

The Cultural Power of the Curator

It is impossible to discuss the cultural power of the curator without reflecting briefly on the concept of power. Power structures, as we have learned from Michel Foucault, always operate in relation to something, and that something can also be very powerful in its own, sometimes unpredictable way. Within each and every power structure there are more or less visible traces of a counterforce, of some kind of resistance. Added to which, power structures are not necessarily destructive and negative, but may also be productive and positive. Power structures operate on every level of human interaction, with interactions taking place between the macro and micro levels, in which we find sites for hierarchies and processes that function according to their own current situation, time and place. Human beings tend in many ways to be protective of their place in the world, and are instinctively ready to use all their power to hold on to their rights and to adequate space.

What then is cultural power? Something that springs from culture, from the social situations in which the activity of communication takes place? Or is it rather the possibility to influence, to leave traces in a cultural context that are relevant to others as well as yourself? The right to express yourself, to be active. For me, it can be both, simultaneously.

When focusing on the specific active agents in the artworld who are most directly connected with curatorship, the artist and the curator, there is often an implication that this involves a power struggle. The curator's power to select artists who are to be placed in the spotlight, the artist's taking over of the role of the curator, and so on. But is it correct or even interesting to read such an implication into this?

The profession of curator is very young, and the role of the curator has not so far been very clear or uncomplicated. Curatorship springs from the museum tradition and from the connoisseurship traditionally aimed at by art historians. The art historian has been a specialist closely linked to the research tradition. In curatorial activity we can also see traces of the tradition of patrons of the arts and of the commissioning of artworks, both from the private sphere and from the state or the church, this tradition being rooted in financial structures and their in-built power. The spectrum of curators active on the contemporary art scene follows the changing paradigm within the discipline of art history and the expanding sphere of visual culture. Curators can today be defined, for example, as administrators, producers or entrepreneurs whose job is to orchestrate, integrate, co-ordinate, direct, define and articulate.

A similar change and reevaluation is going on within the role of the artist. We find the producers, entrepreneurs and directors here as well, side by side with painters, sculptors and other more traditional titles. Artistic practice is full of orchestrating, co-ordinating and articulating work, along with many other skills. It can thus approach curatorship, and we all know of examples of art events in history where artists have played the major role in evaluating strategies and in selecting content.

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So who has the power and who has to resist it? It is obviously impossible to place the role of the curator in opposition to the role of the artist. There are as many ways of working as there are events. There is no 'either/or', but rather 'both/and' - a dialogue must be struck up to allow examination of the processes that underlie the setting of standards and the creation of contexts. And here we should let Mr Foucault remind us once more - we must question the concept and the function of the author, in part because the author's name does not necessarily refer to a single person. The individuality of the author is as problematic as the idea of the artwork understood as an entity. Foucault emphasized the various conditions underpinning the discourses in which the author acts, rather than authenticity and originality.

All this becomes at least partly visible within the communicative medium in which the curator and the artist co-operate - in the exhibitional presentation of art. To mount an exhibition is to make something public, to give access, to try to articulate something about a complex set of visual, conceptual, dramaturgic and experiential elements and values. This medium is constantly being reevaluated, reorganised and critically reframed.

How should we then examine the complex event that constitutes an art exhibition? I propose that we try to do this using three different key concepts: actuality, truth and the agora.

The concept of time is often expressed through a division into the past, present and future. The most enigmatic, the most highly valued of these is the present, the here and now. This is the actual, what we try to reach out for, so as to get a grip on our existence, on the real experience. We look for it in fictional ways of expressing life, in the arts, we try to present it in different media. Jacques Derrida talks about actuality as artifactuality, something that is actively produced, sorted, invested and performatively interpreted. The only way to analyse it is through a work of resistance, to make counter-interpretations of it.

The Hopi Indians are frequently referred to as offering an alternative attitude to life - and this is the case here too. The Hopi language does not have concepts equivalent to our time concept. Instead their world is divided into two main categories: what is apparent and so more 'objective'; and something that is just beginning to appear, something more subjective. Concrete objects belong to the already happened, while internal images, imaginings, expectations and feelings are 'subjective', beginning to appear and directed toward something not yet here. The here and now seems to be a thin borderline, where something slows down and begins to appear. Time does not flow between the past and the future, the present appears in multiple parallel ways in different rhythms, speeds and frequencies. Actuality can be interpreted as multi-layered and pluralistic.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has based his existential philosophy on the process of communication. To exist as a human being means to communicate. This means that I am not the whole of existence, there are other bodies with other consciousnesses, there are other stories and other perspectives. There is no absolute knowledge, there is only dialogue with others. To be able to understand anybody you have to be somebody and enter the debate. You are only in relation to the other, and no one has the privilege of viewing the situation from a distance. The truth is intersubjective. Ricoeur talks about the truth as a lit room, a space for meeting, a free atmosphere for open dialogue. He talks about the truth as something we simultaneously are in and are looking for. His saying "I hope to be in truth" encompasses a fine borderline between an 'already' and a 'not yet', which keeps the communication open. The truth within communication communities is never given, it is, says Ricoeur!

ur, the mission of existence and prevents us from saying: I am the only truth. The truth is thus an eternal mission, something always on the move - toujours en route. It involves a tension between the real and the ideal situation of communication. And this necessary tension between the real and the ideal keeps up the critical self-correction without which communication can easily be perverted, so that we all unite in a common lie.

In his book *In Search of Politics* the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman discusses the idea of a place that is simultaneously private and public, the agora. The agora is traditionally a public place where each individual's personal concerns can be displayed, expressed and ventilated. On the agora we become part of a community and become involved in a discussion about our time and situation. The agora, of course, also provides a possibility for playing around, for showing off, for exhibitionism and narcissism. It is definitely a place filled with power structures, struggles and combats of various types. But it is also a place for communication, for testing out creative ideas, common values and ethical attitudes.

Do actuality and truths appear on the agora? That depends on the degree to which the activities, the communication and presentations on the agora can become meaningful in the sense that this private/public space demands. How can private concerns turn into public ones and vice versa? For this we need forms of translation, we need somebody to ask the crucial questions, to establish the frameworks and to define the borderlines. This could be one definition of the profession of curator, whoever takes that role.

Although only briefly outlined here, the idea of the agora might offer a starting point for further investigation of the art exhibition as a communicative medium within contemporary visual culture. And we must remember that in our post-ideological, post-utopian society agoras have become rare places. And I think that anybody working seriously within the contemporary arts has a rare opportunity to develop them and keep them active.

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