/50], the whole week was actually dedicated for her to cast for her upcoming film 'Revisiting Genesis'. Then she was said "I want to do a Death Metal concert that is intervened by New Noveta in a performance at the opening", and I said "Ok, fine!". And the next day we were installing bronze busts on large top plinths.

It was also about the artists and their response to the space and to that limited time. The seven days trigger something in people. With Karin Kihlberg and Reuben Henry [43/50] we showed a film with Reuben doing the voice component on site for seven days. It's again a performative project, although you might not even recognise it as there's someone live performing the soundtrack of the video piece.

**AD: Going through the projects I realised that I hadn't visited as many as I thought and I had. I actually visited the most static ones and now I see how much I missed!**

FÜ: That's actually quite fine too. I like the fact that you have a different grasp of fig-2 from another person that could have visited a different combination of weeks. I think that's very beautiful. I also treasure people who visited the fifty shows, and they have a different grasp of fig-2. That was also for me really important from the beginning, that everyone who came, even seeing one show, had a feeling of what fig-2 was about. If you saw five shows you'll have another feeling, but still, there's a kind of underlying stream that we would all tap into. So, in the future, if you tell your friends, "fig-2 was this and this", there might be a communality.

**AD: Your practice focuses in curating, writing and research. On your website profile you state that you explore "concepts, such as 'now', 'time-presence', 'agency-subject'". For example, those are some topics that you studied in your project 'Now Expanded' or 'An opera in five acts' at David Roberts Art Foundation (DRAF).**

FÜ: In my late twenties, I got interested in investigating what is 'now' and 'present moment' and 'time' as a concept. I have science background which enables me to bridge concepts from differing disciplines. For instance, in Physics time is the measurement of change and it's a construct, but at the same time that construct is so embedded in our lives that you can't just say "Time is an illusion". You really have to explore and understand what it does mean context specifically.

“There are still so many interesting artists and so many ideas that I would love to support to flourish. I think that's why I will continue curating”

I curated a trilogy of exhibitions called 'Now Expanded' from the perspective of here in the now, with a look at different directions. The first one was called 'The Lost Moment', where I was looking back in time and trying to excavate moments that have taken place, but weren't taken into account when decisions were being made. It could be a subjective, traumatic experience or a societal exhilarating moment.

The second one was on immortality, on how we as individuals, through our subjective truths, or societies through their ethnographies and values, claim immortality. It is also about the heritage in cultures. I was looking into how the idea of immortality is seeded in the present moment.

The third one was 'Time Capsules and Conditions of Now'. That was about how can we be present in the present moment while there's continuous tracing of the past and a projection of the future. That was a two-year artistic research and then it became a publication and the exhibition at the David Robert Art Foundation.

That's how my collaboration with Vincent [Honoré, director and chief curator at DRAF] started and a year later he came up with this idea of an exhibition that would be changing throughout six months. It was called 'A House of Leaves' and it was the opening show when they moved to Mornington Crescent, in the factory building.

He asked me and Per Huttner, with whom I was collaborating at the time, to come up with an idea that would produce another layer onto the show. In 'A House of Leaves' there were different durations set to several artworks, some were permanently installed, and some of them would disappear and new works would appear. Some artworks would change location, so there was already a choreography, so we came up with the idea of making an opera. That was a really exciting and demanding project.

I conceptualised it and divided it into five components: a libretto, the characters, the musical score, choreography and the stage. That's why it was called 'An opera in five acts', each act was the production of one component. I really like this puzzle imagination, where the audience really need to complement. You could come to one act or to five acts and you would have a different experience. The last act was actually the sound, so we just played the sound in the space and we marked the stage.

It was very experiential, as the opera was produced by whoever was attending to that act that day. At act three we had 60 people, who came as an audience, so, for example, three people needed to become one character. We also did musical instruments, in the second act, from whatever was in the house. So we went to the storage unit of DRAF and took rubber bands, staples and anything that we could find and made musical instruments that would assign to the characters. It was always responding to the potential of the moment, whoever was in there would be part of it.

**AD: We previously talked about the responsibility intrinsic in the curatorial practice and this brings to the surface the idea of power relationships linked to the curatorial practice. Curating involves establishing some relationships of power since the curator represents, in part, ideas and creates diverse discourses through the work of artists.**

FÜ: That's totally true. We live in a system of relationships of power. It's important how you define and how you integrate that definition into your life and into your practice. For me power is the ability to make things happen, rather than dictating the occurrence of things.



There's a difference in a sense in which, as you get an experience, that experience comes back as a force that you not only recognise by your environment or other people, but also gives you a certain credibility that adds to your power.

I wouldn't be interested in facilitating this power as a curator to select invite an artist to show work and make that person visible towards my benefit. I wouldn't be interested in controlling the production of the artwork as "you should be doing that or it's better if you...". I would use it to actually allow more freedoms to happen.

I have four assistants, and they have been working so amazingly and I have been giving them a lot of power and responsibility in managing the production of the exhibitions, and we had grown so much trust in the due course. Of course, at the end of the day, I make the decisions, but they could also make their own respective decisions while executing something, and I really enjoy that rather than being the controller mind. When working together (and the same with the artists), we have a dialogue and a conversation, but we should not overrule each other. You might have a different responsibility, but you are still powerful, as powerful as me.

**AD: In relation to this idea, especially in the art world there's sometimes a certain fear to share. Partly because we live in a society based on property and information is the most valuable thing nowadays.**

FÜ: It's true, but I'm not afraid, really. Ideas come and go. Of course there's that infringement concern and I wouldn't be too possessive. I enjoy coming up with ideas, like the mobile walls. I think that was a really good idea and I don't think we could have survived otherwise, because it would have been so boring or impossible financially to build walls. But in the future, if somebody wants to do that, I would be just happy.

**AD: Last question: have 50 projects been enough?**

FÜ: Oh, that's a very good question! Yes and no. I think that the picture I wanted to make is there, I'm really happy about it, about the spectrum of artists that we worked with and everything. At the same time, I could keep going. There are still so many interesting artists and so many ideas that I would love to support to flourish. I think that's why I will continue curating. I'm not retiring, nor will I write my memoirs soon!

*Tom McCarthy, 2015. Installation image of fig-2 exhibition, week 12/50. Courtesy of the artist.*

*Photography by Sylvain Deleu.*