

CUMMA PAPERS #8

CUMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO?

AN INTERVIEW
WITH VALERIA
GRAZIANO
BY HANNA
OHTONEN

Valeria Graziano works as a writer, educator and cultural organizer. She is currently completing a PhD supervised jointly across both the Drama Department and the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary University of London, working on a proposal titled 'Ambiences of Conviviality', which investigates the histories of sociality across the areas of artistic practices, militant organizing, and collective learning.

She visited CuMMA, an MA course in Curating, Managing and Mediating Art at Aalto University in Helsinki, to discuss with students the consequences of bringing together critical management and curating. After a long and intense day of conversation, she was kind enough to dig even deeper into the topic, talking about the concepts of daring and conviviality in relation to the curatorial.

HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE CURATORIAL?

It definitely stands at the juncture between organizational, aesthetic and broader political preoccupations, and I'm sure there are many more intersecting concerns that agitate the field. One way of interpreting a field might be to organize it into a spectrum of forces, so that one could perhaps think about the curatorial as two opposite drives, one of them harnessing and gathering knowledges, items and experiences from other "fields" and bringing them to the premises of the aesthetic and the art field. And another, opposite movement, of squatting the spaces, resources and items of the art sector or the aesthetic tool box, in order to use this institution to feed into and re-generate other processes. I think the curatorial is, of course, a very diverse field of preoccupations, but these would be the two poles around which I would start arranging ethics and projects within it.

Within the broader framework of curating, I've been thinking about the kind of relationships afforded by the concept of daring (as in "truth or dare"), as a way of paying attention and encouraging action that is not about curating/care in the sense of supporting, nurturing and soft managing. It is the opposite in some ways – it is about stimulating and finding an excuse to motivate ourselves to find some different possibles, or

seeing if something can actually be done.

Daring is a bit big-headed and a bit cruel perhaps – but it can also be very innocent, not only childish (I'm thinking here of something Bifo [Franco Berardi] said about innocence being a refusal of assuming the intolerable as a criterion, even when there are no alternatives) – but at the same time it plays with the threshold of our limits; it asks: "How far would you go?" In accepting or refusing the dare, one can discover all sorts of boundaries, and learn that some of them are actually old or fake, and one may perhaps discover ways of disregarding them.

But there is also a very serious ethical responsibility that comes with daring others. A dare can both go too far, and shatter the relationship, but it might also fail in the opposite direction: nothing is sadder than a dare that is too easy, nothing more frustrating than a co-presence where no new possibles are probed, when all the interactions are already coded and formatted as entirely recognizable. And finally, daring implies a choice of engaging with each other (a true dare can always be refused – if not, then we should probably speak of blackmail, like in bullying) and also of engaging with a given institution or context, confronting whatever in that landscape is taken for granted, assumed as the norm.

WHERE IN ALL THIS WOULD YOU SEE YOUR OWN ENTRY POINT?

At the moment, I've been thinking of 'daring' as an entry point into what is at stake in cultural production.

The dare can be a generative term in a number of ways in relation to cultural organizing.

The idea of curating shares its roots with caring, and this often immediately gets associated with a kind of support that is connoted by unconditionality and availability. These qualities, in classic psychological theories, are discussed in terms of primary love or maternal love (this last being a limited characterization that has been subject to rigorous critique within feminist and queer discourses for quite some time now, for instance in Julia Kristeva's writing). In this context the idea of an unconditional and always available type of love or care became the opposite of the secondary or paternal kind of love: conditional and bound up with authority and the law. This would be a classic paradigm.

I believe that, within a certain critical tradition of progressive community organizing and radical education on the left, we have developed a rather rich repertoire of approaches to generating support and welcoming participation around certain key issues, but I believe that we could probably do with a richer set of concepts to think about the elements within our practices that support friction, and pushing each other towards new challenges. Without generalizing too much, I hope, many of these approaches emphasize inclusivity and unconditionality, and the boundless availability of affection, but they don't tell me much about how my work as a

cultural organizer might shape the conduct of others. The reasons for this imbalance are well founded. Don't get me wrong: there is a shortage of settings and situations where it is possible to tap into the kind of unconditional positive attention one can find in participatory arts and cultural platforms, in a context where one has to 'perform or else' across all realms of productivity. However, I equally believe that these kinds of participatory structures, which are all about welcoming participants simply because they participate, are increasingly suspect politically, and we need to interrogate why this is the case.

On the other hand, by daring I'm imagining a set-up where participation is valued according to an ethos that is produced with the participants, but it is not about celebrating what the majority of them wants. I imagine these kinds of relations under the rubric of daring, shifting away from a psychoanalytic vocabulary that is perhaps loaded with too many other implications to be employed here. In doing so, I don't wish to return to a binary dynamic between conditional and unconditional attention, but to think a different paradigm, in which we can have cultural projects that autonomously affirm their own values and then reclaim the procedures by which they evaluate successful contributions to them. A dare is an antithetical activity that does not necessarily become contentious or agonistic. It can be a field where someone can come to experience her or his own excellence or sense of mastery over a process that is relevant to her or his life.

COULD YOU SAY A BIT MORE ABOUT HOW YOU WOULD SITUATE DARING IN THE PRACTICE OF CURATING, OR IN THE FIELD OF CULTURAL ORGANIZING?

I guess I've been using it in relation to what is a bit of a false impasse within the debate around participatory, socially engaged art practices, one that pushes us to choose between practices that do-good and feel-good, as opposed to practices that feel uncomfortable, and which are ambivalent and therefore challenging. And this is the point, that I don't find being made to feel uncomfortable is particularly challenging, but more often it is, well, actually quite comfortable. Projects or programmes that content themselves with presenting ambivalences do not automatically set up a dare, or bet with me or against me that one or the other version of a reality might be more desirable, probable or true. Indeed, they can reinforce, by their very insistence on this double possibility, a very comfortable, cynical or sentimental posture vis-à-vis the issue that they are exploring.

Here it might be useful to recall an important distinction between game and play, as theorized by scholars such as Brian Sutton-Smith, Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and others, as such a distinction is becoming increasingly meaningful for cultural production, since increasingly the productivity of games is considered a standard for managing participation. For instance, around 2010, the term gamification began to circulate as a marketing buzzword to describe the use of game elements in other kinds of contexts, the idea being to increase the desirability of the experience and motivate people to engage with it. This particular framework has already been subject to criticism within the field of game studies and

experience design, especially since its actual applications in the commercial world have often been unimaginatively translated into very banal activities: awarding badges, points or levels, without taking into account more complex mechanisms of gameplay.

However, overall my interest in games and other forms of play, such as daring, is also motivated by the fact that the realm of gaming as a cultural form has grown exponentially. Work is now talked about through a language of gaming, and employees are evaluated for their attitudes as team players. While all play produces meaning, the specific paradigm of the game relies on players' willingness to acknowledge a set of rules, and it is the nature of these rules that is at risk of never being questioned in the process. In dares, if we think of this instead as a form of play, the main mechanism is precisely the search, discovery or invention of new rules that might produce unexpected results. The process of elaborating the new rules is indeed part of the dare, and the activity required by the dare itself might be seen as an exploration of the affordances, or opportunities for action, that that specific set of rules makes available.

For me there is something important in such a modus operandi, an opportunity to revisit some of the exploratory and adventurous ethos of art and cultural practices that, during the 1990s, were often referred to via scientific paradigms, such as laboratory, experiment, etc. What if, instead of using scientific terms of reference, artists, curators and cultural organizers reclaimed the legitimacy of practices that are in a play relationship with reality? I believe that radical play forms that are open, transversal, and which engage reality with an open-endedness in regard to rules and values will occupy an increasingly crucial role in the context of the gamification that is currently guiding the management of both consumption and production.

HOW DID YOU END UP THINKING ABOUT THE TOPIC OF YOUR PHD - CONVIVIALITY?

Our bodies have a capacity for producing collective pleasure, but we don't have a word to describe this. We have names for erotic or love relationships, the pleasure of being with your child – we have tools for thinking about these emotions, but not for the experience of the pleasure of accessing collective thought or of being in the middle of a large-scale action, like, for example, occupying a square or dancing at a rave. I was interested in this field of experiences; what are they and what do we do with them? It's not enough to understand that we have this capacity. It's not generative of other thoughts. So I thought about whether we have other similar histories, and started looking into how people, through the various ages, have talked about this.

So, conviviality in antiquity referred to a set of practices for experiencing collective pleasure – that is, not only undertaking pleasurable activities in the company of others, but as a capacity for experiencing the very presence of others as a pleasure. Sartre used to say 'l'enfer, c'est les autres' (Hell is other people)... I've been looking in the opposite direction.

One thing that caught my attention when looking into antiquity is that conviviality was practised around a banquet, or a feast of some sort. And this element of sharing food, to me, can be used to think about an expanded principle of conviviality, as a way of jointly acknowledging and satisfying basic needs, such as nutrition,

shelter, movement, sexuality, etc. and bringing them out into the open. However, in this transposition, these fundamental necessities that sustain the body inevitably become something more elaborate; they begin to sprout aesthetic and signifying capacities. In doing so they escape the strict cycle of necessity – the endless alternation of labour and consumption, for instance – but in conviviality (literally, to live in common) labour and consumption can become something else entirely.

Then, if we look at what happens in modernity, we find that, both at the level of practice and of language, something else happens, and people, especially those belonging to the European aristocracy, begin to speak of sociability instead of conviviality. The actual word 'society' that we use today to talk about large human groupings was actually first used to describe gatherings of the upper classes in the salon, and later at the academy, the café, the club, etc. Historians explain that, in the 1600s, an individual could be thought of as either the subject of an absolute monarch or as the subject of an absolute God, but there was no way to talk about the experience of belonging to a society that was distinct from the State and the Church.

That's where this hybrid space of *sociabilité* began to develop, especially in France (and then elsewhere in Europe). And when it emerged, it unleashed a lot of energy; it became a bundle of

things: it had to do with, for example, being able to be witty, to dress fashionably, but also to develop a style of thinking, writing, debating, gesturing, posing, dancing and so forth... And through all these practices modern subjectivity is somehow formed – what we recognize today as the individual being a specific product of modernity.

This was fascinating, because it was a new framework for understanding pleasures, in the sense that the realm of sociability was severed from both official life and private life, and in a sense this left us with an inherited model for separating social activities from the activities that sustain them – the opposite of conviviality. In other words, sociability tends to function a bit like a scene or a spectacle, as a performance that depends upon its separation from regular life circumstances. Sociability usually involves servants that clean up after you, shake your cocktail, and stay home with your kids – there's a whole world of production and social reproduction that goes on to sustain it, but which needs to be excluded from it. Sociability produces a pleasure by severing itself from the politics of its production.

In our present age, we're again undergoing another shift, which sees the reincorporation of the processes that sustain sociability within its realm of visibility. In a way that parallels what

happens within artistic expression and performances, in certain circles the incorporation of the mechanisms of production is used to produce the experience of authenticity. This new-found conviviality, however, is quite perverse, as it also incorporates within its visible production structures the capitalist relations that sustain it. In other words, it is the commodity form of sociality, and people pay a lot of money to access it; it is a very intense process. However, the introduction of a logic of capitalization into conviviality is not only a qualitative issue, but also changes these practices and relationships qualitatively. And this was consequently one of the central drives that motivated my research: how to think of an updated version of militant conviviality to counter this expanding commodity form? What I mean by this is that people have a capacity to add a dimension of pleasure to their interaction, in addition to the sheer necessity of or requirement for their cooperation, and I think that there is a deliberate under-productivity in convivial situations that expresses a counter-rationality to the logic of capital, which is about relentless efficiency in the name of accumulation. I believe that convivial practices can offer an interesting place to look for modes of producing the commons.

FOR ME, CONVIVIALITY ALSO AUTOMATICALLY DENOTES THE CONCEPT OF FRIENDSHIP. IS THIS A CONNECTION YOU HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT?

Friendship, like love, is a very evocative term, however, the answer to your question is no, the point of conviviality is not to be friends with everyone. Indeed, the way I think of it is precisely about the importance of finding tools for producing the preconditions for encountering the kinds of people that we don't have strong feelings for, or desires for, in ways that leave that possibility of friendship open. I find that even in political organizing it is always challenging to formulate practices that are not only fair, but also pleasurable, to go beyond the more spontaneous inclinations one might have towards another person. For all the talk about how important it is to be different, considering people who are not our friends as allies requires a resilience that is hard to sustain. Conviviality represents an ethical

opportunity to acquaint ourselves with a variety of other forms of life and their 'peculiarities', autonomously and outside the confines of functional roles, because there is no ulterior end to sociable activities, and it is in this sense that I've been researching into collective experiences that incorporate convivial elements into their politics.

When you don't start from the same vocabulary, the same values, the same style, then there are no pre-given blueprints for how to generate conviviality, we might not know how to generate any sort of desire for the situation, but maybe there will be something there if we persist. This is why I find that daring each other might be a way to modify our habitual conducts in a manner that laughs at the discomfort we might provoke in one another.

Writer, educator and organizer VALERIA GRAZIANO has, among other things, worked with the Micropolitics Research Group (UK) on a number of participatory-action research projects, co-curated Summer Drafts – Laboratories of Transversal Vivacity, an experimental programme exploring pedagogies of anti-racism, and initiated a practice exchange series called Self.Organizing. Her critical and curatorial initiatives have been hosted at institutions including Vanabbemuseum (Eindhoven), In-Presentable (Madrid), MACBA (Barcelona), and Moderna Museet (Stockholm). Currently, Valeria is completing a PhD supervised jointly across the Drama Department and the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary University of London.

Alongside her studies at CuMMA HANNA OHTONEN is freelancing as a writer and working on collaborative projects that combine art with sharing knowledges. Currently she is working on her thesis, researching the possibilities of relating contemporary museums to a notion of public space. She is interested in dialogue and action as means for gathering collective momentum.

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Daring, caring and the ethics of relating to each other. An interview with Valeria Graziano by Hanna Ohtonen.

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