

Exhibition as the Artistic Medium, Curator of Contemporary Art as the Artist: The Changing Statuses of the Exhibition and the Curator in the Field of Contemporary Art

October 1st and 2nd 2010, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

International symposium organized by the Igor Zabel Association in cooperation with Beti Žerovc

Co-produced by Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

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ABOUT

In the background of the symposium lies the idea that large system changes have occurred and are still occurring in the field of contemporary art and to a certain degree in art in general. However, they are not treated and reflected upon as they occur, and they are especially rarely efficiently theoretically analyzed and explained in the local context. They are almost taken for granted and believed to be a sort of “natural flow of events” as if they have no significant influence on the artistic production, etc.

The changing of the statuses of the exhibition – which is in a way a “privileged genre” of our period – and the curator in the field of contemporary art are two such phenomena.

CONTEXT

An extremely important point in the development of the medium of contemporary art exhibition and its curator is represented by the vast development and increased support shown in contemporary art that took place in the 20th century (especially after World War II). Some major aspects: an increasing number of museums and spaces for exhibiting contemporary (or also contemporary) art, favourable tax incentives for art supporters and buyers, favourable cultural policies in the sense of supporting live art, the introduction of art classes on various education levels accessible to all, which result in the expansion of art professions and a competent and interested public, various private incentives, etc. All this established a favourable environment for fine art, in which a large and uncontrollable contemporary production flourished, while the exhibition as the primary form of its “consumption” grew. The contemporary art exhibition has been transformed into an institutionalized, mass and geographically widely spread practice.

In this context the exhibition changed from a relatively neutral carrier or frame for exhibiting artworks into a direction in which it can become an independent piece of work and a specific artistic entity that tells its own story and can have distinctive features. If we think of the currently popular large group curatorial shows they are usually no longer neutral carriers of various single artworks or art projects, but ambitiously composed integral projects in which artworks are a part of the greater picture. The works of art are (merely/also) parts of a bigger iconographic program that can be repeated (especially if successful) in all kinds of adapted variations. This means that an exhibition can be structured according to a recognizable concept, which, especially when repeated, “puts together things that used to be separated” more efficiently and permanently than assumed.

In relation to this phenomenon we can also notice the changes in the relationships between the various protagonists within the art field. While in the not so distant past the curator or organizer of the exhibition did not approach its concept as an author – or only to a very limited extent – today's exhibitions are marked by distinctive authorship of the curator. By using existent artworks or artworks that the curator simply commissions to fit the space and achieve the desired subject matter s/he establishes complex iconographic programs – especially at larger exhibitions. In this

way the curator passes on his/her personal stories and directs complicated thematic totalities in accordance to her/his intentions.

The exhibition also changed from an event that used to be relatively static and in which the artworks “happened” to a kind of a chain-event, in which “events happen” within the exhibition itself, through interactive works, performances, installations, actions, total interiors, video and sound recordings, etc. This is accompanied by a range of events such as symposia, lectures, presentations, “club events/evenings”, etc. This trend of establishing constant happenings that grab the viewer is so strong that not only do individual exhibitions want to achieve this, this goal also wants to be reached by art institutions as a whole. What else is an institution, such as for instance the Parisian “Bourriaud-Sens” Palais de Tokyo, other than a promise of constant happenings that will constantly offer an authentic experience of live art and warmly greet us? The difference between the exhibition space and the exhibition in the past and today is thus literally physical, touchable and audible. For example, if an exhibition used to be “mute”, it is nowadays – as a rule – noisy and full of interfering sounds. While in the past the reigning element of the exhibition was the “physical exhibition” (the opening and the guided tour were often its only “events”), today we are continuously “invited” to attend all kinds of events within the exhibition itself, sometimes every day, sometimes even several times a day.

The exhibition – at least in one of its versions – is thus becoming a directed “thematic” event and an organized gathering with audience participation. We can notice that the viewer spends more time at such events than s/he used to and that s/he also identifies with them differently. In this respect the curator acts as a director/organizer of the viewer's experience.

We will end with the treatment of the exhibition on the artistic level; the “eventfulness” is intensified with the establishment of a direct link between the curatorial exhibition and the avant-garde art events from the past (dada, surrealists, futurists, Fluxus, etc.), in which today's curatorial exhibition appears as a logical continuation of their tradition. This takes place in practice and especially in theory – see for example various chronologies of the history of exhibitions. Even though it seems that this connection is rather innocent, this is by no means the truth, for it importantly defines the context of understanding the curatorial exhibition; it redirects “the reading” of individual artworks onto the whole and the frequency of the “reading” of these wholes onto the type of perception that we otherwise establish towards art.

THE CENTRAL ISSUES THAT WILL BE ADDRESSED IN THE LECTURES AND PANELS

- If the exhibition itself is becoming a work of art, what are the main features of such a work of art? Can we define its structure? Can we define why is it or isn't it a work of art?
- What makes or doesn't make the curator an author? What makes or doesn't make the curator an artist?
- Do we still view and enjoy individual artworks within exhibitions or do we increasingly view, appreciate and contemplate exhibitions themselves? Can or must we view and enjoy these two things separately or simultaneously? Or should they merge as in a theatre play or film?

OTHER POSSIBLE ISSUES

- What are the possibilities that the “auratisation” is being transferred from the work of art and the artist to the exhibition and the curator?
- What is the role of the art market in those changes?
- What is the artistic part of creating an exhibition: the selection of the topic/works/artists, giving the form to the event, making the artworks visible, interpreting them?
- What is the artistic effect of the exhibition? As a spectator, do I see, feel and understand things in a new perspective? Do I develop a different view of the world? Do I enjoy? what and how?
- If a direct link between the curatorial exhibition and the avant-garde art events from the past (dada, surrealists, futurists, Fluxus, etc.) is established in curatorial theory, are people like Marinetti or Macunias or dada artists the forefathers of curators? If this is the case what are Manet and Courbet? What is Paul Durand-Ruel? What are the Central European Secessionists?
- Who would be the best to answer these questions: philosophers, sociologists, art historians, artists ... or curators themselves?

- Why is a project in a form of an exhibition art if it is created by an artist (as examples we can take the projects of T. Hirschhorn or General Idea), while a similar curatorial project is not considered to be art?
- Is it 'un-ethical' for a curator to become an artist, as he has got a different task – or is it only normal, because if you work with art as much as s/he does, it is expected that you will sooner or later develop such aspirations? Where these merely suppressed, denied until now because of the specific circumstances? It seems that the older curators, such as H. Szeemann or L. Lippard, were more in touch with their 'artistic selves'.
- Is it possible that we are doing a bad thing, if we are not letting/fully supporting the exhibition to become a work of art?

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