

James Voorhies

## I Call This Work Research

Monday, August 13, 2018  
Curatorial Research Bureau  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts  
San Francisco, California

The eleven-foot gold-velour panel curtains arrive. The storefront space with a wall of windows facing a busy downtown San Francisco street and spotted with movable wood tables and book displays, which only a week earlier had settled into a momentary organized-disorganized stasis, is again thrown into disarray. Installation of the curtains, plus long aluminum suspension rods and scaffolding, is accompanied by the sound of drilling and hammering. The bookshop manager (in their third week on the job) steadily proceeds amid the chaos, writing artists and publishers to inquire

about consigning their publications. A friend and patron stops in for coffee. She looks at books and journals, walks around the space, talks with me about providing support. Soothing notes from a Max Richter CD, at times barely audible above the noise of construction, coat the space: my relentless insistence on calmness, however one can have it, even when it's obviously unachievable. Another visitor, a curator friend at the institution across the street, stops over with a handful of books for us to review and potentially consign. Do they want coffee? No. I'm making cappuccinos. Emails continue to pour across the screen about an overdue press release, followed by quick calls to marketing and communications teams to discuss the language used (incorrectly) to describe this bookshop/vitrine/exhibition/public program/sometime "Open Seminar"/sometime private seminar platform-space. Indeed, the slashes, hybridity, and shape-shifting—both conceptual and literal—of the Curatorial Research Bureau are difficult to communicate in 250 words. But, oddly, aren't the slashes, hybridity, shape-shifting, and illegibility what make the CRB attractive as a thing, precisely because its combination of activities, peoples, and functions is not easily discernible?

Curatorial Research Bureau (CRB) is complex: a consumer space selling books, an academic site hosting graduate seminars, the location of an array of public and private programs, and the new home of the California College of

the Arts (CCA) Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice. CRB sits administratively within two institutions dedicated to the contemporary arts, CCA and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), both in San Francisco. It is administered by the curatorial practice program in partnership with YBCA and Bureau for Open Culture (BOC), a curatorial initiative that I lead in collaboration with my partner, the illustrator and designer Nate Padavick. As BOC, we have repeatedly nestled into various institutional contexts since the inception of BOC at Columbus College of Art & Design, Ohio, in 2007, attempting to forge intersections among art, design, education, public space, and consumer culture—all while pushing against and, as the entangled and enmeshed position of CRB demonstrates, asking institutions to confront their engrained characteristics in order to offer new ways to engage audiences with art and its ideas.

The typographical slashes, while not easy to relay in a press release, do in fact communicate something. The multipronged quality of CRB is responsive to (and a product of) the hyper-hybridization of our contemporary moment, where a “bookshop/screening” or a “coffee bar/artist talk” conflate the consumption of material and immaterial culture as equally valuable modes of experience and cultural exchange. Recognizing the fuzzy line between audiences and consumers, the CRB bookshop as a consumerist form will provide programmatic possibilities for curating art and cultural presentations. It will seek to transform that familiar consumer bookshop site into a learning site, leveraging the platform for social connectivity and education *as exhibition*. Audiences (/consumers) know how to engage with the retail situation of shopping (fig. 1). Here, at CRB, distinctions between the arts and entertainment, even between a club and the general public, or between art and academic institutions, will become increasingly blurred, in both public and private scenes, all in the pursuit of audience-building, in pursuit of connecting ideas to people, and people to people, through the lens of contemporary art and culture.

How do I talk about this work as part of my research as a curator?

February 26, 2016  
Consumer Research Center/  
Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Curatorial Research Bureau is, one could say, version 2.0 of a program I launched in February 2016 at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA), where I was the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director (fig. 2). The program was called Consumer Research Center/ (CRC/). The "/" was built right into the title for that project, and CRC/ also engaged in activities exploring the hybrid consumer form as a viable mode for high-touch social connectivity in a twenty-first-century arts organization. CRC/ posed similar questions about the influence and value of consumer points of sale (POS) for building publics (audiences) around an arts institution. Comparable to CRB, it was a partnership with Berlin-based publisher and international distributor Motto Books, where Motto supplied titles from around the globe with direction from me about specific content pertinent to upcoming programs and exhibitions. In Cambridge, my team at CCVA gathered publications by faculty at Harvard and nearby academic institutions, such as MIT and Northeastern University, to complement the global offerings by Motto. And, again comparable to CRB, we strove to create a platform where the immediate surrounding public would feel they had something at stake in what we offered.

As part of the programming at CCVA, I organized a series of "Open Seminars" inside the space of the CRC/. The faculty in the Visual and Environmental Studies department, Harvard's undergraduate arts program housed at the Carpenter Center, often invited artists and writers to

engage with their students, mostly in the private arena of seminars and studios. I was interested in how to invert that activity, make it public and available to broader audiences. In coordination with faculty, we identified artists and writers, such as Nina Beier, Natalie Czech, Karel Martens, Simon Dybbroe Møller, Gloria Sutton, and Ulla von Brandenburg, whose visits to Harvard could step into the public realm through the Open Seminar format.

That spring, I taught a seminar course and organized an exhibition, both under the title *Phil Collins: A Learning Site*. The course had twelve students—undergraduate and graduate—mostly from Harvard but also from Brown University and MIT. The multilayered practice of British artist Phil Collins was the focus of a constellation of public curatorial and private academic activities that transpired in their respective precincts of the Carpenter Center. Over the course of three months, the exhibition and seminar combined into a singular thing dedicated to presenting, experiencing, studying, and analyzing the work of one of contemporary art's most engaging voices. As a community, we experienced from different analytic perspectives the provocations that Collins presents in his work. This occurred through a variety of channels. In a traditional seminar, my students discussed texts by Claire Bishop, Mai Abu ElDahab, Anton Vidokle, Maria Lind, Fulvia Carnevale, Judith Butler, Nicolas Bourriaud, and others. We looked at a history of spectatorship, participation, and social engagement in contemporary art over the past forty years through the lens of Collins's practice. We read about artist Robert Smithson. We viewed work by artist and choreographer Yvonne Rainer. We discussed the writings of critic Michael Fried. We used case studies of exhibitions, artworks, and institutions to create a kind of knowledge toolbox that would allow us to think about and analyze the changing role of the spectator—from indifferent viewer to integrated participant—and the artists promulgating this shift. Among them, we considered the work of Group Material, Carsten Höller, Oda Projesi, Liam Gillick, Andrea Fraser, Walid Raad, Martha Rosler, Elmgreen

& Dragset, and Bik Van der Pol. The course was also a critical reflection on curatorial strategies in exhibitions at museums and biennials in the United States and Europe, including Tate Modern, Kunstverein München, Moderna Museet, the 2009 Venice Biennale, New Museum, Skulptur Projekte Münster, and documenta.

The exhibition component was another channel. Collins's video *the meaning of style* (2011) was installed during the entire run of the program. That installation space transformed twice into the site of two Open Seminars. As part of the course requirements, students (under my direction) collectively hosted two Open Seminars dedicated to subjects in contemporary art related to Collins's practice: spectatorship, participation, critique (fig. 3). Each seminar drew about forty attendees from the general public. In addition to analyzing *the meaning of style*, we watched clips from *the louder you scream, the faster we go* (2005), *they shoot horses* (2004), and *how to make a refugee* (1999). We analyzed Collins's films as a group with the unpredictable contributions of public audiences, providing students with valuable insight and exposure to addressing in real time the often wide-ranging questions and comments posed by people who attend public programs.

In a third channel, the Open Seminars were complemented by a program I organized for Harvard Film Archive (the Carpenter Center's cinema) to present feature films by Collins. Free and open to the public, visitors watched on successive evenings *the world won't listen* (2004–11) and *This Unfortunate Thing Between Us* (2011). Collins then spent a week at Harvard leading a seminar with my students and a separate workshop involving Harvard Radio Broadcasting, the campus radio station (fig. 4). The week was capped off with a screening of his film *Tomorrow Is Always Too Long* (2014) followed by a public conversation with Collins and me. In order to test these different channels of engagement, Collins and his work were threaded throughout every facet of CCVA's programmatic mission that spring.

Slashes and hybridity. Public and private. Orchestrated

connections and coordinated mediations. This is what my curatorial research practice looks like.

Tuesday, August 14, 2018  
Curatorial Research Bureau  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts  
San Francisco, California

Today, more drilling and measuring;  
metal tracks for the curtains installed;  
more boxes of books arrive from Motto;  
budget meetings to discuss how to account  
expenses and submit requests to the  
college for reimbursements. I walk over  
to SFMOMA to meet with a curator about  
an upcoming visit by the Rotterdam-  
based duo Bik Van der Pol to discuss how  
they might intersect with CCA graduate  
students. That afternoon at CRB: I meet  
with another SFMOMA curator and CCA's  
dean of design to discuss the museum's  
forthcoming exhibition about Sea Ranch,  
the famed housing development envisioned  
by Lawrence Halprin three hours north of  
San Francisco. How can CCA be involved?  
That's often the question. I pursue making  
something out of context. I prioritize  
context—of art, ideas, people, places,  
and things—as an active ingredient in  
the practice of curatorial research. The  
late-afternoon meeting concludes abruptly;  
we need to move the modular table to make  
room for the scaffolding needed to install  
another track for the curtain. Next:  
a discussion with the bookshop manager  
about advancement in our organization  
(and we're not even open yet!) then

continued reflections with marketing and communications about the language used in the press release. Also: the website—almost finished, completing headshots of people at both institutions who help administer this project while fielding more photographs of the CCA Curatorial Practice alumni. I make more cappuccinos. I offer espressos to visitors. I walk to the hardware store to return light bulbs that were too bright. I pick up L brackets.

What about this work is research?

May 26, 2011

Bureau for Open Culture > Beer Garden

MASS MoCA

North Adams, Massachusetts

Bureau for Open Culture > Beer Garden opened Memorial Day weekend in 2011. This project was an element of *I Am Searching for Field Character*, a four-month program I organized at the invitation of MASS MoCA curator Susan Cross. *I Am Searching for Field Character*, itself, was part of Cross's exhibition *The Workers: Precarity/Invisibility/Mobility*. *Field Character* was another hybrid animal, an exhibition/residency/public program/publication studio/workshop/learning site/archival research and interview project/store, and—slash—beer garden. *Field Character* explored the economic and social qualities of the cultural worker, staged within MASS MoCA's massive arts complex, a sprawling former factory campus. The overarching focus on labor was central to *The Workers*, installed in the museum's main building. Cross's exhibition examined the conflating characteristics of material and immaterial workers, taking a cue partially from the changing socioeconomics of the rural, mountainous region of the Berkshires where MASS MoCA is located. Western

Massachusetts is known for its sprawling brick industrial complexes of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Many were water-powered mills and originally produced textiles. In MASS MoCA's case, the textile factory eventually became the home of Sprague, a company that made capacitors and other electronic components until closing in 1985. The Berkshires today is populated with small-scale industries, colleges, tourism, and arts organizations, along with many artists, academics, writers, and culture producers who call it home and collectively contribute to the lifestyle of the region. *Field Character* examined this workforce by engaging with it, selling products such as leather goods, books, butter, and yogurt in a store run by the artist collaborative Red76 led by Sam Gould (fig. 5). BOC hosted a weekly beer garden sited at MASS MoCA next to the Hoosic River where occasional readings took place but mostly just casual gatherings of locals and tourists to drink beer and talk (fig. 6). BOC programs were free of charge, although we did charge for beer. BOC was located in a small building behind the museum. Through my insistence (and persistence), I negotiated with museum officials to allow visitors to arrive at the beer garden by walking across an exterior bridge and thus circumventing the interior of the museum. North Adams residents and tourists, therefore, engaged with BOC on their own terms, not the museum's.

Part exhibition, part performance, part studio, part unclassifiable—*I Am Searching for Field Character* identified and shaped a portrait of the cultural worker with an emphasis on their precarious economic existence. Our daily presence in the space, working as shopkeepers, bartenders, curators, writers, tour guides, community organizers, and educators, intentionally gave visitors more than they expected after walking into our small building. Our simultaneous roles had hybridity built into them. The shop and beer garden were thresholds, equalizers that allowed the most introverted and unsure museum visitor to engage with the space through the well-worn and understandable cultural form of shopping. Goods with prices could be found at the entrance. Once

inside, however, visitors wandered around and looked longer, talked with us, and learned about our programs, upcoming exhibitions, and the *Field Character* project. We conflated and purposely obscured notions of labor and the immaterial touristic, service, and culture industries transpiring inside architecture built originally for workers who made material goods. We were there to serve. Our performance was research to better understand how to address audiences.

Wednesday, August 15, 2018  
Curatorial Research Bureau  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts  
San Francisco, California

A FedEx packet of materials—zines, collages, and posters—by ALBUM arrives. The Norwegian artist duo Eline Mugaas and Elise Storsveen based in Oslo and known as ALBUM periodically makes zines sourced from advertising and popular culture. Since 2008, Mugaas and Storsveen have been sifting through printed material found in Scandinavian households from the 1960s through the 1980s, then combining the visual matter into a fanzine, or limited-edition, saddle-stitched publications. Photographs and illustrations printed in a range of media—from cookbooks, travel journals, and etiquette manuals to fashion magazines, sex-ed manuals, and gardening and science journals—are taken from original sources, juxtaposed, and reproduced in the ongoing zine. The publications are free of text. Each issue of *ALBUM* is dedicated to particular themes, such as the lonely man, femininity, architecture, family,

outer space, and nature. In these fanzines, consumerism, popular culture, and domesticity seamlessly converge, reinforcing the fluidity and exchange among everyday life and the onslaught of advertising and news media images.

I had calls today with the college's development team about fundraising and meetings with YBCA about the opening party on September 27, 2018. We also talked with YBCA about the integration of our curatorial practice students into upcoming YBCA meetings in order to provide students with opportunities to bear witness to the complexities and even mundane points of operating an institution and organizing exhibitions. We purchased houseplants from a nearby nursery and collected vinyl text panels from the manufacturer. The website <http://www.curatorialresearchbureau.org> was uploaded to the World Wide Web.

At Curatorial Research Bureau, I'm presenting the ALBUM collages and posters as part of the assembly and display of materials for the exhibition *Marianne Wex: 'Let's Take Back Our Space.'* The display is first in a series of modest presentations called "Case Studies." Each month, Case Studies will identify a book to unfurl into an exhibition of archival materials, photographic reproductions, periodicals, ephemera, sound, and text that amplify ideas explored by the featured publication, using the inventory of the CRB bookshop as a launching point for assembling the materials. Wex's 1979 publication *'Let's Take Back Our Space'* led us to compile a collection of visual documentation, reproductions, books, and writing related to ALBUM, Jérôme Saint-Loubert Bié, Caravaggio, Hal Fischer, André Malraux, Martine Syms, and Wolfgang Tillmans.

Marianne Wex: In the early 1970s, this German artist

shifted her practice from painting to photography. She began surreptitiously photographing men and women in public spaces around Hamburg (where she lived), systematically capturing their body language. More than posturing, she was interested in “involuntary and unconscious” gestures, the natural states of behavior caught unawares. She photographed people sitting on benches at train stations or standing at crosswalks (fig. 7). She documented people lying on the beach, sitting on the grass in parks, leaning against doorways and automobiles, or standing with arms akimbo. Taking stock of her immediate context in Hamburg, she eventually amassed a staggering collection of more than five thousand photographs as part of her artistic research. She organized and sorted this collection, separating images of men and women and then arranging the photographs into different categories, such as “leg and feet position” and “arms and hand positions,” and then various subcategories such as “standing persons,” “seated persons,” and “walking persons.”

Not unlike how Wex looked at her immediate, rich, and resourceful context as a palette for making work, Case Studies demonstrates (especially for students) how to look around, to take notice—in this instance, of publications—and make something of something, of the materials at hand. Identify the overlaps, make them legible through the tactics of display and juxtaposition. Think curatorially.

Three bookshops and a beer garden. I call these things exhibitions. I call this work research.

Thursday, August 16, 2018  
Curatorial Research Bureau  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts  
San Francisco, California

Today, after months of planning, meetings, emails, and even more meetings and emails about Curatorial Research Bureau, the space at YBCA suddenly came together (as

things do with exhibitions). The ripple-folded curtains, with their magisterial height, velour fiber, and gold color, have a commanding and calming presence. They will serve to dampen sound and provide privacy for students and professors in the CCA Curatorial Practice program, who will hold their seminars in the space enclosed by the curtains. A few classes during the fall term will occur while the bookshop is open. The problem, therefore, was how to allow the space to be bookshop/graduate seminar accommodating our consumers/audiences/students. The problem was how to provide privacy while the bookshop is accessible to the public. After considering several scenarios, including building walls or even relocating seminars to other parts of the YBCA office complex, the curtain arrived as a viable solution. The iconic ripple fold is intended as a visual cue that we own the curtain, we acknowledge the recognizable and familiar theatrical aesthetic and, in turn, we own the performance embedded in the daily operation of Curatorial Research Bureau. Indeed, it is a theatrical stage for students and professors, for guests, artists, and the visiting public. The curtain, too, will frame the space for public events: talks, readings, screenings, and, of course, the overtly recognizable performances. Today, we installed the vinyl text panels and continued pursuing publications by nearby colleagues, artists, and writers as we build up inventory that is global/local.

Teaching, administering, directing, chairing, traveling, writing, hiking, dinners, vacations. My social media, exhibitions, and books. These all amount to my curatorial practice. The multiplicity of this activity is my research for thinking about the curation of scenes and orchestration of experiences and people in the fields of contemporary art and education. By assembling pieces and parts, gathering people and resources, combining objects and ideas, I create things that are composed of a constellation of many characteristics. This work becomes discernible and operates under names like Curatorial Research Bureau and Bureau for Open Culture. It also comes together in larger research projects such as my book *Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968*, published by the MIT Press in 2017. And while this work is responsive to context, it hardly accepts it without a challenge. If anything, context is viewed as valuable fodder and an amicable adversary to push against in order to create something else, something more, for audiences near and far. That's why physical and online spaces are, since 2007 when we founded BOC, essential. These are the conditions that I work through with Padavick. I'm interested in taking familiar contexts and forms—the bookshop and beer garden, the curtain and the seminar, the academy and the museum—as a means for curatorial performance in the public realm (fig. 8). I'm attracted to forms as modes for curatorial research, as means for thinking curatorially in order to learn and understand better how to foster a scene, create an audience for the space, concept, and institution.

Friday, August 17, 2018

Curatorial Research Bureau

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

San Francisco, California

A quiet day installing Case Studies;  
construction is over; Max Richter is  
clearly audible; the sun filters into the  
space on the final day of a busy week and,

James Voorhies is a curator and art historian of modern and contemporary art. He is Chair of the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice and Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. He is also Director of Curatorial Research Bureau, a bookshop, learning site, exhibition, and public program located at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. He holds a PhD in modern and contemporary art history from The Ohio State University and is the founder of Bureau for Open Culture. His book *Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968* was published by the MIT Press in 2017. Research for his new book *Binding Agents: Toward an Aesthetic of the Postcolonial in Contemporary Exhibition* received support from the Graham Foundation and Etant donnés Contemporary Art.

# The Curatorial in Parallax



Bartomeu Mari  
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Irit Rogoff

Beck Jee-sook  
Paola Antonelli  
Margriet Schavemaker  
Victoria Walsh

Beatrice von Bismarck

Paul O'Neill  
Simon Sheikh  
Kim Seong Eun  
James Voorhies

Annette Jael Lehmann

Dorothee Richter  
Lim Shan

Pascal Gielen

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coincidentally, Nate's birthday. We work alone in calmness, assembling and finessing the space, uploading more books to the CRB website, designing the newsletter (fig. 9). I finish this essay and assemble the accompanying images. Curatorial Research Bureau will open its doors on September 4, 2018, the first day of class at California College of the Arts.

I call this work research.