

Beti Žerovc

**When Attitudes
Become the Norm**

**The Contemporary Curator
and Institutional Art**

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Introduction

The present book offers a selection of articles on contemporary art curators and curatorship, which were written between 2002 and 2012. My attention was drawn more or less naturally to the phenomenon of the curator of contemporary art. In the early 1990s, when I started working professionally in the art field and wished to understand my new environment and learn its basic principles, curating was the big topic in the art world. Contemporary art curatorship seemed to be irreversibly expanding, with curators popping up like mushrooms in every corner of the globe; at the same time, there was a proliferation of very vocal debates as to whether this was a good thing, what the consequences of the trend might be, and what effect it would have on art and the role of the artist. As a researcher, I wanted not only to ponder the most obvious facts – that the profile of the curator of contemporary art was quite different from that of the traditional art curator; that this new sort of curator had an enormous influence on the artist; and that, with this curator, the exhibition of contemporary art was also changing as a medium – but also to develop my reflections into a more comprehensive and analytical understanding of why this form of curatorship was, in fact, occurring and, indeed, who the curator actually was and what sort of activities, responsibilities, and powers belonged specifically to him.

When I began my research on contemporary curatorship, I soon realised that to understand the phenomenon it had to be examined in its broader social, political and economic contexts, and, especially, in relation to the radical changes that had taken place in the art field in the previous century. The 20th century had given rise to an extraordinary faith in art, and in the positive dimensions of art, all around the globe – that was something historically new. This general, socially established positive attitude toward art provided the foundation, both philosophically and materially, for the development of curatorship. Society's positive attitude toward art generated a remarkable influx of money and other resources into the art field, which allowed for the creation of a gigantic and still-growing highly diverse institutional platform for contemporary art and, with it, a permanent need for a large workforce to manage, explain, and organise this platform.

In the book, I analyse the curator as a figure who appears, evolves, and tirelessly participates in the institutionalisation of contemporary art. Arm in arm with the development of the institutional platform for contemporary art, and its requirements,

the figure of the curator is structured simultaneously as a bureaucratic, managerial, and producing figure, as someone who is actively involved in the conception, development, and interpretation of art, and as someone who is able to create an attractive discourse and set of events that give meaning to this kind of art production and that support its exceptional importance in contemporary society. With the curator, institutional art achieves its fullest expression; he takes it to a new level: art is created not merely with the idea and hope that it might one day end up in an art institution, as part of an exhibition or even in its permanent collection, but it is actually made in close collaboration with the art institution and is designed to fit the institution's space and needs.

The present book brings together a variety of texts – analytical essays, case studies, and interviews – in the desire to illuminate the topic as fully as possible and from different perspectives, while at the same time telling a story that is vivid and engaging. Because I have written extensively on curatorship, and from various angles, in the book I limit myself to the four topics I find most interesting: the history and evolution of the figure of the contemporary art curator; the leftist politicisation of contemporary art as it occurred, and is still occurring, in connection with the curator; the phenomenon of the contemporary art exhibition and the curator's role in it; and the exhibition of contemporary art as a set of institutional rituals and the potential effect of such rituals.

The first section of the book provides a historical and contextual framework for understanding the phenomenon of curatorship. Using, in particular, comparisons with older professional profiles in the visual art field, this section outlines the basic range of the contemporary art curator's powers and activities, which are, in fact, still being constantly developed. The period after the Second World War appears as an important time of preparation for the development of curatorship, as secularised Western countries in particular devoted more and more attention and resources to contemporary art and made it an active part of both their domestic and foreign politics. The work of their increasingly powerful cultural ministries and other similar public institutions, the creation of effective alliances between private capital and public funds, and the notably rapid pace of institutionalisation are only a few of the factors that gradually brought about a

state of remarkable prosperity in the field of contemporary art. Under such favourable conditions, the rise of the contemporary curator began in the late 1960s, when, working in art galleries and museums, he was able to establish himself as a direct producer of contemporary art – among other things, art started being made literally as a consequence of his invitations to artists to participate in projects – and, with respect to exhibitions, as a creative figure. Eventually, the “curatorial” exhibition of contemporary art achieved wide acceptance; such exhibitions are noticeably different from their historical predecessors in that the curator can mark them with his own personal imprint and, quite plainly, define their ideas, philosophy, politics, etc. This kind of subjectivised exhibition seeks to become more and more an exhibit in itself, a distinctive event, and as such hopes to attract ever greater attention from the media and the public. A significant part of the narrative in the first section of the book is told through interviews with people who played important roles in the pioneering period of contemporary curatorship: Pierre Restany, Zoran Kržišnik, Harald Szeemann, and Daniel Buren. Through their stories, important differences between old and new principles, and different work practices, are revealed, as well as specific antagonisms, such as the tensions that occurred between artists and curators.

I move from the first to the second section of the book with the article “Networking, Curatorship and Social Capital”, which portrays as the curator’s existential environment the highly ramified global network of the art system with its characteristic rules of operation as it developed at the end of the 20th century. The article summarises the state of affairs at the end of the “Heroic Age of Curating”, when in the last quarter of the century contemporary curatorship established itself intensively, taking root in existing art institutions, creating, with extraordinary ingenuity and true missionary zeal, many new structures and institutions, and spreading rapidly around the world. The spread of curatorship, which often coincided with the spread of capitalism and neoliberalism into new territories, was accompanied by a highly politicised discourse about how contemporary art and its institutions could help to construct a better, more democratic, more equal, and freer world. Fifteen years later, from today’s perspective, more visible changes can be seen only within the art system itself: for instance, it seems that in terms of power relations the traditional dominance of the West is easing, that people in the

art field are today less passionate about taking sides and making explicitly political statements, and that a fondness for individual mythologies is again on the rise. But in structural terms, there has been no serious change or deviation. The contemporary art system and curatorship are today more successful and more widespread than ever, while the established models of practice are perpetuated in ever greater numbers.

The tendency toward a highly politicised left-leaning contemporary art, which I alluded to above, might be described as the first artistic genre that developed in explicit connection with curators – under their aegis, we could say, or at least with the curator as co-creator. Here we are talking about ideas that seem to have become less attractive and less prevalent in recent years but that were only recently extraordinarily vital, especially in the 1990s, when certain curators fervently presented the ethical dimension as nothing less than a structural feature of curatorship, and exhibitions as an effective tool for the emancipation of society. In the second section of the book, therefore, I analyse this curatorial stance and ask whether the exhibition can be a socially emancipatory practice with extra-artistic effects and whether the curator can be an effective socio-political activist. The essay “The Curator and the Leftist Politicisation of Contemporary Art” offers a critical reflection on such possibilities through an analysis of curatorial training. In my interview with Charles Esche, a curator who has very explicitly declared his leftist views in the field of contemporary art, we open up the aporias of such a position, one after the other, on the basis of his own personal practice. The essay “Beautiful Freedom” presents certain key thoughts about why such institutionalised political activity does not deliver the socio-political results it proclaims, or at least desires, but instead produces, literally, the very opposite effect, in that, primarily, it provides ideological cover for promoting the interests of those who maintain and finance the art system.

In the third and fourth sections of the book, I devote my attention largely to the phenomenon of the contemporary art exhibition: I attempt to define its essence and nature and to elucidate what and how it actually communicates to us. The curated exhibition of contemporary art has in recent decades become both a privileged form in the contemporary art field and a practically unavoidable element in the creation and existence of a large segment of contemporary art. It is the format in which con-

temporary art occurs, lives, and breathes. Today contemporary art is so vitally connected to the exhibition medium and the art institution that much of this art is incapable of any worthwhile existence outside this environment.

Such a state of affairs sparks reflections in several different directions. Among other things, I examine whether the curated exhibition can itself be an independent work of art and what is actually artistic about it. I also look for answers and analogies – at times, I admit, somewhat strained – from outside the visual arts, especially in other creative fields. In the essay “The Exhibition as Artwork, the Curator as Artist: A Comparison with Theatre”, I consider the artistic potential of curatorship in dialogue with theatrical directors who have found the medium of the contemporary art exhibition so intriguing that they have employed it as a form of their own production. I also look in more detail at how the exhibition’s authorship is structured. Can this be defined as individual authorship or does it make more sense to speak of collective authorship? What is the curator with respect to the exhibition: expert, artist, a mix of the two and then some, or some entirely third thing? Indeed, in this connection I consider whether, with the contemporary art exhibition, it (still) makes any sense at all to think about authorship in such terms and I ask if the curator is merely one who executes the characteristic forms of institutionalised rituals, in which he is unavoidably bound to established models and prescribed formats.

One thing that should become clear in this part of the book is that the physical exhibition is often, and increasingly, merely one element, a kind of background, in the broader complex of the exhibition, in which the curator, armed with an arsenal of the most diverse means and mechanisms, produces a focused set of events and a discourse by which he guides us in our thinking about the chosen topic. The events and the curator’s discourse are part of a flow of events and discourse in which the institution deftly interweaves and homogenises all that it produces – and this “flow” seems today to be the chief product of the individual contemporary art institution. Here we can see plainly the institution’s tendency to reduce everything to a common denominator; capable of the most extraordinary harmonisation of multiplicities, the institution is like some truly marvellous milling machine: whatever drops into it, no matter how indigestible it seems, is ground into a pleasing porridge. The flavour differs, of course,

depending on the institution's focus, locality, and so on; questions about flavour and the correct way to make the porridge are the subject of constant debate and sometimes even very heated dispute. But this is precisely how the system lubricates itself – how the institutionalised rituals of contemporary art consumption are perpetuated with considerable uniformity all over the world.

Toward the end of the book I reflect on the fact that so many of us, ordinary viewers and art professionals alike, gain a sense of ourselves and feel fulfilled as cognitive, emotional, ritualistic and political beings specifically in the institutional setting and in the context of curated events, and I ask if these are still areas that can be perceived and defined with any success. What I mean is that, for the most part, we in the art world would rather not think or speak about these issues. We want to experience the institutional setting, as much as possible, as a neutral, even benevolent place. We want our discussions to be focused primarily on theorising over exhibitions and artworks – the kind of theorising, of course, that omits, or takes but little account of, the fact that in recent decades art institutions have not only been housing and exhibiting artworks but also commissioning and producing them, organising their use, and overseeing their meaning. I am convinced there is urgent need for a more thorough consideration of the implications of the processes I describe. All the more because art institutions have become commissioners and producers of contemporary art of a type and on a scale similar only to what the aristocracy and the Church were in the past.

There was once great discussion about how removing artworks from their original context and installing them in the museum meant their certain death. Today, it seems, we need to be thinking about different questions. Does the institution of visual art bring something to life if within it we create enough materials, structures, and rituals that are in many aspects similar to religious ones? And what, in fact, are we summoning to life?

With two exceptions – “The Exhibition as Artwork, the Curator as Artist: A Comparison with Theatre” and “Why Is It Important in the Art Field to Think About Art Events?” – the essays in this book were written, at least in the main details, before the spring

of 2007 as chapters for my doctoral dissertation. The chapters were later developed into articles, and what appears in the present book are more or less reprints of their first publication in English. Although the essays are not necessarily one hundred per cent congruent with my thinking today, I did not wish to change them, as this would mean sacrificing their relevance to their own time, when, in their responsiveness to current issues, they contributed to the animated conversation around the figure of the curator. I felt it was important, too, to preserve the texts' "vital juices": their directness, their feelings of grievance, their impassioned speech – aspects, in other words, that are usually first to go when we are tidying things up in retrospect. All the texts, however, have been newly edited, and a few have been slightly shortened: at times I wanted to avoid repetition, while in some of the interviews I left out passages that strayed from curatorial topics.

In the original Slovene texts, I used masculine grammatical forms when speaking in the abstract about the curator, the artist, etc. – gender-neutral reference is not as prevalent in Slovene writing as in English – and this is also reflected in the translations. My use of masculine pronouns, however, is entirely generic and should not be taken as implying anything about gender. But given that when it comes to the most influential positions in curatorship this otherwise very feminised profession quickly turns into a predominantly white male world, the selection of exclusively male interview subjects seemed entirely appropriate.

I fear that certain terminological difficulties may confuse or mislead the reader. The terminology for contemporary art curatorship is not (yet) fully established in individual languages, let alone internationally harmonised. As a result, writers on the subject resort to arduous descriptive definitions or use general labels even when a fuller understanding might require more specific terms. I hope my readers will understand what kind of exhibition I mean when I say "exhibition" (usually I am thinking of the thematic group exhibition of contemporary art that allows the curator to develop his own potential), and, most importantly, that they will understand when "curator" means the kind of contemporary art curator we have seen in recent decades and when it means the more traditional museum curator, for which I sometimes also use the term "art custodian" (perhaps creating further confusion). In Slovene, we have different words for these two

forms of curatorship, a fact that caused quite a few difficulties when it came to the English translation. (Incidentally, it might be wise to ask what, in fact, motivates the persistence in English of one term for two such very different work ethics and practices.)

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all those who participated in my research and assisted me during the writing and publication of the texts. The support I received from the Slovenian Research Agency was indispensable to my work, as it paid for nearly all of the research that forms the basis of what I write in this book.

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I also sincerely thank my dear collaborator Rawley Grau, who translated most of the texts in this book, and who, indeed, usually translates my texts. For this book he meticulously reviewed his earlier translations and made improvements. Rawley plays an essential part in my communication with the wider world, and our translation “marriage” goes back so many years that sometimes I think he knows what I want to say better than I do myself.

I am also very grateful to Mary Anne Staniszewski for contributing her thoughts on my writing and on the topics I discuss. Her agreeing to write the Afterword to my book means so much to me because her book *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* was from the beginning an important inspiration for my own research on curatorship.

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