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The Curatorial Voice in Contemporary America

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2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

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The Curatorial Voice in Contemporary America

Abstract

Originally I looked to curatorial practices to investigate the theme of 'word and image' due to the interplay of words such as wall texts, brochures, catalogues and promotional cards in conjunction with the art as image. When I approached the research I began to see these various texts as a framing device, or filter, for the work. My research into curatorial practices in contemporary art examines the field's historical growth and present condition. If in this talk the explicit relationship between words and images seems lost, it is not lost, but rather embedded into the intrinsic nature of exhibition. A viewer utilizes texts to narrate an exhibit, those texts are manifestations of the curator's thoughts and intentions for the show, and these intentions are formed by a theoretical foundation. My interests grew from the microcosm of text and image relations to the larger history and condition of exhibiting contemporary art and the curatorial profession. A curator can speak personally about his or her own views of how to set up a show, but when exhibiting art is considered generally and historically, many issues come into play. Most important are issues of the art market, the institutional system, the power of the curatorial voice, and the capacity the exhibition has to echo a cultural current.

Comments

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The Curatorial Voice in Contemporary America

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2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image
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Final Project Paper
April 2006

Originally I looked to curatorial practices to investigate the theme of ‘word and image’ due to the interplay of words such as wall texts, brochures, catalogues and promotional cards in conjunction with the art as image. When I approached the research I began to see these various texts as a framing device, or filter, for the work. My research into curatorial practices in contemporary art examines the field’s historical growth and present condition. If in this talk the explicit relationship between words and images seems lost, it is not lost, but rather embedded into the intrinsic nature of exhibition. A viewer utilizes texts to narrate an exhibit, those texts are manifestations of the curator’s thoughts and intentions for the show, and these intentions are formed by a theoretical foundation. My interests grew from the microcosm of text and image relations to the larger history and condition of exhibiting contemporary art and the curatorial profession. A curator can speak personally about his or her own views of how to set up a show, but when exhibiting art is considered generally and historically, many issues come into play. Most important are issues of the art market, the institutional system, the power of the curatorial voice, and the capacity the exhibition has to echo a cultural current.

The influential mid-century critic Clement Greenberg pushed for painting that was void of pictorial content, references to the outside world or influences from other disciplines. He explained modernism as being self-referential and therefore thought painting should be about painting; truth to materials enforcing pictorial flatness. The Abstract Expressionists, specifically Pollack, embodied these notions. In this period, the critic was the strongest force alongside, or counter to, the artist, and Greenberg had become the most dominant critical force. The curator had a behind-the-scenes position as caretaker and organizer. Through the sixties, Minimalism and dematerialization of the art

object would defy Greenbergian standards and push art in a new direction, towards what we now call post-modernism (Though like Gerard said, this is a tricky term to define). Greenberg's thoughts on art influenced exhibition greatly, and the conventions of exhibition surrounding the Abstract Expressionists and post-painterly abstraction are probably the first type of exhibit that comes to mind. Conventions arose as to how much space a painting needed to speak on its own. Brian O'Doherty, author of Inside the White Cube, a collection of essays published in *Artforum* in 1976, asserts that these conventions become laws and "we enter the era where works of art conceive the wall as a no-man's land on which to project their concept of the territorial imperative." He cites Color Field painting as the mode of exhibition that is characteristic of the time, where each piece has enough space to speak before the next piece begins (**IMAGE**). He remarks that how we read these hangings is as unconscious as chewing gum; it is socially sanctioned and very serious. The Color Field works and other works of the modernist tradition utilized the pristine walls and the sacred magic of the gallery to impart on the viewer the sensation of "a Rolls Royce in a showroom".

Investigating the context moves attention away from the art object and focuses attention on what the space means. O'Doherty recognizes this as revolutionary to art and to exhibiting. When a space is transformed in a single gesture, the concept is tied to the space and the space cannot be bought. It is a moment in time that alters the notion of art as commodity. Negating art as commodity is important to O'Doherty as a means to re-inventing art. Marcel Duchamp was the fore father of exploring context as content and the gestures by other artists that followed in the seventies broke the laws that had been conventionalized in the sixties. In 1938 at the International Exhibition of Surrealism

Marcel Duchamp installed *1,200 Bags of Coal* (**Image**). The hanging bags were covering the ceiling. On the floor was a stove that read as a reversed chandelier; it was a floor-ceiling transplant. O'Doherty praises this act as “exposing the effect of context on art, of the container on the contained”.

With postmodernism, and the flood of gallery gestures that occurred in the seventies, the accepted notion that the gallery space is “neutral” is banished. What O'Doherty means here is that postmodernism no longer easily accepts the gallery as a sacred space untouched by time. The gallery space is an agreement, a clause, between artist and consumer. Investigation of context revealed the construction of societal values within the white cube.

In his book *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition* Bruce Altshuler finds a breaking point in 1969 in the course of the avant-garde and its exhibition. On the one hand, advanced art was accepted and desired by the public, and a strong commercial and institutional system had come to support it. On the other hand, artistic means paralleled the strong social change of the time and activism around the Vietnam War. In the world of advanced exhibitions, this dichotomy between new artistic modes of anti-commercial and dematerialized art and the strong commercial and public support for “advanced art” spawned an important development, the rise of the curator as creator. By 1969 chief innovations would be made by the exhibition organizer. Like the rebellious work displayed, their exhibitions sought to challenge the standard way of framing art for the public, the manner and mode of presentation becoming part of the art presented. One man in particular, a museum director from Switzerland, Harald Szeemann, is said to be the first curator as creator, or star curator. Szeemann believed no traditional forms of

exhibition could represent the art that was produced from these radical social, political and aesthetic impulses that grew out of the counterculture of the late sixties. His show *When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Processes-Concepts-Situations-Information* carried the motto: *Live in your head*. In his catalogue essay, Szeemann states that the show was unified by the artists “inner attitudes” producing works under the headings Anti-Form, Arte Povera, Concept Art and Earth Art. Here the focus is abruptly turned away from the art object as made for market consumption to the act itself, produced by a particular attitude and disrupting the primary triad of the art world- studio, gallery and museum. Szeemann even reproduced his own process by including the address list he used to visit the artists in New York (**IMAGE**). Of the sixty-nine artists in the show, fifteen were represented by information or documentation alluding to works elsewhere, either physically in other locations like earth works, or metaphysically, in a conceptual realm. With permission from the city, one artist, Michael Heizer used a wrecking ball to smash part of the sidewalk outside the exhibition naming it the *Berne Depression* and Richard Serra threw nearly 500 lbs of molten lead along the base of the white gallery wall recreating *Splash Piece* (**IMAGE**). The Swiss were outraged at the destruction of the sidewalk and there was general anger at the abuse of public money to fund the perceived atrocities inside the galleries. *Attitudes* was funded by the corporate giant Phillip Morris Europe and in the catalogue the president wrote “there is a key element in this <<new art>> which has its counterpart in the business world. That element is innovation.” And that the works exhibited “are not adjuncts to our commercial function, but rather an integral part.” By 1973, Lucy Lippard, popular feminist, art critic, theorist and political activist, was mourning the unrealized aspirations of 1969 as over the next two decades

the oppositional inclinations of advanced art was to be largely co-opted by commercial and institutional development. *Attitudes* became the model for the increasing number of large survey and theme shows that give the curator the opportunity to play a central role and participate creatively.

In 1988, Heinech and Pollak conducted a study for the Pompidou to investigate the trend that followed Szeemann. They pointed out that over a generation there had been a change in the balance between the two tasks of presentation: the permanent display has reached a standstill in its evolution while the temporary mounting of exhibitions is constantly growing in volume and variation. The curator must now perform an enlarged role, determining a conceptual framework, selecting specialized collaborators from various disciplines, directing work crews, consulting an architect, assuming a formal position in terms of presentation, and organizing the publishing of a catalogue. The study notes that the press now emphasizes the exhibition as an object in and of itself, often citing the “author”, so it is no longer a transparent medium produced by an institution, but rather the work of an individual. A comparative term for this phenomenon is *auteur*, a product of French cinema. In any position in the art world, *auteur* is not defined by institutional properties nor functional properties, but rather ‘symbolic’ properties, as an individual holds a particular quality. The increasing tendency to stage a ‘theme’ with accompanying historical and cultural resonances has created the comparable ‘star curator’ or *auteur*.

The developments caused by the rise of curatorial power shaped its present condition. A symposium held in 2000, Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility addressed the state of current curatorial practice. Robert Storr, Senior

Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art stated that “in spite of the vogue for talking about curators as artists. I would strongly insist that they are not...their relation to [their] medium and to art itself is like that of a good editor to a good novelist.” Paul Schimmel, Chief Curator of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art commented “the most important change in curatorial practice today is the role of the independent curator—a kind of journeyman curator or wandering global nomad who doesn’t have the shell of the museum to protect them. This has done the most to invigorate the museum, although I share Robert Storr’s concern about the curator as a star auteur, I’m also encouraged that curators are able to bring a personal vision and passion into the discipline.” Though it is perhaps the institutions that regulate the professionalism of the position, and without the board of trustees, the director, and the name of the institution and its associations, the position would lose its restrictions and the barriers would disappear entirely. As it stands, institutions are the prime means for viewing temporary exhibits and Ralph Rugoff, director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco investigates how to reach a balance whereby the curator can use a theme and many artists, but without invoking the often frowned up notion of curator as artist. Rugoff states that a great group exhibition asks its audience to make connections. The show juxtaposes works whose “overlapping concerns resonate in ways that transform our experience of them.” Rugoff suggests that the best analogy for curating, rather than an editor to a novelist, or director to a film, is found in the field of consumer packaging. He states “the consumer research industry has demonstrated the ways in which our experience of an object, and our subsequent interpretation, is shaped by the context that frames our encounter—even if that context is no more than the label

on a bottle.” What is unique to the packaging of a group exhibition, is not that it only sparks a desire to consume, but also a desire to question the experience. In order to keep this key element of questioning exhibitions the curator needs to ask questions that engage the audience, rather than creating a didactic and tidy exhibition where all the viewer has to do is read the wall text and look to the indicated piece. Rugoff notes that when the group show is “about” a specific subject, like war, the art is merely serving as an illustration for the broader theme and are often disjointed in relation to one another. Therefore, it is essential to the group show to create intimate connections between the different works in the show and not only link them through their mutual connection to a topic. Ideally, the group show would create a context that “prompts us to re-imagine and re-think what we already know about art.”

To research the practical application of theory regarding curating and exhibiting I worked with Associate Curator at the ICA, Jenelle Porter as she organized her current group show “Gone Formalism”. Incidentally, the show deals with Greenberg and his original conception of Formalism and how the word is used, or abused, today. Jenelle believes the immediate associations regarding the word are Greenberg’s terms where works are evaluated according to inherent material and in turn deal with form, color and line. The contemporary artists included in the show are described currently, by critics, as formalists. She questions how this can be if “not one of them is interested in divesting their work of content, nor purely focusing on the inherent qualities of their respective materials.” The artists in the show use a formalist language to investigate complex issues surrounding things spiritual, political and metaphysical; constructing a language that co-exists with concept. Jenelle gathered these objects together because “one way to

comprehend the difficulties and complexities of contemporary culture is to be confronted by multiple voices that speak the same language, albeit in different dialects”. These thoughts are displayed in the introductory panel as soon as you step into the gallery. “Gone Formalism” is intentionally open ended and the exhibition allows the viewer to make connections between the pieces, which are not strictly grouped by artist. When I questioned Jenelle about how she chose to set up the show, she spoke about the need for the audience to find their own path through the problem she poses and therefore there are no didactic wall texts that explain to you how an artist is integrating formalism and concept. And like Rugoff states is essential to a good group show, connections between the pieces can be formed as a viewer looks at the formal language of one piece, its content and then at the piece next to it, wondering what do they share and how do they differ.

At the symposium in 2000 *New York Times* writer, Roberta Smith addressed her concern that what she considers the curator’s art, is under threat due to issues concerning funding and sponsorship. Smith gives examples of people, not curators, working the curator’s position. For example a show sponsored by Shiseido, a cosmetics company, at the Gray Art Gallery, which is, basically, an exhibition that looks like a makeup counter in a store (**image**) and the Armani exhibition at the Guggenheim, connected to a 15 million dollar gift to the Guggenheim from Armani (**image**). She states “I’m as interested as anyone in the expansion of the definition of art, or the expansion of the definition of the curatorial practice, but is there a point at which it sort of dissipates or becomes completely diffused?” I researched my topic, for the most part, chronologically, so I had read Altshuler’s chapter on 1969 before I came upon this quote. In the margins, where

Altshuler notes that Szeemann's own exhibition processes reflected the radical attitudes and tone of 1969, I wondered if it was possible today to echo the current tone of our society or were things too diffuse? Have all the walls between the different sectors of society been torn down and if so, do only hybrid forms of display that incorporate the common threads of advertising, sponsorship and corporate culture, like the ones Smith cites as threatening to the curatorial profession, truly mirror present society.