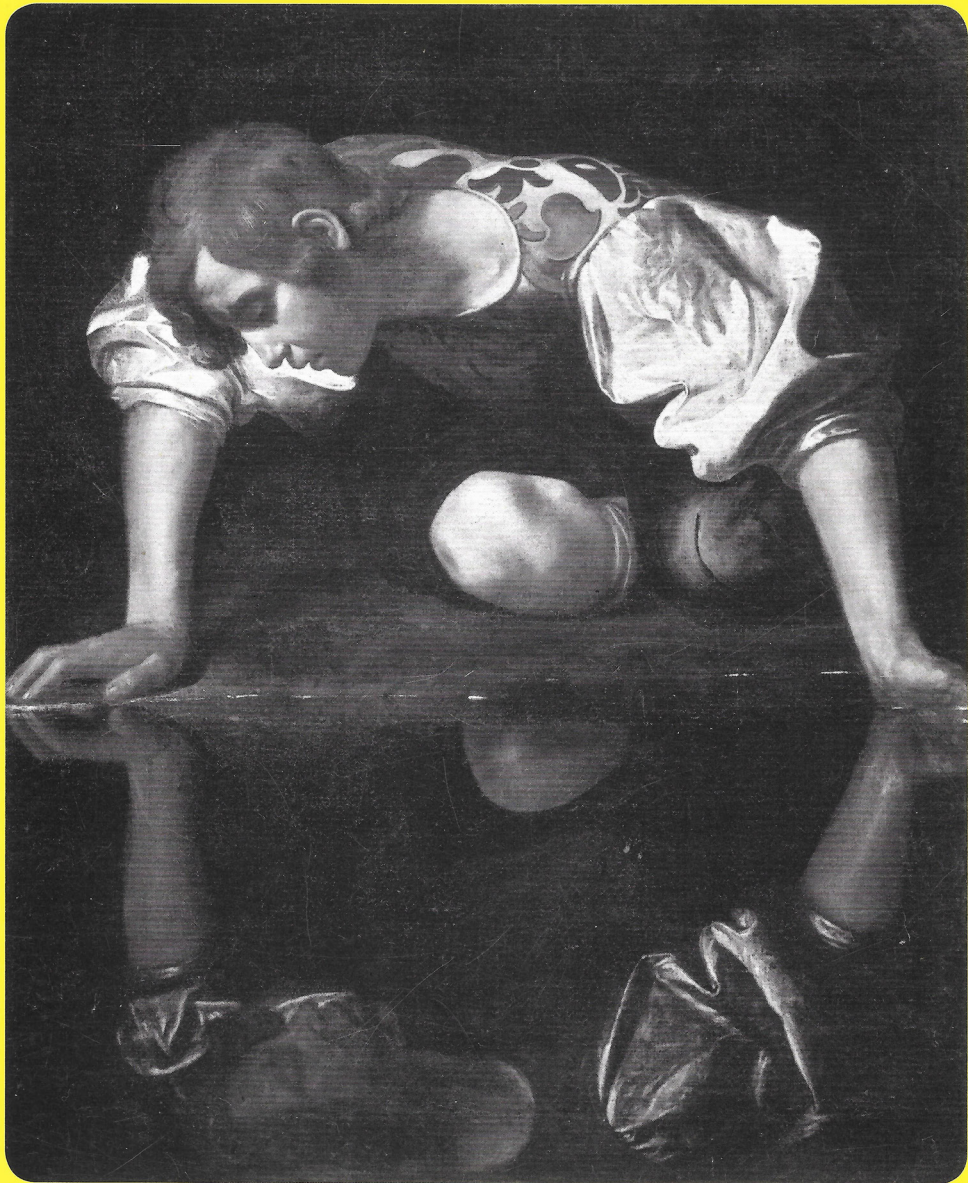


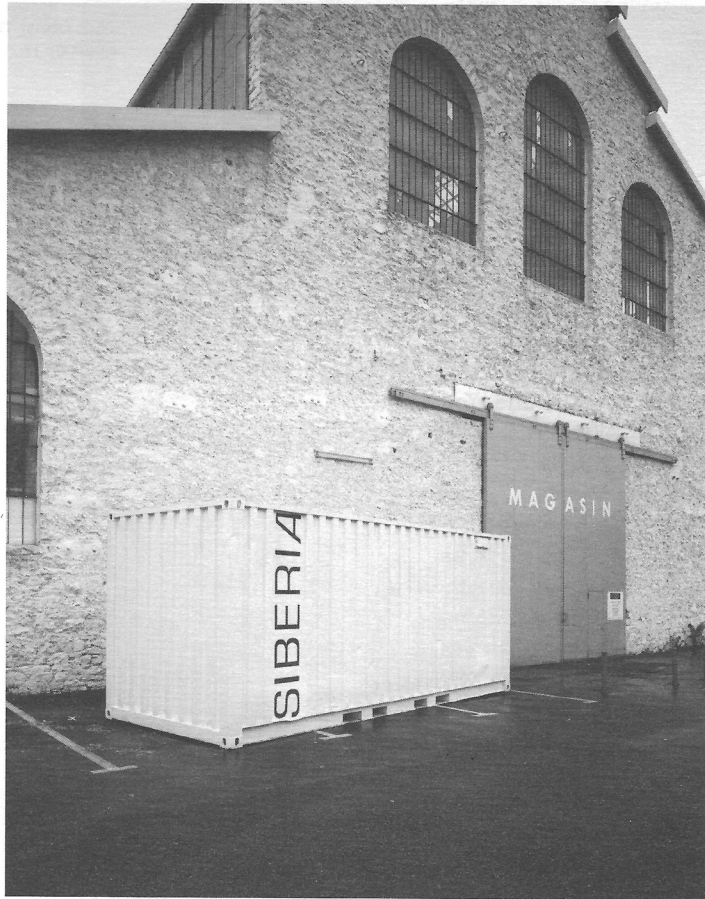
THE EXHIBITIONIST



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1988 installation view, Le Magasin, Grenoble, France, 1988, showing *Siberia* (1988) by Bernard Joisten, Pierre Joseph, and Philippe Parreno

BACK IN THE DAY



GETTING STARTED

Tirdad Zolghadr

Whether you consider it the beginning of the end, or merely the end of a beginning, the first curatorial student exhibition put on by the very first curatorial program is a milestone in the profession's history by any standards, surely. The exhibition in question was held well before I'd ever even heard of curating, at an institution I still only know through its eminent status among the pedagogical avant-garde, yet it's easy to see how this particular show holds more historical clout than many "professional" endeavors. The *École du Magasin* in Grenoble, France, is where institutionalized curatorial education first began, and its first graduation show, *19&&*, held from February 27 through April 10, 1988, included 11 artists and was organized by six curatorial students working closely with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, a student from the *École supérieure d'art de Grenoble* who had decided to spend a year at the newly founded curatorial program as a kind of exchange. As it happens, the project kick-started conversations that would influence the course of the field, in the realms of art production and institutionalized curatorial education, for generations to come. By creating a tight network of curators and artists that would prove to have remarkable longevity, it ironically also has confirmed people's deepest paranoias regarding curatorial programs and the networks they generate. To name only the more notable examples, many subsequent collaborations unfolded among *19&&* artists Philippe Parreno, Pierre Joseph, and Bernard Joisten, and also between Gonzalez-Foerster and *Magasin* student Esther Schipper.¹ A lanky young intern by the name of Nicolas Bourriaud dropped by at the opening.

Schipper, incidentally, was an essential interlocutor for this essay. To begin with, when I naively enquired whether Harald Szeemann—having reached heroic posthumous magnitude at most schools—was already so important to her classmates back in the day, she wryly reminded me of Szeemann's rather sketchy track record over the 1980s, and painted a pretty compelling picture of what the later years of that decade looked like from the perspective of a curatorial student. In retrospect, the stropky impatience of the

1. Many thanks to Esther Schipper and to Lore Gablier of *l'École du Magasin* for their kind support.

2. All translations are the author's.

show's title—&&, etc. etc., do get on with it—is picture-perfect in zeitgeistian accuracy. 1988 marked the last moments of both the Cold War and the pre-digital era, and was characterized by a growing hunger for new “vehicles,” new terms and networks in particular. Powerful ideas reconsidering the exhibition as a medium were in the air, and Collins & Milazzo—two independent curators working mainly in New York—were the freelancing sensation, setting a radically new tone of breathless connectivity, one that was only later to become the caricature of curatorial ADD. The international art market was booming as never before, still buoyed by historical innocence, bereft of the uncomfortable boom and bust experiences that were soon to follow. In France, the provinces were quickly becoming more attractive as the “centre d'art” (or Kunsthalle) model was gaining ground across the countryside. In nearby Frankfurt, too, a new Kunsthalle by the name of Portikus was now at the disposal of the Städelschule, and considered a promising harbinger of things to come.

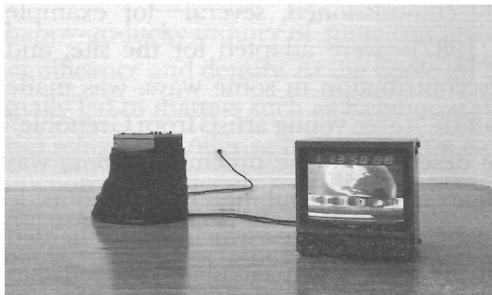
As they still do today, albeit for an even smaller group of four students, studies at Magasin involved two semesters. The inaugural year of 1987–88 was marked by an open-ended spirit of experimentation. The curriculum was dominated not by seminars or workshops but by peer teaching, shared research, and a plump Rolodex at the students' disposal. Interestingly, though the school has since embraced the term *curateur*—making it, to my knowledge, an institutional exception in France—the first generation of students did not consider themselves as such, nor even as the now-common *commissaires*, but referred to themselves officially as *médiateurs*. Students were predominantly French citizens; the government recognized the École du Magasin as professional training, and offered students a stipend based on a percentage of their previous income.

If generations of curatorial students across Europe and America were soon to grapple obsessively with the thematic group show as the supposed curatorial master's degree medium par excellence, the 19&& team did not attempt to define any overarching topical premise at any point in their process. The checklist was assembled and negotiated based on individual proposals over the course of the academic year, with the curators regularly introducing artists they'd recently encountered, and also sharing extensive documentation, interviews, and correspondence. (When differences did arise within the group, this reportedly wasn't due to divergences in artistic taste, but to curatorial criteria and personal friendships sporadically merging, to the sporadic misgivings of some other colleague.) Appropriately, the printed matter accompanying the show did not even offer a collective statement, and in a supplement to the municipality's cultural bulletin, *La Lettre Grenoble culture*, the school, for its part, affirmed that 19&& “does not offer a unilateral vision of the artistic production of the year” but merely a “range of tendencies” allowing for “certain overlaps.”² So the “&&” in 19&& indicates a sequence not only in

chronological terms but in spatial ones as well: marking no more and no less than an accumulation of correlated individual priorities in a shared institutional setting. A move that seems all the more fitting when the symbolic weight of the *École du Magasin* setting was already so unusual and ponderous.

It's probably safe to say that, in this case, the curatorial premise of open-ended accumulation is the kind that seems both pointed enough to be distinctive, and fluffy enough to travel fairly well over time. Concrete enough to be novel, but vague enough to avoid the look of anachronism. It was Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster who proposed the show's title, along with its logo, which, though not considered an artwork, did serve as the basis for a collaboration with Esther Schipper in Paris shortly thereafter. Gonzalez-Foerster also participated in the selection process of the *19&88* artists, all of which sheds fresh light on her later projects such as *Moment Ginza*, which she produced at the Magasin eight years later, and which blurred the lines between artistic and curatorial prerogatives with comparable gusto.

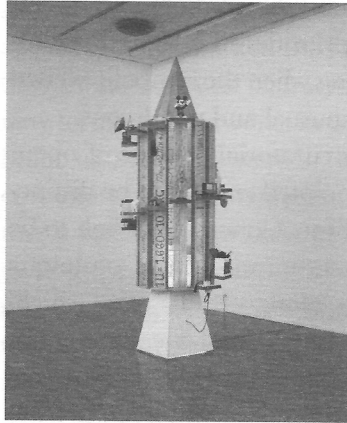
In sum, it's hardly surprising that one is hard pressed to find sturdy common ground among the participating artists, apart from their belonging to one and the same generation (all of them were born in 1960, give or take). To name but a few examples, the range of the exhibition was broad enough to embrace the meta-deadpan neo-conceptualism of an early Thomas Locher, the meditative undulations of a Marie José Burki video, the fantastical and boyish bounce of a Patrick van Caeckenbergh, and the gregarious minimalism of a Grenville Davey (Davey was soon to win the Turner Prize). The



19&88 installation view, Le Magasin, Grenoble, France, 1988, showing work by Marie José Burki

contribution of the collective Cercle Ramo Nash looks particularly enigmatic and (perhaps therefore) particularly intriguing in the handout, but the handout does not offer descriptions of the art, and in some cases omits even titles. The aforementioned supplement to *La Lettre Grenoble culture* only filled some of these gaps, though it did supply the artists' headshots (or, in some cases, "headshots") along with artist quotations of wildly varying tenor and content. The Cercle Ramo Nash hails the Situationist International with dramatic pessimism and Anthony Wilson evokes the "fragmentation" of society and the resulting "challenges to representing totality," while Parreno, Joseph, and Joisten invoke the figure of Big Brother looming on the horizon. Two decades on, paraphernalia of this kind gains enormously in value. One is of

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1988 installation view, Le Magasin, Grenoble, France, 1988, showing Patrick von Caekenbergh's *La Fusée* (1987)

course tempted to consider the haircuts and the tropes old-fashioned (“oh the 1980s”), but at second glance the latter are perfectly in line with the rhetoric of today’s artists and curators, still celebrating the Situationist fathers, the anti-metanarrative-evergreens, and the *frissons* of mutual surveillance. At the very least, such documents serve as reminders of the historical baggage that comes with the snippets we endlessly recycle, but with a swagger that suggests we’d just invented the wheel.

As for the finances, the search for sponsorship was (and, as far as I know, still is) considered an integral part of the exercise in Grenoble, and 1988 relied on a handsome list of supporters, from Pro Helvetia to Saatchi to the prominent collector-commissioner duo Yoon Ja and Paul Devautour. Though only few of the works were newly commissioned, several—for example Eugenio Cano’s sculpture *Big Red* (1987)—were adapted for the site, and *Siberia*, arguably the most ambitious contribution in some ways, was made from scratch. A joint venture on behalf of “three young artists from Grenoble” (as Parreno, Joseph, and Joisten are described in the brochure), *Siberia* was installed inside a freight container adjacent to the exhibition hall, just outside the main entrance. The three artists labeled the piece—which is documented in Parreno’s 2009 monography, itself the most widely circulated reference to 1988—a “container of images” and made it out of a variety of media, from digital animation to acrylic paint on PVC to backlit photos on Plexiglas, to represent a timely iconography of fashion, technology, and consumer goods. The literally standoffish air of the project, along with the artists’ insistence on “challenging group exhibition models,” still seem characteristic of certain discussions today, particularly though not exclusively in the context of curatorial student shows.

Other “Magasins,” in Stockholm and Bremen for example, are marked by their own historical referents (such as Tatlin’s 1916 Futurist Moscow exhibition of the same name), but in Grenoble, the term, meaning “shop” or “warehouse” in French, is tightly linked to the peculiar history of the building that houses it. For their graduation shows today, students at the École du

Magasin still have at their disposal the Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, also known as Le Magasin tout court. Twenty-three years after 1988, the roomy, postindustrial spleen of the warehouse has become the emblematic, staple aesthetic of the Kunsthalle flair, and there are many reasons for this. Not only do such warehouses woefully remind us of the lofts we cannot afford, they also offer ample legroom (with 3,000 square meters, 1988 could easily devote a generous amount of space to each work) and often serve as compelling mnemonic echo chambers for the exhibitions they house. The "manufacturing-plant-as-Kunsthalle" model monumentalizes the replacement of manual work by immaterial labor exemplified by the cultural industries. In Grenoble, the narrative bears an additional twist. The venue was erected in the late 19th century, but in Paris, not in Grenoble, under the auspices of the famous Gustave Eiffel, who was preparing his contribution to the 1900 World's Fair. Following the Parisian Grande Exposition, the warehouse was purchased in its entirety by the hydroelectric enterprise Bouchayer-Viallet Ltd., pulled apart, and reconstructed in Grenoble.

Although schools are widely assumed to be the perfect cradles of collective memory, they are, in point of fact, perfectly amnesiac in nature. Even flash mobs look like the Roman Curia in comparison. Alumni are wont to maintain their murky connections, as they did in Grenoble in 1988, but they do so at far remove from the institutions themselves, and so the latter remain largely bereft of any memory whatsoever. Faculties and directorships change, and the idea of actively safeguarding the memoria of an ever-growing body of student shows is rarely taken seriously. It's striking that such a slipshod, happy-go-lucky inquiry of mine can unearth such a rare degree of historical significance and density. At the École du Magasin, the socialization that eventually led to matters such as Relational Aesthetics exemplifies what a curatorial school can offer at its very best: a catalyst for a form of knowledge production that is deeply social in character, where the material and the theory, the practice and the ideological overlay, can potentially play roles that are less cookie-cutter, less humdrum, and less boring than usual.

But to most of us, student shows are a minor genre, and a history of curatorial student shows is simply twice the pain. And although I do understand (I really do), whether you like it or not, over the last two decades, an underexamined heritage has emerged that undeniably defines and directs the field. Curatorial training has moved from an annoying idea to a potential alternative to the reigning criteria in the field, still dictated by male bonding, copy-paste academia, and the art market, even if it will always run the risk of embodying all three things combined. In a recent interview, Maria Lind continued her pushback against curatorial training by likening it to the car industry: poised for oblivion unless it redefines itself from the bottom up. Looking back at curatorial education since 1988, it seems that systematic reinvention has been the standard fare, and will hopefully remain so for a while to come.