JEAN-MARIE BOLAY AND BÉNÉDICTE LE PIMPEC

Collaborators and Fabricators

The Delegation Process at Hand in John M Armleder's Work

In his study of John M Armleder's oeuvre, written on the occasion of a major exhibition of the artist's work in 1987, the art historian Maurice Besset emphasized Armleder's close connection to the Fluxus movement. Citing Robert Filliou's famous principle of equivalence, which equates "well made/badly made/not made,"[1] Besset then proposed an Armlederian extension: "Made by someone else."[2] This addendum to Filliou's principle, that is, the artist delegating the production of a work, was the starting point of the research we carried out at Geneva University of Art and Design under the direction of Ileana Parvu between 2018 and 2020. Although delegation is not in itself a new phenomenon in the history of art—one need only recall the way artists' studios were organized in the modern period—certain procedures that motivated this approach, the expanded principle of equivalence being a telling example, are specific to a way of making art that appeared in the second half of the twentieth century. These processes explicitly posit delegation as part of the work, rather than as something engaged for practical reasons that range from saving time to borrowing the skills and contexts of production that the artist does not have.[3]

The idea of delegating the fabrication of a work as part of the artistic process is historically linked to the emergence of art that brings together the idea and the work, its physical or, in the case of performance, event-based realization remaining secondary. This way of making without making appeared at the end of the 1950s, at the crossroads of the Fluxus movement and what was grouped together as conceptual art.[4] Language thus became conceptual art's preferred material.[5] An artwork could thus be reduced to a series of instructions to be carried out by someone other than the artist. On the one hand, it was analogous to a musical score interpreted within the framework determined by its composer, as in Sol LeWitt's work.[6] On the other, the primacy of the idea meant that the physical work was referred to as a model. As Joseph Kosuth wrote in 1966 about his Photostats, "The actual works of art are ideas. Rather than 'ideals' the models are a visual approximation of a particular art object I have in mind."[7] In both conceptual art and Fluxus, there existed intermediate positions, represented by such artists as Lawrence Weiner or George Brecht, for whom the question of the material fabrication or interpretation of a work was of no consequence.[8] This double question—of

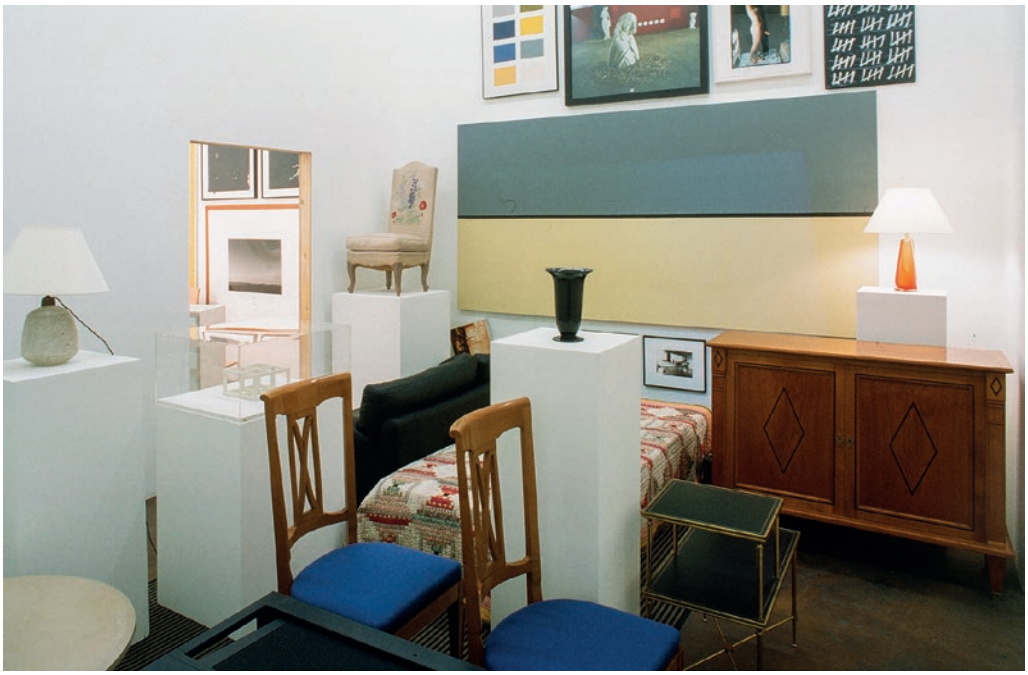
https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111018737-009

the freedom to interpret the artist's production instructions in creating the work and of the nonnecessity of the hand—took up part of our research. Armleder, to whom we dedicated an important chapter in the book *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire : Entretiens sur la production de l'art contemporain*,[9] plays an interesting role in this history, in that he occupies a kind of middle position between the moment in the 1960s when these questions crystallized and current practices. His work incorporates certain questions raised by Fluxus and, perhaps less frontally, some of the issues at stake in conceptual art in a unique manner.

An important figure in the Geneva art world, Armleder was born in 1948 into a family of hoteliers in his native city. As a teenager, he had two encounters that could be described as decisive: first, with John Cage at a music festival; second, with his drawing teacher, who inspired in Armleder and some classmates and rowing friends to found an artists' group named after him, the Group Luc Bois. They established a collective practice of artistic experimentation that included happenings. Making art that welcomes chance, the idea of unpredictability and the Cageian influence were introduced in a subgroup, the Max Bolli group, started by Armleder and his rowing mates in reference to a driving-school shop window filled with photographs of accidents.[10] From these different entities, the Écart group (in French, *écart* means gap or deviation) emerged in 1969, on the occasion of an eponymous exhibition in a form that deviated from their usual activities. In Écart, Armleder assumed various roles in addition to that of artist: event planner, exhibition curator, gallery owner, bookseller, and performance artist. He also established a way of working characteristic of his practice: "Since the Écart period, I have very often worked with people, but their expertise does not interest me. It is perhaps rather the dissolution of the author, the sharing that attracts me. This has always been my thing."[11] His liking for obscuring the notion of authorship, the beginnings of which could be seen in the collective exhibition *Linéaments*, inaugurated in 1967 in Geneva, was reaffirmed in such works as *3 à 4 pièces*, dated 1968, 1973, and 1976, signed by him but produced collectively. Another example is the suite of drawings titled *3×(2×1),* produced in 1977 with Patrick Lucchini and Claude Rychner, cofounders with Armleder of Écart, which involved copying, borrowing, delegation, and the interchangeability of artists.[12] Écart ceased its activities in 1982, and from then on Armleder pursued an individual career with increasing success but never moved away from his earlier approach.

A glimpse of the artists with whom Armleder spent time during this period sheds light on his knowledge of the theoretical concepts that underlie his practice. During the Écart years and later, he met and exhibited Sol LeWitt, Andy Warhol, Lawrence Weiner, George Brecht, and John Cage, among others—in short, figures who were deeply involved in questioning notions of authorship, the ready-made, delegation, and the collective, including the two movements already evoked: Fluxus and conceptual art.

Although since then, he has never belonged to any group, a sense of the collective continued to permeate Armleder's work, particularly in his numerous collaborations with artist Sylvie Fleury, for whom he himself even executed pieces. Armleder became widely known for his *Furniture Sculptures*: sculptural and pictorial works combining furniture and references



1 John M Armleder, view of the *Ne dites pas non !* exhibition, Mamco, Geneva, 1997

to the history of modern painting, and in particular to Constructivism (fig. 1). These works marked the beginning of an increasingly assertive process of delegation, with Armleder leaving the choice of furniture to be painted to his exhibition assistants, museum staff, or his son.[13] The artist came to think of himself, in a now-famous phrase, as "collateral damage."[14] From then on, he called into question the necessity of his own presence in his work.

The issues of delegation and authorship are frequently mentioned both in the artist's statements and in texts written about him. Our primary focus here, however, is to explore other points of view of his practice. Since Armleder's relationship to delegation and authorship has always been clear and agreed upon, we also needed to look at the other actors in the delegation process: assistants, curators, and others involved in this practice in different capacities. This text proposes to examine the artist's rhetoric, bearing in mind the anthropological approach defined by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: considering the interview as an "invisible negotiation," systematically doubting the spoken word, and applying the principle of triangulation—which is to say, cross-referencing ideas from various sources.[15]

This cross-referencing is all the more necessary in that Armleder seems to be aware of the possible effect of his words, as evoked by Friederike Nymphius, who in her book on the artist[16] recounts a studio visit by a journalist in 1988, during which he responded to her "with malicious self-deprecation." This is also supported by a remark by Christian Bernard, who was the director of Mamco (Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Genève) from 1994 to 2016,

about Armleder's status as an *homme de cour,* surrounded by the court.[17] We can therefore understand that Armleder's viewpoint is not only insufficient to understand delegation, but that his importance on the art scene makes his collaborators (occasional or not) wary of expressing themselves in this respect.

Our reflection is informed by a series of interviews conducted as part of our research. Armleder's position was examined from two perspectives: those of the Lausanne-based artist Stéphane Kropf, who was his assistant for some ten years, and those of curators. Our interview with Christian Bernard offers a general view of Armleder's way of working with an institution over the long term. Our joint interview with artist Pierre-Olivier Arnaud and art critic Julie Portier describes the ups and downs they experienced in their collaboration with Armleder while putting up an exhibition of his work in the space they codirect. The artist's views and those of his assistant and the curators were then compared with one another and with those from other sources to determine which elements may activate delegation, including questions of context, the function of chance, the role of collaborators, and issues of authorship. Above all, what we seek to achieve here is to know if, paradoxically, and despite everything, in the delegation process, the hand still keeps a place in Armleder's practice by invoking notions of control and pleasure.

1. Delegating Artistic Production

The artist Stéphane Kropf, who is currently in charge of the bachelor's of fine arts course at the École cantonale d'art de Lausanne (ECAL), was a student of Armleder's there before becoming his assistant from 2006 to 2017. According to Kropf, Armleder did not pass on to him any particular skills as his professor; his teaching took the form of informal conversations, during which they established a friendly relationship. Kropf acquired important technical knowledge on his own, however, and had been hired as chief project manager at the Mamco, where he worked on the major Armleder retrospective presented in 2006. It was on this occasion, in a somewhat fortuitous way, as he explains in his interview, that he became Armleder's assistant. During the installation of the Mamco retrospective, Armleder was discussing a future exhibition to be held at the Kunstverein in Hanover and then at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University in Massachusetts; the curator at the latter was expressing concern about who would install the show there. Kropf, who by chance was walking by, was hired by Armleder on the spot. He thus unexpectedly found himself in the role of assistant, having to manage exhibitions in large institutions without the presence of the artist. This position led him to have to make decisions on the other side of the world, sometimes without being able to consult Armleder due to time constraints, even if those decisions remained essentially technical:

> Before I was the one who made choices with, in opposition to, or instead of John, I was above all, the one who made the mural paintings, which meant having specific technical expertise. But onsite, especially in Seoul, the directors very quickly expected me to make decisions, which never bothered me. I don't think John did either, it was part of the game. . . . Little by little, after certain exhibitions, I happened to make a lot of decisions.[18]

Before hiring Kropf, Armleder generally made arrangements in the context of exhibitions, borrowing from local and available manpower to whom he gave only minimal instructions, as he explained to Nymphius in 1999.[19] According to Christian Bernard, delegation in the framework of hanging an exhibition was for Armleder a question of opportunity, of convenience, a pragmatic decision.[20] Hiring someone on a permanent basis thus called into question his opportunistic, impersonal way of doing things; it also redefined the role of assistant, which primarily became that of an intermediary, as Kropf pointed out:

> He thought it was strange to have an assistant, a studio manager. For my part, I didn't even think about what title I might have. He's the one who gave me that role, he gave me a kind of endorsement. So I became his assistant, the person who would also be his interlocutor for galleries, museums and others, which he had never had before.[21]

For Armleder, having an assistant came down to unburdening himself of the work of executing his own pieces. It was less a matter of delegating the work than of "work" in itself: in the 1970s, saying that an artist "worked" was frowned upon. Since the artist did not produce anything, he had no need for assistants or employees, and the fact of having them brought him into a capitalist relationship to his work.[22]

This stance probably explains why Armleder had not thought earlier of hiring an assistant. But in 2006, he was surely at a point in his career when success was making it difficult both to manage his studio work and organize exhibitions, even if the latter was in part delegated to the manpower found onsite. Having an assistant thus made him "question his real relationship to delegation."[23] When Armleder was to be present during the installation of an exhibition, Kropf's role was also to prepare the groundwork for him: "I had to create the right circumstances: playing surfaces he would enjoy, good conditions, good restaurants, good hotels; and then he could produce nonstop."[24]

Delegation also took place in the studio, where it was not just a matter of technical skill. Even if, Bernard explained, when Armleder

> worked with Stéphane Kropf, Stéphane took his time making things, which he did very well, by the way—historians will be able to easily see that the pieces made by Kropf are better made than the ones John made himself, or those they made together. Kropf has skill and a taste for craftsmanship that John never had, and he had a very good feeling for what John wanted.[25]

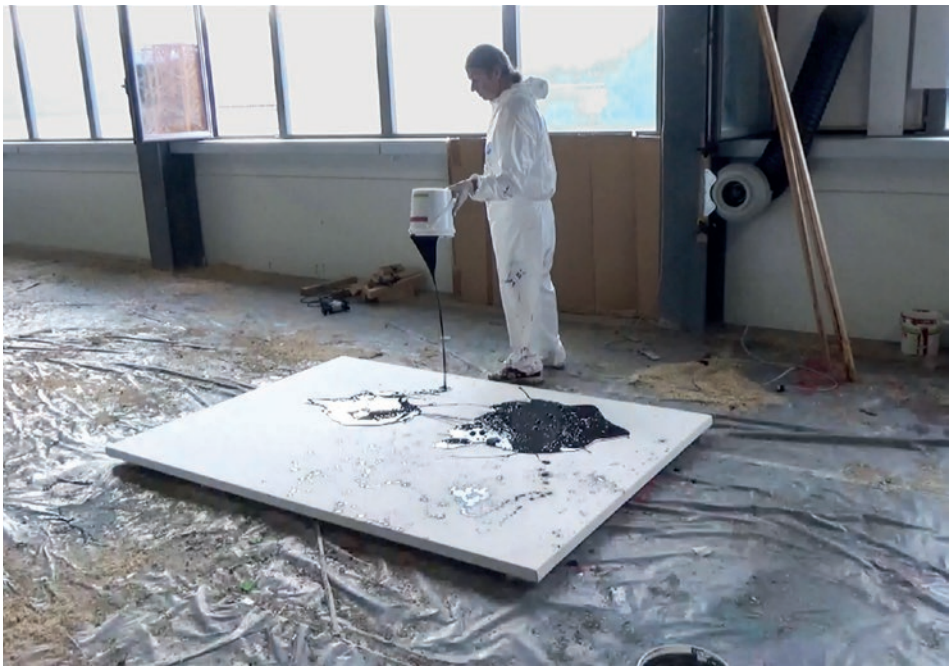
But according to Kropf, "John knows technique. He has a knowledge of craft due in large part, I think, to the fact that he grew up in the hotel business . . . . He never delegated technique entirely, or if he did, only by accepting that the result would be an Armleder thanks to a final little twist."[26]

Therefore, there was neither a lack of knowledge of technique nor a refusal of it, which Armleder was keen to point out to Nymphius, saying, "I am convinced that my technique is pictorial, it's just that my drip paintings are not 'paintbrush paintings.' I've often found pleasure painting in the traditional manner, but unfortunately, it's something I don't do anymore."[27] On the contrary, although technique was not invoked, and although it was not a criterion for work that, in the absence of skill, would also motivate the process of delegation, it did reappear in that little Armlederian twist that Kropf mentioned: "I've always been fascinated by the way in which John was able to reappropriate his work. He added that famous 'Armlederian' touch at the end."[28] This "great little thing," the "twist" resonates with the "virtuosity" that Lionel Bovier, director of the Mamco since 2016, talked about in relation to Armleder's way of selecting elements from his environment that made up his *Furniture Sculptures*.[29] This virtuoso ability to take hold of an opportunity, which implies a kind of discreet, modest expertise, took advantage from the context or perhaps accidents. According to Kropf, the element of chance constituted "the very pretext of the work . . . which is always sublime when it comes to [Armleder]."[30]

This was accompanied by a palpable pleasure in making things; Armleder loves to paint and makes no secret of it (fig. 2).[31] "John has always produced a lot of paintings," Kropf explains. "When I worked for him, I mostly worked alongside him. I did the paintings that required climbing a ladder, he did the ones on the floor."[32] Armleder also made certain works almost exclusively by himself, such as the drip paintings he mentioned in an interview with Nymphius on his relationship to technique.

Although he finds pleasure in painting, Armleder does not give importance to an artist's personal expression. "In all the paintings I make," as he explained to Parvu, "there is also a pre-established composition that I imagine. Then comes the fabrication, which I love doing. But I don't give it any kind of expressive value."[33] Whether he or someone else actually makes the work is irrelevant to him.[34] On the one hand, Armleder is conceptual because he has what the art historian Moira Roth has called "the aesthetic of indifference," inherited from Cage, which led Armleder to describe an artist as "collateral damage."[35] On the other hand, also like John Cage, he takes an ambivalent position regarding the idea of a system: for him, making a preestablished plan can only exist if it includes the possibility of amending it, even abandoning it completely.[36]

Herein lies a kind of paradox, which is emphasized by the assistant's presence. Armleder places a great deal of importance on the conceptualization of the work. The work—or creation—thus takes place before the work is fabricated, but without everything being thought out in advance; and the technique imagined for its fabrication is not part of the concept and has no particular meaning.[37] Still, fabrication is necessary; without it, the work would not



2 John M Armleder in his studio, August 31, 2018, Satigny

exist.[38] But as Kropf explained, "John has always had the fantasy that someone would show him a piece of his that he would have no recollection of making, that he would never have thought of making, or even that he would never have made."[39] This implies that there is a desire in Armleder—which remains a just that—to abolish the act of creation as well as its author, so that only the work would remain.

Armleder says he does not believe in the notion of authorship,[40] which for him is completed by the Duchampian viewer.[41] In fact, he gives more importance to the viewer's gaze than to what he himself might wish to convey in his work. The burden is therefore on the viewer to interpret the work, which is devoid of any authorial intent.

However, if we cross-reference our interviews, this interpretation contradicts the artist's inimitable twist, his personal touch, "that great little thing that would give his exhibitions a little Armlederian boost, which we [Kropf and Armleder] could not have decided on together."[42] As Kropf puts it:

> At the last moment, [Armleder] would say: "I'm going to add a green plant. I'm going to put a couple of things in this corner, and it will be perfect." That is where it's not about technique on one side and the idea on the other. I've never been the one making the pieces and John the one thinking about them, because it's always intermingled.[43]

Is it really a question of technical virtuosity, in the sense of a mastery of artistic practice that invariably leads to confirming the position of author? Or, on the contrary, could one speak in Armleder's case about a consummate sense of form? This ambiguous relationship to concept and to authorship is, in fact, fully assumed by the artist:

> Yes, I think Stéphane could have told you about it too, because I often gave him a kind of plan for my works. He would follow it, and then, at the last moment, I would contradict a decision . . . . So often, at the last minute, I would decide to do something different, which made Ludovic [Bourrilly, his new assistant] or Stéphane protest. I'd tell them that I'm the artist after all [laughs]! Which I'm not really convinced of, by the way . . .[44]

Armleder thus exercises a form of control over the final work and its execution. He assumes the position of the artist at the last minute—not during the process of making the work, but while he is being shown the work, or while it is being exhibited. This contradiction seems to have been heightened by his hiring Kropf as his full-time assistant:

> For some years now, with all the work I have been doing with Stéphane Kropf's assistance, I have realized that, since he is an artist too, he sometimes takes the initiative. . . . This is undoubtedly part of my process, but there are also times when I take it back. Sometimes he does what he wants while thinking at the same time that it's what I would have liked to do, that he's really serving the ongoing project. Which he knows as well as he knows me. But recently, when he was making a painting, I stopped him and said: "Ah no, that's not it!" But in reality, he's as right as he is wrong. And so am I.[45]

Paradoxically, the presence of an assistant at his side reinforced Armleder's position of authority, even if this position only seems to be assumed tangentially. If the assistant's role is initially to act as an intermediary between the artist and art institutions, it could be said that he is also the intermediary, the mediator between the concept and the work, a tool among other tools, which would explain Armleder's reversal and the reaffirmation of his authorship position.

2. Welcoming Whatever Comes

Is the human factor as an intermediary between concept and work also decisive in the artist's relationship to an art institution? The modalities of working in a museum seem to be the same as those discussed above, as seen for example in Armleder's *Furniture Sculptures*, in which he often delegates shopping for component parts to someone else. The reasons for this are clearly the same as those cited earlier: saving time, welcoming the element of chance, the random opportunities that arise in a certain place and with those who happen to be there. However, this delegation process, as we will see below, does not exclude Armleder's direct

participation in hanging an exhibition,[46] nor even the possibility that he takes on the role of curator. In talking about an exhibition held in Capitou in 1994, as in a similar situation in Baden Baden in 1998, Armleder told Nymphius that he had initially wanted to collaborate with the curators and had accepted their proposals, but that when he arrived in Capitou, he unconsciously began to change everything and thus to take on the role of curator himself.[47]

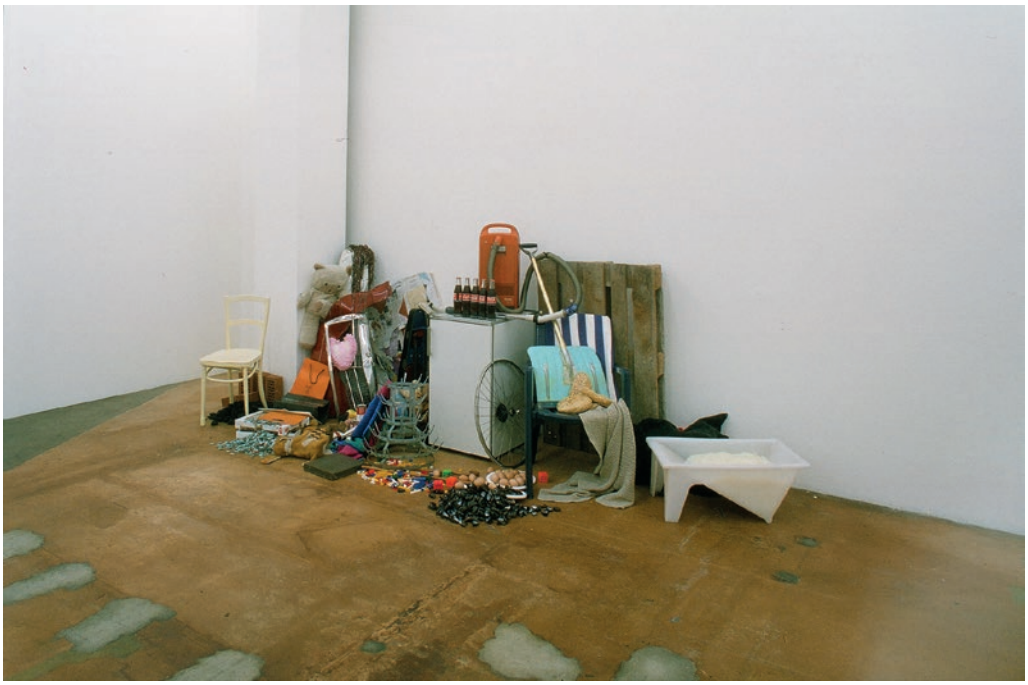
However, this approach can sometimes cause problems, including Dantesque hangings at the last minute. What can be seen from the institution's point of view as a certain casualness on Armleder's part—a sort of refusal to plan an exhibition in advance, with a certain degree of improvisation—engenders a situation that urgently mobilizes a great deal of the museum's resources at the last minute. In this case, it might even be referred to as delegating stress to the curators or the installation team, although Kropf, Arnaud, and Portier deny having had this experience. For Kropf, Armleder himself

> is never stressed, so he's never in a hurry. On the other hand, John's motto is *bâcler*: you have to *bâcler*. We talked about this a lot, especially to try to translate the word into English. The verb "to botch" didn't seem to fit since it focuses on doing something wrong, while in John's case, *bâcler* means to "finish" it by fully accepting the final outcome.[48]

Being open to accidents, which is the pretext for the work, is in line with the philosophy of the Max Bolli group, which developed around the glorification of failure and the philosophy of Cage, who dismissed the idea of an artist's omnipotence. As Armleder explained, "I think that since I was very young, I've always had a taste for grabbing onto chance, or for programming it, in a way. It's something that has always driven me, in fact. When I was young, I actually met John Cage, the person who introduced chance into music."[49] Armleder also told Françoise Jaunin that an accumulation of errors was much closer to reality, a stance that Bovier calls being open to the "Id."[50]

But how is this openness to what happens in a situation experienced at the heart of an art institution? To find out, we turned to Christian Bernard, who worked with Armleder on several occasions and who, in the 1990s, delegated to him the curation of the Suite genevoise space at the Mamco (fig. 3). Due to a lack of time, or as a game, the artist delegated in return the realization of his projects to the museum. This was the case for the exhibition *Don't Do It* in 1996, for example, which Bernard described as follows:

> John wasn't around much, and it was very complicated to get him to come up with an idea. When we did manage, we were pretty sure we had one, but he was travelling a lot at that time. The exhibition *Don't Do It*, held in 1997 in the Suite genevoise, was made according to instructions in a fax. At one point, we said to him: "We can't go on like this, you have to give us some instructions." So he sent three proposals [which we produced] . . . . The exhibition was totally delegated. We had no choice. John wasn't there, and I'm sure we opened it without him.[51]



3 John M Armleder, view of the *Don't Do It* exhibition, Mamco, Geneva, 1997

But the process of delegation took place even in the artist's presence. On the occasion of another exhibition at the Mamco, the artist gave directions—sometimes very vague ones—to the museum, so someone could produce one piece or another. The teams tried to follow his requests as closely as possible, and Armleder never commented on the production, because, according to Bernard, "his position is consistently to welcome what comes. Among all the gestures in his work, the dimension of welcoming what arises, whatever presents itself, is fundamental."[52]

In this case, the question of failure seems therefore unimaginable, since Armleder does not think about examining what comes from or returns to the institution, perhaps because in mounting an exhibition, the notion of authorship is diluted within the institutional system. In fact, a whole system, not just a person, is activated in order to produce the work.

In the same interview, the art historian Valérie Mavridorakis remembers some striped paintings made for Armleder by students at the fine arts school in Rennes that were obviously failures, but which the artist accepted:

> The example in Rennes, in 2006, is quite telling. There was a three-part exhibition at the University's Galerie Art & Essai, at the Galerie du Cloître at the art school, and at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, where he did a hanging of the contemporary collections. John had delegated the fabrication of striped paintings to students. They were using scotch tape as a guide, but the art

> students in Rennes were not particularly expert with this technique, unlike those at the ECAL. The paintings were failures. From a technical point of view, they were awful. We were appalled and thought John would refuse them. But he found them fine, because they were bad.[53]

This way of doing things is a strategy of avoidance on the part of the artist, who seeks to choose, to decide as little as possible. Bernard went so far as to talk about Armleder's withdrawal from decision-making.[54] Working in an institution with Armleder, as in the case of working with an assistant, therefore means carefully preparing the groundwork and creating or accompanying situations so the work can be accomplished. From the institution's viewpoint, this implies placing a great deal of trust in the artist: Will he get involved early enough or actively enough to ensure that the exhibition opens on schedule? From Armleder's viewpoint, this means trusting the institution to take the artist's place in the decision-making process and in coming up with proposals.

3. Delegating Invention

A last and more recent example illustrates this issue of trust very well: the exhibition *À Rebours*, which took place in 2017 at La Salle de bains, an exhibition space for contemporary art in Lyon. This exhibition showed us how delegation between artists and curators could take place from a distance, from the first contact to the invention of an artwork. La Salle de bains has been codirected since 2017 by the artist Pierre-Olivier Arnaud and the art critic Julie Portier. Its specificity is that it proposes exhibitions that evolve while they are being shown to the public and that are presented in three different forms.

From the outset, Armleder adopted an ambiguous position regarding the exhibition project. While he immediately accepted it, he also made a point of telling the curators that they did not need him in order to organize the exhibition. He asked them pointedly to reach out to him on a regular basis, describing himself as "lazy" and encouraging them to recontact him to obtain a scenario for the three parts of the exhibition. Arnaud and Portier were not too discouraged and took these warnings more as a sign of modesty than as a way of working. Once the dates of the exhibition had been determined, Armleder at first remained vague about his intentions, but subsequent telephone conversations led to an initial proposal:

> Portier: We set the dates and that's when we understood . . . that he expected us to tell him what we expected of him.
>
> Arnaud: We set a first date, and he told us, "Ok, I'll get to work. Call me back next week." We called him back and, as he also did in so many successive phone calls, he replied, "I haven't done anything this week." We then clarified our request and let him know that we wanted there to be wallpaper.[55]

The exhibition organizers had considered several avenues of work with Armleder, but time was running out, so they eventually decided on the content of the exhibition themselves and commissioned a specific task from the artist.

> Arnaud: The following week, we received two proposals for wallpaper designs. We were obviously very happy, but we still needed to know which one of them to produce. Time was running out and we had to start production. John Armleder's response was quite simple: "You choose."
>
> Portier: We knew that was his way of doing things in this type of situation, but it was strange to receive two proposals.
>
> Arnaud: No matter how well we were aware of it, experiencing it was something else entirely.[56]

Kropf, who at the time was still working occasionally for Armleder, explained that the more demands were made on the artist, the more he resisted doing anything.[57] We compared and contrasted the curators' points of view with that of Armleder, who felt that he had given sufficiently precise instructions, that he himself had suggested the idea of the wallpaper, and that he had simply left the curators to choose the color.[58] This first part of the exhibition had probably not yet mobilized a particularly successful relationship with the delegation process, but it had already highlighted two different realities: that of the artist and that of the curators.

Arnaud and Portier soon discovered that they had to take the place of Armleder if they wanted to exhibit his work. Although they had expected him to provide them with other elements for his exhibition, nothing came. The curators then tried to imagine what an Armleder object or sculptural ready-made might be.

> Portier: [W]e ourselves started looking for things, as if we were his assistants going shopping with him, except that he wasn't with us. We ended up saying to ourselves, "Well, this is a John M Armleder work, this is not." I think that's the strength of this work. With ready-made objects, borrowed styles and unsigned styles, there ends up being an obvious formal signature. It's not a petty pleasure, but I think there's curiosity on his part, which we felt, to see things that are shown by others and that could be signed by him.
>
> Arnaud: I put a lot of quotation marks around these terms because we were not "forced" to make decisions for him, but up to what point had we been "pressured" or "cornered" into it? As time went on, delegation took place de facto, in a tacit way. It was like a contract established with us without our knowledge. As the discussions progressed, the work seemed to be going nowhere. Except that in fact, the work was moving forward; the process of delegation, which we had to accept, was taking shape.[59]

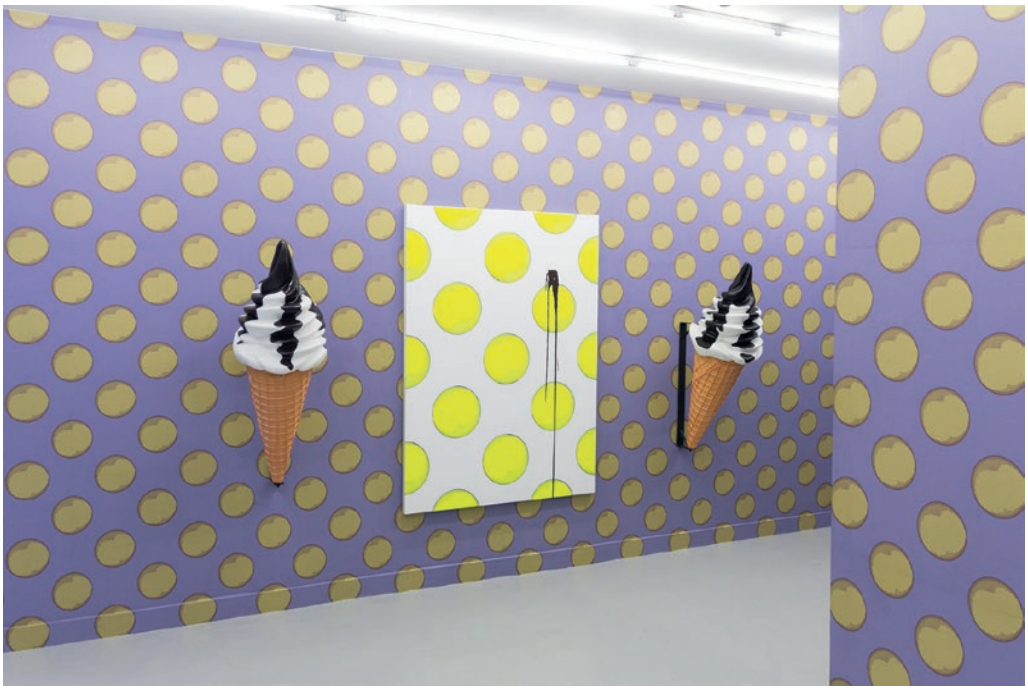
Although the two curators had not been unaware of the artist's way of working, they were nonetheless disconcerted by the extreme freedom he had given them. They had to fulfill themselves the role of the artist, which had been left vacant.

> Portier: Do you really want to tell the truth?
>
> Arnaud: You had been saying for a while, without thinking about this project in particular, that it would be great to do an exhibition of fake ice cream cones.
>
> Portier: These were objects that I'd been looking at for a while, in summer, at seaside resorts. . . . They're standardized objects, but some of them are touching, when they try to stand out by being a little classier than others. So we looked for Italian-style ice cream cones. This allowed us to put the question of design aside while still having objects with a strong connotation. We found them in a black-and-white form—vanilla and chocolate—which we really felt was a kind of baroque perversion of Suprematism.[60]

Arnaud and Portier submitted the two objects representing ice cream cones to Armleder, who accepted them enthusiastically, confirming at the same time his future presence at the opening. Arnaud explained, "From the moment he told us this, we understood the entire mechanism, both that he was going to 'sign' the exhibition and also that he was going to be present and therefore 'validate' the ensemble. It seemed clear to us at that point that we were in this process of delegation."[61]

Armleder saw the introduction of the two ice cream cones into his exhibition very differently. According to him, there was nothing extraordinary about them. What the curators saw as an experiment in inventing Armleder's work was little more than a proposal that the artist accepted. Arnaud and Portier nevertheless believe that the delegation process was actually a test. If they managed to make the right choices, the artist would be more involved in their exhibition; if they made poor choices, he would not have gone to the opening, although we can assume that he would have agreed to accept the exhibition in any case.

The third part of *À Rebours* included a painting by Armleder produced by Kropf, in which the wallpaper motif appeared to be stained by dripping chocolate ice cream (fig. 4). The artist's reappropriation of both the objects and the ensemble formed by the ice cream cones and wallpaper is embodied in this painting, in this very pictorial gesture. This last element is a materialization of Armleder's way of working. To begin with, the artist delegated not only the execution of the work, but also its invention. In this way, he first diluted the notion of authorship, then asserted his position as author in extremis by means of a painting produced by his assistant. Although he himself did not produce any of the works presented in *À Rebours*, it was the dialogue with him, from a distance, made up of negotiations and vague instructions, that enabled the exhibition to exist.



4 John M Armleder, view of the *À Rebours 3* exhibition, La Salle de bains, Lyon, 2018

4. By Way of Conclusion

Armleder's position on delegation is paradoxical and cannot be reduced to a strict operational opposition between making, making someone else make, and not making. In this, it is very different from the process of delegation in conceptual art, of the execution of a work according to instructions, as in the works of LeWitt. Rather, it builds on what Parvu, quoting Tim Ingold, describes as a situation traversed by forces and energies that the artist gathers, synthesizes, or distills.[62] In his *Pour Paintings,* Armleder questions his position as author in yet another way. He makes these works horizontally, covering the canvases with paints and various materials before raising them up halfway through the drying process. The chemical reactions produced by the mixed substances act long after the artist has finished working. Armleder has no control over the drips that result from this process and that continue to transform the work. It is odd, according to him, to think that "works of art should be permanent and never change."[63] Delegation is thus not necessarily limited to people, assistants, or curators—it can also be achieved by the materials themselves.

Although he rejected the position of inspired author, Armleder paradoxically invented a style all his own. Curators and assistants strive to define it, despite the fact that it is so difficult to identify. The work is initially inseparable from collective thinking, made in dialogue with an

art institution, a context, and assistants. Nevertheless, Armleder reserves the last gesture for himself. At the end of the process, he returns to his position as author.

Because of his reputation, Armleder is favored with a great deal of tolerance on the part of his collaborators. Although he has undoubtedly succeeded in desacralizing his position as the all-powerful artist-author of a work, he nonetheless exercises a kind of formal control, which may be in contradiction with the rejection of the artist figure. This contradiction can give rise to tensions with his collaborators, occasionally or frequently, in that the artist's way of doing things is sometimes incompatible with the expectations of art institutions or assistants. He is, no doubt in spite of himself, a figure of authority, perhaps supported by the art world, and the casual way in which he delegates can be difficult to live with for those who experience it. To borrow his own expression, one would be tempted to consider his collaborators as "collateral damage." This raises the question as to whether delegation requires a relationship of trust established beforehand, with someone familiar with an artist's work, or if it can be done with anyone, even outside the art world, in accordance with the Fluxus principle of blurring the boundaries between art and life.

Translated from the French by Laurie Hurwitz

Notes

1 This principle was evoked for the first time by Robert Filliou in his installation *Principe d'équivalence : bien fait, mal fait, pas fait* in 1968.

2 Maurice Besset, "Untitled," in *John M Armleder*, ed. Dieter Schwarz, exh. cat. (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1987).

3 Ileana Parvu, "Manières de faire," in *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire : Entretiens sur la production de l'art contemporain*, ed. Ileana Parvu, Jean-Marie Bolay, Bénédicte le Pimpec, and Valérie Mavridorakis (Geneva: Haute école d'art et de design; Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2021).

4 If Dada or Duchamp may be at the origin of such a practice, let us note that Henry Flynt, a composer associated with Fluxus, is credited with the association of the notions of art and concept: "Concept art is first of all an art of which the material is concepts, as the material of e.g. music is sound." Henry Flynt, "Essay: Concept Art [1961]," in *An Anthology*, ed. La Monte Young (New York, 1963). The essay can be viewed at https://henryflynt.org/aesthetics/conart.html.

5 Ibid., and Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

6 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 79–83.

7 Joseph Kosuth, "Notes on Conceptual Art and Models," in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 3.

8 Lawrence Weiner discussed in Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), and Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*.

9 Parvu et al., "John M Armleder," *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire*.
10 On the Bois, Bolli, and Écart groups, see Lionel Bovier and Christophe Chérix, *ECART, Genève, 1969–1982 : L'irrésolution commune d'un engagement équivoque* (Geneva: Mamco; HEAD, 2019).
11 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 76. All quotations from interviews published in *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire* have been translated into English by Laurie Hurwitz.
12 Lionel Bovier, "L'irrésolution commune d'un engagement équivoque," in *John Armleder*, ed. Lionel Bovier (Paris: Flammarion, 2005).
13 See examples in the exhibition catalogue *John M Armleder : Furniture Sculptures 1980–1990*, ed. Claude Ritschard and Charles Georg (Geneva: Musée d'art et d'histoire, 1990), pp. 15–103, esp. pp. 20, 181, 185, 229, and 234.
14 The expression often appears in Armleder's interviews. See, for example, Parvu, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 29, or Françoise Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation : Entretiens avec Françoise Jaunin* (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 2016), p. 40.
15 Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, "La politique du terrain : Sur la production des données en anthropologie," *Enquête*, no. 1 (1995): 71–109.
16 Friederike Nymphius, *John M Armleder: Pudding Overdose* (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2002), p. 75.
17 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 99.
18 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," pp. 45–47.
19 "Daher nutze ich oft die Hilfe von Assistenten oder anderen Künstlern, um meine Werke erstellen zu lassen. Ich gebe ihnen nur noch die notwendigen Anweisungen und sie führen sie für mich aus." Friederike Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius, Genf, 28.10.99," in *John M Armleder: Pudding Overdose*, p. 154.
20 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 97.
21 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 44.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 51.
25 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 96.
26 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47.
27 "Ich glaube schon, dass meine Technik malerisch ist, nur dass die Schüttbilder vielleicht keine 'Pinsel-Malerei' sind. Ich habe gern und oft mit traditionellen Techniken gemalt, leider mache ich das heute nicht mehr." Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius," p. 155.
28 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47.
29 Lionel Bovier, "Peinture abstraite et sculpture d'ameublement," in *John Armleder*. Claude Ritschard goes so far as to describe Armleder's attitude as paying attention to circumstances. Claude Ritschard, "Pièce nocturne, dit-il : Le temps, la non nécessité, l'ambivalence dans la démarche de John M Armleder," in *John M Armleder : Furniture Sculptures 1980–1990*.
30 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47.
31 Stéphanie Moisdon, "Entretien," in *John Armleder.*
32 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47. Due to serious health problems that Armleder has often spoken about, he can no longer climb ladders.
33 Parvu, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 29.
34 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, p. 95.

35 On the aesthetic of indifference, Moira Roth quotes a statement written by John Cage, to accompany an exhibition of Rauschenberg's white paintings at the Stable Gallery in 1953:
"To whom
No subject
No image
No taste
No object
No beauty
No message
No talent
No technique (no why)
No idea
No intention
No art
No feeling . . ."
Cited in Moira Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," *Artforum* 16, no. 3 (November 1977): 50.

36 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 75 and Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius," p. 154.

37 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, pp. 94, 97–99, 148.

38 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 74.

39 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 50.

40 Ibid., p. 74.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 47.

43 Ibid.

44 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 73.

45 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation,* p. 154.

46 Dieter Schwarz, Suzanne Pagé, Jiri Svestka, and Dieter Honisch, "Préface," in *John M Armleder*, p. 7.

47 Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius," p. 157.

48 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 45.

49 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 26.

50 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, p. 152. Bovier, "*Whatever by Whomever* ou Du principe de 'remise en jeu' dans le travail de John Armleder," in *John Armleder*, p. 44.

51 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 85.

52 Ibid., p. 89.

53 Ibid., p. 97.

54 Ibid., p. 96. Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, pp. 149, 153.

55 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Pierre-Olivier Arnaud et Julie Portier," p. 58.

56 Ibid., pp. 58–59.

57 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 51.

58 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 71.

59 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Pierre-Olivier Arnaud et Julie Portier," p. 59.

60 Ibid., p. 63.

61 Ibid., p. 65.
62 Parvu, "Manières de faire," p. 13.
63 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 77.

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