MACHINE PROJECT Guide to

CURATING AND PLANNING EVENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Philosophies and Concepts 6
- Events as Containers 6
- Events as Laboratories 7
- Some Words on Risk and Failure 8

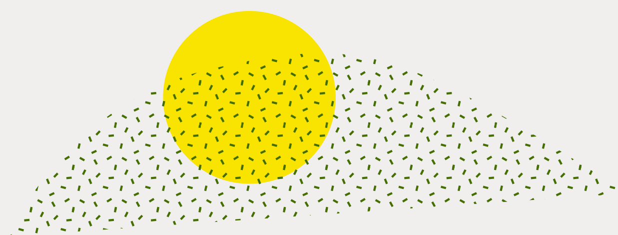
How to Choose What to Do 11
- When to Say Yes 11
- When to Say No 12

The Players 15
- The Curator 15
- The Artist 18
- The Audience 21
- The Site 25

Producing an Event 27
- Events are Stories, So Tell a Good One 27
- The Reveal 30
- Narrative Hooks 32

Afterwards 44
- How the Story Ends 44
- Documentation 45

Review 47



Introduction

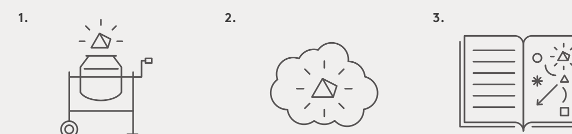
About this Guide

Hi! I'm Mark Allen. As Machine Project's founder, primary director, and curator, I've produced hundreds of interactive artworks, performances, and workshops over the past fifteen years. Some were successful; others were terrible and embarrassing. With this tool kit and its two companions, I'd like to help you to maximize the successes and minimize the embarrassments (though those are helpful, too)

Machine Project, founded in 2003, is a non-profit presentation and educational space investigating art, technology, natural history, science, music, literature, food, and whatever else humans like to do. Machine began as a place for me to sleep, experiment, make a mess, and host my friends' work. Since those early days, we've grown into an internationally-recognized organization working with both artists and institutional partners to create the conditions for new ideas to emerge into culture.

After many years of practice, I've distilled some basic ideas, philosophies, and techniques for event-based programming into this tool kit. It's for anyone interested in producing events as a form of cultural programming. It's for anyone who wants to make something exciting happen with other people but isn't sure where to start. Curating events can seem scary when you're just starting out, but I believe the best way to see how something works (or doesn't) is to just dive in and start doing it, so let's!

In the text that follows, you'll find:



- concrete advice based on my experiences curating and organizing events
- an overview of the goals and philosophies at play in Machine's particular approach to event production
- anecdotes and exercises for organizing effective events

My hope is that this tool kit will inspire, encourage, reduce anxiety and lead to the growth of independent programmers, organizers, and can-do curators across the country.

Opening Night

On the night of Machine Project's inaugural event back in November 2003, our doors opened at 10:10 p.m. and closed promptly at 10:20 p.m. If you arrived at 10:21 p.m., you were met with a locked door, through which you could discern the sound of a thundering guitar and mysterious flashes of light. At exactly 10:30 p.m. the event came to a halt, and Machine's door opened. Assuming your curiosity had the better of you and you stuck around, you could now wander inside to experience the aftermath of the performance you just missed.

If, however, you made it inside before the door closed, you found yourself in experimental animator Kelly Sears' kingdom of ice and crystals and dragons and digital wizards, set to a live metal band. Called "Sexi Midi," this event was described to my then small list of email subscribers as: "a brief event featuring prog rock video with live guitar and bass shred. Bud Light keg beer. Also kittens."

It was a fun event, but not necessarily one for the ages, which suited me just fine. My goal wasn't to orchestrate the perfect experience; it was to pick something to do, find people to do it with, and do it.

Developing this strategy over the course of Machine's first year, I hosted a dizzying array of events and people: an object-focused installation about the Cold War and British code-breaker Alan Turing; an erupting, room-sized reconstruction of Mount St. Helens made of flowers accompanied by a hot chocolate fountain; a BYOB beer social and poetry reading; a showcase of bioengineered sculptures made of oysters and reishi mushrooms; a leather body-builder torso you could ride like a mechanical bull; an experimental hip-hop show/orange juice squeezing; concurrent workshops in DIY smoke bombs, ice cream, and extracting stimulants from over-the-counter cough syrup; a live-action medieval battle between armored warriors using melee weapons; and a timed series of "extreme PowerPoint" presentations.

Once I started using the gallery as a public space, my notion of what an event could be evolved quickly. I began to view an "event" as a flexible container capable of holding almost anything—as a structure (an excuse, really) I could use to get people directly involved with new ideas and topics. Once that understanding took root, Machine really came into its own, and I viewed every person I met as a potential presenter (or subject matter) of an event. I made a point of inviting non-artists as often as not, which both opened up wonderful possibilities and set Machine apart from other spaces in Los Angeles.

Machine's reputation began to grow, which led to more funding. We now had the resources to present more than one event a week, and soon we were hosting something every single day—sometimes even

more than once a day. Because why not? During this era we maintained an emphatically high volume/low budget approach, with income going towards keeping the space rented and the lights on, and the focus squarely on sharing ideas and having a good time.

Since those early years my focus has expanded, and we've taken part in many long-format collaborations outside of the four walls of our Echo Park gallery. What has remained consistent, though, is a gleeful enthusiasm for supporting all kinds of people in their various weird and sometimes esoteric interests. This spirit is still at the heart of everything Machine Project does.

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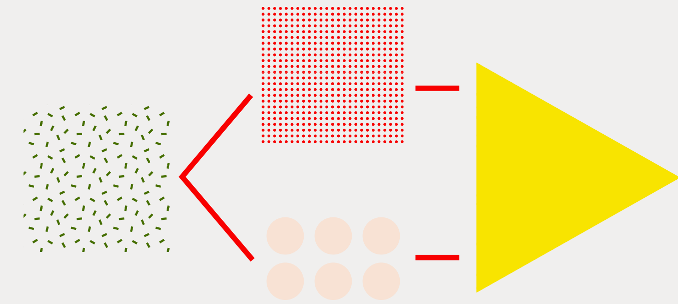


Philosophies and Concepts

Events as Containers

Ideally, the container for an event is a space—both psychic and physical—that is safe, in that it is designed with clear expectations that guide the actions of both the audience and the artist. My concept of the container goes beyond the choice of site; it encompasses everything that happens in the space that you—the curator—have created. This means you'll want to have a plan detailing what time the doors open, whether or not someone will greet people as they enter, if and where the audience sits, who runs the lights, and when the event begins and ends. You'll want to have a clear understanding of the artist's expectations and be prepared for the unexpected.

Events as Experiments

Let's consider the role of the library versus that of the research laboratory. The library—like the museum—is a place where objects and knowledge deemed valuable to a culture are collected. A research lab is the opposite kind of institution. It represents the start of a creative process rather than the endpoint—the testing ground for ideas that may someday end up being collected and catalogued in a library. In this analogy, the Met in New York is the library and Machine Project is the research laboratory, and events are our experiments.

And if you're a small, nimble laboratory like Machine, you can take an experiment from start to finish in just a few days. For example:

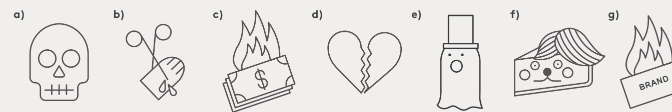
- Monday: Think of an idea.
- Tuesday: Make a webpage for it and invite people.
- Wednesday: Gather what's needed for the event.
- Thursday: Test anything that needs to be tested.
- Friday: Have the event.
- Saturday: Debrief and learn from the event.
- Sunday: Sleep all day.
- Monday: Think of a new idea based on what you learned.

This rapid prototyping allows an organization to get a high yield of useful data at low cost. You can try, fail, dust yourself off, learn from the experience, and apply what you learned to the next thing quickly.

Just remember that with this fast-and-dirty experimental approach, transparency is a must. Make sure your potential attendees know from the outset what level of propriety, impropriety, structure, or chaos to expect at your event. There are lots of wonderful, intelligent folks out there who show up to an art space expecting a polished finished product. That's great! But that's not our focus at Machine, and it's our responsibility to let people know this before they show up.

Some Words on Risk and Failure

Of course, when you intentionally play with people's expectations there are risks. Here are some potential consequences of risk in ascending order of acceptability:



A. Death

B. Physical harm

C. Financial ruination

D. Hurting people's feelings

E. Embarrassing yourself and/or the artist

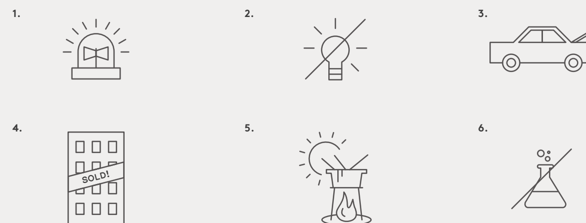
F. Making an audience uncomfortable

G. Damaging the brand of your organization

Risk can be divided into the categories of Real-World Consequences and Embarrassment. My advice is to avoid risks with real-world consequences like dismemberment, emotional scarring, or bankruptcy. Do, however, seek out opportunities for potential embarrassment—especially if it's around issues of quality. The risk of sounding stupid or looking dumb shouldn't discourage any of us from doing something new or difficult; risk of fire, measles, or triggering a blackout on the eastern seaboard should.

To experiment means to actively embrace failure, because failures yield useful data. Every event generates new knowledge—about an artist's work, the world at large, or simply how never to run an event again. When disaster strikes, rather than assessing the aftermath in terms of failure or success, think about how it affected your audience, and what knowledge you gleaned. Did the disaster result in a roomful of dead cats? That's awful—you should be very upset! Did the cats survive, but the audience left with hurt feelings? This is less upsetting than the dead cats, but you should still be upset—making your audience feel bad is exclusionary and poor manners. Did the cats and the audience leave the event unharmed, just bored, annoyed, or confused? Sure, it's a little embarrassing, but think of all the valuable data you collected! Analyze what worked, learn from what didn't, then move on.

Here are some things that have gone wrong with our various projects:



- A public sound piece was misinterpreted as an emergency alert.
- A Los Angeles granting agency rejected our proposal because we were "too innovative to scale."
- We thought locking kids into the trunks of cars was a good idea.
- A New York residency was canceled because the owners sold the building.
- We organized a fundraising event around fondue on the hottest day of the year.
- A public art series was canceled midway because of "questionable artistic quality."

This brings us to the meat of this document: choosing and planning an event!

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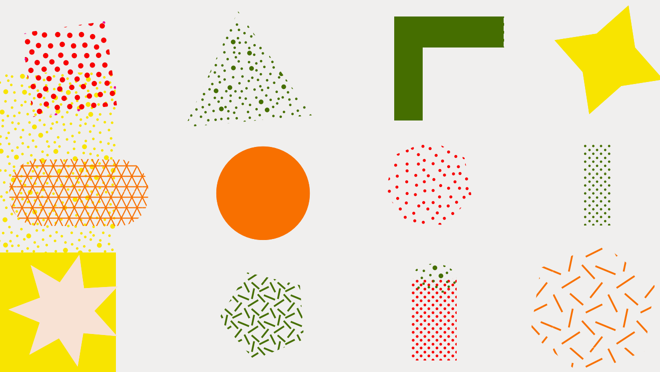

How to Choose What to Do

The best efforts come from a place of genuine excitement or curiosity. I curate topics that satisfy my own interests. For instance, I'm naturally drawn to the way two apparently unrelated fields can find points of commonality, whether it's architecture and music or large-scale puppetry and milk tea. Start by thinking of yourself as audience member #1. What excites you? What do you want to see in the world?

When to Say Yes

Here are the questions I ask myself when considering whether or not to work with an artist on a major project:

- Do I like them personally?
- Do I think their work is interesting and worthy of a wider audience?
- Can I bring something special to the collaboration—can I nurture the work in a way that someone else can't?
- Can I help the artist go to the next level in their work—to do something they haven't done before?

And if it's a one-night/casual/low-stakes event:

- Is the content something I'm curious about?
- Do I think there is at least one other person besides myself and the artist who is interested in the content?
- Is this an opportunity to try something new or work with someone new?

You should work with people you trust, believe in, and wish to help succeed. Find people who are interested in the world, and want, foremost, to make the world more interesting to others.

When to Say No

Even if you curate with a spirit of experimentation, there will be ideas and people you just don't like. When you're just starting out, though, it can be difficult to sort a YES from a NO. I'm here to help.

In my work at Machine I'll most likely say no to a proposal if:

- It doesn't sound fun
- I don't like the people involved
- I don't think it can create meaningful impact
- I'm already stretched too thin

When you turn an idea down, it's best to be as clear and polite as you would be with a well-meaning but totally mismatched blind date: graciously, succinctly decline and move on. If you're asked for further explanation and don't care to continue the conversation, you can always say that it's your policy not to accept unsolicited submissions. And if you don't like lying, make that your actual policy.

It's best to respond to all unsolicited submissions—and all emails, in general. Telling people no is never fun, but it doesn't benefit anyone to get pulled into projects which are not a good match. And ignored requests come back with more requests later. The best technique is to respond quickly and politely declining the invitation, and, if possible, suggest an alternative venue.

Final Notes on Nos: If your interest in a project stems from a desire for prestige or popularity—basically to please other people—you'll almost certainly miss the mark. Say no! Also, avoid taking on a project as a favor. There's a good chance all concerned will end up frustrated and dissatisfied.

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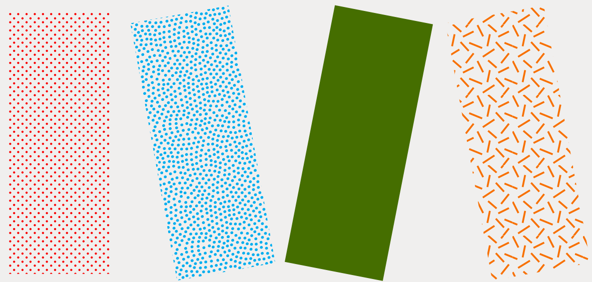


The Players

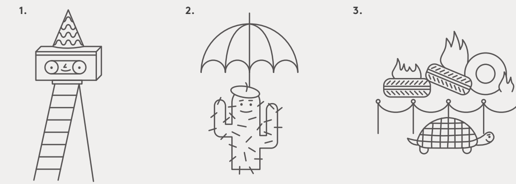
So who is involved in this crazy laboratory and what do they do?

The Curator

That's you!

Why are you doing this, again? Is it to fill the world with things that interest you? (That's why I do it.) Is it to create opportunities for a broad assortment of people to engage with the arts? (That's why my friend Charlotte Cotton does it.) Clarify your motivations—being in touch with why you are doing this is the first step in deciding what sorts of projects to undertake.

Curatorial practice demands the following duties:



1. Supporting the artist
2. Protecting the integrity of the artwork
3. Creating a sense of safety for the audience, which sometimes means keeping your Game Face on in times of strife and chaos

As the curator, you are often the conduit between the artist and institutions, bureaucracy, logistics, and other un-fun things that need to be tackled when bringing a project to fruition. Curation is about facilitating a series of opportunities and frameworks in support of an artist's work.

Though you have a responsibility to support the artist's vision throughout this process, gentle transparency about your opinions has its place, too. If an artist you're working with is going in a direction you're unsure about, you should say something. For instance, "Spraying the audience with hot fudge might upset them." Any final aesthetic decision is ultimately the artist's call, but you should delicately, clearly, express any serious concerns.

During the event, it is essential to keep your game face on—even if, as you predicted, the hot fudge

thing is not going over well. Remember that humans are naturally empathic; our perception of an experience is highly influenced by those around us, and we construct much of our experience of the world through mirroring the behavior of other people. So, if you feel an event is going poorly, DO NOT SHOW IT ON YOUR FACE. If you're worried, anxious, disappointed, bored, or angry with a work of art or an artist—and you definitely will be sooner or later—BOTTLE THAT SHIT UP AND SAVE IT FOR AFTER THE EVENT.

At the event, your job is to set a tone that is positive, present, open, and welcoming. If you look bored or annoyed at an event, the audience will pick up on it—they are looking to you for cues on how to experience the show. By keeping up your game face no matter what, you are providing emotional support both to the artist and—even more importantly—to the audience. Plus, it's just disrespectful to your audience to decide for them that something is boring, bad, offensive, or dumb. They can decide for themselves.

Things you should never say:

- "I hope people will come, the PR didn't go well"
- "the director is really nervous about this event"
- "please try not to screw this up"
- "the audience looks bored, can you add some spice to the act?"

Curating events involves processes which are out of your control, in real time, in public. In the end, the best way to evaluate your success as a curator is to focus on your areas of responsibility. Did you support the artist? Did you support the audience? Was a space of radical freedom provided? The reviews don't really matter. How much the audience liked what they experienced is less important than how well you handled creating the opportunity for the experience, and what everyone learned from the process.

Always keep in mind that spending your time making art and working with ideas is a great luxury—even though it can involve long hours, hard work, and low or no pay. You have to enjoy what you are doing, because there might not be many other rewards. If you're looking around saying "why do I bother," it's useful to remember that you don't have to bother at all. An attitude of gratitude is very helpful for keeping things in perspective.

The Artist

…Or the scientist, poet, expert, or any other presenter you'll be working with. This is your main creative collaborator. Where do you even find this person?

I have a pretty simple strategy: When I meet someone fascinating, I think of something for them to

do, then invite them to come do it. It could be a lecture, a performance, or an electronics workshop. I keep an eye out for anyone making compelling work of any kind, in any medium. I make note of book reviews. I ask for recommendations from friends I trust.

I tend to work with people who are experts in their given field, whether that's noise music, Sasquatch-hunting or replicating a forest indoors. I believe that the public wants to experience, learn from, and interact with experts, but the approach needs to encourage inclusion and excitement. Once you have someone with an interesting idea, make sure they can express it to an audience in an engaging way. Having a world-class chef-engineer frame and display their plans for a theoretical pneumatic burrito cannon is a fantastic start! But what if that chef-engineer abhors public speaking? Maybe the cannon could be built in collaboration with a retired bombardier who will fire burritos into the audience for people to catch and eat. When picking collaborators, try to get a sense of how well they might be able to relate to their audience, and adjust your approach accordingly.

Author-Driven vs. Content-Driven

At Machine Project, we create events that are content-and story-driven. We name and acknowledge the author-artists, but I try to be clear from the start that

what we are doing is more important than who is doing it. For example, we might promote a workshop in architecture for cats (taught by Keith Rocka Knittel) or a walk from Echo Park to the ocean (organized by Josh Ketchum) rather than "a piece by [artist's name]." We value like crazy the people who teach, present, perform, and organize events, but it's easier to spark people's imaginations with concepts rather than names—especially since most of our collaborators aren't famous.

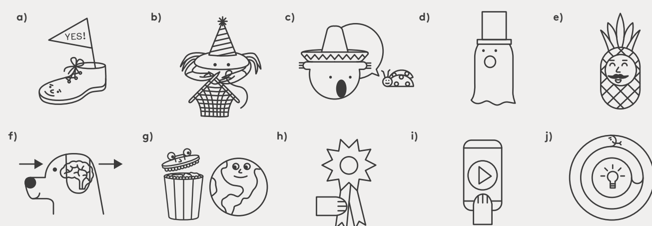
Speaking of fame, I recommend being aware of how reputation and cultural capital affects the dynamics of what you do. For example, if one member of your collective already has a bigger public profile than the rest, she might be the focus of attention in the press and elsewhere—even if the actual workload is spread out evenly. Naturally, this will bum some people out, but there are positive consequences, too. When one person has more cultural capital than others in the group, that visibility can be leveraged to bring other, less-heard voices forward into the discourse. If Machine Project is working on an electroclash album with Barack Obama, Machine will gain cultural capital from being next to Barack Obama, and we will all get invited to more electroclash festivals. Just as financial capital attracts more financial capital, cultural capital attracts more cultural capital.

The single-author narrative stealthily discourages us from considering whose voices we are exclud-

ing, or what discourses we might be excluded from ourselves. Buying into singulzar authorship strengthens its power in our communal narrative. Personally I subscribe to the concept of singular authorship as pernicious wraith—an annoying ghost that haunts galleries and institutions. You can bust this ghost by putting the work first and being clear with your team that that is your intention. Being honest with artists about goals and boundaries will help to ensure everyone gets what they need from the collaboration.

The Audience

In addition to showing up to your event and looking good, the audience can:



A. raise the energy in the room

B. participate, sometimes playing a direct role in performances

C. provide the artist a sounding board for their work

D. make you feel good, or bad, about things that happen at an event

E. laugh at your jokes

F. receive and process information

G. take that information back out into the larger world

H. give merit to the work of the artist, via their critical attention and willingness to engage (or not)

I. set up expectations for new audiences, either after the fact, via documentation, or in other public arenas

J. create a community around an idea

Events Can Create Communities

Shared enthusiasm for specific cultural forms is powerful—it helps to construct group identity, and fosters a feeling a being inside something. That's nice!. But where there is an inside, there is also an outside, and that can be less nice. In my years of curation, I've tried to explore whether an attitude of radical acceptance is possible to sustain. Can a contemporary culture be constructed around the idea that we are all the same, rather than that we are all different? From another angle: can our differences be used as a common point of reference to explore our similarities?

Seek Out Interdisciplinary Audiences

What is an interdisciplinary audience and why should you want one? It's an audience comprising people from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, interests and levels

of expertise. You want one because the more perspectives you bring to a shared experience, the better. Also it's boring when your audience is already familiar with everything you're presenting to them. What does a geologist have to say about a marble statue? What does a stadium janitor have to say about the sociology of crowds? What kinds of questions will an architect ask an avant-garde chef?

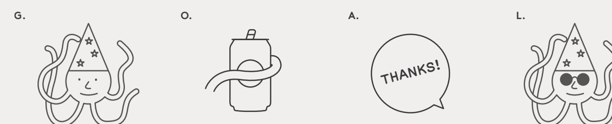
You're Welcome

The key to attracting an interdisciplinary audience is very simple: be welcoming. You want people to feel comfortable walking in that door, even if—especially if—they don't know anything about the topics you're presenting. My core strategies for making new work accessible to broad audiences are humor, transparency, informality, gratitude, a generous spirit, and the use of narratives to frame the premise of an event.

Art and culture can cause anxiety for people who aren't in the field—and even for many who are. Humor is a great way to ease this anxiety and make people feel welcome. Shared laughter let's people know that they are invited inside of something. Likewise, keeping things informal creates a sense of bonhomie and lowers the pressure on an attendee to act "properly." In the beginning, Machine was about making a space where people could feel casual about

dropping in, especially if the event was on an obscure topic. I made sure events were presented as fun and friendly, so people didn't feel like they had to study before showing up. The idea was to create positive associations with the space so people would keep coming back—no matter what was happening.

G.O.A.L.



At an event, your job is to let guests know they're in the right place, you're happy they came, and that they are free to explore on their own. My method for communicating all of this quickly is something I call G.O.A.L.: Greet, Orient, Acknowledge, Leave alone. People have an instinctual desire to be acknowledged and seen, but also a strong inclination toward the self-guided discovery of a new place. As a host, the trick is to greet them ("you're welcome here," "hello"), orient them ("grab a beer," "here's a flier"), acknowledge them ("thanks for coming"), then leave them alone. Don't ignore them, obviously, but don't inundate them with information, either—give them just enough to pique their interest. Following the G.O.A.L. method puts your guests at ease and allows them to align themselves toward the work using their own curiosity as a guide.

Here's a simple script I used when greeting people at our Butter-Making Aerobics class:

> "Hello! This is a butter-making aerobics class led by those two guys in short-shorts over there."
>
> [Point to Jimmy and Mike]
>
> "We're making butter out of the cream over there."
>
> [Point to cream]
>
> "Two days ago, the cream was inside those cows."
>
> [Point to video of cows]
>
> "Go see Nina over there to get your cream."

Within ninety seconds they've met the hosts, grasped the concepts, and know what to do next. From there, they are left to their own devices.

The Site

Choice of site has powerful implications for the audience's experience of the work. Though any space can be a site, as a culture we have settled on a few basic iterations, each accompanied by a set of expectations we're barely even conscious of. Without being told, people know what to do when they enter a theater: sit down, shut up, watch. They know what to do in a gallery: walk around, look, don't get involved. The stage, the white cube, the concert hall, the circle—these are all culturally constructed contexts designed to signal where and how to focus our attention and energy.

As curator, you have the opportunity to recognize these conventions and decide which to keep and which to disregard. Awareness of the power dynamics inherent in the architecture or common use of a site can be a rich source of play when curating, especially if you are interested in experimenting with expectations. By changing just one element in an unexpected way, you drastically change the energy and meaning of an event. Seat the audience on the stage, for instance, and you will alter their focus in ways you can't predict.

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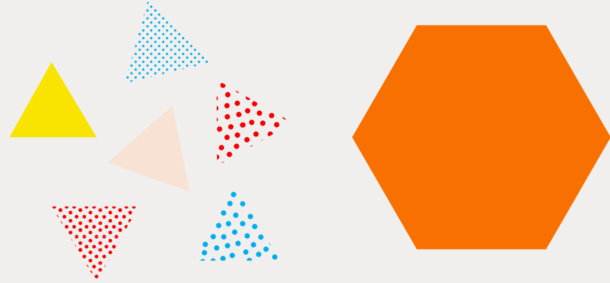

Producing an Event

Events are Stories, So Tell a Good One

Let's start with a basic assertion: humans understand the world through stories. We process an event or experience in terms of how it all started, who was involved, what was experienced, where it happened, and so on. Your event should be crafted as a kind of story—one your guests can take with them out into the world and share with others.

> "Come at 8pm for a violin concert by this person who is a violinist. There will be seats to sit in and wine and cheese beforehand and it will end around 9pm. The event is free of charge."

This story-event is very easy to understand. People who like violin music or that particular violin music-maker, will attend this event and know what to

expect. They are armed with all the information they need: place, time, fee, expected duration, conditions inside (seats, snacks). You can make a career of events just like this and be considered a success.

OR!

You can do something more complicated, aggravating, unusual, and—maybe, just maybe—interesting. We've already talked a little bit about how to cultivate ideas for your events (talk to people, listen to their ideas, be curious about the world). The next step is to get other people—an audience, potential funders, maybe the press—interested as well. Drumming up excitement for a lecture on the sex life of sea slugs (or a similarly obscure subject) is not as easy as you might think. Storytelling and narrative hooks can help. Ask yourself these questions when conceptualizing your event: Who is the protagonist? What is the narrative arc? What's the reveal? Is this a story people want to hear?

Long before your event even starts, the story you're telling can build interest, sell tickets, clue people in on any conditions they need to be aware of for safety reasons, set expectations, and give people information that will help them get more out of the experience. (It can also help to keep people from attending

an event they ultimately won't enjoy, which means a happier audience and vibe.)

> "With a background in punk/acid rock, Balinese and Javanese gamelan, and Tibetan Buddhism, he creates extreme sonic experiences to affect awareness and is a specialist at playing things the wrong way and making non-musical instruments sound good. We're not sure what he's going to do, but he was really interested in our basement."

> "When we learned that the Harmonium Orchestra would be performing at Machine, we ran to Wikipedia, which informed us that a harmonium is a free-standing musical keyboard instrument not dissimilar to a pipe organ. We suspect that this event will be your only chance this weekend to witness six harmoniumists free of charge in an Echo Park storefront measuring under 600 square feet. That's a healthy ratio of one harmonium every 100 square feet. It is highly likely that no matter where you sit at this event you will be within fainting distance of a harmonium."

> "This show will start exactly at 8pm. No late entry! We're serious. We're locking the door at 8pm. Do you remember when we did the Sexi Midi show and you came late and you couldn't get in because the door was locked? Don't let that happen to you again!"

Even the lowly disclaimer can be a powerful tool for telling a story and setting a tone. A well-written disclaimer is simultaneously a form of promotion.

> "Please note, this event may be terrible."

> "Please note, we've never done this before and it may totally not work but we think it would be fun to try."

> "Please join us in the 'Forest' for $3 short stacks, maple syrup, and nature films about bears."

> "We've been told that it will be well lit and autumnal. Please wear something orange and receive a free orange thing."

> "Warning: this event does not involve nudity."

A sentence like **"Please note, this event may be terrible,"** succinctly and humorously tells potential attendees that they're entering an experimental space—that there is the potential for accidents and they need to bring a sense of humor.

The Reveal

A good reveal is the very definition of under-promising and over-delivering. As an example, let's say you want to put on a music show. The protagonist is the musician. The arc is that the musician was a piano prodigy who has gone on to international acclaim—despite this, she is gracing your humble, poorly-funded art space that you run from your aunt's backyard squash garden with a performance. Plus, the musician has promised a surprise. The reveal (or the twist) is that the musician didn't bring a piano with her—she's going to perform

a new piece composed for garden tools. She has also brought her own set of plants raised to listen and respond to her songs as scientific proof that plants benefit from music. There will be a pumpkin pie taste-test between pies made from gourds grown with music versus ones that were not. People who attend get more than what they expected—though, importantly, not too far off from what they expected, since they still get to see the musician perform—and leave with extra layers of story to tell.

Or, you advertise a lecture on food safety, which turns into a meal where people have to pick which dishes are safe to eat given the information from the lecture. The meal becomes a legal deposition after someone you've planted in the audience pretends to get sick, which then becomes an art installation of evidence bags and courtroom drawings, which then transitions into your parents' anniversary party celebrating 40 years of home cooking. One idea flows into the next, and people leave with doggy bags and a great story to tell about the unexpected but awesome things that they experienced.

More about what makes a good reveal:

- It's generous to the audience. It charms them—it doesn't trick them, punk them, or make them feel dumb.
- It's fast. Adding a 45-minute encore to a poetry reading isn't a good reveal. A three-minute juggling panda bear performance at the end of a poetry reading about juggling pandas is a great reveal.

- It provides a surprising, illuminating postscript to what came before it. It helps us understand what we've seen in a new way, offering a new slant or perspective.

Narrative Hooks

Remember what Mary Poppins said about the spoonful of sugar? (It helps the medicine go down.) When it comes to an event, a clever or funny or stupid hook is the spoonful of sugar—it gets people excited and ready to engage with the ideas they might otherwise find boring or difficult. Let's look at one of my favorite Machine workshops: Jason Torchinsky's "Car Theft for Kids." The hilariously awful idea of teaching kids how to steal a car was the sugar—the title alone is funny and intriguing. Ultimately, the medicine was revealed to be basic lessons in electricity, wiring, mechanics and simple engineering. Everyone, kids included, learned exactly what was advertised—how to break into a car—but in doing so they also learned these other things that were unexpectedly applicable to their lives.

Below you'll find my favorite strategies for creating narrative hooks. You can also think of it as a loose taxonomy of event types:

Combinations. Combining two topics or people or foods that don't belong together is a very effective hook. It could be a gentle merger or a collision. It could be two topics conspiring together, or battling for

supremacy. Poetry and powerlifting don't usually go hand in hand, so how about a reading of *Leaves of Grass* held at a gym, allowing super-aggro bodybuilders to work out to the lilting verse of Walt Whitman?

Then there's the time I invited an etymologist (someone who studies language origins) to speak at Machine when I had meant to invite an entomologist (someone who studies insects). That's how we ended up hosting an event with competing lectures called "Etymology vs. Entomology." Yes, it was a dumb gimmick, but the resulting event was fascinating, fun, and unlike anything else happening in Los Angeles that Tuesday night.

Here's a general observation about the universe: everything is connected to everything else. You discover a concept in a book and then you start to notice it popping up everywhere in everyday life. Forcing stuff together is a way to jump start that process. My friend, Adam Lerner, runs the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver. They have a long-running series called Mixed Taste, which pairs two experts in unrelated fields—say, black holes and sausage making, or Wittgenstein and the boutique hotel business. What inevitably, magically happens is that connections between the unrelated topics reveal themselves through the discussion.

Gimmicks. A gimmick takes a dumb, funny idea out of the theoretical and into the actual. Whack-a-mole

with humans! Operas performed by dogs! One of my favorites pieces is "Haircuts by Children," presented by Mammalian Dive Reflex. It was exactly as advertised: participants let untrained children cut their hair. Beyond the gimmicky premise, the project revealed something about how casually we make decisions that affect the next generation. "Haircuts by Children" also embodied some of the most important principles of a good gimmick:

- the title explains everything about the project
- there is something very literal-minded about the idea...
- ...and yet, there are deeper, subtler ideas lurking beneath that literal layer

One of Machine's most popular events was a butter-making aerobics class, taught by a duo called Pop Secret. Participants were led through a rigorous aerobics workout while holding and shaking jars of cream. By the end of the class, the cream had turned into butter, which was then spread on the fresh bread we had been baking in the back room (conveniently allowing our participants to eat back the calories they'd just worked off).

Substitutions. For our residency at the Hammer Museum, we toyed with the idea that Machine Project was taking a vacation at a different institution. This led to a discussion about vacations, which led to the question: are vacations the exclusive domain of humans? We re-

solved to test this assumption by substituting plants for humans. We set up a vacation spot for houseplants on the Hammer's second floor balcony—if you wanted your plant to enjoy a vacation, you just dropped it off and we saw to all its needs and desires for a few days. It turns out plants like vacations, too.

Change One Thing. Take a common format or scenario with fairly set protocols and change one variable, such as location, duration, audience, or audience size. Some kinds of dance performance are meant for large halls filled with people—so stage your performance for just one person in a closet. Poetry readings are usually for humans, so give a poetry reading to cats. Swap the locations of paintings with the locations of paper towel dispensers in museums. If a reading would usually take twenty minutes, do it for two minutes or for two hundred minutes. Make a sit-down event a walking event, like a poetry hike. On a basic level, these events are fun and surprising. On another level, they engage with the history of institutional critique and its quest to make the invisible—cultural conventions, structures, support systems—visible.

A Digression on Institutional Critique. While in graduate school, I studied with artist Michael Asher. He remains a big influence on how I think about curation, and it's from him that I learned the strategy of changing one variable in a system to activate it. For instance, he once tore down the wall between his gallerist's office and exhibition space as a way of examining the invisible (some would say imaginary) wall between art and business sides of the art world. His work asked the viewer to see a museum's hallways and ceilings as spaces no less suitable for artwork than the galleries.

Michael developed a methodology I've followed closely when working within institutional spaces like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art or the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. His insight was simply that institutions are made up of individual people with their own subjectivities and desires and ideas. With this in mind, Machine's work at the Hammer focussed on bringing the voices of its employees to the surface—the voices that are usually masked by the anonymous, institutional Voice of God that larger museums speak with. This ranged from taking portraits of staff members with their dogs, to opening up the Machine storefront as a weekly space for Hammer employees to showcase or develop their personal projects.

So, by changing one thing, you can achieve something as simple as giving an audience a pleasant little surprise. Or, you can achieve something as complex as shining a harsh light on the invisible ways institutional architecture can reinforce dominant power structures.

Something to keep in mind is that a change in variable isn't necessarily a virtue in and of itself. Yes, you could host a poetry reading where people are slow-

ly beaten with sticks, but would that really make for a better, more illuminating event? You should think empathically. For example, if you devise a clever way of luring an audience of poetry haters to a poetry reading, that's changing a variable but it's not terribly kind to the poet. Always ask yourself: is this kind? Is this contributing? Does this create a new space of possibility, does this make the world feel like a bigger, better place?

Take Things Too Literally. Misunderstand the unspoken context. Take a metaphor literally, or interpret a literal idea as a metaphor. Draw inspiration from the genie from joke mythology who misinterprets wishes in the most frustrating—though technically accurate—way. Give your audience a million male deer when they were expecting a million dollars.

A few years ago, Machine Project was invited to take part in an annual neighborhood event called Echo Park Rising. We decided to take the "Echo" part of our neighborhood's name too literally, programming a weekend of events that included a workshop on making echo effects guitar pedals, Ezra Buchla's feedback-drenched screening of *My Dinner with Andre*, and a panel discussion with the microphones set on a thirty second delay.

The "Bad Idea," Aka, Do Things Wrong. Think of the last thing you should do. What might happen if you did it? You probably shouldn't put art in a swimming

pool. We did that very thing with Snorkel Dreams: A Machine Project Guide to Art Underwater at the Annenberg Community Beach House in Santa Monica. Paintings, ceramics, photographs, video, blown glass—all underwater. A bad idea? For sure. Fun and well-attended? You bet.

The Excuse. Use an event as an excuse to meet someone or do something you're interested in! Invite a writer that you are obsessed with to come read. Offer a class on a skill you want to learn. Are you curious about how different people might get along? Invite them to do something together.

The Outing. Get people together and go somewhere. This is an expedition, an adventure, an afternoon away from ordinary life—say, a guided geological tour of downtown Los Angeles. Your job is to coordinate, handle logistics, and provide a framework for people to get out into the world and do something.

We once organized a walk to the beach from Machine Project. It's a sixteen-mile trek that provides an experience of Los Angeles that bears little resemblance to sitting in traffic on the 10 Freeway. It might never have occurred to most of the participants to take this walk on their own, but by setting a date, giving it a name, and putting a little energy behind it, it attracted a big, diverse group of walkers.

We sometimes like to add an unexpected bo-

nus to an outing. For example, ending a hike with an ambient music performance utilizing amps and instruments carried up the trail in backpacks.

Simultaneous Actions. Create an event where people separated by geography do something together. Though the Simultaneous Action might utilize Skype or the like, it is a very different animal from a live stream or similar telepresence event. This is an important distinction. I avoid working remotely unless it genuinely adds something to the experience. If it doesn't improve the event to have half the orchestra Skype in from across town, why do it?

Now back to Simultaneous Actions. My friend Lauren van Gogh runs an art space in Johannesburg called The Sober and Lonely Institute for Contemporary Art. Close to Lauren's space is a street called Olympic; here in Los Angeles, Machine Project is a few blocks from a street called Marathon. (You see where this is going.) During the 2012 Olympics, we coordinated a cross-continental mini-marathon via Skype. Going for a run in your neighborhood is not always that interesting, but racing against someone you don't know on the other side of the world on a similarly-named street really spices things up.

Competitions. Competition is a tried and true way of building audience involvement, whether it's as a competitor, a returning champion, or a gleefully booing fan. I think contests are most fun when they provide

opportunities for underdogs to upset the favorites, and do not emphasize or require training and expertise. We once hosted a cable-detangling competition, inspired by my friend Steven Schkolne's claim to be the fastest cable detangler in Los Angeles. We used a clothes dryer to spin (but not heat!) bundles of assorted cables from our basement—headphones, USB, ethernet, power supplies—then set the contestants loose. Steven did not win the contest.

This particular event also illustrates the power of a good hook. Maybe a dozen people showed up to the competition, but it got picked up by a few blogs, which somehow led to coverage by a major newspaper in Japan, who reported that cable detangling was the new craze sweeping California.

Do something expensive for free. Make something free expensive. The former is fun and effective if you can swing it financially. Free Iberian ham with party attendance! The latter is fun, effective, and way more affordable. For the low price of $15/month or $180 annually, you can be a remote Machine Project member and one of our staff will spend a few minutes each month thinking of you or someone of your choice!

Take the joke too far. Buy a couple of deep fryers and host an annual Holiday Fry-B-Q. Invite folks to bring anything—really, anything—they want to fry and let them fry it, DIY-Fry style. Don't blink when someone asks to fry their cell phone so they can post the video

on their vlog. Take it one step further next year and add a simultaneous Pie-B-Q. Flip the whole goddamn thing around and shove it off a cliff the following year when you turn it into Freeze-B-Q—an anything-goes liquid nitrogen freeze-for-all. Watch a cell phone video of yourself breakdancing while bonkers on Jagermeister ten years ago, shot by your trusty Operations Manager. Ask that Operations Manager to fry her phone. Repeat.

Workshop. We love workshops. Gathering people to learn something new—what's not to love? It's a familiar format, yet it leaves room for experimental attitudes and utopian, transgressive, or liberatory impulses. Please see our The Machine Guide to Workshops for more on this topic.

Lecture. A lecture is just someone sharing knowledge. Most often, that someone is an expert in their given field. My general rule is to keep the lecture to 45 minutes, leaving 15 minutes for questions. Even the most engaged audience has its limits. The success of the lecture isn't necessarily tied to the lecturer's level of expertise—enthusiasm and performative presence can go a long way.

The great logline. Ideas travel best through media if they can be described in one sentence. As an exercise, think of an event you can promote with a few words that will put a clear image in your prospective

audience's heads. For instance, again: Butter-Making Aerobics. You make butter by shaking a jar of cream while working out. Dog Opera. An opera by dogs for an audience of dogs.

Looking outward. Connect your idea to the world beyond your doors. Can your event be merged with programming at an organization that serves a different audience? Can it be linked to current events? Seek out collaborative opportunities in distant lands—these will reveal new perspectives on an idea.

Building a Conceptual Series. Program a series of events that suggests a narrative and reveals the depth and breadth of a topic. Our former Operations Manager, Lucas, curated a series on digital security that started with a talk on how to send secure email. The second event in the series focused on to how to smuggle data out of the country. The final event taught participants how to hide an encrypted thumb drive with makeup and prosthetics. The idea started out with rational, helpful advice on email and ended with participants disguising drives with fake oozing wounds.

When All Else Fails, Keep it Simple. Ultimately, some ideas are more fun to talk about than to actually do, while others reveal their value through execution. This is an important concept. If you're excited about something, but you're not coming up with any clever ideas to put it across, don't toss it or force it to be something more elaborate than it calls for. Simple

ideas can blossom into something rich and unexpected through the actualization process. You can't always predict these things, sometimes you just have to try it and find out.

Unpredictability aside, you can do some quick work on an idea by running a simulation in your head. Are you having fun in this imaginary run through? Is your audience having fun? If you get tired and depressed during your simulation, or if your audience is disappointed, that might be a sign that the project is a dud.

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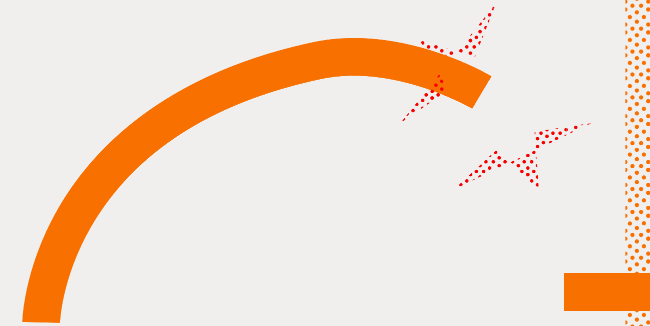

Afterwards

How does your event-story end? Hopefully the way you planned—with your Reveal or some other tidy resolution, like applause and high-fives for your poet. But an event is a living thing, so really, the answer is that you never know. Leave room in your plan for accidents and improvisation. Part of the pleasure for an audience of a live event is the potential for the emergence of the unexpected. Despite all your clever conceptualizing, sometimes an unexpected mishap is best part of an evening. Just be sure to have an exit plan, so you can continue to steer the ship even as you adapt to what's actually happening.

In general it's good to wrap up your event while people are still fully engaged—in other words, before they are tired or bored and dying to hit the road. It's the old showman's directive to always leave your audi-

ence wanting more. This dovetails quite well with the spirit of experimentation, wherein every idea doesn't need to be tightly wrapped up and concluded.

Documentation

Documentation serves a few basic purposes: to make a historical record of what occurred; to share the ideas of a project with a larger audience; and to disseminate the results of research with the field. Documentation matters to me because it's where Machine Project exists for most people—a sizable chunk of our audience doesn't experience our events firsthand. I like to think of the documentation and stories told about our events as friendly Mind Spores floating out into the world and settling into people's brains. Once settled there, they can influence creative activities beyond Machine and the range of my awareness, spreading a Machine-like curiosity about and approach to the world. Even the lowly email blast plays a role in this process—it's not uncommon for me to meet someone who says, "I've never been to your space, but I read all your emails."

Documentation often fails when it tries too hard to be definitive. I recommend creating documentation that feels right, even if it's not absolutely accurate and representational. Machine's documentation has taken the form of reports, tool kits, photography, videography, sound recordings, sketches, interviews,

courtroom drawings, psychic readings, and dioramas—sometimes multiple documents, each acting as a particle in a cloud of probability of what happened, might have happened, should have happened. There are no claims to be the thing, but an approximate sense-image composed in aggregate. This strategy also comes in handy when nobody took decent photos.

Art exists in our brains. More precisely, art is an object or an action taken to implant an idea in the viewer's brain, in the hopes that the idea will blossom with time and reflection. The object or action is just the means for implanting that idea. Ultimately, it's that idea that truly constitutes the artwork.

Over time, all that will remain of your event is the audience's memory of it. Make it a good one.

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Review

Before we go, let's review some of the basic principles of curating and planning events.

Make it simple. Aim for an idea that you can describe in one sentence. A weak idea doesn't get better by making it more complicated. Besides, any action undertaken with the public will inevitably reveal complexities unforetold and unexpected. A good project has a clear concept while leaving room for surprises to emerge.

Make it funny and unexpected. A simple action with an absurdist angle is a winning formula. Try changing just one variable of a familiar structure. The Puppy Bowl is a great example of this technique—puppies in

the place of football players! Other good techniques include taking a joke too far, combining topics that don't belong together, or taking a metaphor literally.

Iterate and grow your project from a simple starting place. Once you have a core action, you can then elaborate on it with various bells and whistles. Try the project multiple times with different audiences. New possibilities will be revealed each run through and can be built on to strengthen and enrich your project.

Don't forget the watchers. Some people love to participate, while others prefer to look on from the side lines. Your project should be compelling for both. Allow for both observing and doing.

Practice empathic design. Consider why someone might or might not be motivated to participate in your event. Can you imagine your neighbor or a stranger sitting next to you on the bus taking part? Remember that you might like your idea more because you thought it up.

Don't make the interaction socially risky or embarrassing. No one wants to be judged in public! Consider a structure that has an option to be creative or expressive but that still works if people do the obvious thing. Remember that you've been thinking about your idea for a long time. What's important to you may not be obvious to your audience.

Create a tight linkage between action and reaction. The action of a participant and the reactivity of the piece should be clear. If someone presses a button, something should happen immediately. The mechanism of an interactive or participatory project should be clear enough for a chimp, orangutan or dolphin to follow along.

If you have the opportunity, consider making a project for dolphins. That would be amazing.

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Okay, now go do some stuff!