

## CUMMA PAPERS #24

CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) is a two-year, multidisciplinary study field at Aalto University in Helsinki, focusing on contemporary art and its publics.

with **An interview  
Felicity Allen**

# (in) formalisation

Felicity Allen has a rounded experience in the field of art. Her practice is rooted in an approach that is artistic, curatorial and educational. It goes without saying that her work covers a wide variety of themes, and it seems she has a deep connection to dialectical human relations. In this interview we focused on her experiences in gallery education, following on from the conversation we had as part of CuMMA's Discourse Series, where it became evident that the elements of practice are not self-contained, but rather operate fluidly. We discussed contemporary issues relating to educational practices in galleries and museums, and Felicity provided us with a holistic view drawn from her own experiences in the field.

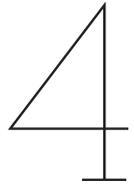
by **Jernej Čuček Gerbec, Gabriela Gazova, Anna Korotkova  
and Marharyta Liavonenka**

**WHAT** pedagogical and curatorial strategies can be used to provide an equally accessible, challenging and educational experience for visitors with different backgrounds?

**THERE IS** no general rule. Certain museums have specific rules, but it depends on what sort of exhibitions and contexts you are thinking of: I wouldn't like to make any sort of generalisations for exhibitions in that way. In the museum context, let's think about texts in exhibitions, which may be good or bad, useful or obstructive. I often prefer not to read a text, but think it is important to respect both the work and the person who might want to read one. It is critical not to interpret the artist or the work, but to give enough context and information to enable the viewer to think about the work itself. When I was at Tate Britain (2003–2010), we had a lot of arguments about interpretation. Really good people working in the Interpretation team (part of the Education Department) individually brought quite different perspectives, including one who specialised in museum interpretation rather than contemporary art. A focus from interpretation specialists was often what people coming into the museum might understand or need, and of course a lot of people coming to a museum aren't very familiar with art. I was interested when an interpretation curator—who'd formerly been a curator of prints and drawings—said she aimed to enable visitors to have an intimate relationship with particular works, as she had with the prints and drawings she cared for. Another interpretation curator—without an art specialist background—did some visitor research in the gallery and discovered that most visitors didn't know what the word 'modernism' meant; in fact, they thought the word modernism should be explained. But Tate Britain shows modern and contemporary art all the time, so this problem becomes more complex, because we need to think carefully about how we talk about modernism in such a context. I hope these two examples of different approaches indicate the subjective quality of the decisions

and directions we take, which inform different methods and trajectories when engaging with a mix of curatorial, educational and artistic practices. Instead of, or as well as, text in an exhibition, there might be other events specifically aimed to complement the text, offering different ways of learning about modernism. The question concerning modernism highlights the convention of a curatorial preoccupation with the disciplines of history and theory as essential methods for thinking about art.

ONE thing about working with contemporary art is that a substantial proportion of its audience are those involved in producing it, either as professionals or as amateurs. In my experience, primary school children are some of the most interesting people in thinking about contemporary art, because they accept and interrogate what you present without a desire to judge. I may sound like a modernist romanticiser of childish ‘naïveté’, but this has been my experience on the occasions observing myself or others working with children in a range of roles. I should add that I see being inclusive with children, and allowing them agency, to be an important feminist strategy, but I’ve already written about this in relation to gallery education. I have found that young children often love working with artists because they get the chance to concentrate for long periods of time. Usually in school their time is very broken up and it is very frustrating for young children, because they often want to immerse themselves into something—that is, to behave perhaps like artists. The way we divide children from adults assumes that all adults are the same, distinct from children, which is completely mad. The preoccupations of people in their twenties are often as different from people in their thirties, as are those of children under ten from adolescence, and likewise in people in their forties, fifties and so on. One needs to think very specifically to create education programmes that refuse to categorise people into binary opposites, for instance, child and adult. You might put on a mix of introductory and specialist events as additional forms of interpretation in relation to



an exhibition, and replace hierarchies of knowledge with concepts of mutual learning and exchange. This is fundamental to challenging many socially constructed borders, but also to developing useful and thriving knowledge which respects—and actually listens to—different perspectives.

FOR instance, when I worked at London's Hayward Gallery (1999–2003), we did a solo show of Ann-Sofi Sidén in 2002. Her exhibition *Warte Mal!* was very intense, with multiple videos in cubicles and different spaces. The videos were made about—and with—sex workers on the East German border with the Czech Republic. I worked on this exhibition with Cathy Haynes and curator Clare Carolin. Cathy developed an interpretation space which gave a wide range of information about sex work, migration and borders, which negotiated different and sometimes antagonistic perspectives, as well as giving artistic context to the work. So you had both, not necessarily what you expected when you came to the exhibition. We also ran a programme of different seminars throughout the exhibition which tackled different aspects: some focused on contemporary art history, others on issues of feminism, sex work and migration. Again this created very real intellectual frictions, especially as sex work continues to be a subject of strong disagreements between feminists (it was certainly so in the '70s, and I'm guessing this goes way back in time). In addition, as well as promoting the exhibition generally to people working with sex workers, we developed a partnership training programme with a specific group of social workers whose practice included working with sex workers. From their professional perspective, this training was apparently nothing to do with notions of contemporary art, but in fact the exhibition generated a development of sophisticated and deep knowledge which they shared in discussing their own experience with each other. I was impressed, for instance, when one commented that it had helped her think differently about a client and her client's experience. She said it would help her to approach her work with her client differently.

The programme linked to questions of practice in making work and curating the exhibition, because everything was focused on practice and we were constantly questioning: ‘How do we practice? How do we relate to each other structurally and personally in terms of intimacy? How do we define our boundaries? How do we negotiate these things? Where does the structural power lie?’ And of course it was completely relevant for the social workers, because they were working with women working as sex workers, whose children they would therefore have categorised (and might actually have been) ‘at risk’. I am interested in this exchange of different perspectives and applications of knowledge as an evolving practice.

I AM describing historic work that I’ve been involved with for a specific reason. I have argued elsewhere about the textual negotiations of the development of gallery education in Britain (from the 1980s), and I especially want to challenge the idea that gallery education only became ‘radical’ at a certain historic/theoretical moment. It’s not unusual to problematise history from a feminist perspective, even when it appears to acknowledge feminism: in fact, part of the work of feminism is necessarily to educate and to challenge history. In the early ‘90s, gallery educators used to argue that critics reviewing exhibitions should also review the education programmes, to develop thorough curatorial criticism. I’m struggling to think of an instance of this having happened, and perhaps I’m motivated to discuss something of the work with the Sidén exhibition because I was disappointed to find that the only critical record of its education programme was in Paul Basu and Sharon MacDonald’s *Exhibition Experiments* from 2007, which simply published an edited transcript of one of the seminars—ironically, perhaps—with notable feminists including Griselda Pollock.

I AM giving historical examples also because I continue to argue against the idea that gallery education was a product of the UK’s New Labour government (1997–2010), which is how many curators and writers who became professional in that period have described it. There is



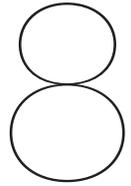
a thread of radical—and especially feminist—gallery education that both generated its development in Britain in the ‘80s (informed by radical curatorial, artistic and educational practices from the ‘70s), and is sometimes still produced. This doesn’t mean that it’s always been perfectly theorised, nor is it to deny that there is plenty of conservative or poor gallery education (not necessarily the same thing), just as there’s conservative curation or bad art. However, it’s really important to value the continuous struggle, the labour, and the fact that it has mainly been undertaken by women artists and artists of colour whose challenge to their exclusions by the mainstream status quo takes many forms, and has sometimes included gallery education. Our work regularly goes unrecognised as an artistic practice, not only because of the conventions of hierarchies which name individual artists while concomitantly perpetuating codes of privilege, but also because our exclusions have necessitated that we adapt and push in different ways. Therefore there is frequently an apparent mutability—we try different methods, ducking and diving—but actually there’s often an underlying consistency that conventional curating and art histories might fail to recognise. This is why I’ve coined the neologism, the ‘disoeuvre’: an oeuvre that may not be easily identified as one, but nevertheless is. All this is to say, education has been, at least in part, an important strategy both to attempt to change culture and its institutions, and to find ways into those institutions, whether as—at any one time—employees, freelancers, amateurs or visitors.

IN relation to new developments at Tate Modern and similar institutions, what does it mean to create an informal space of knowledge? How do you relate the need for reinvention to what you’ve been discussing, and to earlier examples of gallery education?

IF you want to take Tate Modern as an example, it should be mentioned that it is pretty unique because of its scale and global

position combined with the work it does. It doesn't mean that it is the template for other museums to follow; we should understand the very specific geographical, cultural and political contexts of museums and exhibitions. Anyway, I would call most museums potentially educationally informal. Informal education depends on choices about time and movement, you're making your own path, you are the agent of your own learning, and you learn to interrogate the precepts presented to you. Recent exhibition design—with a singular progression of galleries and the ubiquitous shop at the end—transforms the visitor from agent of knowledge to consumer. (Tate Britain's original galleries have three portals each, with a string of slip galleries alongside the larger ones, allowing the visitor to loop around and double-back, continually creating their own route, shuffling the pack.)

MY perception is that Tate Modern frequently formalises education. I'll come back to that, but first I'll illustrate what I'm saying by going back to the Hayward, which is part of a series of buildings on the South Bank in London, 10 minutes walk along the river from Tate Modern. The Hayward opened in 1968, and its brutalist architecture at that moment was absolutely the most exciting thing (I remember: I was a young teenager!). Let's say, between the '60s and '90s it was probably one of the most radical of the larger galleries in London, run by Joanna Drew. There was another gallery in Britain, then known as the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, run by David Elliott, which was doing similar things but on a smaller scale. (Gilane Tawadros worked alongside Helen Lockett on the education and interpretation programmes during some of that time at the Hayward, and Ian Cole worked on education alongside David Elliott at what is now Modern Art Oxford.) The Whitechapel had its moments (for instance, when Nick Serota directed and Jenni Lomax ran the education programme), but the Hayward was showing black British artists, as well as art from completely different cultures, both contemporary and historic, and truly global. It was



also running a quite radical touring programme all over the British Isles, mostly led by Roger Malbert. This was when most others, including Tate, were only showing and collecting Western art with little apparent consciousness of their own exclusions—you could say that the Hayward was a pioneer in including postmodern curating alongside the modern. When I went to work at the Hayward in 1999, something I hadn't anticipated was that the gallery didn't have any educational rooms or studio spaces, because it was built in 1968. We all wanted to make good programmes but there wasn't anywhere to do it, so I argued that in the spirit of '68, we should do it in the galleries, which suited my thinking very well.

**MOST** artists who showed their work loved this gallery because it employed a different architect to design each exhibition. The artist and/or curator could talk with the architect about making the space specifically for the particular exhibition, whether as a collective or solo show. So I suggested we also think about the kind of space we need for the particular educational programme, specific for each temporary exhibition. Susan Ferleger Brades, who was then running the Hayward, totally supported me on this, and looking back now, I regret that my limited stay at the Hayward also limited the development of that idea.

**ONE** regular programme I ran there was Student Debates. I would invite a group of students from particular programmes, depending on what the exhibition was, to research the exhibition and then hold a public discussion in the gallery with their tutors and other visitors. The event would be advertised in advance, so the visitors were a mix of people who'd come especially and others who became interested in the event as they happened to be there. It was perfectly possible not to join in and just carry on looking at the exhibition on your own. Some times worked better than other times.

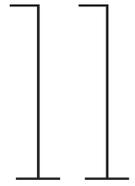
**ONE** exhibition, *Spectacular Bodies*, was about historic and contemporary representations of medicine and the body, both as art and as science. Since it crossed with medicine, it gave us the opportunity



to create a fantastic series of events and programmes. I devised a programme to bring people together—including surgeons and nurses who were involved in cutting and crafting the body—to talk with artists, including sculptors whose studio experience might bear comparison, in relation to works in the exhibition. And it worked. We had some very powerful meetings: together, embodied, standing, walking in the gallery, thinking about these things with people from different disciplines in that way, in the space where the work was exhibited. Not being very precious about it, thinking through being in the space as well as through discussion, some of which was quite unnerving, setting your teeth on edge. That is a particular example that I am proud of. There were other things that didn't work so well. For instance, one of the Student Debates brought together students from University College, London: medical students from the highly respected medical school, and MA art students from the highly respected Slade School of Art. Two different disciplines together and it seemed they could hardly speak to each other; perhaps, more importantly, the art students couldn't step out of their field, they were so locked into being "correct" in how they spoke about art, there was no generosity. They weren't prepared to listen to the medical students who were speaking the wrong language, making rather unsophisticated assumptions about art. There was a real friction, which might have been mildly entertaining to watch but was very frustrating as well. It wasn't useful friction, it was a performance of anxious social snobbery dressed up as art as a self-referential discipline, juxtaposed with a very simple lack of familiarity with this type of knowledge, and no willingness on the part of the art students to do some basic induction. I tended to see my role as facilitator, and might have stepped in more, but in this case, perhaps because they came from a prestigious institution, the two professors seemed to exacerbate the students' lack of listening, intellectual-duelling to no real purpose. You win some, you lose some.

**HOW** do you see curatorial and educational methods being formalised to support concepts of social exchange in the museum? If Tate Modern is formalising social exchange, what are the new forms of knowledge affecting everyone involved?

**PICKING** up on Tate Modern, I haven't been involved with Tate for a while now and I am talking from what I've observed rather than being part of the discussion. What I have observed is that, for whatever reason—and I suspect there are some valid reasons in the museum's terms, some of which might be financial—Tate Modern clearly demarcates the way people use spaces, and this has been constant since it first opened in 2000. Before the new wing was opened last year, children's and family activities tended to be technological and contained in walkways or landings between exhibition spaces. There were also games designed by artists that you could borrow as a family to relate to specific gallery displays, very much with an idea of a nuclear family, very controlled. One of the things we did differently at Tate Britain (although it stopped when my boss, Director Stephen Deuchar, and I left), was to create different kinds of social intimacy in the galleries: you'd have an event that would encourage people to come and do practical activities in big clusters in the galleries themselves, lying on the floor, messing around—doing what is done in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall (but confined there). In contrast, what we were doing at Tate Britain was much more about giving more autonomy to visitors (including children) to use the space freely, including the galleries. Young people put on gigs in the galleries, or in a programme called 'Visual Dialogues' they worked with artists to make interventionist interpretation within the displays. Tate Modern has always been very controlled about behaviour in the galleries, including in Tate's collection displays. Different rules applied to the Turbine Hall—you can mess around and you can do your thing—and these are epitomised by the anti-BP performative demonstrations by Liberate Tate: you can go and do



your intervention, you can lie down, but it's confined to the Turbine Hall. When Liberate Tate demonstrated at Tate Britain, they occupied a range of gallery spaces. Now the space known as Tate Exchange at Tate Modern, where you can go and have discussions, reinforces this demarcation of spaces. It's difficult to know how it will evolve, but as far as I can see, the Exchange space is like playground space, again it's separate from art. And 'play' or exchange is often discursive and for adults: conventional public programmes territory. I am not saying that's wrong, I am just saying that is a very controlled environment and less interesting to me. (And I should add that whenever we had events involving clusters of people in the galleries at Tate Britain, we always left some galleries relatively quiet, contemplative.)

**WHAT** we were doing when I was at the Hayward was, for me, inspired in part by the memory of an exhibition I'd been to there in 1978, famously seen as a feminist or women's exhibition (the Hayward Annual 1978, known colloquially as the Women's Hayward Annual). I went to a discussion between Mary Kelly, who was exhibiting, and the film historian Laura Mulvey. A group of people turned up for this event (maybe all women, I think) and, as I said, the Hayward didn't have a separate space, and in my memory there were a couple of chairs for the speakers and the rest of us sat on a mix of chairs and cushions on the floor of the gallery. Physically as well as intellectually it connected us with other discussions we might have been part of as feminists in that period, outside the gallery, when we would sit around talking with each other—for instance, in consciousness raising groups—in quite an intimate way. It had a powerful effect on me, because I remember I was over-awed by both Mulvey and Kelly, they were the most intellectual feminists discussing art that I ever met, that is classic academic but for me, breaking new ground, as there had been no women academics when I was an undergraduate in the '70s. And yet, or maybe hence, it felt like we were occupying the gallery. For me that was terribly important—that sense of intellectual challenge combined with

informality and intimacy and the sense of ‘this is our space’ and ‘we are allowed to do this in our space, we are making this space ours’; it was really important. As a teenager in the ‘60s, my friends and I used to go to the Tate (now Tate Britain) after anti-Vietnam War demonstrations; it was free, reasonably warm, we liked looking at art, and we could wander around and sit down. With the Mulvey and Kelly event it felt almost as if we had brought the demo into the gallery (which, of course, many, including Liberate Tate in London, or the Occupy movement at New York’s Guggenheim, have done before and since, in different variations).

**WHEN** I went to work at the Hayward years later, I realised that I was working with my memory of events like that. All of this, I think, is very much around the social, around agency—intellectual, emotional, physical, around ownership, around intimacy and the subjective.

**AS** an educator, what is your opinion of galleries merging social experiences (like café, food) with an art exhibition?

**SINCE** I’ve largely been looking back, I want to take you right back to the situation when I first graduated and moved to London in the late ‘70s. I was living on the Stoke Newington/Dalston border, then a very poor part of Hackney, and among the new collectives was Centerprise, a place for meetings, a community bookshop, a café, and a children’s nursery. People often forget about the nursery, which was an absolutely vital part of its political strategy. In Britain in those days, art was definitely a minority interest, and the idea that ‘we’ didn’t ‘do’ art, ‘we’ were a literary nation, was commonly promulgated by mainstream journalists and writers. In an effort to make art more accessible, and to show new radical work, Centerprise Café showed art. I saw work by the pioneering feminist artist Jo Spence there, when she was part of the photography collective Hackney Flashers. I didn’t mind the fact that it was in the café

especially, I enjoyed the exhibition although I later saw the work in gallery situations which, I think, did it more justice. When in 1980 I went to work in a gallery set up by artists, the Air Gallery (now known as Space, and linked to Space Studios), I heard my colleagues saying that whenever you put contemporary art in a café, the art always loses out: it was always just the decoration on the walls. I feel rather mixed about this, just as now I have reservations about the model of art described as socially engaged which parades forms of social interaction, including eating, within the gallery, which can sometimes seem like the art-about-art-world devouring each other. I suppose for me the important thing is not so much the café versus the gallery, but about how you conceptualise the space you're working in, in relation to the depth of thought you give to the people who might (or might not) come; you might 'host' visitors, as well as the work (which might also involve people and some sense of hosting). I think there was perhaps, in the 1970s, an idea that a chance encounter between a person having a coffee and a work of art on the café wall might engender a desire in the coffee drinker to deliberately seek out more art, or even in a rather Brechtian way, to 'critically engage' with it, using today's cliché. Without something else in the atmosphere, I'd think this is unlikely. Nora Sternfeld's work talking with firefighters and serving coffee to the public in a contested space, as part of the 2016 Bergen Assembly, is an interesting development from what is possibly a long history crossing through café life, the domestic salon, the portrait painter's studio, sociability and art. I think the key here is understanding and working with the intimacy and detail of the whole process, the whole environment, or the whole context: giving shape to the work as a whole, every part a player, every player a part.

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is a London-based artist and writer whose practice crosses the studio, the social and the institutional. A founder member of what became the Women's Art Library (1978), feminism continues to inform her thinking, most recently in her 2016 PhD, *Creating the 'Disoeuvre': Interpreting Feminist Interventions as an Expanded Artistic Practice in Negotiation with Art's Institutions*. Motivated by dialogue and mutual learning, she is currently working collaboratively with a necessarily anonymous Syrian artist who lives in Damascus, a collaboration originating in a British Council project developed when Felicity led Tate Britain's Interpretation and Education department (2003–2010).

**JERNEJ ČUČEK GERBEC**

is a conceptual artist not limited by medium. Currently he is studying an MA in the Visual Culture and Contemporary Art programme at Aalto University. His practice has roots in the theoretical, and he is currently researching the aesthetic of the everyday and the mundane. His former work was based on the theory of post-structuralism and semiotics.

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**ANNA KOROTKOVA**

is an artist working with the concepts of body and embodied knowledge through the medium of photography. She holds a MA degree in Russian Literature and is currently an MA student in the Visual Culture and Contemporary Art programme, with a one-year exchange in the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

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holds a BA in Design from the European Humanities University in Lithuania. In 2015–2016 she studied an interdisciplinary ArtScience programme in the Royal Academy of Art in the Netherlands, with a focus on interactive art and performance. Marharyta is currently pursuing an MA in Visual Culture and Contemporary Art and is interested in curating, managing and mediating art.