Star Wars
authorship and curatorial practice

Roger White

I
In March 2005, there was a lot of unhappy chatter—most of it unrecorded—about the way the second GREATER NEW YORK exhibition at PS1 Contemporary Art Center was curated. There were rumors of last-minute inclusions and exclusions, verifiable examples of gender inequality and an embarrassing discrepancy between a stated "open call" submission policy and the consequentially thorough representation of several key MFA programs. One decision in particular generated a lot of ire: the official list of participating artists wasn’t circulated until the opening of the show. While it seems likely that this was the result of a logistical reality—it is, after all, hard to keep track of 142 names—some artists ventured the opinion that the curators were engaged in a canny publicity strategy, suppressing the list in order to keep the spotlight on themselves for as long as possible. Whether or not this is true is beside the point; the fact that people perceived it as such is worth noting.

Artists criticize curators politely and scathingly for the same reason they are circumspect when attacking critics. In truth, artists have been concerned for some time now about the repackaging of curators as celebrities—as quasi-artists whose public presence and authorial input threaten to overshadow the actual work in a given exhibition. This is the first of a two-pronged anxiety—a bit theoretical but mainly practical. It’s theoretical in the sense that artists are, rightfully, protective of the context in which their work is received, and the intervention of a curator queuing author adds yet another filter through which the artwork will be viewed. It is also practical because in the art world, authorship and celebrity translate directly or indirectly to money somewhere down the line. There’s a sense that a change in the public role of the curator creates another competitor in the battle for the spotlight.

II
There are plenty of historical examples of artists whose practice is essentially a form of curating—Marcel Broodthaers’ Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Objets et Bibelots—his early photo-based appropriations—all the way up to Carl Bore’s recent sculptures of shelved books and found objects. We can, conversely, cite plenty of curators whose methodology is highly artistic—Hans Ulrich Obrist’s explorations of non-spatial or de-authored exhibitions to Bob Nickas’ inventive, installation-like group shows. Add to that artists who also curate, like Fia Backström and Josef Strau, and curators who exhibit their own work, like Matthew Hagers and Robert Birnbaum.

Yet somehow, we never confuse these categories. We can immediately make very nuanced distinctions between, say, an artist who is operating like a curator and an artist who is curating. This is because the language with which we discuss the intent or meaning of an artwork or exhibition is different from the language we use to discuss an artwork or exhibition’s existence as an object or event. It is as if the former discourse is relativistic and the latter classical. Physicists. In the former language, we can discuss the way in which curatorial practice blurs the boundaries between disciplines or the way an artist’s practice undermines ideas about—or conventions of—authorship. This is not contradictory, it is akin to saying that an electron has wave-like as well as particle-like characteristics.

But in the latter language, we discuss things deterministically, using the categories that are supposedly under investigation: who is the curator? Who is the artist? To whom do I belong? Do I attribute authorship? The more conservative, deterministic, universalistic language is the one employed by institutions and the media through which art is publicized, bought and sold—the language of the press release and art journalism, in which one wants to know, first and foremost, who gets credit for what. Publicizing,
buying and selling are all tasks that are easier to accomplish if we deal in discreet, unambiguous terms like artist, curator, and exhibition; it certainly makes keepbooking easier. A good articulation of this language discrepancy comes from an interview between artists/curator Pia Backstrom and art historian Bettina Funcke:

Backstrom: Something that I was thinking about a lot this summer was Rirkrit Tiravanija’s piece, Utopia Station, in Venice. It was first of all a parasitic situation, because Gaster Höller removed all the other artists’ names.

Funcke: Gaster Höller did that?

Backstrom: That was his contribution, so Rirkrit clearly becomes the name that remains.

Funcke: That’s interesting that Gaster did that, instead of Rirkrit.

Backstrom: Yes, of course, Gaster gets the signature for removing it for Rirkrit. And that’s the problem, I think.

III

The more the structure of an exhibition is interrogated and its conventions dismantled, the more the figure of the curator becomes the point of access for spectacles, journalists and collectors. A paradoxical figure in this regard is Obrian, a curator of the above-cited Utopia Station who, more than anyone, inaugurated the supposed era of the curator-as-art-star. His inspired experimentation with the conventions of exhibition is intimately related to the practice of artists of the ‘90s with whom he is closely associated: Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno and so on. And like these artists, Obrian is committed to a vision of art in which the discourse, social or institutional contexts that determine meaning and value are constitutive of the experience of making and looking at art. Such a position, in which the artist or curator is one element in the broader system that produces contemporary art, is inherently in opposition to the interpretation of the artist—or curator, or anyone for that matter—as an autonomous creator of meaning. This makes it a little jarring to encounter the language of the celebrity profile applied to him:

The 26-year-old Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist lists Paris, London and Vienna as his primary residences, but on any given day he can as easily be found in Berlin, New York, or, for that matter, Saas-Fee. Obrist wields a ridiculously romantic existence; he has traveled—visiting artists famous as well as lesser known—since his student days, developing his peripatetic impulse, his notion of “permanently traveling,” into a unique curatorial program.

IV

I can’t speak with authority about the language of academic curatorial programs, but the most frequently used word in any MFA program circa 1998 was interesting. I think of the word interesting as emblematic of a methodology of institutionalized art practice derived from general Cultural Studies, itself a derivative of Frankfurt School-style critique—the context of describing artistic practice contextualized within a non-art field. Interesting is also the mantra of the artist, as researcher, adopted from the model of the critic as cultural anthropologist. Interesting, in the way we have exhausted the term, also implies a hierarchy in which the artist/critic is positioned higher than he or her interests. The extent to which I can find something interesting is directly proportional to my comprehension of it and the divergence of my viewpoint from the frame of reference of the object, interest, first and foremost, main distance and the delirium of the establishment of more specific relationships to the object such as endorsement, disapproval, criticism, affection or,censure.

As in any other discipline, research in the visual arts has its own etiquette and a set of criteria: one can be interested in a more or less interesting way. Like a PhD student selecting a dissertation topic, I attempt to make out a field of study that is both innovative and surprising. My interests then become attributes of my work—reference points I appropriate in order to indicate something about myself. However, an object, phenomenon or artwork identified as interesting has in no way been awarded any particular merit, or rather, merit is on my side of the subject-object relationship. Sometimes bad culture is more interesting than good, and a good artist can make anything look good.

The only thing I worry about with respect to curators is whether or not they find artists interesting. I get nervous when the relationship of a curator to an artist starts to resemble the relationship between an artist and their own interests: hegemonic, hierarchical and unwilling to commit to judgment.

V

Since there is practically no theory to speak of anymore, many artists unhappy with the state of affairs have turned to curators as escapegaps. But do curators actually wield any more power than they used to? Well, yes and no. Curators exert tremendous local influence over artists’ careers, but as the way curators are trained changes, their choices in this regard will change as well. Thus is nothing new.

Personally, I don’t think that curators have any more control over the art world on a structural level than they ever did; power is still wielded, for the most part, by the people who buy art or sit on acquisition committees at museums. I often wonder what would happen if the curators of the next Whitney Biennial decided to select twenty—rather than some hundred-odd—artists for the next show. For one thing, it would be a very sad and slow season in the art market as galleries and magazines geared towards emerging artists would run up against a serious labor shortage. The Whitney might suddenly find itself with competitors anxious to take up the slack. We also might be able to see the function of the Biennial in greater relief and ask questions about who determines the shape of contemporary art and why. It would be a curatorial coup. I don’t think it’s necessarily a good idea, but it certainly would be interesting.

Notes
1 Conversation between Bettina Funcke and Pia Backstrom, North Drive Press, #7, New York, 2004

Erwin Wurm, Rinsing Gerald Matt (Be nice to your ancestors), 2004
Caret
23 1/4 x 17 1/2 inches
Courtesy Hepel Kunst Verlag, Ostfildern