The Artist-as-Curator: Paper for International AICA Conference

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My original proposal was a reply to Okwui Enwizor's keynote topic. When he was no longer participating, the organizers of this conference decided I should keep to my original subject since this approach may provide another way of thinking about exhibitions. Let's begin by looking at my first proposal concerning the artist-as-curator phenomenon:

> The hybrid term "artist-as-curator" suggests a number of problems that need to be analyzed and understood. First, one must discern whether artists are abrogating their preeminently creative and productive role when they become curators or are extending it by making a distinct type of installation art in which the medium becomes other artists' work. If the former is true, then we are faced with the situation of artists who have chosen at least for the term of a given project to become curators. If the latter is the case, then these artists have developed an art form patterned on curating but qualitatively different from it. But if neither scenario is entirely accurate, then we are confronted with a new hybrid that has been developed in a consistent fashion in the work of such conceptually oriented artists as Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, and Fred Wilson in

which they explore and critique art's institutional frame. Of course, the reverse of this situation must also be taken into account since curators often assume the prerogatives of artists when putting together exhibitions.

As you can readily see, this proposal concerns the genre of artist-curated exhibitions. Like reversible gloves they can be worn first one way and then another. The purpose of this proposal is to emphasize at the outset the complexity of looking at exhibitions and reviewing them – something we all do – and to appreciate the lamination of ideas and attitudes constituting art exhibitions that are too often mistaken as basic and direct means of understanding art. Although there is not time to consider the explosion and proliferation of the term "exhibition" to define the casual and seemingly serendipitous ways art's meaning is a factor of its presentation, I would like to acknowledge at the outset the important contributions made by Louise Lawler. She has helped us understand that the display of art in collectors' homes, auctions houses, and even museum storerooms are all forms of exposition that reveal our thoughts about it and can substantially change our understanding of it.

Let's go back for a moment to well-known basics and look at Roland Barthes' chart distinguishing differences between first and second order signifying systems that appears in his early work, *Mythologies*. Barthes characterizes the denotative sign as a cohesive complement of the signifier and signified – what is explicitly stated – which we can consider for the time being "the work of art" and the concepts it obtains. The two are

customarily taken together to furnish the basis for the connotative process – the suggested meanings – which we will call the exhibition per se. Barthes refers to this connotative proceeding as a "myth," which for him is an ideological effect, using the term in its broadest sense as the naturalization of a given culture's dominant values. Later, in his book *S/Z* he recognizes the problems of this model since denotations are already ideologically produced meanings. So, using Barthes' terms that are ultimately derived from Louis Hjelmslev, denotation (that is, the basic Sausserian two-fold sign) is already a connotation; it is already positioned within an ideological frame, for example, when a child is indoctrinated in a given culture's values as Louis Althusser has indicated. What this means for our discussion will hopefully be fairly obvious. In this schema we are considering, exhibitions are connotations that until recently have been too often regarded as denotations, that is ideologically innocent constructions taken as self-evident representations of an artist's oeuvre and a given groups' activities. The situation acquires the complexity this paper wishes to expose when we look at thematic exhibitions in which an intellectual armature is presented as a diagnostic tool. In most museum exhibitions, however, groups of works are customarily arranged in historic sequences that assume the force of implicit frames.

Marcel Broodthaers exposes these implicit frames in his magisterial work *Musée d'Art Moderne, Section XIX Siécle: Département des Aigles, Section des Figures* of the early 1970s. Broodthaers' museum at first appears to be a straightforward denotational piece. It presents a host of signifiers in the form of culturally mediated images of eagles all tacitly pointing to the same signified, the large diurnal birds of prey belonging to the

family Accipitridae. But the tags underneath each image or group stating "This is not a work of art" that point to the museum's overarching frame that redirects the birds's signification to the realm of connotation. Broodthaers' museum designation changes denotation into connotation since we are presented with codes common to natural history museums rather than the art museums cited in his title. The closure provided by Carolus Linnaeus' taxonomic system, which we might expect from a natural history museum, is undermined in Broodthaers' piece. In an un-Faucauldian manner, this Belgium artist conflates the discourses of art and natural history museums and thus explodes their frames to show the alternative and incomplete historical discourses these two types of museum's represent.

Sometimes artists do not have to become curators in order to transform the exhibition's overarching frame. In the case of Ed Ruscha's first retrospective in 1982[**check title and time**], his work entitled *I Don't Want No Retrospective*, which was used as the cover for the catalogue, undermines, through the seeming bad-boy strategy of denial, the frame offered the exhibition. It changes the tense of the exhibition's structure from the past tense of assured conclusions to the conditional. In his second retrospective, on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. and slated for the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, in October 2001, Ruscha, similar to most subjects of retrospectives, has not attempted to evade the packaging it offers. Instead, he seems delighted to be encapsulated by it, and so are his curators who have chosen to celebrate Ruscha's new cool attitude by choosing the cover image, *Ice*. His retrospective, a coffin, so to speak, has been carefully measured and constructed so that the denotation

of his art is in sync with the second-level connotations of modern master of a recognizable period style. In terms of the Deleuze and Guattari text *Anti-Oedipus*, Ruscha has been oedipalized, literally, as Jasper Johns West Coast progeny. No matter how he might protest, his objections in this exhibition catalogue are characterized as part of the established program of rebellion that the discourse of modern art legitimizes. Thus his role in modern art's history was assured the moment this project was proposed.

While living artists might alter the framework of the retrospective exhibition that has been naturalized as history, deceased ones cannot. One of the most egregious rewritings of an artist's motives yet to occur is the recent traveling retrospective of Norman Rockwell's work in which he is lifted from the realm of illustrator to that of fine artist. Here his new denotation is a product of this new connotation, and the curators of this exhibition have assumed the creative mantle of artist-curators in order to accomplish this transformation. They have wrongly concluded that since Rockwell conceived his illustrations as oil paintings on canvas he must be in tune with the more enlightened muse of fine art. They ignore the fact that such an approach was widely practiced by Rockwell's antecedents N.C. Wyeth and members of the Brandywine School. The exhibition thus presents itself as the final chapter of a Horatio Alger rags-to-riches success story in which Rockwell's purported goal to be recognized as a master painter is finally revealed. His parodies of Rubens and Jackson Pollock are cited as examples of his prescience and knowledge rather than considered as examples of his philistine pandering to popular taste. In the exhibition catalogue the names of Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec are invoked in order to legitimize Rockwell's art. In addition

Rockwell's name is put forth as a progenitor of Pop art, surely a misunderstanding of the ironic conflationary tactic of reframing popular imagery in the guise of high art undertaken by Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, to name only two practitioners of this approach.

Rather, than dwelling on history's candidates and victims, lets go back to Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press in 1973, for terms to assist us in analyzing narratives used for art exhibitions. In this illuminating study of fictional devices used to couch historical accounts, White relies on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* that offers four basic modes of emplotment: Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire. If one applies these archetypal story forms to art exhibitions, which has not been done before, what is remarkable is how few of them have been considered relevant. By far the most popular of the four for art exhibitions is the Romance. White describes it as "…fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it – the sort of drama associated with the Grail legend or the story of the resurrection of Christ in Christian mythology."(p. 9) This mode of emplotment is readily apparent in the genre of one-person exhibitions in which the artist is characterized as a hero capable of overcoming formidable odds in order to realize his or her distinctive point of view. In order to accommodate the dictates of this approach, curators have often created special Procrustean beds: they have excised entire series of works, complete decades, and even the last portions of an artist's oeuvre in order to meet the Romance's strict requirements.

An adjunct to Romance in the realm of art exhibitions is Comedy, with its connotations of momentary triumph over great obstacles and reconciliation of one's views with those of the world. Because Tragedy suggests a fall even though the hero might attain wisdom through personal surrender, this narrative mode is almost never used for art exhibitions. Art exhibits are supposed to be upbeat moral tales about the ways that the arts succeed over other avenues of human expression even to the point of becoming the quintessential commodities capable of transcending even their objecthood in their ascendance to the nether realms of Platonic models. Satire is the polar opposite of Romance; it recognizes human beings as encumbered by their world rather than acting as its commanders. Because of this recognition of our basic incapacity to deal with our world, Satire never becomes the overarching framework of traditional museum exhibitions even though such heroes as Goya might use it as subject matter. This far too brief excursus into HaydenWhite's well respected analysis of the narrative strategies invoked by nineteenth-century historians enables us to glimpse at the radical limits that have been imposed on the genre of curatorial exhibitions, the mainstay of most museums and certainly the implicit rules guiding blockbuster shows. These restrictions also provide a rudimentary diagnostic for investigating the activities of artists acting in the capacity of curators and to appreciate how they have enriched this genre.

When Hans Haacke created his exhibition/work focusing on Seurat's *Les Poeseurs*, he presented the art world with a new way of thinking about art and ownership. By carefully researching the provenance of this particular piece from its inception, he demonstrated its escalating value and changed meaning. As the work moved from its

primary mission of demonstrating new concepts about color and light and their interactions to the realm of manifesting the purview of the modern masterpiece, its denotations became permeable to these new uses and their ramifications. The irony of this transformation is that *Les Poseurs* at the time Haacke completed his piece in the early 1970s was considered the equivalent of a mutual fund. The piece was owned by Artemis S.A., A luxembourgian holding company. Over time, the original viewers of Seurat's painting have been reformulated as potential investors. Haacke's reworking of *Les Poseurs* is an enrichment of the genre of art exhibitions since it is explicitly a tragedy and implicitly a satire.

We might consider some of Barbara Kruger's installations to constitute an artist-curated exhibition. In them the direct political import of individual pieces is deflected and transformed when their powerful imperatives are subsumed under the emplotment of the Romance that testifies to the artist's prescience and courage in critiquing ongoing social ills. We might say that the connotations of her installations are out of sync and even contradictory to the denotations of individual pieces comprising them.

The situation is far more complex in Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* of 1993. Created for both the Contemporary and the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, Maryland, the exhibition's title indicates the type of destabilization that Wilson hoped to achieve since the word "mining" connotes both prospecting and potentially detonating the historical presentations and collections of the Maryland Historical Society. Rather than regarding history as a *fait accompli*, Wilson considered it a series of ongoing

interactions in which connotations abut with denotations and the ideological import of the latter is underscored by the interventions of the former, as evidenced by these slides of his exhibition. Using the Hayden White/Northrop Frye diagnostic, we can say that Fred Wilson's exhibition *Mining the Museum* characterizes the past and present machinations of historic exhibitions as highly satiric and comic. It is satiric in its exposure of such limitations as racism that have guided people in the past and that still govern representations of history, and comic in its momentary triumph over these conditions.

Still one of the most extreme positions for the artist-as-curator to take is Robert Smithson's installation *Cayuga Salt Mine Project*, part of the first museum exhibition of earth art at the Andrew Dickson White Museum at Cornell University in 1968. This work demonstrates Smithson's concept of the museum of the void to the point of undermining his own work. "Visiting a museum," Smithson wrote, "is a matter of going from void to void.... Blind and senseless, one continues wandering around the remains of Europe, only to end in that massive deception 'the art history of the recent past.'... Brain drain leads to eye drain, as one's sight defines emptiness by blankness. Sightings fall like heavy objects from one's eyes. Sight becomes devoid of sense, or the sight is there, but the sense is unavailable." [From "Some void thoughts on Museums"] We might say that the work "mine" referenced in this work's title plays on the actual Cayuga Salt Mine under Cayuga Lake where the work originated, the personal possessive pronoun, and, similar to Fred Wilson, a detonator capable of blowing both apart. For this piece, Smithson problematized first the denotation of the work of art so it constituted a partial presence pointing to an evocative process consisting of a series of absences such as the

descent into the mine itself followed by mirror trail that are seen here. The nonsite in the gallery was both the signifier and signified of art's reduced status. The narrative of the exhibition, to put it in the White/Frye category, would be a tragedy and a satire since it acknowledges the defeat of both the art object and the exhibition encompassing it to connote the fullness of experiences giving rise to art. In addition, Smithson's installation is a satire since both are parts of a larger context from which they have been removed.

In this paper I have set out to accomplish three main goals: (1) to show how Barthes' ideas regarding denotation and connotation might be useful to our understanding of exhibitions and their usual tactic of supplanting individual curatorial accountability with institutional responsibility, (2) to indicate the usefulness of fictional devices for analyzing art exhibitions and understanding how restricted this genre is – I worked with Hayden White's but others could be used—and (3) to demonstrate the ways that artists-as-curators have played with these narratives and enriched our understanding of the possibilities of what types of exhibitions might constitute the modes of emplotment, satire and tragedy. In the course of this brief overview I hope to have conveyed the idea that exhibitions always mediate art, no matter how self-effacing they might appear to be. Curatorial choice, whether it is enacted by a museum employee, an independent curator, or an artist, is always an intellectual decision that involves the delimitation of one set of ideas and the revocation of others. It changes and transforms the artwork. Often the curator's discernment of art's connotations will work backward and transform its denotations (that is works of art per se) so that their seemly self-evident meanings are no longer what they appeared before being cast as characters in a particular exhibition.

Looking at art in exhibitions is a complex and layered affair that requires critiquing not only the art included in it but the overall exhibition transforming and redirecting it.