

Artists as Curators – Curators as Artists?

Hans-Dieter Huber

'God is a Curator' was the title of a lecture by the Munich artist, musician, critic, and curator Justin Hoffmann. 'Thank God I am not a Curator', dreamt the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman on the occasion of the conference *Stopping the Process? Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibitions* in Helsinki's Nifca Center, in 1997. Which could lead one to conclude that Zygmunt Bauman is apparently neither God nor a curator. Perhaps one should add that, of course, God, too, is not a curator, but has instead his representatives on earth for this. Namely, in ecclesiastical law, a curator is an appointed warden or guardian who acts on behalf of the mentally ill or mentally deficient in ecclesiastical trials. In German ecclesiastical legal terminology, the 'Kuratus' is the chaplain of an area belonging to a parish's association. He is a kind of assistant priest who works in subordination to a pastor, but who is sometimes also independent. Especially when one considers the popularity of exhibition openings held on Sunday mornings at the same hour as religious services, one can certainly draw parallels in the history of this concept.

The starting point for the following considerations is the observation that, in recent years, the concept of the curator has been increasingly coming to the forefront in exhibition events. Here we are dealing with the emergence of a star system, as Richard Sennett described so well in *Die Tyrannei der Intimität [The Tyranny of Intimacy]*. More and more, curators are pushing into the foreground as the organisers of exhibitions. A glittering cult of names under the label 'Curated by...' has meanwhile arisen, even if someone has done no more than take care that the workers hang the pictures properly, that the right captions are under the plates in the catalogue, and that the most important people possible have been invited to the opening. If you know the name of the curator, you usually already know what to expect.

Generally, specific curators are associated with a more or less definable group of artists, who are taken along from one exhibition to the next in the tow of individual curators. Curators thereby increasingly occupy and define the interface between artists, institutions, and the public. The question is whether we want to see the defining power over contemporary art concentrated in one person's hands. The question is thus: Where are we? In a time of increasing curatorial Absolutism or already in an age of curatorial Enlightenment? The curator is becoming increasingly self-reflective. He reflects his activity critically or uncritically. It is no secret, in communication science, that increased self-reflectivity and increased discourse lead to the differentiation of an autonomous subsystem that I would like to call the 'curator system'. But it does not seem to have become completely autonomous and differentiated yet, because many curators are simultaneously active as critics and some also as artists.

The various societal roles or positions intersect here in individual personalities. The current trend of founding 'schools of curating' accelerates the institutional uncoupling and

autonomisation of a curatorial subsystem on its own. After this point in time, an exhibition prepared without the participation of a professionally trained curator can only be an incompetent exhibition, and criticism will blame it for that.

For this and other reasons, since the early 1990s, there has been something like a signature, a specific style, a specific image, a name that can be associated with specific curators and their respective work. What once characterised the work of an artist, namely his style, his signature, and his name, is now true of the work of the curator. He must acquire as fast as possible an unmistakable, original, and innovative 'handwriting' if he is to position himself in the increasingly competitive curator market and thus to survive and attract attention (and that also means: as much money as possible) to himself.

We can go further and ask whether the curatorial subsystem, whose historical differentiation we are currently experiencing, has already sufficiently differentiated its public identity to allow us to speak of the curatorial identity of specific institutions, for example when we consider Thomas Kren's globalised visions of the Guggenheim Museum. Everything that was, until recently, a typical strategy for the artist – namely, striving for an unmistakable and innovative style that attracts attention (and that means: money, too) is now relevant on the level of the curator. That means that typical strategies of artistic work have now shifted to a meta-level or been transformed (if one is inclined to view the curator, who stands between the institution and the artist, as a meta-level of artistic work in the institutional field).

The question is thus what these changes mean strategically for the artists. If everything an artist learned with great effort during his training, namely to be innovative and unmistakable, and to bring forth a unique style, is now suddenly appearing on the level above him, namely on the level of his curator friend, then the artist's stylistic autonomy has been confiscated and he has slipped a rung lower. The 'semantic ascent' of the curator accompanies the 'semantic descent' of the artist and his work.

So here the interesting question is how artists respond in their artistic work to this shift in or confiscation of significance. Do they, too, attempt a leap to this meta-level of the curator and now produce their unmistakable, artistic, and societal style on this meta-level, as Fareed Armaly, Tilo Schulz, Marina Grzinic, Alexander Koch, Christoph Keller, Jutta Koether, and Apolonija Sustersic do? And if not, how does their work change under the conditions of 'semantic descent'? Is meaning produced from now on by curatorial arrangement? Does it no longer matter what can be seen in the pictures, because the attention, the meaning, and with them the financial surplus value comes on a meta-level of gallery selection and/or curatorial arrangement? Or, in this system of a creeping (or meanwhile trotting) erosion of the artist's position of meaning and power, is a firm resolve to drop out the highest, because newest, form of art (as exemplified by the Belgrade artists' group Skart)?

But the curator, as a still mostly self-appointed meta-artist, is not excluded from the threat of 'semantic descent'. The first signs are appearing that – because of the increasing competitive struggle, the pressure to position themselves, and the desire to capture atten-

tion (and that means: to acquire money) or to establish their own cultural identity – institutions, foundations, and sponsors increasingly tend to present themselves as unmistakable, original, unique, and unrenouncable for the society and its culture. Artistic strategies in the institutional field are thus currently moving ever further up into management. With each rung of this 'semantic ascent', the artist grows poorer and less meaningful.

In recent years, a new species has immigrated into the art system, calling itself exhibition designers, scenographers, or event designers. Their difference from the way artists and curators work lies in the fact that they are organised as tightly controlled companies, like advertising agencies or architectural offices, acquiring contracts, grooming clients, and employing a large number of staff and independent contractors. What is new about this species is that it covers the most various areas of exhibition design at the same time. Most of the leaders do not come from art, but from architecture, stage set designing, or product design – often combined in one person.

The job description of such exhibition designers can range from the complete conception of the exterior architecture to the interior architecture with precise plan and detail drawings for carpenters, electricians, and fitters, through the conception of the content of the show, including the presentation of the material objects, to the theoretical, historical, and cultural-historical texts, catalogue production, corporate design, and technical support. What is thereby convenient (and above all: expensive) for the commissioning party is that he is offered an allround, complete solution to all his problems. But to be perfectly clear: this is a matter of spending millions. Some such projects have an overall volume of up to twenty-five million euros. That is approximately equal to the entire annual budget of the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn. It is not unusual for such exhibition design agencies to work simultaneously on up to ten different major projects.

Here we tread the ground of a new historical shift of position. It is increasingly inscribing itself into the interface between commissioning party or institution, on the one hand, and curators and artists, on the other. In comparison, the idealistic freelance curator and the artist living just above the poverty level seem like insignificant church mice. In my opinion, the need is urgent to discuss strategies and results that could lead out of this historical situation. Perhaps Sigmund Freud's slogan will be true again that art arises above all from discontent with civilisation.

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