Anton Vidokle, artist and co-founder of e-flux, was born in Moscow in 1965 and currently lives in New York. Begun in 1998, e-flux has grown into a financially self-sustaining email announcement service/artist-run project that reaches visual art professionals through its website, online projects, travelling satellite exhibitions, and a print-on-demand journal. Vidokle has created a Warholian mini-economy based on strategic self-organization in an effort to pioneer a new set of conditions for creative production. After the cancellation of Manifesta 6 in Nicosia, Cyprus (which he was slated to co-curate), Vidokle transferred his research into the possible inter-relationships between education and art-making and set up a temporary “school-in-exile” in Berlin. Over its twelve-month run, unitednationsplaza gathered together more than a hundred artists, writers and philosophers for a free-form series of performances, lectures and discussions. Vidokle’s practice—consistently predicated on a singular form of performative authorship—embraces the volatility of artist-driven collaboration and poses a re-interpretation of institutional conventions about what exactly constitutes an ‘exhibition’ today.

EG: I just finished reading Anton Vidokle. Produse, Distribuire, Discuie, Report (Stenberga Press, Berlin, 2009), an anthology of essays about your artistic practice. The book includes repeated attempts to classify what exactly it is you do: Is Anton an organizer, a host, a coordinator, an educator, etc? Why do you think there is such an emphasis on definition? Is obscuring these lines an essential part of your practice?

AV: Liam Gillick sometimes talks about people confusing dinner plates for the food, and proceeding to try to eat the plates… I suspect that something a bit similar happens with some of the work I make. Some of the essays in the book try to sort this out.

Often I think people confuse the means for the ends: rather than seeing curatorial, organizational and administrative methods as tools for an artistic practice, they see them as a certain kind of an end point. Partly this is because many of the things that I do don’t emphasize representation or a kind of symbolic ‘artistic’ gesture, but rather set up functional, useful structures. I also try to downplay the whole authorship thing. Most of my projects are collaborations with other artists, curators and writers that set up situations geared towards a more collective experience. There is not a lot of hype around them.

For example it took a number of years for most people to realize that e-flux Video Rental, a project I developed with Julieta Aranda in 2004, is an artwork rather than a curated exhibition of video art or some type of media resource. In the first few years, a lot of artists saw it merely as an opportunity to show work, most curators saw it as a good research tool the work that they themselves should have been doing by developing video libraries, researching recent production, organizing public programs, etc.

Things really came to a head with the Lyon Biennial in 2007, where the curators invited Julieta and me to participate with this work, but then omitted it from the catalogue and installed it at a location quite far from the museum where the ‘art’ was presented. A year before, something similar happened when, after being invited to show this project in a group exhibition at a museum in Oslo, we were suddenly uninvited. Apparently the director felt that this was not a work of art. Some years later we found out that this director purchased all the works in this exhibition for a private collection, ours being the only one impossible to acquire though a sale…

EG: For a person who dislikes email as much as you do, I find it interesting that e-flux now subsidizes myriad self-funded artistic initiatives. Could you talk about the genesis of e-flux, and how its objectives and the scope of its projects have changed since its inception?

AV: I didn’t always dislike email. There is a certain self-reflexivity to writing that I often do not have with the spoken word, maybe because English is a second language for me or because I don’t think fast enough… So to be able to write something, read it again, correct and improve it before the other reads it—that’s really fantastic! In short, e-flux came about as a sort of an accident, it was not something I planned to do. This happened about ten years ago and of course things have developed quite a bit since then.

There were several important phases that altered the way it was developing: one of the first things that made it possible for this to happen was a private mailing list was a long stay in a small town in Colombia with Adriana Arenas, who was one of the artists involved in starting e-flux. While there, I noticed that there were these amazing, atomized artistic scenes scattered throughout the world, many of which are very sophisticated and energetic. Yet other than the ones located in the centres of art, most of these art scenes lack sources of current information and

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have almost no ability to project information about what they are doing locally to the rest of the world. On the other hand, people in New York or London seemed to be over-saturated with information, but perhaps of the wrong type. So the idea became to try to address this circulation problem, to alter the balance of distribution. This made our project a lot more serious.

Another important moment was the idea to start developing and presenting art projects that used the e-flux network as a frame or a space—in other words, generating our own content. Perhaps one of the most transformational projects we did around that time was something Jens Hoffmann came up with called The Next Documents Should Be Curated By An Artist. It was basically an anthology of proposals for a future documents developed by a number of artists ranging from AA Bronson’s “documents of sex” to a really brilliant analysis of power relations in the art world by Daniel Buren and Martha Rosler. This project also included an open forum: a kind of feedback loop that enabled reader participation. It was very active and really showed me the potential of discursive structures as a critical tool.

Shortly thereafter, upon Julieta’s suggestion, we decided to give up our private studio space and rent a small storefront in Chinatown which was to function both as an e-flux ‘office’ and artists’ studio as well as a public space. We used the storefront as a kind of an informal site to develop experimental projects, like the video rental, Martha Rosler Library, PAWNSHOP, etc.

A couple of years later, after the cancellation of Manifesta 6, which I was to be one of the curators of, I was able to realize a part of the program developed for it independently in Berlin, using e-flux revenue as funding and under the name unificationplace. UNP (continued a year later in New York as Night School) was something between an exhibition, an experimental school and an artists’ space/residency program which went on for a year and involved collaborations with more than one hundred artists, writers, curators, architects, theorists, etc. When its program ended, that collaboration with many of the participants has continued in the form of an online publication, e-flux journal, edited by Brian Kuan Wood, Julieta and me.

So basically e-flux keeps developing into more and more varied structures that involve more and more participants and contributors. The idea is to keep opening up.

EG: Though e-flux is admittedly a subjective distribution network, it seems that it has become an important arbiter of taste—a project only really registers in the global contemporary art world consciousness once it has been announced via e-flux. I know that e-flux is more than simply a blanket institutional critique and that you can’t control what people are going to do with these emails once they arrive in their inboxes, but does that concern you?

AV: Hmm… Sometimes it is a concern, yet I am not sure if we should worry about this too much. The art world has many arbiters—magazines, museums, biennales, academia, the market, and so forth. As long as they all have a different point of view on art—as long as there is no consensus—we are not in a situation of hegemony. Years ago Komar and Melamid told me one of their witticisms, that as long as there is more than one mafia in town, it’s a democracy.

EG: You’ve managed to distance yourself institutionally and create an economically sustainable artist-centred practice. You’re constantly proposing new hybrid systems of artistic enterprise and exchange. PAWNSHOP seemed to be the ultimate collaborative business model/artistic project. Tell me more.

AV: Well the scary thing about our art pawnshop was that it could actually work as a feasible economic model. We could have continued it permanently and made a profit. Of course this would come through exploitation of the precariousness of artists’ economies. So we ran it for about three months, staged a bankruptcy and gave away the profits to Doctors Without

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Borders. Last September we were invited to re-open PAWNSHOP in Beijing, at the Shop run by Vitamin Creative Space. It seems to be doing well in China, where pawnshops were originally invented about two thousand years ago or so.

What interested Juliesta and me, the reason why we conceived this work, was to create a situation in which to think about the value of art: how this value is assigned and how arbitrary the process is. Usually, pawnshops have a thirty-day-layover period when an object is pawned but cannot be sold, it exists in a kind of a limbo where it’s not clear if it will be redeemed by its owner or will become available for purchase. During this time it can only be displayed, but displaying it does not create more value as opposed to museum exhibitions which increase the value of an artwork.

It was very interesting to run a pawnshop. For one thing we had a very different type of visitor once we put the pawnshop sign in the window: every time there was a burglary in the neighborhood the cops would show up to see if stolen items were being pawned at our shop. So they would come and get confused by the selection of objects we had: books of poetry, a lifesaver, a bottle with a label that said ‘Artist’s Soul’, and so forth. Then we’d have to explain this all to the police, which is a very different type of conversation about art than one you’d have with an art audience. It was fascinating.

AV: Actually the idea was to try to revitalize exhibitions of art rather than pedagogical models. I’ve never taught and generally don’t like academia. However I am very interested in how gradual and process-based educational structures function. To me they present an opportunity to slow things down and make them a bit more interdisciplinary, in the sense that in educational research, things such as discussion, production, presentation are a bit more evenly balanced than in exhibitions of art. On the other hand, education is often a closed process open only to enrolled students and faculty, not to a general public. So I wanted to try to combine a kind of educational structure with the radical openness of a public exhibition.

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Yes institutions tend to try to re-appropriate certain practices that they initially exclude. I suppose it’s been like this for most of the span of modern and contemporary art. What is a bit frustrating about this is that when institutions finally decide that they can’t ignore a certain emergent practice any longer, they try to re-shape it to fit into their own bureaucratic structure, the nomenclature of art, rather than open themselves to this practice. This does a lot of violence to the work, really dumbs it down and does not advance the development of art.

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Your project seems to create a strategic set of conditions that allow for participants to engage in free-form experimentation. You’ve managed to perfect a ‘formula’ that I suspect larger institutions are scrambling to emulate. Does this bother you? Can your projects remain both inside and outside the institution at the same time?

AV: I am not sure there is such a thing as an ‘outside’ these days. Perhaps the best one can do now is to try to stay close to the edges…