

Art after the Didactic Turn

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The emergence of the academy in the exhibition circuit is connected with the popularity of ‘relational aesthetics’. Pursuing contact may well have led to a lot of talk in the exhibition circuit, but a genuinely critical dialogue has been lacking until now. It’s more a question of talking for talking’s sake. According to Robert Garnett, ‘the exhibition as academy’ is weighed down by a threatening academicism. It’s time to disrupt the prevailing relationships.

The message conveyed by a number of recent curatorial interventions seems to be that we’ve all got a lot to learn. I don’t think I’m exaggerating in suggesting that every week there seems to be the announcement of yet another art-educational initiative of some sort or another. First we had the recently-cancelled Manifesta 6, the Cyprus School of Art, whose stated models, perhaps somewhat ambitiously, were the ‘alternative academies’ of the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College. This project took the place of the show, a strategy replicated at the current Force de l’Art survey of recent French art at the Grand Palais in Paris, where one of the curators eschewed the apparently outmoded option of selecting objects and curated an ‘école’ instead. Art institutions like the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven are in the process of launching academies, while the next Documenta will take the theme of education as one of its ‘leitmotifs’. It seems that art’s ‘didactic turn’, discussed in a previous issue of METROPOLIS M (2/2002), is intensifying even further.

None of the curators involved in these enterprises are claiming to be teachers however. Rather, they are creating ostensibly novel, participatory curatorial frameworks that exceed the conventional model of the static exhibition. To conceive of a curatorial project that circumvents the show as presentation of objects to the extent of the Manifesta project is indeed an unprecedented development that amounts to an instance of a kind of ‘Relational Aestheticism’ expanded to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* scale. And it is the latter concept, itself a curatorial phenomenon, that has enabled the further blurring of the boundaries between art and curatorial practice. If, as the theory goes, any artwork that constitutes an open-ended structure that engenders participatory ‘relations’ amounts to an instance of a ‘relational aesthetics’, then it follows – and surely has followed – that curatorial practice can make the same claims by conceiving of the exhibition in such ‘relational’ terms. The problem here is that such claims are so widespread, so seemingly easy to make, that they appear in almost every institutional press-release. A work or whole show can be critically underwritten even before it is made. The important question this raises is, doesn’t this self-certifying and therefore unquestioning, tautologically closed circle amount to what we would elsewhere refer to as an academicism? This is, I think, the deeper issue that underlies the above manifestations: not just a didacticism, but an academicism within curatorial culture itself that functions to render it immune to critique.

Passive and active

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Before going any further, let’s take a history lesson, so to speak, and look at where the origins of this phenomenon might lie. The emergence of art as a ‘participatory structure’ is usually associated with the emergence of Conceptual art in the 1960s and its displacement of the passive consumer of the auratic art work in favour of the active reader of the work as text. This was, of course, confluent with ‘the death of the author’ and the ‘birth of the reader’ taking place within philosophy at the time. The relations between Conceptual art and didactic activity are strong, and this is something of a neglected area within current research. One example, close to home for me, is that of the English Art & Language group, who have

stressed that their teaching activities were part and parcel of their art practice from the very outset. During the late 1960s they hijacked the Fine Art department at Coventry College of Art, their headquarters in the English Midlands, and transformed it into a degree in Conceptual art where the curriculum was made up of Art & Language's own reading list. Students literally became participants by becoming actively involved in the group's practice that was itself conceived as an ongoing, open-ended discussion. Typically, however, they never took for granted the potential idealism of Conceptual art.

This self-reflexivity was literalised and displayed in the *Index* project at *Documenta 5* in 1972. Here they were forced to concede that the participants did not extend beyond those currently engaged as part of the group itself. *Index* was a series of closed filing cabinets consisting of a literal index of every idea that had come up for consideration since the group was founded. For them it marked the point at which Conceptual art itself amounted to a closed chapter in the history of recent art. The artworld, much less the world itself, was little changed, and the institutional success of the movement, marked by Documenta 5, paradoxically marked its failure: the point at which its pseudo-egalitarianism became ideological false-compensation for its absence within the world beyond the gallery.

This was a critique they levelled at the soon-to-be paradigmatic debates taking place in England surrounding recently imported structuralist and poststructuralist theories of representation. A particular target here was the artist/theorist Victor Burgin, another figure who stressed the pedagogical dimension of his practice, and who from the early 1970s led a postgraduate course in photography at the University of Westminster, London. This was largely structured around the definition of art-photography as critical work in and on representation, as a signifying practice that took its place non-hierarchically alongside other signifying practices engaged in the work of deconstructing ideology. Probably the first initiative of its kind, it was highly controversial, even radical. Soon, however, it had become the template for the new theory-led approaches to the teaching of art in the 1980s and after.

By the 1980s, of course, 'Art Theory' had become fashionable. This and the massive expansion of the art market played a significant role in the emergence of the curator. In a context characterised by what we might refer to as 'the Baudrillard effect' where a philosopher could be as famous and fashionable as an artist and theory's market stock was high, art shows now had to illustrate a theme. Someone had to author these theme shows, and that person was of course the curator. The exhibitions organiser was now a curator. The curator's status was consolidated by the increasing turnover of the market, and the demand for new artists necessitated the emergence of new impresario figures who simultaneously acquired significant validating power. The process of art criticism was too slow, and the function of critical judgement was circumvented by the branding power of the 'Name' curator.

Writing at the height of the Postmodern moment, theorist Thierry De Duve directed an incisive critique at the institutionalisation of theory in a text that, conveniently here, is largely a discussion of the relations between theory and practice in art education. His arguments in *When Form has become Attitude – and Beyond*, of 1994, are encapsulated in the following quotation: 'Once it becomes possible to put something down on paper this means that its potential for negation has become conventional. Deconstruction is today's "good taste".' Once theory and practice exist in too close an interface, once it becomes common to instantly guarantee the critical status of a practice via recourse to a ready body of contiguous 'critical' theory - does this not amount to pure academicism?

Self-criticism

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Today, of course, criticism and theory are in a widely perceived state of crisis, and today's 'good taste' is the curatorial phenomenon of Relational Aesthetics. Completely devoid of any of the doubt or difficulty of Conceptual art and much 'postmodern' art, all it demands is that we simply conjoin in open-ended 'participatory' structures, the 'democratic' potential of which is assured by the unquestioning a-priori claims of the textbook, forming a perfect, formalistic and tautological circle of closure. Reduced to highly distributable and consumable sound-bites this quasi-theory is perfectly reconciled with its times, offering as it does ideological false compensation for the absence of real democratic structures in the world

beyond the Biennial.

Lawrence Weiner, one of those artists without whom Relational Aesthetics for sure would not exist, once defined contemporary art as ‘something that has not yet found its place in the world. Once it does it becomes part of Art History’. Good art, he implies, is that which is ‘homeless’, ‘untimely’ as Nietzsche would have said. The untimely amounts to a spatial as well as temporal breach; in other words it is a kind of Event. An Event is that which is New as opposed to being merely novel, and new things are still made. Why otherwise would we still engage with art? The problem is that our contemporary academicism lacks the theoretical means for accounting for Newness. Curatorial culture seems to have no time for something that might confound its logic, something that can’t be immediately underwritten by the language of the press release or funding application form.

It’s not that we need new conjunctions between theory and practice - this would just amount to another academicism – rather, what we need are new creative, productive dis-junctions. Philosophical concepts such as the Event can enable this, but it is yet to be properly applied within contemporary art. Partly, this is a result of the fact that it is all too often couched in rather elevated philosophical rhetoric. But, if we think about it in less lofty terms, any object that confounds the existing means of judging or making sense of art might be an Event. There are big Events and small Events; a single art object can be an Event, just as much as an entire movement. The Bauhaus and Black Mountain were Events for sure. What is significant, however, is that Events cannot be unilaterally willed or simply thought into existence; they certainly can’t be curated into existence. An Event is that which is as yet unthinkable, is unforeseeable and subsequently forces thought to take place. It exceeds the would-be ‘relationality’ of any subject just as it does the objective circumstances – social, economic, political - out of which it nevertheless emerges. But, Events are rare, too scarce for the rapacious market and the turnover of Biennials. That’s why we have to settle for curatorial novelty instead.

An Event is ultimately that which can only be amenable to ‘sense’. Maybe this is a way of bringing ideas such as Jacques Ranciere’s concept of the ‘sensorium’, or art as a ‘reframing of the sensible field’ closer to contemporary art and popular culture. The creation of new sensible aggregates, new viewpoints, or percepts and affects, form the basis of new concepts, and offer us ways to rethink the existing objective state of affairs. This exceeds didacticism or the functionalist imposition of an ‘interventionist’ role upon art. Rather than intervening in existing differences or ‘relations’, existing ‘conversations’ and modes of communication – ‘there is always too much conversation’, as Deleuze used to say – art might be seen as a means of creating the confounding difference of the New that induces conversations yet to come. However, the self-certifying curatorial rhetoric that underpins the projects referred to at the outset risk denying art this very role, risks curating and bureaucratising away art’s powers to actualise the virtual differences it creates.