

## NADA BERO\_: THE EMPEROR'S NEW SUIT

In the world of contemporary art a curator is a problematic figure, to say the least. That this is indeed an elementary disaster of a more recent date is borne out by the fact, that the phrase *curated by* still gets many computer programmes to bristle with indignation, condemningly underlining it in red as grammatically incorrect. Many of those who learned the English language can see it for themselves at first hand while checking a text they have just written. And while the present tense of the verb *curate* is acceptable to the limited computer taste, its past perfect tense, or rather its passive form, is unacceptable and beyond the pale. I presume that similar problems exist in other languages - they certainly do in Croatian, my mother tongue - where no verb exists that would unambiguously cover the "dubious" and mystificatory activities of a curator.

I personally know only one curator who claims to be neither critic nor theoretician, but merely a practitioner, an organiser of exhibitions. The majority of them wish to their activities to be perceived as a complex organism within which theoretical and practical values actively complement one another. This is best described by the theatre set-up: a curator wants to be a dramaturge, director, manager, stage designer, costume designer, actor, technician and, yes, even a prompter.

The real problem lies in the fact that not only the verb denoting it, but also the task of a curator, both are outside accepted standards. The curator borrows, copies, reworks, rewrites, wears borrowed plumes, uses - without authorisation - methods and achievements taken from other activities from a much earlier date - such as diplomacy, barter, trade, prostitution - without being judicially pursued. Quite the contrary in fact, people speak of the "cultural power of a curator"!

What power are we talking about? And what culture?

It is, of course, the power that a curator occasionally and for brief periods of time draws from the others in the artistic "feeding chain", in which his or her role is, to a great degree, of a parasitic nature. First and foremost, a curator feeds on the power of an artist - the producer, but of no lesser importance are the powers of a user, commissioner, buyer; in other words, the power of the market. For, just as the market participates in the profiling of an artist, so it also plays an important role in the production and profiling of curators. Paradoxically, the greater the power of artists, the weaker the power of curators. The so often repeated claim that great curators back great artists is totally unfounded. What does lend support to great artists is well-organised system of capital and profit.

In the fifties and sixties, when the phenomenon of the modern-day curator first appeared, he or she was satisfied with the role of a mediator, an emissary or a representative of a group of artists or individuals. In today's language, the curator was the spokesperson for artists. His or her ego was of a limited usage-value and was instrumentalised; it was more in the service of promoting and



explaining the other and less given to advocating his or her own ideas and elaborations.

With the appearance of conceptual art, towards the end of the sixties and in the seventies, the curator's role became completely controversial. In the new artistic practice, where artistic "work" became inseparable from contemplative elaboration, the role of a curator as an interpreter of the artist's ideas became redundant. The artist him/herself, in fact, became curator, a direct interpreter of his or her own ideas, with self-referentiality becoming the most significant intellectual baggage of that decade. It is rather curious to note that many artists were also able to explain the positions of other artists. In their struggle against the institutions they established informal spaces, thus gaining the power against which they rebelled. The number of exhibitions in such "independent" artistic premises, curated and selected by artists themselves and who in fact want to control matters completely, grew. The entire system - from selection and presentation to interpretation and valorisation - gave them an illusion of being masters of their own destiny, of avoiding the manipulations of curators, critics, gallery-owners/operators.

It did not take long for the artist-cum-curator to create his or her complementary pair - a curator-cum-artist. Indeed, many claim that the process was simultaneous. In reality, destabilisation of borderlines between curator and artists demonstrates just how marginalized both roles have become. Instead of crossing swords, co-operation ensued. After all, a fight to the finish really would be pointless.

Further relaxation of tensions was brought about as a result of the fresh winds and spirit of overall democratisation that took place in the decade just gone by, which contributed to the status quo. One should not be surprised by the fact that words like 'opening up', 'decentralization', 'communications', 'transparency', 'exchange', 'mediation', 'co-ordination', are taking over in all areas, while the multiplication of roles and redistribution of power become the most sought after solutions. According to Fredric Jameson, the cultural paradigm has in fact colonised both politics and economy. Everything has been "culturised"; politics is culture, economy is culture. Culture itself has become big business. The example of young artists Svetlana Heger(9168) and Plamen Dejanov(1970) who, by encompassing within themselves the roles of curator, gallerist, collector, sales agent and marketing expert, are paradigmatic for the new generation of artists which is prepared to sign a Faustian pact between contemporary art and corporate money, or rather to recognise that culture is big business and, ultimately, to profit from it. Taking upon themselves the role of a child in *The Emperor's New Suit*, i.e. calling a spade a spade, they have made the process of production and consumption of art totally transparent and quantifiable through exact economic indicators. They have taken Beuys' claim that "creativity is capital" at face value, i.e. they capitalised it.

The pinnacle of their artistic strategy, or - as some believe - the straw that broke the camel's back, was their co-operation with



the BMW automobile corporation at the international exhibition *Dream City* in Munich, which took place in the spring of 1999. The general sponsor of the exhibition, the aim of which was to investigate the social aspects of late capitalism, was another large German concern, Siemens.

Heger & Dejanov, who, incidentally, were the youngest of all the participants at the exhibition, which included names such as Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci and Felix Gonzales-Torres, rented their exhibition space to BMW, whose seat is in Munich, the "Dream City" - which also happened to be the title of the exhibition and taken, not without a degree of irony, from some tourist brochure or other. The artists believe that Munich owes its wealth, to a great extent, to the fact that it is the seat of BMW. Following lengthy negotiations with the BMW KulturKommunikation department the artists succeeded in renting their own exhibition space at the *Dream City* exhibition to BMW, which the company then used to set up their advertising and sales stand. They also relinquished the pages in the exhibition catalogue, intended for the presentation of their work, to advertisements for the new type of BMW Z3 sports two-seater, which for the duration of the exhibition was parked on the parking lot in front of the Kunstverein building. In compensation for renting out their exhibition space, the artists received a new BMW Cabriolet, which they then sold to the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna (MAK), as their own work of art, under the condition that the Museum relinquished the car to them to use as a "part of the MAK travelling collection".

With that project Svetlana Heger and Plamen Dejanov stirred up numerous controversies and attracted fierce criticism in the world of art, with some artists removing their exhibits from the exhibition in a protest over "mixing art and trade", and for transgressing the borderlines of private sponsorship. One of the curators disassociated himself from their activities in a written statement, which was exhibited adjacent to the BMW stand at the exhibition in Kunstverein. In his statement the curator said that he regarded their activity as being aggressive, and that art should be divorced from money.

It is no wonder that Christiane Zentgraf, Director of the BMW KulturKommunikation, while explaining in an interview why the famous automobile corporation was prepared to co-operate with the artists, also said that BMW learned a great deal from the Heger & Dejanov duo. She pointed out that "mixed marriages" (Walter Grasskamp) between art and commerce are as old as the moral reservations that art has always talked about ("purity" of the partner, money)<sup>1</sup>, thereby confirming, probably unconsciously, the thesis of Boris Groys - a German theoretician - who regards artists in general as the avant-garde of marketing. By nature, art is first and foremost a process of investigation, with all other areas following in their footsteps.<sup>2</sup> According to Groys, the art market is the avant-garde of modern economy. Economy should learn from artists. An artist is a hero of marketing. He is creating

<sup>1</sup> Wolf-Günter Thiel and Milena Nikolova: An Interview with Plamen Dejanov, Svetlana Heger and Christiane Zentgraf, Director of BMW KulturKommunikation, *Flash Art International*, May/June 1999, pp. 84-87

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Hanno Rauterberg, *Die Zeit*, no. 49, 2 Dec. 1999



something for which there is no requirement. In earlier times it was the aristocrats who did it, and artists have assumed their role in the market economy. Thus, an entrepreneur can learn from an artist how to sell something that is not needed. It is easy to sell underwear, says Groys, everybody needs it. An artist, however, sells black squares, although nobody needs black squares. Needless to say, appropriation and decontextualisation are neither unknown nor are they new categories. Svetlana Heger and Plamen Dejanov have been learning from their artistic predecessors, among them being the representatives of the historic avant-garde, as well as the artists-activists from the seventies and eighties. However, the *Ready-mades* of the Heger-Dejanov tandem differ from their historical predecessors in their retention of functionality. They serve the very thing they present themselves as. The BMW sales stand at the *Dream City* exhibition was neither a simulation nor a trade quip, it was a bona fide sales stand with all the original elements: advertising brochures, posters, tiny BMW-shaped chocolates, and a very real agent performing sales transactions. Transactions performed by artists are logical elaborations of their work strategy, deployed to investigate the mutual dependency of the markets of labour, capital and cultural assets. They believe that economy of exchange cannot be separated from the market of culture.

There is no doubt that the work of Svetlana Heger and Plamen Dejanov is explicitly political, although their "politicalness" is fundamentally different from the activism of the artists from the seventies and eighties, as, for instance, Hans Haacke, Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger. There is, however, a confusing aspect to their "activism" inasmuch as their ideological premises are, at first glance, obscure and divergent. They mix different languages and codes all at the same time; one moment they don the innocent guise of consumerism and mass culture, the next moment it is the vestment of social commitment, or even of elitist indifference - all in all, they emit messages the target of which is difficult to define.

In order to detect the source of their poeticism one has to go back a few years. Heger, originally hailing from the Czech Republic, graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna, and Dejanov, of Bulgarian stock, graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts, also in Vienna. As MAK scholarship holders they made their first appearance on the international art stage in 1966 in the MAK Centre for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles, in the group exhibition entitled *The Garage Project*. They leased exhibition space reserved for the presentation of their work, free of charge, to young Californian artists as a part of an advertising campaign for a newly-opened art premises. In the projects that followed, the starting point of their artistic strategy - communication with the local community - began to acquire quite specific economic determinants, such as hire, purchase, exchange, investment, profits... categories which, although ever present categories in the functioning of the art system, have mostly remained in the background, hidden from public



view as being something unbefitting the "interest-free world of beauty".

In their investigation of production relations in culture, the young artists are primarily interested in their own position within the labour market system, that is to say, in establishing the value that artistic work holds in society. Soon after graduation they realised that artists are not sought after anywhere, while the professions, such as doctors and lawyers, rank high on the demand list in newspaper advertisements.

The problems related to work, artistic work included, or rather its valorisation, are particularly prominent in a highly developed society which, in principle, easily absorbs its own critics, even if it were a sharp-witted criticism by an artist. Just as a strong family cannot be unduly harmed by the unseemly behaviour of its own children, so "naughty artists" do not threaten a strong society. As for Heger & Dejanov, they opted for the type of criticism one could describe as the "behaviour of an exemplary child", consciously risking expulsion from the "society of naughty artists".

Let us take, as an example, their work at the exhibition *Enter: Audience/Artist/Institution* that took place in the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, in 1997.<sup>3</sup> As a part of their artistic project during the exhibition, Heger and Dejanov decided to work illegally as dishwashers and waiters in a restaurant and at a hotel in Lucerne, Switzerland - a country where manual labour is better paid than are professional activities in many neighbouring countries. Having paid for their living expenses, the artists used the rest of the money they had earned to buy works of art and designer objects, which they then exhibited on special platforms as a cycle of their own works under the title *Plenty Objects of Desire*. In other words, with the surplus value they financed their own artistic work. The principle of renting out, purchase and creation of a collection are both a method and content.

Concurrently with renting out their work, the artists rent out the exhibition space allocated to their own work to various interested parties, from famous companies to anonymous individuals. Resulting earnings are invested in purchase of works of art and designer articles, or rather, the *Plenty Objects of Desire* collection. This time their earnings stemmed from their artistic status, not from their work. What remain visible on the platform are beautiful, glittering, colourful objects whose arrangement, composition and price change from exhibition to exhibition, thus becoming a form of super-collectables.

Is that criticism?

If anybody is to be criticised, then it is the artists who usurp and sign other people's works as their own!

By exhibiting the works of art of other artists and designers as their own artistic work, the artists have rocked the concept of authorship of a work of art, and through it the entire artistic system. Creation of "corporate art" - as some have rather pejoratively, dubbed it - for the Austrian tandem does not

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<sup>3</sup> Enter: Audience/Artist/Institution, Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, 1997, curated by Barbara Steiner



constitute abandoning criticism. Indeed, they are more interested in a silent subversion of the artistic system than they are in the open criticism of society. It therefore comes as no surprise that the very experts in the profession - curators, critics, editors, gallerists, most fiercely dispute their work. Having had the opportunity to co-operate with Svetlana Heger and Plamen Dejanov at the *On Holiday* project they staged this year - and which constituted their real holiday in Dubrovnik - which, although initiated by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, was fully sponsored by private sponsors, I had the opportunity to see how highly the marketing experts value the work method of the two artists. At the same time, people from the fields of culture, media, and the Museum itself, found their easygoing, lay back approach irritating.

I can now genuinely say that the said co-operation taught me a thing or two about the "cultural power of a curator". To be more precise, I have learned how to exchange curator power for goods, services and money of a sponsor. A conclusion that imposes itself is this: the cultural power of a curator is proportionate to the amount of money backing him or her. I would therefore gladly hire out my "cultural power" for a million dollars to any interested sponsors.

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