

Take Care

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HOW TO WORK BETTER.

- 1 DO ONE THING
AT A TIME
- 2 KNOW THE PROBLEM
- 3 LEARN TO LISTEN
- 4 LEARN TO ASK
QUESTIONS
- 5 DISTINGUISH SENSE
FROM NONSENSE
- 6 ACCEPT CHANGE
AS INEVITABLE
- 7 ADMIT MISTAKES
- 8 SAY IT SIMPLE
- 9 BE CALM
- 10 SMILE

How to Work Better (1991) is a well-known work by Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss. It consists of a ten-point manifesto that the artists found, enlarged, and had painted on the side of a building in Zurich. Their instructions are meant as a self-motivating reminder and description of their own process as artists, but are also directed to the rest of the world as a propositional code of conduct or ethic of behavior — in fact, a copy of *How to Work Better* is pinned to the wall of countless artist studios around the world, as well as above the desks of many curators, including this one.

The question of how to work or how to behave is one that lies at the root of all of our decisions. To rehearse a common truism: it's not just what you do, it's how you do it — it's not just what artists or curators do, but how they behave when they do it. **Beyond the different styles, techniques, or themes that characterize their work are the different codes of conduct that guide the way they act or behave.** The same could be said of museums or art institutions: running alongside the question of what they are showing is the question of how they are behaving.

In recent years, small organizations around the world have been formulating different answers to that question. **They are taking risks not just with what art to show but also with how to work and how to behave as an institution.** In other words, in addition to having an adventurous and forward-thinking curatorial program, they are experimenting with new institutional and curatorial methodologies that articulate a new ethic of behavior and a new code of conduct. As a result, they are outlining a context for what it means to propose an alternative today. My own effort towards this, with The Artist's Institute in New York, is but one proposition among many others.

With mainstream museums and commercial galleries often showing uncommercial work by uncommercial artists, **the role historically played by alternative spaces** has been made somewhat redundant. **Now is a time when MoMA shows performance art, the Whitney shows site-specific art, the Guggenheim shows institutional critique, and the New Museum shows artists who are *Younger Than Jesus* (2009).** Commercial galleries such as Reena Spaulings or Alex Zachary allow the most prominent collectors to buy work by the most uncompromising artists. And those smaller organizations that manage to stay non-profit and independent soon find themselves invited by the Tate Modern's "No Soul for Sale" (2010) or the ICA's "Nought to Sixty" (2008).

While these mainstream or commercial structures might take risks with what they show, few take risks with how they work. In most cases, they produce exhibitions, one after the other, and strategically compete for larger audiences and for more widespread recognition. The challenge for a contemporary alternative space or curatorial approach is **to behave differently.**

For example, the logic and structure of exhibitions could itself be called into question. Much of the difficulty with making an exhibition lies in the fact that to extract something from circulation — an object, image, practice, or idea — and interrupt it, examine it, and exhibit it, is to do it a great injustice. The philosopher Bruno Latour, among others, discusses the life of *things*, referring, in the largest sense, to all that which is usually not considered to be cognizant human subjects: objects, pictures, rocks, animals, natural systems, etc. These things, he argues — objects, images, and ideas included — have their own agency and won't simply sit still under someone else's microscope, on someone else's terms. In fact, what makes them compelling is precisely what animates them, what they want, and how they behave when they are set loose into the world. In other words, objects, images, and ideas have lives to live, and instead of conceiving of an exhibition as a way to reign them in and use them to carefully prove a point, an exhibition could be something much riskier: a way to discover, along with the audience, how that point will behave and where it will wander as it lives its life. In this sense, the opening of an exhibition could mark the beginning of a curatorial idea, not its end.

Traditionally, it's the other way around: curators open their shows and play the role of explicators, working to enlighten visitors who don't know what they know. They are expert performers of the *I Know* and avoid displaying any sign of the *I Don't Know*. **Instead, an alternative curatorial behavior could be to embrace a more vulnerable relationship to knowledge. An institution could stop behaving like an explanation machine**, where those who know are teaching those who don't know, and invest in what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls the equality of intelligences¹, where those who know something engage with those who know something *else*. It's not about preparing explanations in advance, but about following the life of an idea, in public, with others.

Clearly, the goal is not to reject the expertise of the *I Know* in favor of the anti-intellectualism of the *I Don't Know*, but to step outside of that binary entirely. Following the art critic Jan Verwoert², it means performing both the *I Know* and the *I Don't Know* in the key of **the *I Care***. Verwoert suggests the *I Care* as an act of giving what you don't have to people who don't want it, or, in other words, as an act that is more *affective* than it is *effective*. If an institution goes from knowing to caring, it could point to the affective relationship that ties people to ideas and become a place for attachment rather than consumption. After all, the ideas that make us curious are not the ones we fully understand, but the ones we care about — *I Love It* is always more compelling than *I Get It*.

In unpacking the *I Care*, Verwoert also points to the importance of the figure of the muse: he or she who inspires and influences you — or, etymologically speaking, who **amuses you**. Funnily enough, one tends to think of the curator as being the artist's host, inviting him or her into an institution, but it's actually the other way around: we are the guests of the artists we choose to work with. **In that context, like for any other houseguest, we should find a way to say Thank You. An exhibition could be an homage instead of a lesson—a way to thank artists, not dissect them.**

Curatorial responsibility involves the invention of ways to appropriately pay tribute to the **lives of artworks and artists**—not the invention of curatorial methods for their own sake. **By always putting the artist first, a good exhibition behaves like a guest who takes care to do whatever is true to the spirit of the work.**

To pay homage to someone falls somewhere between admiring them and studying them. A tribute is neither an analysis nor just a party. Giving a toast is about making people care, not about making them understand. The act of appreciation, by nature, is not didactic — it's what you like, not what you know — but it is social: it involves not just what you like, but caring about it so much that

¹ See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press, 1991

² Jan Verwoert, "Exhaustion and Exuberance," *Dot Dot Dot 15*, 2007, p. 89-112.

you want to share it with others. It's more than naming a favorite book, it's recommending it. The affective curatorial approach of the *I Care* can inhabit that space between an homage and an explanation, between a tribute and an analysis, between a recommendation and a nomination. Once again, this is a place where the *I Know* co-exists equally with the *I Don't Know*, in the form of the *I Care*. While the uptown museums conduct their art historical power games and the downtown galleries conceive their elusive tactics and smart chess moves, those eager for another model could perform **the vulnerable, dangerous, and radical act of wearing their heart on their sleeve.**

While behaving in the key of the *I Care* can be an act of celebration, it can also be one of critique: the art of the toast is closely aligned with the art of the roast. An alternative and affective curatorial behavior involves the biting quip and critical edge of *parrhesia* — to use a term resurrected by Michel Foucault³ — or fearless speech. To practice *parrhesia* is to have the courage to speak frankly from a position of exposed vulnerability. Unlike the careful and calculated strategies of a much safer practice of *rhetoric*—the debate of differences between equals — *parrhesia* involves a willingness to stand for irreverent or critical values from the perspective of a less powerful member of the community, and is certainly relevant to those smaller and more vulnerable institutions.

To care also means to take care and to pay attention, and in order to properly do that, as argued by philosopher Bernard Stiegler⁴, we need to slow down and take our time. While museums build more buildings, produce more exhibitions, raise more money, place more ads, and hope to draw more crowds, **another model could be to do less and spend more time with what we do. Rather than feeding the conveyor belt of the *next, next, next*, we could stop channel surfing and demand a more focused and sustained attention span. One way organizations do this is by simply repeating themselves: year after year, the commercial gallery Miguel Abreu in New York, for example, repeatedly hosts a screening of films by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, insisting on their sustained relevance to the gallery's identity and program as a whole.** Another way many organizations take their time is by emphasizing research over exhibitions: if exhibitions traditionally last six to ten weeks, research-based initiatives allow for the pursuit of speculative questions over longer periods of time, leading to more in-depth and textured thinking. BAK in Utrecht, for example, commits several years to thinking through a single theme through exhibitions, publications, conferences, or private roundtables, all placed on equal footing. Mamco in Geneva, although far

³ See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, Semiotexte(e), 2001

⁴ See Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010

from being a smaller alternative space, conceives of an exhibition as a single program that evolves over several years, made manifest in a series of episodes. Another mainstream yet relevant institution, the Dia Art Foundation in New York, not only presents single exhibitions that last a minimum of eight months, but is also committed to maintaining (and caring for) expensive long-term projects such as Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977) or *Earth Room* (1977). While many galleries and art centers seem seduced by Hans-Ulrich Obrist's *dontstopdontstopdontstop* (2006), others aren't, and prefer to *stop*.

The media, of course, always favors the fast and the furious. Therefore, stepping off the conveyor belt also means falling out of the news cycle, and behaving this way will inevitably draw smaller audiences. **This smaller scale does come with several advantages: not only is it much cheaper to maintain a smaller physical space, but this intimacy will also favor a face-to-face encounter and demand a more active and immediate engagement.** Organizations such as Salon Populaire or Silberkuppe in Berlin, Kunstverein in Amsterdam, Pro Choice in Vienna, Front Desk Apparatus in New York, castillo/corrales in Paris, or New Jerseyy in Basel are no larger than 100 square meters, and are designed with that very characteristic in mind.

Since they invest in face-time rather than in ad-time, these small institutions build their audience as the **result of a self-selecting process.** In other words, the people who pay attention are not the ones who are encouraged to do so, but the ones who choose to do so. Since anyone is invited to attend any of the exhibitions or events, this is not a case of speakeasy or strategic exclusivity, but it effectively creates a space for self-selected and **engaged community of people who care.** The goal is not to engage in a competition to attract more audiences, **but to establish a smaller gift economy for anyone who is curious enough and makes the effort to come by for a visit, whether a friend or a stranger.**

More than anything, the challenge for a contemporary alternative space today is to behave the way Martin Luther King Jr. called upon *all* people to behave: to be maladjusted. By evoking a term usually associated with a psychological defect or illness, Dr. King famously declared that he was proud to be maladjusted, and that he would never adjust himself to a society that discriminates against racial minorities. **In the art context, these smaller institutions are proud to be maladjusted: they do not adjust themselves to an art community obsessed with knowledge, power, and scale.** Instead, they step onto the smaller and more vulnerable roads and allow learning to replace teaching, camaraderie to replace competition, the homage to replace the explanation, and the dance move to replace the chess move.

As a tribute to Fischli & Weiss, let me conclude and summarize by proposing an updated set of instructions for a contemporary ethic of curatorial behavior. It could certainly hang over the desk at The Artist's Institute.

HOW TO BEHAVE BETTER.

1 REMEMBER THAT YOU

DON'T KNOW

2 LEARN TO CARE

3 SAY THANK YOU

4 WEAR YOUR HEART ON

YOUR SLEEVE

5 INSIST ON TALKING

FACE TO FACE

6 FOLLOW THE LIFE OF

AN IDEA

7 SPEAK FRANKLY

8 TAKE YOUR TIME

9 BE MALADJUSTED

10 TOAST