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Against Curating

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Curating is undemocratic, authoritarian, intransparent and corruptible. Without giving reasons, without discussion, curators choose their artists and decide where and how to show which kind of work. How is it that in the world of art, where so much emphasis is placed on freedom, that much power is granted to exhibition autocrats?

The effects of the curatorial epidemic are not limited to the exhibition. They impact the whole of art-world. Since curating has been around - actually not for so long - , artists have adapted to the new curatorial regime. They now offer their works under all kinds of thematic aspects, since curators often like to choose a theme for their exhibition. The result is the production of art "about something". Dependencies which have long been surmised are returning. Formally, the artists are autonomous, they can do what they want. But the curators can do the same. With the subtle difference that the latter decide what is actually exhibited.

Curators are not accountable for what they do, certainly not to the public. However, as the money for exhibitions becomes scarcer, it helps if galleries and collectors pitch in. As a result, many exhibitions are coming down to marketing activities in favor of the art market.

Where the public hand still pays, it is considered good manners to serve the political consensus. At least, works of art "about something" have the advantage to not turn completely away from the rest of the world and slide away in abstract revelry like the late modernist art. In the end, this leads to a lot of large exhibitions full of art dealing with immigrants, marginalized groups, precarious living conditions, gender relations, oppressed peoples, or environmental problems. Of course all these are honorable and important topics, but all the art as usual curated and served, without anyone but the curator having a say in the selection. Could we not turn inside the humanitarian and progressive attitude and also use it to democratize the art business?

Instead of discussing selection and criteria publicly, artist lists are treated as a state secret. On the other hand, mediation is regarded as the most urgent problem for curators. No wonder, for if autocratic rulers want to sell their decisions to the people, mediation is the where ends meet. How, and that is the main concern, can one bring the mostly

uninformed public to accept the certainly well-intentioned rulings of the despot? With mediation.

Criticism eagerly desires to support this cult of mediation. Else, it no longer it bears any importance. The curator at least could not care less. By the time the exhibition is installed the job is done. And since viewers have been degraded to mere objects of mediation, no one is concerned about their opinions. Without power, criticism has fallen to the level of pure ornament. In art magazines, criticism fills the pages between the advertisements. Together with most of the theories circulated in the field of art, it has largely retreated to garland the work of the curators with a decorative philosophical florilegium.

Art historians should know that things can work in different ways. Exhibiting was not always the business of autocrats. There was a time when curators had to take care of the comparatively boring job of taking care of a museum's collections, to cure, literally. Major exhibitions, such as the first editions of the Documenta, served to document the present state of contemporary art. Of course they were curated, but there were criteria. And these criteria were disputed. Since the curating became thrown under individual obsessions, the criteria have evaporated and so did the discussions.

Going back in history, in the times before 1920 one encounters the institution of the jury, mostly comprised of artists in public discussions in front of their works. Important exhibitions were organized by artist's societies and art clubs, as the Sonderbund in Düsseldorf and Cologne, or the Secessions of Munich, Vienna or Berlin. The most productive phase of early modernism was marked by collectively curated and publicly debated shows.

When modernism reached its peak and turned from progressive to conservative, curating came into fashion. Once the institutional power once gained, it had to be secured, and strongmen were put in charge.

As predecessors of curating, usually two men are named, Alexander Dorn, who worked in Hannover during the 20s and 30s, and Willem Sandberg, who started as graphic designer at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and invented modern curating before and after the second World War. The decisive change came with the Documenta of 1972, when Harald Szeemann celebrated curatorial self-glory in all of its splendor.

There were artists who did not miss the drama of this power seizure. Daniel Buren warned that, from now on, no more art, but the exhibition would be exhibited, thus

turning the curator into the real artist. Even more sharply, Robert Smithson in his essay *Cultural Confinement* stated, "*Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories. Some artists imagine they've got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control.*"

How could this amount of power end up in the hands of the curators? To answer this question, a short glimpse into the history of the museums helps. Most of them were founded around 1800, with the purpose to give the new nation-states a cultural identity. After the mid of the 20th century, these states were transformed into pure economic units. Cultural identity was left to consumption. Collecting art got more and more privatized, as was everything else. Thus, the old museums lost their task. Declining budgets forced them to restrict the collecting. Instead, they solved the task to fill their spaces with temporary exhibitions. The curators came as agents of Con-Temporaneity .

What could take the place of curating? The old museums and their collections will not return. Artist's associations have long lost their progressive impulse. But perhaps it would be possible to revive them by ceding them some power. Altogether, the task is to create a situation in which exhibition making can be re-democratized. That entails, to have debate before, and not only after the exhibition, in a way that it can exert influence, change and shape decisions.

Maybe one should consider to involve a party that has been largely forgotten within the artworld. I'm not speaking of the 1% who can afford to invest in art, but of all the others who might be interested in art if only art would also be interested in them. Not only by picturing their lives in videos and images, but by ceding some of the actual power and decision making from the hands of the few back to the hands of the many.

How could that possibly happen? This question can only be seriously asked by people who have never used social media. On all platforms, people have long got accustomed to create their own playlists, decide what friends to follow, what pictures to post, and what to say. Nobody feels satisfied with curated content. Therefore, goes the demand to the museums, art associations and curators: overcome the curating, involve the viewer, democratize exhibition making!

tripleampersand.org/against-curating/

German: www.zeit.de/2017/26/ausstellungen-kuratoren-kuenstler-macht/