



TOTAL SERVICE ARTISTS

by Raphael Rubinstein

Poster designed by Martin Kippenberger for the group show "Birken Ness," 1987, offset lithograph, 33 by 23 1/2 inches, from the portfolio "Good Reproductions Needs No Excuses." © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Otsuka, Cologne, Cologne.



"What is art?" hasn't been an interesting question for a long time, but the query "What is it that artists do?" might be. We know that artists make art, but what about all the other things they do as artists? I'm not thinking here of the many artists who operate in expanded fields, artists whose creative process might involve running large workshops, consulting with scientists or designating some daily transaction as a work of art. What I have in mind, rather, is someone like the late Martin Kippenberger, who presented himself in a strikingly prescient way as a "total service" artist. I borrow the term from Diedrich Diederichsen, who, in his introduction to Uwe Koch's 2003 catalogue raisonné of Kippenberger's books, identified the German artist's "total service concept, according to which none of the procedures connected with the production and sale of the visual arts—invitations, opening, party, food, meetings with art collectors, studio visits, the artist's clothing and the clothing of his associates, posters and other PR/advertising methods and finally catalogues—could be left up to professionals or to routine."

Of course, over the last half century—since Fluxus, let's say—many artists have assumed responsibility for all manner of ancillary "procedures," sometimes explicitly claiming them as art: Dick Higgins (artist as publisher), George Maciunas (artist as landlord), Marcel Broodthaers (artist as curator), Joseph Beuys (artist as lecturer), Lynda Benglis (artist as advertiser), Jeff Koons (ditto). Then there are hyper-entrepreneurial artists who want to do (and have) it all, albeit with extensive outsourcing: Andy Warhol, Takashi Murakami, Damien Hirst. Do-it-yourself tendencies shouldn't surprise us, since from its beginnings modern art has involved the pursuit of autonomy (from tradition, from society, from patronage, from limiting styles), a refusal to cede control to anyone other than the artist. Further, by taking on such everyday, seemingly "noncreative" activities, artists have contributed to another quintessentially modernist project, the demystification of art.

Among the jobs that total service artists are tasked with, one of the most important is that of being their own historian or critic. This can take various forms, including interpretive commentary, corrective letters to editors or archival research into the history of a local art scene. It can even involve crafting imaginary scenarios of how one's work might be received by major institutions. Usually, artists become their own historians because no one else is paying attention to their work or because the people who do are doing so badly. A pioneer in this practice was Italian artist Guglielmo Achille Cavellini (1914-1990), who coined the term *autostoricizzazione*, or "self-historicization," in the early 1970s.

Today, by choice or necessity, more and more artists have adopted the total service model, but when they pursue "total service" and "self-historicization" they must confront issues and ambiguities that weren't a concern for Kippenberger or Cavellini. They have to ask themselves: does embracing "total service" represent an expansion of autonomy and mark a further step in the demystification process, or does it simply reflect the increasingly vulnerable status of every worker in the post-Fordist economy, what philosopher Paolo Virno refers to as "precarity"? Like workers everywhere, and especially in the U.S., artists are expected to assume more risk and more responsibility than before. Just as employers in the larger economy provide fewer and fewer benefits, and technology allows businesses to shift more labor to their customers, so do galleries reduce the services they offer, compelling artists to take on many functions they traditionally provided, such as promotion and archiving. There's a certain irony to this situation, since the artist has been seen as a model for the freelance/adjunct/outsourced worker, and also for the multitasking, jack-of-all-trades employee. Noting that artists originally acquired a special status in capitalist society because they "refused to follow the specialization required by other professions," Hito Steyerl has warned that "the example of the artist as creative polymath now serves as a role model (or excuse) to legitimate the universalization of professional dilettantism and overexertion in order to save money on specialized labor."¹

In this article I will look at eight artists whose work involves some aspect of total service or self-historicization; I will also touch on the role of several artist-run exhibition spaces on New York's Lower East Side. Each of the artists I discuss inhabits a specific situation, acts in response to specific conditions. For Cavellini, it was, in part, the challenge of being perceived as a collector rather than an artist, and perhaps also living in a country with an underdeveloped infrastructure for modern and contemporary art. Kippenberger, at the outset of his career, needed to distinguish himself from other Berlin artists still wallowing in stoned '70s subjectivity, and then labored under an increasing sense that he didn't have much time on this earth. Mark Flood has emerged in a city (Houston) where the only avenue to having a contemporary art context was to create it yourself. Jamar Shatkin's interactive approach to a gallery show is influenced by his experiences as part of the art collective This Red Door. Looking for an alternative to the dandyism and negation embraced by some other painters of her generation, R.H. Quaytman finds herself affected by the particulars of her family history. David Diaz offers his own career as a test case for how artists can get written out of art history and write themselves back into it. Adrian Piper felt the urgency of wanting to "set a minimum standard of respectful treatment of the work of African-American women artists, below which no critical review would dare sink."² Lerer Munk is inspired to bring recognition to the forgotten and marginalized artists of New York, and, as a self-described college dropout, to pursue what he calls a "self-directed educational program." As will be seen, these artists are not linked by style or medium. What they share, rather, are certain ways of being in the world—and being against it.

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Mark Flood:

Alternatives to Patronage

At first glance the temporary shows Mark Flood has been mounting over the last few years might seem like updated versions of "Fiasco," the famous 1988 warehouse exhibition in London that Damien Hirst organized to promote his and his friends' art. (Although Houston is Flood's main base, he has studios in several locations around the U.S.) The strategy has been used frequently before and since: young artists find a cheap or, better yet, free space, fill it with art, do some heavy PR, and hope that the art world flocks to the show. Flood's projects, however, are far more complex and contradictory, which should be no surprise from an artist whose paintings veer from the exquisitely decorative to the emphatically rude.

From July to December 2014, leading up to and during Art Basel Miami Beach, Flood turned his storefront studio in Miami's South Beach neighborhood into a gallery. Dubbing it Mark Flood Resents, he filled the space with work by young artists from Houston, many of whom traveled to Miami for the show at his expense. At the same time in New York, he mounted a similar project, occupying a small space on 23rd Street in Chelsea next door to Zach Feuer, his New York gallery. In an interview on the website *Hyperallergic*, Flood explained how the gallery grew out of his insatiable collecting: "I was always sending collectors and dealers to check out the studios of artists I thought were great. But often, there wasn't much art to see, because I'd already bought it all! Occasionally, it got pretty ugly, with the collectors cursing me and the dealers trying to insult me by saying I was a dealer too. I tried being generous, leaving a few morsels behind as I consumed everything in my path like a cloud of locusts, but I'm just too selfish. So I decided to have a gallery in Chelsea where I could show people what art I was buying, and let them do the math, and the hunt, on their own."⁸

A more ambitious entrepreneurial project of Flood's in 2014 was the Insider Art Fair. For a week in May, it occupied the entire second floor of the former Dia building in Chelsea, a space many people might know as the site of the annual Independent Art Fair, where a select group of institutional galleries present work. Rather than imitate a standard art fair, Flood treated his enterprise as a cheap brothel. The floor was divided into small spaces, some featuring a mattress on the floor and one or more of Flood's paintings on the walls. Lighting was practically nonexistent and for opening night Flood, who loves nothing better than to shatter decorum, hired a group of strippers to perform. An information booth displayed stacks of fake paper currency and a supply of the Insider Art Fair catalogue. Priced at \$100 a copy, this 188-page catalogue intersperses menage-toi-tois satirizing shifty dealers and "sambo collectors" with countless images of Flood's paintings, many photographed casually in his studio or outdoors in summer's backyard. Perhaps the most interesting part of the catalogue comes at the end in the form of 25 pages of writing from Flood's iPhone. He shares his studio to-do lists, anti-art-world rants (sometimes in the form of poems), movie scenarios, aphorisms and, finally, his detailed plans for the Insider Art Fair itself. Still more of Flood's writings can be found in *Clark Flood*, a 576-page self-published tome from 2009 that brings together his columns from the Texas-based online art magazine *Glasnost* and "unpublished, unfinished and unedited drafts dumped straight out of Clark Flood's hard drive." (Flood constantly assumes aliases, and sometimes sends assistants to his openings rather than going himself.)

Flood began writing about art in the 1990s, long before his opulent "luscious" paintings and terse, stenciled text canvases drew the attention of dealers and collectors. Under a female pseudonym, he published exhibition reviews in the *Houston Press*, an alternative weekly. Art of dealers and collectors. Under a female pseudonym, he published exhibition reviews in the *Houston Press*, an alternative weekly. At the time, as Flood told me during a visit to his Houston studio earlier this year, he felt that there was "no context" for his art in Houston, so he set about creating one. Even then, he was keen on flouting the rules; all his *Houston Press* reviews, he says, were written in advance of him actually seeing the shows.

One could see the support that Flood has given to young Houston artists in recent years—employing them as studio assistants, buying their work and showing it in his pop-up galleries—as a continuation of context-building, but it's also motivated by his deep dislike of nonprofits. He wants young artists to be able to support themselves by selling their art, rather than waste their time filling out grant applications and running after museum curators. For Flood, nonprofits are institutions that perpetuate bureaucracies that use artists "to justify their existence, to maintain their funding, to keep their salaries."⁹ They don't encourage hard, safe art and, especially outside of major art centers, delude young artists into believing that getting a grant or being included in some mediocre show will help their careers. Although Flood often expresses contempt for the art market, and likes to quote the observation attributed to Duchamp that "critics, dealers and collectors are only so many faces on the back of artists," he seems to find it much more palatable than the nonprofit world. His aim with his pop-up galleries and extensive collecting, he told me, is to find an alternative to the kind of patronage that forces young artists to beg for money.

One of Flood's mottos is "don't give info."¹¹ Artists, he believes, should resist all requests for explanations of their work and biographical background. He doesn't like, and doesn't provide, the press releases, résumés and artist statements that artists are usually expected to furnish. "When they ask me for the info, I can't do it. It fucks up the work." Flood's refusal to engage in the mediation of his work seems at odds with the "total service" model until you realize that he's not against communicating with the public, he just wants to do it on his own terms (see the 576 pages of *Clark Flood*).

For all his caustic taunting of the art world (his text paintings often sport phrases like "where museums" and "another painting"), Flood, like Kippenberger, sincerely enjoys many aspects of having an art career and wonders why other artists don't get more involved with activities like designing magazine ads. "I want to make great ads," he told me during our conversation. "I can't believe that other artists don't make ads." Ultimately, however, Flood's motivation for devoting so much time, thought, energy and money to activities that are not directly connected to making paintings may be as much indebted to a central tenet of postmodernism as to his crusade against exploitative patronage. "It's not enough to make a work," he reminded me, "you have to place it into a field of meaning."¹²

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