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From Medium to Message

The Art Exhibition as Model of a New World Order

Art philosopher Boris Groys sees the art installation as a way of making hidden reality visible. The ambiguous meaning of the notion of freedom that Groys observes in our democratic order is also present in the contemporary art installation. This can be exposed by examining it and analysing the role of the artist and the curator. The public space created by the installation, and by the biennial, is the model for a new political world order.

Today, art is frequently equated with the art market, and the artwork is primarily identified as a commodity. That art functions in the context of the art market and that every work of art is a commodity is beyond doubt. But art is also made and exhibited for those who do not want to be art collectors – and they are the majority of the art public. The typical exhibition visitor rarely sees the exhibited art as a commodity. At the same time the number of large-scale exhibitions, of biennials and triennials, documentas and manifestas, is constantly growing. All these big exhibitions, in which so much money and energy is invested, are not made primarily for art buyers, but for the large mass, for the anonymous visitor who will perhaps never buy an artwork. Also, art fairs which, on the face of it, are meant to serve the art buyers are now being increasingly transformed into events in public space which also attract people who have no interest or not enough money to buy art. The art system thus is on the way to becoming part of that mass culture that art has long been out to watch and analyse from a distance. It is becoming a part of mass culture not as a production of individual pieces traded on the art market, but as an exhibition practice that combines with architecture, design and fashion – as it was envisaged by the pioneering minds of the avant-garde, by the artists of the Bauhaus, the Vkhutemas, and others as early as in the 1920s. Thus, contemporary art can be understood primarily as an exhibition practice. That means, among many other things, that it is becoming increasingly difficult today to differentiate between the two main figures of the contemporary art world – the artist and the curator.

The traditional division of labour inside the art system was clear enough. The artworks were produced by artists and then selected and exhibited by curators. But at least since Duchamp this division of labour has collapsed. Today there is no longer an 'ontological' difference between making art and displaying art. In the context of contemporary art, to make art means to show things as art. So the question arises: is it possible and, if yes, how is it possible to differentiate between the roles of artist and curator when there is no difference between art production and art exhibition? Now I would argue that such a differentiation is still possible. And I would like to do so by analysing the difference between the standard exhibition and the art installation. A conventional exhibition is conceived as an accumulation of art objects which are placed next to one another in the exhibition space to be viewed one after the other. The exhibition space works in this case as an extension of the neutral, public urban space – like a side alley, in fact, that the passer-by may turn into if he or she has paid the admission fee. The movement of the visitors through the exhibition space remains similar to that of a passer-by walking down a street and watching the architecture of the houses left and right. It is by no means accidental that Walter Benjamin should construct

his 'Arcades Project' around the analogy between an urban stroller and an exhibition visitor. The body of the viewer in this case remains outside art: art takes place in front of the viewer's eyes – as an art object, a performance, or a film. Accordingly, in this case the exhibition space is understood as being an empty, neutral, public space. The exhibition space is here a symbolic property of the public. The only function of such an exhibition space is to make the art objects that are placed in it easily accessible to the gaze of the visitors.

The curator administers this space in the name of the public – and as a representative of the public. Accordingly, the curator's role is to safeguard the public character of the exhibition space – and at the same time to bring the individual artworks into this public space, to make them accessible to the public, to publicize them. It is obvious that an individual artwork cannot assert its presence by itself, forcing the viewer to take a look at it. It lacks the vitality, energy, and health to do so. The work of art, it seems, is originally sick, helpless – in order to see it, viewers have to be taken to it just like hospital staff takes visitors to see a bed-ridden patient. It is no coincidence that the word 'curator' is etymologically related to 'cure'. To curate is to cure. Curating cures the powerlessness of the image, its inability to show itself by itself. Exhibition practice thus is the cure that heals the originally ailing image, that is, gives it presence, visibility – brings it to the public view and turns it into the object of the public's judgment. However, one can say that curating works like a supplement, like a *pharmakon* in the sense of Derrida in that it both cures the image and further contributes to its illness.[1] This iconoclastic potential of curating was initially directed against the sacral objects of the past by presenting them as mere art objects in the neutral, empty exhibition spaces of the modern art museum or *Kunsthalle*. In fact, it is curators, including museum curators, who originally produced art in the modern sense of this word. For the first art museums – founded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and expanded in the course of the nineteenth century due to imperial conquests and the pillaging of non-European cultures – collected all sorts of 'beautiful' functional objects that were previously used for religious rites, interior decoration, or the manifestation of personal wealth, exhibiting them as works of art, that is, as defunctionalized autonomous objects put up for the mere purpose of being viewed. All art originally is design – be it religious design or design of power. In the modern period, too, design precedes art. Looking for modern art in today's museums, we have to realize that what is to be seen there as art is, above all, defunctionalized design fragments, be it mass-culture design – from Duchamp's urinal to Warhol's Brillo box – or utopian design which – from Jugendstil to Bauhaus and the Russian avant-garde,

1. Jacques Derrida *Force de loi (*Paris: Editions Galilée, 1994 [1990])

and on to Donald Judd – sought to give shape to the 'new life' of the future. Art is design that has become dysfunctional because the society that provided its basis suffered a historical collapse, like the Inca Empire or Soviet Russia.

Autonomous Art

In the course of the modern era, however, artists began to assert the autonomy of their art – understood in the first place as autonomy from the public opinion, from the public taste. The artists have required the right to make sovereign decisions regarding the content and form of their art – beyond any explanation and justification vis-à-vis the public. And they were given this right – but only to a certain degree. The freedom to create art according to one's own sovereign will does not automatically guarantee the artist that his or her art will be also exhibited in public space. The inclusion of any artwork into a publicly accessible exhibition must be – at least potentially – publicly explained and justified. Of course, artist, curator and art critic are free to argue for the inclusion of some artworks or against such an inclusion. However, every such explanation and justification undermines the autonomous, sovereign character of artistic freedom that modernist art has aspired to win. Every discourse legitimizing an artwork can be seen as an insult to this artwork. Every inclusion of an artwork in a public exhibition as only one among other artworks displayed in the same public space can be seen as a denigration of this artwork. That is why in the course of modernity the curator was considered mostly to be somebody who keeps pushing himself between the artwork and the viewer – and disempowering the artist and the viewer at the same time. Hence the art market appears more favourable to modernist, autonomous art than the museum or *Kunsthalle*. On the art market, works of art circulate singularized, decontextualized, uncurated, which apparently gives them a chance for an unmediated demonstration of their sovereign origin. The art market functions according the rules of the potlatch as it was described by Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille. The sovereign decision of an artist to make an artwork beyond any justification is trumped by the sovereign decision of a private buyer to pay for this artwork an amount of money beyond any comprehension.

An art installation, however, does not circulate. Rather, it installs everything that usually circulates in our civilization: objects, texts, films, etcetera. At the same time it changes in a very radical way the role and function of the exhibition space. This is because the installation operates by symbolic privatization of the public space of exhibition. It may look like a standard, curated exhibition, but its space is designed according the sovereign will of an individual artist who is not supposed to publicly justify his or her selection of the included objects or organization of the installation space as a whole. The installation is

frequently denied the status of a specific art form, because the question arises what the medium of an installation is. The traditional art media are all defined by a specific material support: canvas, stone, or film. Now, the material support of the medium of the installation is the space itself. That does not mean, however, that the installation is somehow 'immaterial.' On the contrary, the installation is material *par excellence*, since it is spatial – and being in the space is the most general definition of being material. The installation transforms the empty, neutral, public space into an individual artwork – and invites the visitor to experience this space as a holistic, totalizing space of this artwork. Anything included in such a space becomes a part of the artwork only because it is placed inside this space. The distinction between art object and simple object becomes insignificant here. Instead, what becomes crucial is the distinction between marked installation space, and unmarked, public space. When Marcel Broodthaers presented his installation entitled *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle in 1973, he put up a sign next to each exhibit saying: 'This is not a work of art.' As a whole, however, his installation has been considered to be a work of art, and not without reason. The installation demonstrates a certain selection, a certain chain of choices, a certain logic of inclusions and exclusions. Here one can see an analogy to a curated exhibition. But it is precisely the point: the selection and the mode of representation is here a sovereign prerogative of the artist alone. It is based exclusively on his or her personal sovereign decision that is in no need of any further explanation or justification. The art installation is a way to expand the domain of the sovereign rights of the artist from the individual art object to the exhibition space itself.

And that means: the art installation is a space in which the difference between the sovereign freedom of the artist and the institutional freedom of the curator becomes visible, immediately able to be experienced. The regime under which art operates in our contemporary Western culture is generally understood as freedom of art. But the freedom of art means different things to a curator and to an artist. As it was already said, the curator – including the so-called independent curator – makes his or her choices ultimately in the name of the democratic public. Actually, to be responsible towards the public a curator does not need to be part of any fixed institution: the curator is already an institution by definition. Accordingly, the curator has the obligation to publicly justify his or her choices – and it can happen that the curator fails to do so. Of course, the curator is supposed to have the freedom to present his or her argument to the public. But this freedom of the public discussion has nothing to do with the freedom of art understood as freedom of private, individual, subjective, sovereign artistic decisions – beyond any argumentation, explanation and justi-

fication. The sovereign decision of an artist to make art in this or that way is generally accepted by the Western liberal society as a sufficient reason to perceive this artist's practice as legitimate. Of course, an artwork can also be criticized and rejected. But an artwork can be rejected only as a whole. It makes no sense to criticize any particular choices, inclusions or exclusions made by an artist. In this sense the total space of an art installation can be also rejected only as a whole. To use the same example: nobody would criticize Broodthaers for having overlooked this or that particular image of this or that particular eagle in his installation.

The Installation as a Testing Ground

So one can say that in our Western society the notion of freedom is deeply ambiguous – and, of course, not only in the field of art but also in the political field. In many domains of social practice – such as private consumption, investment of one's own capital, or choice of one's own religion – freedom is understood in the West as freedom to take private, sovereign decisions. But in some other domains, especially in the political field, freedom is understood primarily as the freedom of public discussion guaranteed by law – and thus non-sovereign, conditional, institutional freedom. But, of course, the private, sovereign decisions are controlled in our societies to a certain degree by public opinion and political institutions. (We all know the famous slogan: private is political). And on the other hand the open political discussion is time and again interrupted by private, sovereign decisions of the political actors and manipulated by the private interests (here, on the contrary, the political becomes privatized).

The artist and the curator embody these two different kinds of freedom in a very conspicuous manner: the sovereign, unconditional, publicly irresponsible freedom of art making and the institutional, conditional, publicly responsible freedom of curatorship. And that means that the art installation in which the act of art production coincides with the act of art presentation becomes a perfect experimental terrain to reveal and explore the ambiguity of the Western notion of freedom – the ambiguity that lies at the core of this notion. Accordingly, in the past decades we have seen the emergence of the innovative curatorial projects that seem to empower the curator to act in an authorial, sovereign way. And we also see the emergence of artistic practices that want to be collaborative, democratic, decentralized, de-authorized.

Indeed, the art installation is often viewed today as an art form that allows the artist to democratize his or her art, to take public responsibility, to begin to act in the name of a certain community or even of society as a whole. In this sense the emergence of the art installation seems to mark the end of the modernist claim to autonomy and sovereignty. The decision of an artist to let the multitude of visitors enter the space of his or her

artwork, and to allow them to move freely inside it, is interpreted as opening the closed space of an artwork to democracy. The closed artwork's space seems to be transformed into a platform for public discussion, democratic practice, communication, networking, education, and so forth. But this analysis of the art installation practice tends to overlook the act of symbolic privatization of the public space by the artist that precedes the act of the opening of the installation space to a community of visitors. As it was already said, the space of the traditional exhibition is a symbolic public property – and the curator who manages this space acts in the name of public opinion. The visitor of a standard exhibition remains on his or her own territory – the visitor is a symbolic owner of the space where all the individual artworks are exposed, delivered to his gaze and judgment. The space of an art installation, on the contrary, is the symbolic private property of the artist. Entering the installation space, the visitor leaves the public territory of democratic legitimacy and enters the space of sovereign, authoritarian control. The visitor is here, so to say, on foreign territory, in exile. The visitor of an installation space becomes the expatriate who has to submit him- or herself to a foreign law – to a law that is given to him or her by the artist. Here the artist acts as a legislator, as a sovereign of the installation space – even and maybe especially so if the law that is given by the artist to a community of visitors is a democratic law.

Politeia

One can say that the installation practice reveals the act of unconditional, sovereign violence that initially installs any democratic order. We know that: The democratic order was never brought about in a democratic fashion. Democratic order always emerges as an effect of a violent revolution. To install a law means to break one. The first legislator can never act in a legitimate manner. The legislator installs the political order but he or she does not belong to this order, remains external to this order, even if he or she decides later to submit him- or herself to this order. The author of an art installation is also such a legislator that gives to the community of visitors the space to constitute itself and defines the rules to which this community has to submit – but does not belong to this community, remains outside of it. And that remains true even if the artist decides to join the community that he or she has created. This second step should not cause us to overlook the first one – the sovereign one. And one should also not forget: after initiating a certain order, a certain *politeia*, a certain community of visitors, the installation artist has to rely on the art institutions to maintain this order, to police the fluid *politeia* of the installation's visitors. Jacques Derrida meditates in *Force de loi* on the role of the police in a state.[2] The police force is supposed to supervise the functioning of certain laws but de facto it partially creates the rules that

2. See note 1.

it should merely supervise. Derrida tries to show here that the violent, revolutionary, sovereign act of the introduction of law and order can never be fully erased afterwards. To maintain a law always also means to permanently reinvent and re-establish this law. This initial act of violence is recalled and remobilized again and again. And it is especially obvious in our times of violent export, installation and securing of democracy. One should not forget: the installation space is a movable space. The art installation is not site-specific, it can be installed everywhere and at any time. And it should be no illusion that there can be something like a completely chaotic, Dadaistic, Fluxus-like installation space free of any control. In his famous treatise 'Francais, encore un effort si vous voulez etre republicain', Marquis de Sade presents a vision of a perfectly free society that has abolished all the repressive laws and installed only one law: everybody has to do what he or she likes, including committing crimes of any kind. Now it is especially interesting that De Sade states at the same time the necessity of the law enforcement that has to prevent the reactionary attempts of traditionally thinking citizens to return to the old repressive state in which family is secured and crime forbidden. So we still need the police even if we want to defend the freedom of crime against the reactionary nostalgia of the old repressive order.

By the way, the violent act of constituting a democratically organized community should not be interpreted as contradicting its democratic nature. Sovereign freedom is obviously non-democratic – and so it seems to be also anti-democratic. However, even if it looks paradoxical at first glance, sovereign freedom is a necessary precondition of the emergence of any democratic order. And again – the practice of art installation is a good example confirming this rule. The standard art exhibition leaves an individual visitor alone – allowing him or her to confront and contemplate individually the exhibited art objects. Such an individual visitor moves from one object to another, but necessarily overlooks the totality of the exhibition's space, including his or her own positioning inside this space. On the contrary, an art installation builds a community of spectators precisely because of the holistic, unifying character of the installation space. The true visitor to the art installation is not an isolated individual but a visitor collective. The art space as such can only be perceived by a mass of visitors, a multitude, if you like, with this multitude becoming part of the exhibition for each individual visitor – and vice versa. So one can say that the installation art practice demonstrates the dependency of any democratic space on the private, sovereign decisions of a legislator – or a group of legislators. It is something that was very well known to the Greek thinkers of antiquity and also to the initiators of democratic revolutions – but somehow became suppressed by the dominant political discourse. We tend – especially after Foucault –

to detect the source of power in the impersonal agencies, structures, rules and protocols. However, this fixation on the impersonal mechanisms of power let us overlook the importance of individual, sovereign decisions and actions that taken place in private, heterotopic spaces – to use another term introduced by Foucault. Modern, democratic powers also have a meta-social, meta-public, heterotopic origin. As it was already said, the artist who has designed a certain installation space is an outsider to this space. He or she is heterotopic to this space. The artist is an outsider in relationship to the artwork. But the outsider is not necessarily somebody who has to be included to be empowered. There is also empowerment by exclusion, and especially by self-exclusion. The outsider can be powerful precisely because the outsider is not controlled by society, not limited in his sovereign actions by any public discussion, by any need of public self-justification.

Accordingly, these reflections should not be misunderstood as a critique of installation as an art form by demonstrating its fundamentally non-democratic, sovereign character. The goal of art is not to change things – they are changing themselves all the time anyway. Art's function is, rather, to show, to make visible the realities that are generally overlooked. By taking aesthetic responsibility for the design of the installation space the artist reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the democratic order that politics mostly tries to conceal. The installation is the space where we are immediately confronted with the ambiguous character of the contemporary notion of freedom that is understood in our democracies at the same time as sovereign and institutional freedom. The art installation is a space of unconcealment (in the Heideggerian sense) of the heterotopic, sovereign power that is concealed behind the obscure transparency of the democratic order.

Biennials

Now the question arises how one can interpret the aesthetic-political phenomenon of the biennial that can be seen as an arrangement of curated exhibitions and art installations. The increasing success of the biennial as a specific form of art presentation has surely a lot to do with economical motivations and considerations. The biennial rhythm can be coordinated with the rhythm of contemporary international tourism. The necessity to come to a certain city annually would be experienced by the visitors as a burden. On the other hand, after three or four years one begins to forget why he or she found this or that city so attractive. So the biennial rhythm reflects accurately enough the time span between nostalgia and forgetting. But there is another, political reason for the biennial as an institution that is successful. It is common knowledge that the contemporary world is characterized by the asymmetry between economic and political power: the capitalist market operates globally and the politics operates regionally. The

last global political project that operated on the same level as the global market was communism. And it will be awhile before the return of such a global political project. At the same time it is obvious that the asymmetry between economy and politics is damaging not only the possibilities of emergence of a new global political order but even the economical order as it is. Capitalism is incapable of establishing and securing its own infrastructure, as the recent financial crisis has shown yet again. Capitalism needs a sovereign political power to be able to function effectively. Earlier it was an absolutist state – in the future it could be a state of a new type. But in any case, in the current situation of transition to a new global political order, the international art system is a good terrain on which to envisage and to install new projects of political sovereignty – be they utopian, dystopian or both. So every biennial can be seen as a model of such a new world order because every biennial tries to negotiate between national and international, cultural identities and global trends, the economically successful and the politically relevant. Already, the first biennial, the Venice Biennale, tried to offer the public such a model of a new global order. The results were mostly embarrassing and in some times – especially Fascist times – even frightening. But at least there were some results. And today, the biennials are again the spaces where two closely interconnected nostalgias are installed: nostalgia of universal art and nostalgia of universal political order.