



**A CURATOR'S REPORT  
OF 19  
STUDIO VISITS**

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# ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Studio Visit by Chih Tung Lin

The articles *9 Things to Know before Doing a Studio Visit with an Artist*<sup>1</sup> published on Artsy and *How to Host a Successful Artist Studio Visit*<sup>2</sup> on artrepreneur.com unraveled the activity of studio visits by pointing out Dos and Don'ts as if they were a *How to Win Your Valentine's Heart* manual. Studio visits serve as a platform where artists show and tell in front of a visitor, as a gateway to potential opportunities and showcases. The inside story, however, is as delicate as a Valentine's Day. One step goes wrong - the day ends in chaos. It can be a degrading or encouraging experience. This encounter typically takes place in the artist's 'studio', and accounts for the mechanism of exhibition planning, artwork collecting, or commercial activities in the visual art sphere. A studio visit, mystic it is, holds complexity of layers of interpersonal relationships.

Since I started my studies at Academy of Fine Arts, I have been paying attention to the availability of studio visits with professors and visiting artists provided to the students in the academy.<sup>3</sup> I have found the culture interesting

1 Indrisek, 2019.

2 Wong, 2019.

3 See appendix for guidelines concerning studio visits at Academy of Fine Arts.

and since became more and more curious: What kind of activity a studio visit is? What does a studio visit mean to an artist? What happens during the visit? Who benefits whom? What are the expectations? The visits, mainly taking place at students' studio spaces in the academic building, are registered via an invitation link sent through webmail, dispersed equally to everyone. By ticking a preferred slot on 'Doodle', an online scheduling tool, a studio visit is then set. On the day, students will meet up with the visitor and guide them to the studios. The content of each visits is agreed upon between the visitor and the visitee.

Conventions and fine arts education have taught creative workers in the field of visual arts practical know-hows and contexts about studio visits. Seeing the art school functioning as a mini version of the art world, I found myself, a curatorial student, standing right in the middle of intertwining perspectives. If a studio visit is the very initial encounter with a potential collaborator, in a role of a curator, I pictured the studio visit to be an occasion where I could introduce the way I tend to work, the working environment I envision, and the kind of professional relationship I am seeking to build.

The more I thought about studio visits the more I felt like conducting one myself. Only I had tons of questions in relation to the mechanism of such event: What possible power relations are involved in? What agencies are attached to the curator's role? Can there be an equal exchange? Bearing the questions in mind, I decided that I would pay studio visits as the practical part of my thesis project.

The thesis project, in the form of studio visits, was carried out from September 18, 2020 to February 5, 2021. Participants consisted mainly of art students from Academy of Fine Arts, who either signed up or were invited to participate in the studio visit project via an invitation email. Few participants that I invited myself were reached out through social media direct message or email. The project was divided in three phases. In the first phase 6 visits took place, 8 - in the second, and 5 - in the final phase. In sum, a total of 19 visits took place.

I believed that a studio visit was a site for exchange, so I added a twist by stating in the invitation that I did not want to visit empty-handed. I proposed that I would like to provide a 'service' in exchange for the visatee's presentation whether it was to share about their practice, work of art, or a recent project they were working on. To insert my studio visit into the existing pool of studio visits available in the academy, I released my project invitation following the same procedure. The invitation reached out to the art students at school, as well as artists or practitioners with a career. Once signed up, one became the participant of my thesis project. I then paid visits to their 'studios.' Agreed in advance, the visits were documented with audio recording.

Instead of paying tribute to the conventional studio visits, I was longing for space for improvisation. Hence, I designed my studio visit as like a participatory performance where I, the curator-performance artist, invite participants<sup>4</sup> to play the role of the active agents that interact and interfere with the existing structure. With this idea, I created a manual as a guided script of my 'performance.' Be it a performance, a happening<sup>5</sup>, or a studio visit, the participants were given the authority to fill up the span of the meeting with their desired content. The setup provided me the access to the participants' source of knowledge. Thanks to that, I was able to explore what the role of a curator was like within the pool of collective data contributed by the participants.

In this written thesis, I will explain the project's initiation by introducing the approach adopted and unravel how the project's structure was built. To illustrate the framework of the thesis project, I will focus on de-molding the 'studio visit' activity by analyzing the site of a studio, the meaning embedded in it, its relationship with the resident, and the studio visit culture. Reflecting upon the analysis of the visit documentation, the thesis will delve into topics including the imbalanced power relations and the role fixity in the visual art

4 The artists or non-artists who signed up to my studio visits are referred to as 'participants' in the thesis.

5 A happening, coined by Allan Kaprow in 1957, is a planned event or a performance with room for the artist's improvisation and the active participation of the audience.

field as well as the problematics of the curatorial gesture if done wrong. Besides using information gathered from the field research and literature review to create an outline of a curator's role, their tasks, personal traits, agencies, and responsibilities, I will also insert selected extracts of real conversations from the visits to complement the respective domains of discussions. Finally, I will conclude my field experience by suggesting a better way of working as a curator for future reference and reminder at work.

### **Deciding on the Service**

Deciding on the service to provide in my studio visit, I imagined it as immaterial, yet holding the same quality as the labor paid by the participants when presenting themselves during the visit. It also needed to represent my professional personality as a curator. Despite many ideas contradicting my own understanding of the curatorial profession, it did not take long to decide that the service to provide during my studio visit would be a 'massage.' I grew up massaging my mom on different occasions, so the activity was familiar. With physical engagement, it was not only straightforward means for me to express love and care, but also an efficient method to bond with the person whom I was massaging both physically and mentally. It was labor out of affection, the kind of giving I considered natural and effortless.

The inspiration could be retrieved from a flight to Venice for a study trip. My seatmate Kaisa and I got bored and decided to massage each other's arms. In the middle of the pinching-and-pressing, we began to chat about how nice it would be if the academy's wellbeing system provided massage services. Having in mind that many art students among us were stressed and experienced burnouts during the time, I was sure that a service as such would be something I would like to do within my capacity.

After settling with this decision, I did not make the content of the service un-negotiable; still, as a default, I appeared to the participants as a curator-massage therapist. During every visit, I was constantly switching between

the roles to perform the tasks accordingly. The shuffling roles blurred the boundaries between the relationship I shared with the participant. Our relationship, sometimes as a curator/artist, a performance artist/participant, sometimes as a massage therapist/client, was disrupted and reset over and over throughout the span of the visit. As a curator, I was permitted to enter the artist's studio space, and as a massage therapist - the client's bodily space. As a curator, I was given access to discover the artist's professional identity, and as a message therapist - the client's physical territory. After all, no matter whether it was a massage therapist treating their client or a curator performing hospitality, I realized that my practice did not vary whichever role I was playing.

The 'massage as a service' accounted for a position that collided with the conventional structure of a studio visit. Nevertheless, it created a new way of interaction between a curator and an artist. The layers of politics underlying the topics such as 'touch' and 'service work' will be discussed later in the thesis.



## TWO: THE APPROACH

The preparation of the studio visits was an intuitive creative process. Having no obligation to resonate with theory whilst constructing the architecture of the project, I had the freedom to cross boundaries and not be restricted to thinking in a box. The tools I have carried alongside my journey on learning about curating had contributed to my thinking. My previous degree in psychology taught me how to create space for communication as well as to keep sensitivity in interpersonal interactions. Past theatre experiences where I was involved in directing and acting told me how to employ playful and improvising techniques in my daily praxis. I was curious, however, if my way of working, the approach that comprised from multiple disciplines could develop into a concrete practice of my own. Clearly, I was in search of a framework to resonate with, so that my observation and findings will be crystalized.

In the making of my thesis project, the tasks of creating a site or an event, inviting bodies to enter, and enabling 'relational encounters'<sup>6</sup> to take place were no different than any other curatorial work such as an exhibition making or a workshop organizing. From the perspective of a curator, I thought it be crucial to define how 'curatorial' aligns with and where it is located in one's practice. I believe that the curatorial is located where the definition is made and where one's central value sets in. The term according to practitioners in the field, articulates aspects of co-related subjects ranging from strict definitions of the curator's work, the act of 'curare,' 'operation detached from the

6 Jackson, 2017, 25.

assembly-line model,<sup>7</sup> to practices in between art and curation. Moreover, explained by Maria Lind, the curatorial applies to various contexts, and can be employed by different positions, such as that of a curator, an editor, an educator, a communications person, and so on.<sup>8</sup> The curatorial in the case of my project in fact was located where the curator's presence was. As Dimitrina Sevova and Alan Roth denotes: "The curatorial is not only a co-production between humans but incorporates signs and pre-existing inorganic elements of other multiplicities and fluxes."<sup>9</sup> I was able to pin-point the curatorial in the project in multiple places. In the back-and-forth of the communication process, in the greetings, between fingers, and many other places to be unraveled in the thesis.

Below I am outlining four entry points to my approach of the thesis project. First, it is *Participatory Performance as an Approach*. In *Performatively Speaking*, I will articulate the inspiring idea of performative curating in relation to performative aspects of my project. Introducing the fact that the massage service demands my switching between roles during the visits, I will elaborate more on this in *Interventions and Role-playing*. In *Multidisciplinary Thinking*, I will look at an artist's practice that crossed several disciplines and imagine a possible route that the practice would take.

### Participatory Performance as an Approach

**The "participatory" avant-garde sees art as a kind of conversation, rather than a shock to the system. Art is not embodied in an object but lies in the encounter between the art and the audience, and among the audience themselves. Art is not simply the result of self-expression by the artists of a**

7 Moon Je Yun referred the so-called assembly-line model to 'self-sufficient professional individuals gathering together and contributing to each other's output [...]'. (Moon, 2013, 236)

8 Hoffmann & Lind, 2011.

9 Sevova & Roth, 2016, 1-2.



**preconceived idea but the result of communication with the audience and other partners in the process. The artist's role is not just to proclaim but to listen, interpret, incorporate ideas and adjust.<sup>10</sup>**

Framing my project within the category of participatory art means that I favor an open-ended outcome and value the ever-evolving process. Last but not the least, I rely on and recognize the power that I am handing away from myself, as well as the responsibility I am sharing with the participants of the project. The 'participatory' qualities introduced above serve as the background of the thesis project, meanwhile, align with the curatorial practice I am trying to solidify through practical experiments.

In addition to the broader definition of participatory practices, Grant Kester's *Dialogical Aesthetics* denotes the kind of relationship between the work of art and its viewer: "[T]he artist is not always the one 'presumed to know,' and the viewer qua participant is able to produce his or her own transformative knowledge."<sup>11</sup> A participatory performance that I positioned my studio visit project in translated my role into a performance artist, rather than merely a curator. In the scope of my project, I saw the studio visit 'performance' as my 'work of art' and the participant 'the viewer' experiencing my work. Committed to the framework, my endeavor lied in securing an environment where intersubjective exchanges took place free of obstacles. I was dependent on the participant's, whose studio I visited, willingness to trust, disclose themselves, engage in sharing and receiving information, and most crucially, take hold of their share of power and lead us to a direction of their choice. Regardless of whether I positioned myself as a curator or as a performance artist, after all, the project saw the participants as the core members from start to end. Frankly, Kester's words speak to the focal point of this participatory-curatorial project: "Important forms of knowledge are

<sup>10</sup> Leadbeater, 2009, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Krenn & Kester, 2013.

produced through practice, about our capacities as social and political agents, about our ability to imagine the world differently, and about the values that structure our interrelationships with others."<sup>12</sup>

The participatory was inseparable from the curatorial aspects of this project. Not only was I mending the performance artist-participant relationship, but I also focused attention on taking care of the curator-artist agenda all the time. Whilst coordinating and performing the tasks of the performance, I was carrying out the curatorial act of interacting with the participants at the same time. With the agenda of multiple agencies colliding, I started to see the preparation work of the studio visit as a performance curatorial work, and the curatorial tasks such as paying studio visit and creating social networks performative acts. The shared values of both agendas, however, complimented each other to great extent. For example, I take collaborative working methods as a vital element of curatorial work; in the case of a participatory performance, the task is seen as a necessity. Performing through the entire project, I have discovered several shared qualities from both spheres. I will be elaborating on those in further writing.

### **Performatively Speaking**

Judith Butler takes J. L. Austin's formulation on performativity further by highlighting the conventional 'reality' one enacts within the social world every day. Butler elaborates on how performing a role is a constructed act and that the roles are made 'real' to an extent under social fictions and conventions. 'Gender act' in her statement, if altered to 'profession act' within the role-playing framework of my thesis project, makes remarkable explanation of the 'act' that takes place when one plays a role of the visual art field:

**The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene.**

<sup>12</sup> Krenn & Kester, 2013.

Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.<sup>13</sup>

In my words, the thesis project is performative when the participants arrived at the scene I have prepared. With the participants practicing their roles in a 'performance' they were involved in, a reality thus is made "to the extent that it is performed."<sup>14</sup> In Shannon Jackson's words, "the reality-making capacity of the performative happens at a moment of a receiver's uptake."<sup>15</sup> Aside from the mentioned above, the 'performative' quality of this thesis project resonates with the definition of performing the literal act of creating a performance-like situation; nonetheless, it also holds an extensive meaning of shared time, co-presence, co-creation, and exchange of resources and knowledge with the participants.

Performing arts curator and dramaturge Florian Malzacher elaborates upon their idea of the term 'performative curating': "Adapting 'theatre-like' strategies and techniques enables the curation of 'reality making' situations that not only describe reality but create an awareness of their own realness."<sup>16</sup> I do not intend to hop on the train of 'performative curating' all of a sudden, but taking Malzacher's words into consideration, I can see aspects of the thesis project responding to the approach. The project, despite initiated with a proportional dominance of my consciousness and intentions such as the research questions, still, was a site for improvisation. In addition, the project was not introduced as an entry that would lead to any destination, but a journey to experience together for a fixed time span. Despite the reality of a studio visit being an encounter that may result in further meetings and

<sup>13</sup> Butler, 1988, 526.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, 1988, 527.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, 2017, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Malzacher, 2017, 31.

associations, my project did not guarantee a second step. The impression of the project was pointing at the experimental: it might be an experience, or just another typical studio visit that the participants receive at school.

In fact, I would love to see this project develop and move on from its current function as a 'studio visit.' The reason that this project was born, as I explained earlier, was my desire to create a situation where the transparency of different agents could be enhanced upon their first encounter, leading them to a clarified working relationship later. With a performative method, the framed situation gave space to a more efficient communication. I used a performative language to communicate my project, by which I introduced my principles as a curator in a lively way. Focusing on the process's 'own becoming,' the outcome of performative curating, regarding Malzacher's theory, "highlights liveness, the co-presence of all participants, the (temporary) community."<sup>17</sup> The thesis project's attempt to bring in the performative means was done, foreseeingly, to nurture a ground for a curatorial process like such to happen.

## Interventions and Role-playing

In the artist Pilvi Takala's book and exhibition catalogue *Second Shift* I found thinking and approaches I strongly resonate with. Curator Kati Kivinen analyzes Takala's way of working as "nearly always based on extensive research, combining both background reading and performative field work." She continues: "the field work usually consists of an intervention staged in a particular space, situation, or social context in which [Takala] strive to subvert tacit rules and conventions, often using very subtle gestures and strategies."<sup>18</sup> Intervention, which is a repeating approach in her works, is one way to challenge any conventional situation or sets of values by entering from the 'outside' of the existing condition. Particularly, Takala often goes 'undercover' during the interventions. In *Real Snow White* (2009), *Bag Lady* (2006) as

<sup>17</sup> Malzacher, 2017, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Kivinen & Takala, 2018, 104.

well as *The Stroker* (2018), Takala uncovered an inferior position. Through the implications attached to the roles, she was able to increase awareness of certain topics through her observation:

**The unwritten rules of communities are a recurring theme in the art of Takala, therefore the dynamics of work environments often provide the setting for her work. [...] Takala infiltrates various communities by posing undercover. Through quietly challenging their accepted behaviors, she uncovers and renegotiates what is deemed appropriate. Her works examine how we deal with implicit rules and unspoken boundaries; and how we may express consent with and without words.<sup>19</sup>**

In the thesis project, the studio visit culture at Academy of Fine Arts was itself a rich ground for fieldwork. Since I have been familiarized with the system due to my role as a student, I was able to convert the field experience into context and improvisational material. Based on existing rules, the invitation to do my studio visit intervened with the normality of most academy participants' perception on how a studio visit should be. However, different from the situations created in Takala's works where the purpose of the intervention was kept to herself, I did not hide my intentions from my participants. Instead, I openly spoke about the hidden scenes of my thinking and welcomed a transparent discussion with the participants who had first experienced my uncanny behavior.

Whilst diving in the pool of art intervention examples, I found several projects that resonated with mine. Here, I will use Takala's *The Stroker* (2018) and three other examples to provide a closer observation of how the performative implications of these projects functioned in their cases. The other examples are Allan Sekula's *This Ain't China: A Photonovel* (1974) and Andrea Fraser's *Museum Highlights: Gallery Talk* (1989) featured in the book *Social Works:*

<sup>19</sup> Takala, 2018a.

*Performing Art, Supporting Publics by Shannon Jackson and The Curators' Piece (A Trial Against Art)* (2013) by Petra Zanki and Tea Tupajic.

In *The Stroker* (2018), Takala posed as a wellness consultant where she provided touching services at a coworking space for young entrepreneurs and startups. During the intervention, she would greet and touch people through 'physical negotiation' while she strolled around corridors. Takala challenged the 'the tacit conventions' governed 'acceptable behavior'<sup>20</sup> at a workplace by role-playing a triggering character.

Allan Sekula's text and photo piece called *This Ain't China: A Photonovel* presents a text the artist wrote from the perspective of a restaurant owner. Sekula adopted the analogy of "the restaurant owner as hierarchical director in relation to his subordinate actress-waitress"<sup>21</sup> to present the power dynamic of a theatre troupe and a restaurant kitchen. The metaphoric role-play in the story successfully involved the audience in thinking and realizing the unspoken lines behind the presented narrative.

Another example is Andrea Fraser's *Museum Highlights: Gallery Talk* where 'role-play' was used as a metaphoric medium to convey institutional critique. As Jackson writes, "The performance gains both its force and vulnerability from its co-present situation in shared time."<sup>22</sup> Fraser for example put herself in a double-edge sword scenario but also due to that, she brought awareness to the subject of her work without actually naming it.

*The Curators' Piece (A Trial Against Art)* conceived by artist Petra Zanki and Tea Tupajic, which delved into the economic and power hierarchy that exists between artists and cultural producers, put real curators<sup>23</sup> on stage and let them perform their duties. I had to pause for a moment to reload the concept

<sup>20</sup> Takala, 2018b.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, 2011, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, 2011, 119.

<sup>23</sup> The Curator-performers were Vallejo Gantner, Sven Åge Birkeland, Florian Malzacher, Per Ananiassen, Gundega Laivina, and Priit Raud. (Ferdman, 2014.)

when I first read the description. But later, I fell totally in love with the idea. Straight forward as it seemed, the performativity started already in the act of casting. Curators performing actual curators undoubtedly communicate the role without translation and interpretation. With role-playing, the audience was able to easily grasp what the power hierarchy embedded in the specific roles represents. Still, the whole thing fit within the frame of a staged performance.

In my project, my role-playing as a ‘massage-therapist’ was means to address the power dynamic embedded in the relationship of a curator and an artist. In addition, the analogy allowed me to explore similarities in the inter-relational parts of the curatorial work compared to the aspects of a massage-therapist’s work. The fact that my project took place in the environment of a working organism, where roles were preassigned and restricted, adds on the necessity to stay clear of assumptions and stereotypical portrayals when playing any role undercover. The academic-institutional structure, nevertheless, was a natural environment itself that provided me with a studio visit-disguised ‘stage’ for the experiment to be carried out convincingly.

## Multidisciplinary Thinking

Once I have decided to provide massages in the thesis project, I started seeking for the artists or the practitioners who practice massage and incorporate relevant knowledge in their works. Facebook algorithm led me to an artist who has a diverse background of training and works multidisciplinary in the fields of sociology, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and most of all, massage therapy:

**Wang Yung-An works on the intersections of neuroscience and art through the haptics sense. [...] She focuses on the most primary human sense of the haptics, drawing both from her lived-experience and her professional practice as a**

**massage therapist. Through challenging the relations of the haptics and the visual, Wang Yung-An allows us the space to explore pioneering, yet culturally deeply rooted possibilities of the multi-dimensional body and its visual context.<sup>24</sup>**

Coincidentally, the artist is from the same country as I am. The Taiwanese artist Wang Yung-An in her project series titled *Human Fabric Trilogy*, challenged the relations of the haptics and the visual sensory through performing massage on audience members:

**Wang Yung An created an intimate environment, a professional space for creative practice and artistic exchange. Through deploying massage, the artist triggered the participants’ sharing of memories and expression of otherwise unspeakable emotions. The exhibition documents this process of haptics experience, a process of how being massaged widened the perceptive experience of each individual and opened a space for the participants to express themselves in their own artistic creations.<sup>25</sup>**

A multidisciplinary research method does not need to have various knowledge integrated; however, it requires the collaborating and utilizing of tools and knowledge one possesses. Having very similar training background as Wang, I felt encouraged to mold my practice in persistence, until it solidifies and eventually takes shape.

<sup>24</sup> Wang, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Wang, 2020.



## THREE: STRUCTURING STUDIO VISITS BY CHIH TUNG LIN

In this chapter, I will present the documentation of the practical component of the thesis project. Not all the procedures were disclosed to the participants, but I will be reviewing the anatomy of the studio visits from a subjective perspective as the curator-performance artist in charge of this project.

To start, I will outline the framework of this project – the studio visit convention. The activity itself has had a diverse interpretation throughout history. Thus, I want to draw a clear entry point into this project through featuring aspects of the studio space and its political meaning as a site. Moreover, I aim to identify the relationship the studio has with its residents. To acknowledge the background of *Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin*, I will draw the focus back to Academy of Fine Arts, the site where this project took place, and discuss in depth the academy's own established studio visit culture.

Since I planned the studio visits as a participatory performance, I am positioning myself not only as a curator but also a 'performance artist,' particularly when I elaborate on the making of the 'performance.' In this chapter, I will be talking about the props I used for the project: the invitation and confirmation email written and sent to the participants as well as the manual I followed during the visits. The manual as a guideline, helped secure a restraint-free dialogical environment while keeping the structure of the performance within a frame. With the project foundation clarified previously, I will decode the

manual by explaining the procedures that covered the project's realization from the invitation to the end.

The practical part of my thesis project took place in a semi-private site instead of a public realm. This way, the art students and invited artists taking part were not merely the 'participants,' but also the 'audience' of my project. I did not adopt a conventional solution to present the project to the public; however, I immersed my target audience into a one-on-one interactive experience. Under this framework, the profession or a career stage of the participants no longer influenced the way they were perceived. In my eyes, each of them was equally seen as a 'participant' and an 'audience' member of *Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin*.

### 3.1. SITE VISIT FIELD WORK

#### The Studio as a Site

Daniel Buren said in 1971 that the studio is a place for multiple activities: "production, storage and if all goes well, distribution."<sup>26</sup> Later in 2008, Brian O'Doherty connoted the studio as "social center, as incubator of new ideas, as revolutionary cell, as church of a new religion, as tradesman's workroom, as conventional enclosure of received ideas, as home of a cult, as production factory (including display of product), as clinical, clean kitchen, as chaotic attic, as site of experiment, as lair of the solitary hero."<sup>27</sup> In 2009, it was "a site of intense contemplation"<sup>28</sup> as Sarah Thornton described in her book *Seven Days in the Art World*. Then in 2017, an artist Varja Spook laid out an even more in-depth description during an interview, the studio be:

<sup>26</sup> Buren & Repensek, 1971, 84.

<sup>27</sup> O'Doherty, 2008, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Thornton, 2009, 166.

A sort of mental space  
 A folder in the computer to keep unsolved ideas  
 A sort of workspace  
 Networks of friends to show things before showing them to the public  
 Where people can meet each other  
 Where you can have slightly more private conversations than the final public presentation  
 You can be more honest and vulnerable in the space of the studio<sup>29</sup>

In the year 2021, after a full two-year immersion in curatorial studies, I still found the above connotations valid, for instance, how O'Doherty put that "the studio is such a subject." Understanding what political meaning the studio space carries helps to recognize better how it represents its resident and their agency. The studio as a site incubates correlation of multiple agents, including the reading of the site itself, the artist residing, as well as the visitor. Moreover, it holds the potentiality to "reconstitute the circulation of the innumerable acts of credits which are exchanged among all the agents engaged."<sup>30</sup>

According to Buren: "the studio process creates objects that complement our society of exchange and market value. The market value of an artwork that is produced in the studio is directly influenced by exchangeability and critically relies on an eternal nomadism, not of the producer but of the artwork."<sup>31</sup> In my opinion, the exchangeability of the resource, knowledge, and interpersonal exchanges also rely on external agents, such as a curator visit, to take place. The studio process hidden from the public sphere: it either idles in dust, undergoes an operation, or gets prepared to be polished and shown.

29 Spook, 2017, 141.

30 Bourdieu, 1996, 230.

31 Buren & Repensek, 1971, 84.

In the latter situation, the studio then becomes "a stage for performance,"<sup>32</sup> where the resident actively rehearses for an incident, for example, a studio visit that is to occur.

## The Studio as a Bodily Space

An artist in a studio as a phenomenon in itself can be easily fetishized. One way to free the fetishizing gaze and to decode the artist's behavior of hiding-and-showing,<sup>33</sup> in my opinion, is to study the intrinsic relationship an artist has with their studio. That means, to dwell into the bodily, inter-relational, cognitive, and psychological aspects of the mechanism.

In the artist Annette Messenger's studio, a living room that she has converted into an atelier, she calls herself Annette Messenger Artist. Whereas in the bedroom where 'housework' takes place, she goes by Annette Messenger Collector.<sup>34</sup> The example of Annette Messenger indicated that life and work of an artist might not be separated. Rather, it can be simply a matter of walking from one 'room' to another. The studio space, under such take, is not just a workspace that is private, but intimate. As Ignacio Fariás and Alex Wilkie note in a research program about Studio Studies: "As cultural historians and sociologists have suggested, the modern invention of intimacy did not just involve an interpersonal space protected from the public view, but also one, in which individuals engage with each other in a holistic manner, not reducing each other to specific public roles."<sup>35</sup> If the studio space is viewed as an extension of the artist's bodily space, the study of studio is not merely an examination of it as a space, but as a limb connected to the artist's torso.

32 Thornton, 2009, 169.

33 Bourdieu, 1992, 247.

34 Annette Messenger is a French artist and taxidermist. In her take on a critique of a studio, she advocates a narrative space that plays with new roles, materials and places that arise from living environment. (Lange-Berndt, 2010, 221-222.)

35 Fariás & Wilkie, 2015, 9.



The studio, where the artistic labor is carried out, can be a concrete space of a public workshop, or a room in an apartment, a digital platform of a laptop on-the-go, or even the physical space in the width of the palms or the right cerebral hemisphere. Therefore, the artist's studio cannot be simply defined as intimate, private, semi-private, or public. Undoubtedly, a place where the artist works is a studio. "The bottom line is that artists work where they can, and how they can," writes a curator and a writer Robert Storr in the anthology *The Studio Reader*. "There is nothing mysterious about this, since artists must be pragmatic even when they pretend not to be or do the best they can to disguise themselves or conceal their process."<sup>36</sup>

For commercial reasons or networking intentions, the artist either actively seeks external agents to interact with in the space or accept invitations with a request of a visit. As the boundaries of one's physical territory differs, the artist's relationship with their workspace can vary. In this regard, the endeavor in communicating about consent in advance plays an important part of the meeting.

## Studio Visit Culture

**The studio visitor is the preface to the public gaze. The visitor brings an environmental aura — collector, gallery, critic, museum, magazine. The studio visit can be a raging success or a disaster, a much desired "discovery" or an intrusion from hell.<sup>37</sup>**

A studio visit, to a curator, is a part of a professional work, since it is how they get to learn more about a potential collaborator's practice. Paying studio visits, although is a curator's work fueled by responsibility, "is more of a

<sup>36</sup> Storr, 2010, 62.

<sup>37</sup> O'Doherty, 2008, 12.

privilege, a pleasure than an obligation."<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the agency a curator has in terms of a studio visit is an obvious cause to the power structure embedded in the relationship they form with the artist. The wandering gaze that comes from 'the outside' is something that the artist might not be able to take control of. Despite having sufficient prep-work done prior a visit, the visitor could easily invade the artist's territory, when their gaze slides through the sites of public and private, even areas that have not been agreed upon.

An artist and businessperson Takashi Murakami's operation might not have been dependent on other figures in the art market, but he still believed that "a studio visit is an important art world ritual for promoting art."<sup>39</sup> Realistically, artists show distinct preferences towards studio visits. Some prefer only artists visit them, some meet their visitors outside the studio, while some work with the medium that is not born for show-and-tell thus are never acquainted with the idea of studio visits. Although a studio visit can vary in its format, it is no doubt that an artist is requested to present themselves to an extent. Besides the artwork and creative process, a presentation must also showcase the artist's persona.<sup>40</sup> Despite its medium being an oral speech, apparent narratives from the décor and "the detritus in the studio space,"<sup>41</sup> or the artworks themselves speaking.

Studio visits almost seem like a bet to the artists in my opinion. Unpredictable variables may always interrupt as a surprise. As if playing in improvisation theatre, one always needs to be able to react and respond promptly, while retaining the quality of self-presentation.

<sup>38</sup> Extract of Museum Director Jeremy Strick's comment on studio visits. (Thornton, 2009, 172.)

<sup>39</sup> Thornton, 2009, 163.

<sup>40</sup> 'The public became fascinated by artists' personalities; artists' monographs and biographies thrived as a genre; studio visits became a recurrent item in the popular press; [...] Tellingly, the worship of artistic genius also distracted attention away from the working process: even in recorded studio visits in the popular press, little was revealed about the actual work that went on there; the emphasis instead lay on the resemblance between the decor and general look of the space and the personality of the admired artist. (Kisters, 2013, 20)

<sup>41</sup> O'Doherty, 2008, 12.

## Framing Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin

“There is one thing that I am really scared when the school ends. How to build the structure outside of school because that is something we will need. [...] It is important to feel this network.” (Audio documentation of visit no.1. 19.01.20.29.) The specific studio visit culture in Academy of Fine Arts provided a certain amount of control variables to my project. Since most of my participants were art students that were familiar with the system, they were no strangers to having ‘studio visits.’ Most feedbacks given from the participants were therefore a comparison to their usual experiences, and how other visits differed from mine.

Aside from this, the participants shared similar backgrounds, a career stage, and their role as a student. Meanwhile, the fact that they were aware of me being a peer student<sup>42</sup> made the power dynamic more balanced. As the participants agreed, “The fact that we both are students is something that cannot be escaped. In this case, there was not much of a hierarchy between us. Only professional differences.” (Feedback from visit no.6.) Lastly, I visited with a curious mind to get to know the participants. This way, my studio visit was far from being perceived as a realistic, professional studio visit.

My studio visits were mimetic of the academy ones: the power structure was intact to an extent, and the ambiguity of the curator’s role made impact on the participant’s ‘performance.’ Thus, I put an extra effort into creating a situation where there was a rather ‘equal’ ground created. My studio visit was not designed to be an interview where a clear agenda was introduced. However, I was amazed how much the participants were willing to share with me. To my surprise, I even got to hear about the participant’s ‘true fear’ towards a curator. I accessed numerous personal stories in a casual, yet professional manner during the visits.

Thanks to the existing ground of a studio visit culture Academy of Fine

Arts nurtured, I got to approach the topics I was interested in through a framed setting. In my opinion, operating the project within the academy was an advantage overall. The participants, despite derived mainly from the same academy, provided rich individual diversity in terms of their qualities, professional practices, intentions to fulfill in the visit, as well as their attitudes toward ‘a studio visit with a twist.’ In the end of the day, I gathered a huge capital of potential collaborators, which was a great advantage.

## 3.2. THE MANUAL

The manual was a tool I kept to myself. However, while scripting it, I was weighing my wording to figure out the most suitable way to reach out to the potential participants and to introduce the project to them. How should the invitation sound? How much information is the right amount to provide in the first place? What tone sounds neutral when responding to questions? How much space is sufficient to reserve for negotiation? How much do I control? Which parts should I not hold too tightly? All the questions considered, it molded into the final version of the manual used. As the skeleton of the visit, the manual suggested not only a timeline to refer to but also the language I would use to tell a story as a performance artist-curator.

The following is a total of 7 steps that comprised each visit. From start to end, the participant experiences: invitation, confirmation, introduction, service, presentation, debriefing, and lastly, feedback. In every section, the description reveals both the angles of the procedure operated in the actual event and a more detailed look of its attached meaning or purposes.

<sup>42</sup> *‘In this, we didn’t have that. It changes, and the layer that here we are both students.’ (Audio documentation of visit no.6. 01.08.)*



## Invitation

*(First, the potential participant receives an invitation email to a studio visit. The participant signs up by booking a slot via the doodle link attached in the email.)*

Imitating the format of studio visit opportunities released within the academy, I took advantage of its simplicity, creating an effortless entry for participating in my project. The identical format gave the impression 'this is just another typical studio visit.' In the invitation email, a Doodle link was provided for the registration purposes. Followed up was a short description of my intention to conduct studio visits as well as an introduction of my background. (See the invitation email template of *Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin* on the next page.)

## Confirmation

*(After signing up via the Doodle link, the participant receives a confirmation email that includes further details about the visit.)*

In the email, I properly introduced myself and explained about the studio visit being the practical part of my thesis project. I also inquired the participant's preference on the service and informed about the use of the audio recording for documentation during the visit. The confirmation email was sent prior to the date of the visits so that the participants had sufficient time to reply and ask questions.<sup>43</sup> I then modified the content of the visits accordingly with each of the participant's wishes after collecting their preferences. (See the confirmation email template of *Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin* on the page after next page.)

<sup>43</sup> *'It was nice that you emailed about that(confirmation), I felt there was a way to set boundaries.'*  
(Audio documentation of visit no.3. 55.37.)

Dear Students,

Please use the link below and book a studio visit with Chih Tung Lin:

Please add as a comment your phone number, email address and the location of your studio or other preferred space. After signing up, you will receive a confirmation letter with more details attached.

*There are various ways to study about the relationships between an artist and a curator. I cherish the fruitful exchange a studio visit potentially enables. As a curatorial student, I decide to learn more about studio visits by doing it myself.*

*I do not want to visit empty-handed. Thus, I thought to provide you a massage on the sore spot that troubles you within your studio practice. After the service, you could share with me about your current projects, your artistic practice or anything you like.*

- The visit is expected to last less than 1.5 hours.
- The visits will be following the university's safety instructions. Face masks are recommended throughout participation.
- The service is not limited to a real massage. There is room for negotiation.

Regards,  
Chih Tung Lin

Chih Tung Lin is currently studying at Praxis Exhibition Studies program, University of the Arts Helsinki. With previous trainings in the field of Psychology, Lin sees art from inside of humanity, between layers of internal and socio-relationships. They work with illustration, curation and performing arts. Their praxis is a combination of curation, molding, and play.

Dear xx,

Thank you for signing up for Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin. We will meet on xx.xx, ab:cd-ef:gh.

I am Chih Tung, and from now on you can also call me Wendy. Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin is the practical part of my Master thesis for Praxis Exhibition Studies Programme. I appreciate your willingness to take part in the project as one of the visitees of the studio visits. Please be patient as I open up more about the project gradually.

Before we proceed, I would like to communicate with you about some details related to the visit. Please kindly answer the questions listed below so I can learn more about your preferences and wishes.

Please note that there are no obligatory parts within the visit. Every part is negotiable.

**1. Would you like a massage or not?**

I am intended to provide a massage for you. However, you can suggest another wish of yours if you do not feel like receiving a massage.

**2. Are you fine with me collecting an audio recording as documentation of the visits?**

Excerpts of the documentation will be used in the written part of the thesis.

I will be referring the participants in symbols when writing about specific persons. Please also let me know if you do not wish to be included at all in the thesis.

**3. Are there any questions you would like to ask me?**

The content of the visit will be modified according to your answers. In brief, the visit will be divided in two major parts. The service I provide and your sharing of works/ projects or your practice. It is important that you feel safe and comfortable during the visit, so if anything arises in a later point, please do not hesitate to bring it up. That is all for now. I am looking forward to the visit.

Best,

Wendy

## Introduction

*(On the day of the visit, I, as the visitor, introduce myself, the structure and the timetable of the visit to the participant. During the 5 minutes, I also check again orally whether the participant consents to having the visit audio-recorded, and their choice of service, if they do not prefer a massage.)*

There were no fixed lines for the introduction. However, I typically ran through the structure of the visit with the participant. An example of the greetings upon meeting the participant would be:

Thank you for signing up for the studio visit. I am Chih Tung Lin, but here you can call me Wendy. [...] The visit will take 1.5 hours, and I will run you through the several things we will be doing throughout this time.

First, we start with an introduction, like what I am doing now, I will let you know about the structure, and introduce myself to you. You can do the same after me. For the service part, you can decide when you would like it to be. In the beginning of the visit or after all the talking. It will anyways be timed 15 minutes.

Then we have the presentation where you can share with me anything you want. I suppose you might have thought about it already. Approximately 40 minutes is reserved for this, so you can take your time. Finally, I will explain about my project and you are welcome to ask me any questions you have in mind.

Before you leave, I will hand you a survey sheet which I would like you to fill in. The questions are not mandatory, and you can hand it back to me or send me a photo of it once you are done. [...] This is all for now!

## Service

*(After the introduction, the participant chooses if they want to receive the service immediately or later. If they decide to be massaged, they receive a 15-minute massage.)*

Since it was communicated in the invitation and the confirmation email, the participants were informed that they would receive a service from me in exchange for a presentation by them. A massage was the default option of my primarily proposal. However, the participant could negotiate the content of the service via emails, if they were not comfortable receiving a massage. They were able to still change their mind or halt the service during the visit.

Frankly, not many participants requested to alter things around. Few had proposed alternatives, but there was also a small number of participants who refused to exchange services regardless its content. It was exciting, however, for me to start a conversation prior the visit with the participants. With the back-and-forth, the exchange between the participant and me already took place unintentionally.

In most visits where the massage service was accepted, I steered the direction of the conversation to massage related topics, but not anything related to the participant's practice or profession during the service. While massaging, I would casually bring up a line which revealed my intention of providing such service to the participant: "I used to massage my mom growing up [...]". Constantly, I would ask questions to know if I was pressing the right spot to ensure that the participants felt comfortable.

## Presentation

*(Regardless of whether the participant decides to receive the service earlier or later, at this stage, the participant shares about the subject of their choice with me. The presentation can take up to 40 minutes including any extensive discussions.)*

Keeping in mind the suggested structure, the participant, whom I handed authority, could decide how they wanted to utilize the time and resources during the visit. The presentation could be to share about their works, current projects they were working on, an introduction to their practice, or anything that the participant found beneficial to address. Instead of bringing my own agency into the participant's studio, I relied on their understanding or not-understanding of a studio visit. As a mirroring exercise, the participant and I took turns leading and following until the content of the visit was fulfilled. Given this, the visit was significantly dependent on the participant's energy and flow.

## Debriefing

*(At the concluding stage, I clarify the project intention to the participant. Time reserved for this procedure is around 25 minutes.)*

Participants were curious of the thesis project primarily, so I dedicated the last part to debriefing about the project, meaning to answer questions and explain the setup. 'Debriefing,' a common experiment method used in social psychology, typically takes place 'at the conclusion of a research session.' According to the professor Ben Harris, "a psychologist may debrief their participants by eliciting their attitudes and beliefs concerning the research, revealing the experiment's true purpose and methods, or remove any harmful residual effects of the experimental procedures."<sup>44</sup> The method made sense to me as a tool to carry out the 'clarification' part of the project in a more systematic manner.

Once the visit arrived at an end, I would first invite them to answer questions they had, and then debrief on my choice of 'massage' as a service of exchange and how it relates to curatorial work. In addition, I would also elaborate more on the central themes of the project such as 'what is the role

<sup>44</sup> Harris, 1988, 189.

of a curator?’ and ‘the relationship between an artist and a curator,’ if the participant showed interest. The content of the debriefing sometimes varied. In most cases, debriefing functioned more as an extensive discussion of the questions posed by the participants. When time permitted, I would invite the participant to discuss the topics related to the theme of my thesis.

I considered it vital and transparent to attend to the need of clarification in any kind of interrelationship, hence, this was the part that I insisted on executing even when the participant did not request it. In this project, the procedure was a way to ensure that the participants were not merely in the passive role,<sup>45</sup> but active agents of the process.

## Feedback

*(Before the studio visit dismisses, I hand the participant a questionnaire to fill out. The questionnaire is optional. And they can return it to me afterwards.)*

The studio visits meant to me both a performance and a ‘professional work’. Thus, I consider it crucial to have evaluation applied to the process. With the feedback gathered, I was able to analyze the implications of the visit’s setup through active responses from the receiver’s end.

I thought a survey sheet would enable the access to the information that had not been verbally addressed during the visits. However, like most questionnaires relying on a voluntary submission, filling out the survey sheet was not obligatory for the participants. Consequently, I did not get back the full number of survey sheets given out. I thought the outcome was reasonable given the circumstances. I did not get in touch with the participants to ask about the survey sheet after the visits. Still, a few participants, who valued the procedure, reached out to me themselves after they had filled out the sheet. In addition, a lot of feedback was given on the spot before the visit ended. I felt gratitude for that. (See the survey sheet on the next page.)

<sup>45</sup> Harris, 1988, 205.

### Studio Visit by Chih Tung Lin Participant Feedback Survey

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

No: \_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please briefly answer the listed questions below. Please note that all the questions are NOT obligatory.

1. How do you like the experience?

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2. What do you find different in this visit from the other studio visits or encounters with a curator you had?

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3. Where do you think can be improvements?

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4. Will you be interested in having another studio visit with Chih Tung Lin in the future?

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5. Comments

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Thank you for the feedback!

Your feedback will be used for future improvements on the project.

## Revisions Behind the Scenes

After several trial sessions, I added a transitional exercise, so that there was a short break after the massage service for both the participant and me. The exercise was tested out and then integrated into the script. Throughout the phases, I accepted proposals suggested by the participants, so I was able to experiment with slight changes within a planned structure. For example, in one visit the participant introduced me to an exercise they learnt from a Skinner Release Technique course in return for the massage service I provided.<sup>46</sup> In another visit, the participant and I took turns touring our exhibitions as a bonus.

Initially, there was no transition in between different activities during the visit. When the alarm rang off for the massage, I typically led the participants directly into the next part of the visit. I have observed a slight setback the participants were experiencing during the transition. Most of the time, after receiving the massage, the participants usually seemed too relaxed to get back to the 'real deal' of the visit. They needed time to adjust their positions in their seats several times. They touched and reassured their tense spots. They did micro stretches in their seats, while trying to follow the ongoing program. They nodded their head, tilted their shoulders, pinched their arms seemingly to reconnect to the current space and time.

Regardless of a studio visit being formal or casual, tasks such as presenting one's work, communicating, and engaging in discussions required performing. After all, it was apparent that the participants were not performing, or put another way, were 'off-guard' only while they were being massaged. The situation of switching mindset between a professional setting and a leisure one was reported difficult, when I asked for a feedback from the participants:

### How do these fit into a professional environment, and where

<sup>46</sup> The participant also inquired if we could discuss in a more mutual way commenting: 'Often during studio visits with some professors I feel the content of the discussion may be too restricted due to the idea of talking about only my works. Personal email. (Respond from visit no.15.)

do these boundaries start blurring? [...] When you sent me the invitation, for me, it is all of that, the consent. But then, also this visit, this hour or two. How from maintaining a certain practical exchange of information, we have blurred the lines, say of time, when the alarm rang at 15 minutes, you didn't just lift your hands and left off, you completed your process. Or like now, you are staying extra, even if it is 5 minutes or 10 minutes. It is within those very strict lines, and for me, that is the whole point, of a relationship between an artist and a curator. (Audio documentation of visit no.12. 00.11.57.45.)

While 'acting professional' is a task that takes effort, having needed to switch on and off constantly seemed to be extra demanding in the setting of my studio visits. As a result, I decided to do a revision of the manual after the first phase of the project was carried out. To enable a buffering moment between the massage and the talking, I introduced a transitional event consisted of some stretching exercises and a shoutout-manifestation which I named *Shake It Off*.

The stretching was beneficial for both me as the massage therapist and the participant who received the massage. While taking time stretching out the body, we could adjust and prepare ourselves both physically and mentally before we headed off to the next part of the visit. It was beneficial to call the attention back, to rewind the questions that were on the mind earlier, or simply to gather loosen bits of the consciousness back in place. The time given served as a quick break for us.

Once stretching was done, we moved on to the *Shake It Off* exercise. I would demonstrate the movement while the participants followed. Using the example of an actor, who when leaving practice after a long day, did not want to bring the role they were playing back home, I explained to the participant that through the exercise, we wanted to 'shake off' the roles we were carrying earlier and take on the new roles for the upcoming part of the visit. I would

shake my hands as if I were shaking off water after washing my hands. The participants imitated. Then I would speak: "I had a wonderful time massaging you, but now I want to shake off my role as a massage therapist and take on the role as a listener, an engaging person to discuss things with, an advice giver or perhaps a curator." The participants followed by manifesting a wish of theirs. Different expressions popped up. They expressed how they felt throughout the day, how they enjoyed the massage, what they wanted to focus on or what they planned on doing after the visit.

Besides the more obvious revisions and adjustments I applied to the structure of the visit over time, time keeping was a minor but a vital factor to take care of. Timing ensured undisturbed conversations when it was preferred, but also prevented the boundaries between the various tasks I was performing to blur. I was not fond of constantly checking the time nor being disturbed by an alarm in the middle of a conversation. Thus, I only set a 15-minute alarm for the service. I monitored the rest of the parts of the visit intuitively. With the division on the timing operations, I demonstrated my attitude towards my profession by establishing a set of boundaries. I intended to remind the participant that I was providing the massage service not to spoil the relationship between our professional roles, rather, I was doing it for the purpose of a genuine exchange that felt right for both. I gently addressed the reasons behind the setting and stated my willingness to be responsible and 'take care' of my potential collaborator in the solid analogy of 'a timed-service.'

I never stopped massaging immediately, when time was up, but continued with what I was doing and made a smooth ending. The gesture, even subtle, was me informing that the relationship I wished to build with the participants would not halt, when the visit ended. In my vision, the visit was not just an experience or a service, but a foundation for the artist and I to develop the relationship upon. As I have mentioned in the beginning of the thesis, despite my studio visits being playful or parody-like, I pictured it as an occasion to express my professional qualities as well as to get familiar with a potential collaborator just like in any other studio visit.



## FOUR: REFLECTION

[T]here seems to be a growing consensus among both artists and curators that the new set of relations [emerging around project work] ...needs clarification. While curators are increasingly interested in asking artists to produce work in response to specific existing or constructed situations, the labor necessary to respond to those demands is often not recognized or adequately compensated. Conversely, many curators committed to project development are frustrated by finding themselves in the role of producers for commercial galleries, or a “service department” for artists.<sup>47</sup>

It is worth noticing that there are, in fact, so many ‘kinds’ of curators working in the field. Some live a happy life under institutional auras while some as, Maaretta Jaukkuri writes, “also have to ‘sell’ their exhibition ideas either within the institution where they are working or to some other organiser and financier. If the institution is not their employer, curator is also a precariat trying to sell their ideas and plans more or less in the same manner as artists.”<sup>48</sup> After all, the speculations and accusations of a curator’s role I have gathered via various sources made me wonder how a curator’s image

<sup>47</sup> Fraser, 1994a.

<sup>48</sup> Jaukkuri, 2020, 4.

is painted on a general level. Thoughts on a curator’s role acquired from the studio visits revealed an interesting result and pointed to a common understanding, or even a collective consensus, towards the role of a curator. Despite having a small sample group, I was curious to carve out an imaginative figure of a curator with the help of the participants’ contribution.

With approaches deriving from participatory performances and roleplaying, I collected a variety of first-hand impressions from my participants, who were the source for the study of the curatorial topic. I embedded ‘touch’ as a medium to explore what effects curatorial gestures bring to a working relationship in the setting of a studio visit. In this chapter, I will be disclosing my findings from the visits, including the discussion on ‘touch’ as a metaphor of a curator’s presence, as well as how a curator’s figure is imagined in the eye of others. Finally, I extend my reflection on the gathered information and thoughts by formulating a conclusion that could lead to a more ideal working foundation applicable in the field.

### 4.1. ROLEPLAY IN ACTION

#### Physical Presence

Initially, I received a lot of concerns about the idea of providing massage as part of my thesis project. Comments were circulating around the proposal being too bold. Worried voices pointed out the risk when contacting people in such a sensually/sexually intriguing setting. It was also noted that the invitation could also be a bit intimidating at first, and ‘might scare people away.’ The comments were indeed reasonable when referring to the Goffman’s statement on physical presence:

**When persons come into one another’s immediate physical presence, they become accessible to each other in unique**



ways. There arise the possibilities of physical and sexual assault, of accosting and being dragged into unwanted states of talk, of offending and importuning through the use of words, of transgressing certain territories of the self of the other, of showing disregard and disrespect for the gathering present and the social occasion under whose auspices the gathering is held.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, the concerns accounted for a major factor to reflect upon throughout realization of the project. In a way, I was paying attention to observing the participant's reaction on the spot. The reactions, despite incomprehensible, reveal attitudes and moods that were triggered by the service of touch. Pilvi Takala describes the usage of 'touch' in her work *The Stroker* (2018):

The responses of the 'touches' varied widely, most were polite, but there were those whose body language registered a visible discomfort. Perhaps simply due to the cultural context of this invasion of personal space, or perhaps as a result of the inner conflict that arises when one does not feel able to truthfully or openly react. When unable to assert oneself, this kind of embodied negotiation may take the place of words.<sup>50</sup>

"The work's key content consists of my observations on how the human body is capable of registering discomfort, bewilderment, nervous tension or reciprocity in fleeting, split-second gestures."<sup>51</sup> Pilvi Takala describes the insight of her various touch-related projects. Moreover, she admits how the targeted receivers' bodily reactions could be 'conceivable' at times. Indeed, during the massage service, I have noticed that some participants sat overly straight, some crutched their body as if they were wrapped in a tight plastic

49 Goffman, 1967, 147.

50 Takala, 2018b.

51 Kivinen & Takala, 2018, 110.

bag, some were ticklish and were moving away every time I touched them. Some have enjoyed it, while other might have felt a string of regret once my hands got on them.

A massage is a loving haptic. But while the act of rubbing, stroking, patting, pinching, and pressing has meanings of care and intimacy embedded, a massage can also be aggressive, intimidating, and invasive. Like how Nina Power puts, "Touch is perhaps unusually positioned as the most difficult of possible human interactions, because its meaning is buried under so many layers of emotion."<sup>52</sup> Same with when receiving a massage, first there is the awkwardness, then the discomfort can follow. Finally, vulnerability, when the body adapted to the situation and loosened up. Being in the role of a massage therapist means to stay sensitive in detecting and decoding the non-verbal signals of the physical, to manipulate pressure accordingly, and to maintain the comfort level of the receiver. Like retaining a conversation, the massage therapist is the one who steers the direction of the dialogue while multi-tasking between listening, comprehending, and responding. The work, if done properly, contributes to a positive experience. Otherwise, the recipient may be left feeling disrespected, violated, or being taken advantage of.

## A Touchy Encounter

Having been clarified to the idea of 'massage service as an exchange' in first place, the participants thus were able to perceive the haptic experience 'within the context of touching as a commercial service.' According to Pilvi Takala's observation from the numerous projects on the topic of Touch, it was "perhaps easier to react to it decisively, as opposed to other situations with unwanted touching where it isn't usually spoken about."<sup>53</sup>

Every time it came to the segment of the massage service during the visits, I was always ready to jump into the role of a service worker. I arranged

52 Power, 2018, 30.

53 Kivinen & Takala, 2018, 110.



the participants their preferred seating, inquired about the body part they wanted to be massaged, and asked politely “Is this pressure good? Do you want me to press harder?” I tended the participants, made sure they were comfortable. I commented on their tight shoulders, while they told me what heavy work resulted in that. We chatted casually about the weather, their day, and my day.

Having briefed through how the service of my visit would be carried out, the participants despite behaving on the different levels of flexibility and spontaneity, were encouraged to temporarily escape from the stage,<sup>54</sup> where they were expected to perform, and settle in a cradle of care and relaxation. The getaway from the professional duties of both mine and the participant’s roles, perhaps, made a rather autonomous conversation possible. Similar to what people normally chat about with their hairdresser or with a local café owner, the dialogue flowed easily and light-weightily. The exercise of providing-and-receiving massage was a great warm-up for two strangers. “Receiving a massage could be awkward, but I was surprised how natural it felt. Also, having this ‘unusual’ thing first makes everything else less awkward. With the massage, I felt like it is easier to open up afterwards.” (Feedback from visit no.2.), responded a participant in the survey sheet. After all, if it had not been for the particular setup, qualities such as vulnerability, rawness and honesty could had been concealed, as it usually happens during the first encounters.

Artist and filmmaker Lamia Joreige illustrates real encounters amongst artists at work from their experience in the article *Real Encounters*:

**So how does a real encounter occur? From my experience, it can take place when a displacement of methods and prac-**

<sup>54</sup> “I feel like definitely about studio visits, part of the artists or at least from my experiences as well, it is definitely a performance. There is this certain script and usually follows it but then we’re mostly worried that something will go wrong or that you’re not prepared to in terms of that answering feedbacks or like overall energy. It is a good point, that definitely for the curator it is also the same and also like a place of learning about the whole situation and your right about the obscurity of the role of a curator.” (Audio documentation of visit no.3. 59.24.)

**tices is experienced by those who take part in the encounter - when something feels awkward, but is nevertheless pursued by both (or all) parties. Displacement of a practice—as I have come to see it—involves making use of some artistic method without anticipating its reception.<sup>55</sup>**

Indeed, there were a few awkward moments. However, the blurring boundaries created a dimension where a relationship beyond professional relations was made possible. Sometimes the participant might have hesitated on crossing the line of private and professional boundaries during the transition between a massage service and an artist presentation. In such situations, I have been cheering in my mind, “Let go of the boundaries!” However, it was completely up to the participant themselves to decide and react to it.

### **The State In-between**

A participant shared their reflection on the studio visit experience: “Pure exchange? Luxurious? Idealistic? [...] Maybe it is not an idealistic or an ideal situation or space. It is a performative space. Knowingly or unknowingly, we are performing. I guess I am also speaking in this very immediate way.” (Audio documentation of visit no.12. 1.05.30.)

Having the relations within the visits continuously shifted, I intentionally set the participants in an in-between state where they “have been stripped of their old identities and are yet to be confirmed in their new ones.”<sup>56</sup> During which, the participants often found themselves in a transitioning state which according to an anthropologist Victor Turner, was “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification.”<sup>57</sup> Gradually, my studio visit transformed into an arena where “the possibility of creativity,

<sup>55</sup> Joreige, 2013, 37.

<sup>56</sup> Turner, 1969, 95.

<sup>57</sup> Turner, 1974, 232.

of invention or innovation<sup>58</sup> was unlocked. Besides, the fluidity in the roles also enhanced freedom in improvisation for both the participant and me during the visits.

After all, the question was left open whether there was any difference in how roles, especially my role as a curator and the participant's role as an artist, were perceived by my participants within the intervention framework. I was curious if the participants felt relieved from temporarily escaping their roles when they were receiving a massage, if they found the role-shuffling bothersome, and if they considered the meeting professional. It was challenging to tell if the invitation to an in-between state was conveyed successfully to the participants.

It was however not typical to always get into discussions with my participants of how they experienced my studio visit. Hence, I had no chance to notice the threshold where the participants let go of their roles for the very first time, nor the moment they got used to the shifting of the roles. In fact, Turner describes with accuracy, "when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance."<sup>59</sup> I decided to believe that at least a minor shuffle was experienced.

## 4.2. OUTLINING THE ROLE

### The Curator but a Silhouette

From various conversations with artists and art students on the topic of the curator's role, I could recall a great portion being about uncomfortable encounters. Either it was at work or from studio visits, the experience was described collectively: awkward, uncomfortable, vulnerable, naked, disre-

<sup>58</sup> Loxley, 2006, 156.

<sup>59</sup> Turner, 1982, 44.

spected, or unheard. Usually believed as the one who held power, the one who already had an idea in mind, a curator, as Buren puts it, could use "the convenience of a studio as a boutique to find ready-to-wear art."<sup>60</sup> To my surprise (honestly, not so much), a lot of 'art majors' had little to no idea what a curator does. They either puzzled the work of a curator through their own experiences or took a very wild guess. For example, one participant shared their speculation on the topic of 'the role of a curator' in a discussion they had during their exchange studies:

**The art students were first hesitating like what are these curators actually. What is their role? They are not artists. Are they like these people who are interested of art but are not able to do it themselves? So, they are looking for... like not doing the works themselves but picking up the ready works and putting it somewhere. (Audio documentation of visit no.1. 8.55.)**

Another participant shared with me a personal story about an experience working with a curator for their first solo exhibition. Given that the participant was an artist in the early career stage, in contrast to the curator who was working at the institution, the participant felt that they were in an inferior position where they could barely voice themselves. "This is the text for the exhibition. This is the text that is gonna explain my work. [...] It was kind of against my own moral in a way, so I feel a little uncomfortable because I didn't feel like I can say something. Because she has this higher position." (Audio documentation of visit no.2. 47.10.) I got washed with secondhand frustration, when the participant reported on the working environment at that time.

In short, the curator was not into communicating, but enjoyed giving commands, "It's just like 'I don't think you should do that', which is very intimidating," the artist narrated. (Audio documentation of visit no.2. 36.28.)

<sup>60</sup> Buren & Repensek, 1971, 84.

Before the show the curator produced a text that the artist could not resonate with, but the curator refused to negotiate around modification.<sup>61</sup> The participant questioned the ownership and authorship of their exhibition: “It is my exhibition, and then she started to see it very much as her own project. Because she is also researching into something.” (Audio documentation of visit no.2. 45.44.) Respecting the curator was hard, admitted the participant, mostly because the curator did not seem to have sufficient knowledge or valid work experiences related to the participant’s medium. Still, the hierarchical difference and the power dynamic were enough of a force to make the participant surrender to the situation.

‘Work ethic’ as of today is a vital compulsory lesson in curatorial training. Throughout decades, more and more discussions about the artist-curator power dynamic have been issued, and the maintenance of a healthy working environment for practitioners in the field has been taken seriously. When I came across the article *Art Without Artist?* written by Anton Vidokle, which was published a decade ago, I nonetheless found a quote that accurately reflect on the participant’s experience that took place in the recent time. Vidokle adopted the analogy of ‘workforce and management’ to depict the relationship between artists and curators when working together. The statement, representing problems of the time, did not seem outdated in this case:

[L]ike the workers, most artists suspect that their “supervisors,” the curators, do not really understand the art, that they are controlling, egocentric, and ignorant, and are mismanaging the (art) factory and mistreating the producers. [...] Many artists – from extremely established artists to younger practitioners new to the field of art – feel that curatorial power and arrogance are out of control.<sup>62</sup>

61 “What is the point of writing a text if it is not actually helping. I need to google words. I should understand. It is my work. If I don’t even understand, who else will.” (Audio documentation of visit no.2. 43.36.)

62 Vidokle, 2010.

## Producer or Curator

Once I had a conversation with a friend who works in the music industry as a producer. We were sharing with each other what our work as a curator and a producer is like. The friend described his role as a therapist at work. When working with an artist, his work is to push the artist’s performance forward. When working on a production, to be the one who monitors the quality and controls the pace yet provides counselling to the artist if needed. He invests time in learning about their practices and personalities. He puts effort in familiarizing himself with the artist, and vice versa. He often adjusts the ways of communicating to convey better, and exchanges ideas with the artist. He does not intervene violently or take the lead during the process, but accompanies the artist and responds, when there is an inquiry. “Like a mother?” I was painting a picture of the role. “Like a curator.” I corrected. He admitted the analogy.

In fact, several participants from the thesis project told me that the experience of the visit was like attending therapy. I assumed the reasons for this were my persistent attention, self-disclosure and active listening performed during each visit.

[A]s Szeemann and Hopps demonstrated, actively engaging with art and artists is central to practice, [...] This requires a kind of creative “maintenance,” as opposed to Foucault’s “care,” as it involves supporting the seeds of ideas, sustaining dialogues, forming and reforming opinions, and continuously updating research.<sup>63</sup>

Another conversation that commented perfectly on the previous analogy was from one of my studio visits. The participant was an artist who had worked a lot as a music booking agent and a festival producer. During the visit, we were discussing about what curation is, and the participant gave the best introduction:

63 Fowle, 2007, 17.

Some sort of organizer and facilitator. [...] A music booker or an art curator, it is basically the same thing. A lot of people are doing the same thing. They just do it in different fields, and then it has different names, but what they are doing is basically the same. (Audio documentation of visit no.9. 01.20.)

Akin to the consensus I had with the producer friend, this participant and I also agreed on the similarities of the roles. We ended up listing numerous personal traits that a curator/producer might have, including communicative flexibility, willingness to mend things together, sincerity and empathy. Moreover, "being fluent in mobilizing emotional and social skills for professional goals, which then results in the blending of the private and the public, the informal and the formal, skills and resources,"<sup>64</sup> as Hardt and Negri explains.

Part of being this organizational type is that you know a lot of people, you know who to call [...] because you need to be that person who has the best phonebook. And also, being able to meet people in a sincere, empathetic way, and make people feeling strong or empowered can also be part of the job.

Isn't this basically what a manager does for people? Making them feel they are on the right track, pushing them here and there and helping them. So, I think so many of these roles, they are really open for interpretation, there's not like a formula for them [...] It is hard to learn, because sometimes it is about personal traits and capacity for empathy. (Audio documentation of visit no.9. 36.30.)

64 Hardt & Negri, 2004, 50.

Aside from the numerous titles<sup>65</sup> equivalent to a 'curator', in a conversation between a curator Michelle White and others, it was emphasized how the curator role appears to be a 'cultural producers'<sup>66</sup> when working with an artist: "it puts the curator on more equal footing with the artist; acknowledging the extent of their collaboration in producing the work, and the complex position they occupy in negotiating its context."<sup>67</sup> Concluding with a statement from the participant who worked as a producer:

**I think the key to working with those positions is to challenge them and to experiment with the format of them. Especially to experiment with means of communication, or means of exchange and meeting, [...] Because that is basically what the job is [...] That is part of the role. (Audio documentation of visit no.9. 36.30.38.02.)**

After all the comparisons, it became clearer that a role that carries certain traits of a curator or a producer exists in numerous fields. The person in this role, shares responsibilities of care, works with people and tends the surrounding. There might be a template for the role, however, I could see the role mold in different shapes, not just its default appearance, if processed with experimentality.

65 According to Szeemann a curator's role is like an 'administrator, amateur, author of introductions, librarian, manager and accountant, animator, conservator, financier, and diplomat', or a 'mediator, facilitator, middleman and producer'. (Fowle, 2007, 17)

66 Vidokle, 2010.

67 White, 2018.

### 4.3. HANDLING THE CURATOR'S ROLE

#### Power Recognition

Helena Reckitt writes in *Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction*:

In many instances where curators assert the importance of care to their practice, both the nature and the object of curatorial care remain ambiguous. At the same time, the idea that curators preside 'over' something implies 'an inherent relationship between care and control', as Kate Fowle has noted (2007: 10).<sup>68</sup>

In a Master thesis titled *The Curator as a Conceptual Artist*, where 12 respondents who work actively in the field as curators and artist-curators contributed to a survey related to the topic, the responses indicated that quite often curators use artists as a workforce to realize the ideas they have.<sup>69</sup> The power disparity amongst curators and who they work with is a topic constantly reviewed in the art world. In the book *Seven Days in The Art World*, Sarah Thornton also puts the art-world phenomenon under spotlight in the chapter *The Studio Visit*:

The seating assignment offers a near-perfect representation of the hierarchies of the art world. [...] Apparently Murakami, sensitive to the symbolism of the situation, asked Yoshitake to tell him who was the highest-ranking person from MOCA. When told that it was the director of the museum, he asked her whether Jeremy Strick would like his seat. Yoshitake assured the

<sup>68</sup> Reckitt, 2016, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Hansson, 2016, 46.

artist that Strick would be fine in economy.<sup>70</sup>

During the thesis project, the participants, who comprised mostly of artists, pointed out that a major reason that artists are excited to meet curators is due to the acknowledgement of the curator's power. Many had spoken to me from their perspectives as artists:

There is not actually so much room for collaboration, because the curator is already maybe having the exhibition time or like the curator is already making the calendar for the show and looking for artists to that show. As an artist, I am also aware that this can be my possibility to have my work shown. (Audio documentation of visit no.1.09.56.)

When a curator visits an artist, they usually have an instrumental idea behind this that okay this is going to be to get familiar with your works that going to an exhibition, or like someone who is running a gallery or collection. That creates a power structure. (Audio documentation of visit no.6.01.08.)

Despite working together, an artist and a curator rarely share an equal standpoint. Instead, they could be climbing up toward the same level, while one being ahead of the other five steps above. An incident a participant experienced during the exchange studies had them witness the transition of one's status when having double identities of an 'artist' and a 'curator.' The participant said that a classmate, who was an artist-curator, once curated some of her peer students in her exhibition. "It was a funny situation because we were in the same line being artists but then there is this more power to provide us opportunities," the participant commented on the experience (Audio documentation of visit no.1.11.48.). In typical situations, a curator would be the one with multiple opportunities in their hands, whereas an artist is in a

<sup>70</sup> Thornton, 2009, 175.

relatively dependent position. As an alternative, artists have taken over and initiated projects on their own, creating opportunities that were free from hierarchical barriers.<sup>71</sup>

I recalled a conversation with a participant, who had an experience in theatre directing; we compared the conventional working culture of the visual art field to that of a theatre troupe. From that comparison I could see that the pattern of collaboration resembled the one where the working members carry collaborative responsibilities while focusing on their own tasks. The theatre director who often possesses more power than the others, works in a hierarchical yet functional relation with the assistants, the producer, the screenwriter, the actors, the technicians as well as the sound and the light designers.

Looking back to the professional realm of curation, I have found it crucial to be intentionally mindful of the power configuration as a curator. I deny the possibility to secure 'real equality,' when in fact there could be a tilt in resource distribution. However, it is the curatorial responsibility to mold a dynamic that evens out the disparity.

## The Economy of Care

An artist Andrea Fraser in a speech *How to Provide an Artistic Service: An Introduction*<sup>72</sup> proposed the term 'service provision' to describe the economic condition of "artistic work and labor as a mean of service." Centering around feminist social reproduction theory, Helena Reckitt poses a question on the precarity of immaterial labor towards curators and institutions asking how they can "better acknowledge the myriad activities that sustain their

71 'For example, in New York a number of artists' collectives started accumulating around Tenth Street in Greenwich Village, such as the Hansa Gallery, founded in 1952, by students of Hans Hoffman, including Jean Follet, Allan Kaprow and George Segal. What each gallery had in common was that the curatorial role was taken on by artist committees, leveling the hierarchical model of exhibition-making'. (Fowle, 2007, 13)

72 Fraser, 1994a.

production, while also contesting the exploitation of their own and other people's supportive labor."<sup>73</sup> An anthropologist David Graeber notes that "it is 'immaterial' not because the labor itself is immaterial but because it produces immaterial things."<sup>74</sup> Looking back at my own position as a curator, I could not help thinking that the curatorial labor involving maintenance of working relations if evaluated from an economic standard, is also a term of service that relies both on affective and emotional investments.

Alike a lot of laborers in the service sector, a curator needs to produce or modify emotional experiences during interactions with institutions (if there is one), colleagues, or in the case of curating an artist - the persons who are on the other end of a dialogue. According to a philosopher Johanna Oksala, this labor involves "the production and manipulation of affects."<sup>75</sup> They explain that the 'products' generated, therefore, are emotional responses including "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion,"<sup>76</sup> and "socialization, education, interpersonal values of belonging, and essentially, human beings."<sup>77</sup>

As a curator working with an artist, in order to achieve cohesion in artistic freedom,<sup>78</sup> conceptualization and an overall picture, one must exercise emotional labor to an extent. According to Arlie Hochschild, emotional labor is a paid work that involves "evoking and suppressing feelings. [...] The point is that while you may also be doing physical labor and mental labor, you are crucially being hired and monitored for your capacity to manage and produce a feeling."<sup>79</sup> The work of a curator indeed requires regulating one's emotions

73 Reckitt, 2016, 7-8.

74 Graeber, 2008, 7.

75 Oksala, 2006, 284.

76 Hardt & Negri, 2004, 96.

77 Oksala, 2006, 297.

78 I resonate to Maaretta Jaukkuri's statement: 'The freedom of artist and art is for me the undisputed prerogative that no curator, institution, critic, or theorist can challenge.' (Jaukkuri, 2020, 4-5.)

79 Beck, 2018.



by analyzing, deciding on how to express them whether felt from heart or not, or suppressing them to not show so that the persons on the receiving end could “feel a certain feeling.”<sup>80</sup> The work is vital since the ultimate goal within work relations is to reach a peaceful consensus.

If compared to a care work that is categorized in the service sector, performing the curatorial tasks depends more on the aspects of care and hospitality stemming from the intuitive responsibility of both the curatorial and the caretaker’s roles to keep the system functioning. However, as Reckitt describes the circumstances in which curators are “identifying with their work as a lifestyle, rather than a job,” increase risks of “adopting schedules that blur the boundaries between personal and professional time and accepting nomadic and irregular employment conditions.”<sup>81</sup> The line of self-violation is thin. Despite taking responsibility of taking care, it is necessary to keep the work purpose-driven to avoid investing in sacrificial labor. After all, the purpose of curatorial work is not merely about achieving a significant profile on “affective virtuosity,” but also fostering “incarnated communications, lasting relations, trust, and cooperation”<sup>82</sup> within the working relationship with an artist. As Precarias a la Deriva, a militant research collective based in Madrid, Spain, manifests:

**This affective virtuosity has to do with empathy, with intersubjectivity, and contains an essential creative character, constitutive of life and the part of labor [...] We have to necessarily take into account this affective component in order to unravel the politically radical character of care, because we know - this time without a doubt - that the affective is the effective.**<sup>83</sup>

80 Beck, 2018.

81 Reckitt, 2016, 9.

82 Precarias a la Deriva, 2005, 35.

83 Precarias a la Deriva, 2005, 40.

The participant who formerly studied theatre directing was taught that directing is a social work, which is about working with conflicts. (Audio documentation of visit no.13. 27.20.) Be it a care work, a social practice, or a public service,<sup>84</sup> even though the terms unlikely equated to curation, the tasks such as activating social networks, providing services and care, a curator deal with on a daily basis, took me to a conclusion that a curator’s role is indeed “prosocial.”<sup>85</sup> A curator works for people, work with people, and work towards people.<sup>86</sup>

### **Exchange of Steps and Missteps<sup>87</sup>**

Anders Persson introduces Erving Goffman’s application of social interaction under the frame of “the dynamic relation between ritualisation, vulnerability, and working consensus.”<sup>88</sup> According to Persson, there are two ‘forces’ at work: “on the one hand ritualisation; on the other vulnerability, and the equilibrium between these two can be called a temporarily working consensus:”<sup>89</sup>

**A temporarily working consensus in a situation is the experience of the interacting individuals of a mutual exchange. The advantages to the individuals of the mutual exchange is that the faces of the individuals are not challenged, threatened, or lost. This equilibrium is dependent on each participant and is based on a kind of collective non-decision to ‘put up with the situation’ and is for that reason vulnerable. [...] Every**

84 *The participant who runs an art residency described their practice as a ‘public service’.* Audio documentation of visit no.7. 09.36.

85 Hardt & Negri, 2004.

86 *“Art for me is about communication. In some ways, it is hard to work alone.”* (Audio documentation of visit no.13. 39.20.)

87 Martinon, 2013, 26.

88 Persson, 2019, 25.

89 Persson, 2019, 35.

actor can therefore, unconsciously, or consciously, sabotage the equilibrium of social interaction; for instance, by not doing what is expected according to the kind of etiquette that regulates the interaction, by making mistakes, by creatively going against the grain of what is taken for granted, by using humour to shine a different light on everything, or doing other things that disturb or reframe the interaction order.<sup>90</sup>

A writer Jean-Paul Martinon notes in an essay *Theses in the Philosophy of Curating* that “the curatorial proceeds by inventing steps or missteps from space to space.”<sup>91</sup> In my words, the stepping and mis-stepping is alike the act of communication and interaction, which I regard as the ‘exchange’ happening between an artist and a curator. Meaning the exchange in knowledge, skills, ideas, affection, network and more.

The act of exchange in the artist-curator relationship is complex. It consists not only the exchange of reciprocal labor, commodities, and resources, but also of the building and maintenance of “qualitative relationships”<sup>92</sup> as work partners or collectives in the long run. The exchange that I attempted to illustrate in the thesis project was based on a written agreement. The massage service I provided, and the participant’s presentation accounting for a temporarily working consensus suggested an economy in which an agreed exchange operates harmoniously.

The analogy of a massage service with what a curator does is indeed not strictly accurate. Nonetheless, the agreement being clearly written was my attempt to strike an equilibrium within a working relation. Sarah Pierce, a guest lecturer at the Center of Curatorial Studies at Bard College, uses a brilliant analogy to describe the curatorial. Pierce compares “aspects of the word ‘transparency’ to that of the ‘curatorial’ to illustrate how similarly they

90 Persson, 2019, 39.

91 Martinon, 2013, 26.

92 Gregory, 1982, 100–101.

function as terms, rhetorically, as descriptors and as conditions.”<sup>93</sup> Regarding the curatorial work dealing with social relations, I could not agree with Pierce more:

One cannot become an expert in transparency. It may occur with or without intention, and levels of transparency run through different relationships that have some degree of publicness. (We don’t expect or desire transparency at all times, in all relationships.) [...] And here is the crux of it: transparency implies an ethical dimension, but does not guarantee it. How acts are read is more crucial to the claims on which they stand.<sup>94</sup>

Regardless of how complex the thoughts were behind the scenes, in the case of my studio visits, the acts of the curatorial were read in fact: ‘It was very interesting. I felt safe, comfortable, and happy to share my work. [...] I felt the more ‘equal and equal’ exchange relation with you bringing up the message to share. I felt less pressure.’ (Feedback from visit no.8.)

## How to Work Together

The opposite of power is intimacy. Misunderstanding comes through distance. [...] If I am to meet an artwork in intimacy, we must meet as equals; we each knows as much or as little as the other, we listen to each other’s stories while keeping our own in mind; we simultaneously inform and illuminate each other.<sup>95</sup>

93 Pierce, 2013, 98.

94 Pierce, 2013, 98.

95 The excerpt is from the artist book that accompanied a group exhibition titled *I see you are (not) there.* (Hald, 2020.)



One participant referred to an experience in curating a peer artist, when they immediately doubted whether they have the right to give suggestions to a 'peer' whom they had gone to school with. Soon they realized that they had right away considered the curator as a 'someone higher up.' Their working relationship, eventually, rather than being influenced by the so-believed tilted hierarchical divergence, was powered by something generated amongst themselves. The participant appreciated in the end:

**I realized that it was a very nice way of working together. [...]  
I helped him a bit with the text. Reading and re-reading. [...]  
He kind of trusted me on so many things. (Audio note of visit  
no.3. 01.01.)**

Andrea Fraser and her colleagues issues in *Services: A Proposal for an Exhibition and a Topic of Discussion*: "How might the relations involved in project work be formalized to safeguard the interests of both artists and organizations? How would the formalization of these relations affect the autonomy of artists and the critical or oppositional possibilities of artistic practice?"<sup>96</sup> The question is, what should be done so that the artist-curator relationship can be termed 'working together' instead of 'working for' or 'working under'?

Maaretta Jaukkuri shares her experience working as a curator saying there is no universal solution to the conflicts which may arise in the working situations. One of the best ways to address it she suggests is the following:

**[I]f each of the involved partners would make themselves clear of what they are expected to contribute and what his/her role is therein. When a working level of communication has been reached, these situations often also lead to inspiring discussions and solutions that result from shared experiences, knowledge, and skills.**

She sums up: "in this situation, respect for the artist's freedom as well as mutual respect among the involved partners, artists, producers and curators, is the crucial condition leading to stimulating co-operation."<sup>97</sup> If all the above were fulfilled, the state of 'working together' is no longer merely idealistic.

96 Fraser, 1994b.

97 Jaukkuri, 2020, 5-6.



## FIVE: CONCLUSION

The studio visits took me on a journey and taught me concrete lessons. Through the guidance and support of the participants, I did not only get to develop my curatorial praxis on the spot, but also, I could correct and modify my understanding of the curatorial work.

The thesis project, despite its original purpose as studio visits, served as a platform for an open discussion about curatorial-related topics among the professionals in the field. The platform itself was beneficial to my personal growth as a curator. After the project, I was able to name the most vital qualities of a comfortable working relationship. Moreover, I also confronted the misery of the curator's role together with my participants and revived the misunderstandings out of obscurity. The educational effect that the project brought forth was indeed one of the greatest outcomes in my opinion.

'How does a curator work' has been a driving question on my mind ever since my entry into curation. The thesis project provided me with a ground flexible enough to find my own answer to the question with help from others but also through the acts of my own thinking and making sense. After all, the thesis project suggested an open-ended reading to the question I posed. I was ensured that there was no one way to work as a curator. Still, the project generated a collective conclusion: curatorial work could be supportive and intimate when practiced in mutual grounding, but it could also go a completely opposite way, just like how touch can go wrong.

Planning and carrying out the thesis project proved that despite certain constraints attached to my role as a curator, I could think outside of the box

and introduce my own set of boundaries to people in the field the way I liked. The language I choose to communicate could be challenging for the receivers to adjust to at times, but worthwhile for the ongoing construction of my professional profile. Through the performative touch of the project, the curator's role, which was ambiguous in the beginning, has been gradually carved out with clarity. The 'performance' gave birth to multiple roles, but out of all, recreated a curator's role that resonates better to the 'real' practitioners in the field and to me who followed along the role in its becoming.

Since the initial stage of my project, I have been eager to invent a curatorial approach which could secure a more transparent working relationship with the people I collaborate with. The participatory-performance method provided me with easier access to qualities such as immersion, active engagement, co-creation, fluidity, improvisation, transparency, and spontaneity, which I have seen as important values to maintain in the curatorial process. Even though I had to carry workloads of a performance artist and a curator, I was able to perform curatorial tasks in a rather efficient yet delightful manner thanks to the nature of the method I adopted. *Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin* since the beginning demanded no exact outcome, but the process of exchange. If compared to a typical curatorial project which has a goal to fulfil, the method I adopted in the thesis project will work as a curatorial approach the best in the initial phase where the working group has just formed. I can see this approach introducing playfulness to the ritual of bond creating within group members and the establishing of a group working culture.

After the project was completed, a few participants inquired if they could have a second visit or a follow-up with me. It was reassuring to see the thesis project's potentiality is evolving. In the end, I can proudly confirm that *Studio Visits by Chih Tung Lin* is a curatorial project that invites many kinds of definitions. It can be an experience, a participatory performance, a research forum, a project's birthplace, but also a sustainable approach of my curatorial practice.

## APPENDIX I: LIST OF VISITS

Visit no.1. September 22, 2020. 11:00.

Visit no.2. September 23, 2020. 11:00.

Visit no.3. September 28, 2020. 11:00.

Visit no.4. September 28, 2020. 13:30.

Visit no.5. September 28, 2020. 15:30.

Visit no.6. September 29, 2020. 11:00.

Visit no.7. October 27, 2020. 14:00.

Visit no.8. November 9, 2020. 15:00.

Visit no.9. November 11, 2020. 11:00.

Visit no.10. November 11, 2020. 15:30.

Visit no.11. November 12, 2020. 16:30.

Visit no.12. November 17, 2020. 17:00.

Visit no.13. November 19, 2020. 13:00.

Visit no.14. November 26, 2020. 14:30.

Visit no.15. December 3, 2020. 13:00.

Visit no.16. December 14, 2020. 16:30.

Visit no.17. December 16, 2020. 12:00.

Visit no.18. January 20, 2021. 16:30.

Visit no.19. February 2, 2021. 14:00.

## APPENDIX II: STUDIO VISITS AT THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS



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Bildkonstakademien  
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### Studio visits at the Academy of Fine Arts

#### What is a studio visit?

Independent artistic work forms an essential part of the BFA and MFA curriculum. Studio visits are intended to help the student develop their independent artistic practice and to support their personal growth as an artist. The studio visit is a dialogue-based teaching event, and it lasts for approximately one hour, unless otherwise agreed. The teacher/visitor and the student will meet in a place where the student produces their artworks or engages in an artistic process. During the visit, the student has the opportunity to present their unfinished and/or finished works to the teacher and receive feedback on them.

#### Objectives of the studio visit

The objective of the studio visit is to engage in a collaborative reflection and analysis of the foundations of the student's artistic practice and to help the student develop their artistic thinking and long-term working processes. The mentoring allows the student to develop and reflect upon their independent artistic practice and identity. The discussions may also help the student plan their individual study paths. The teacher's task is to encourage the student and to discuss their artistic practice and the progress of their works in a constructive way.

Studio visits make it possible to discuss the student's independent artistic practice respectfully and analytically and to contextualise their practice in a broader framework. By placing the discussions next to the artworks, the student and the teacher can interpret and expound upon the meanings related to the works. The teacher's unprejudiced attitude towards the student's practice makes it possible to engage in experimentation and leaves room for not-knowing.

The studio visits are organised in accordance with Uniarts Helsinki's Code of Conduct. Paying close attention to ethical questions is particularly important in the context of the studio visit due to the sensitive nature of the interaction. Please consult the Code of Conduct before the studio visit with particular emphasis on pedagogical interaction:

<https://www.uniarts.fi/en/general-info/uniarts-helsinki-code-of-conduct/>

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