Everything is Relevant

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Contemporary Art Within and Without Institutions

Opening statement at
The Making of International Exhibitions: Siting Biennales, New Delhi, 2005
In the past, I have often shared dinner or drinks with artists where we discussed the problem of art and its entanglement with the art system; in other words, the problem of the non-identity between art and the art world. I define the art world as that social, economic, and political network of forces in which art is implicated epistemologically and hermeneutically, to be ultimately processed as exchange value. The discussions would often lead a consensual view of the art world as an ersatz regulatory body, with respect to the conferment of value and status to artworks and to the recognition of artists. The problem of non-identity comes into play when the artist defines his/her practice as a challenge to the status of the work of art and its social and cultural value in society. Admittedly, such a challenge is often made with the complicit understanding of a Duchampian law: that any challenge can only be a paradoxical challenge, to be read à la limite as a wholly artistic gesture fated for artworld gurgitation.

I think the point of our concerns have to do with a certain je ne sais quoi dissatisfaction with art and especially with the parameters of its understanding within the art world. My artist friend Rodney Graham, for instance, would often ask why an artist couldn’t be an urban planner for a day, or a week, or a year, without the legitimatizing authority of either the art world or the world of urban planning? Why can’t an artist just practice different creative endeavours without the recognition of such endeavours within the network effects and cultural continuity of the art world? Why is the system of art validation so flawed that the measurement of so many good and bad artists is completely fungible? And if this is the case, whose interest, ultimately, does this pretense of objective measurement serve? Why is there so much consensus in terms of the narrative of contemporary art historical unfolding, such that seemingly every museum in the Euro-American art world is experienced more or less similarly?

As a much younger artist, I remember visiting the Grey Art Gallery, the art museum space of New York University in New York City, with the American artist Dan Graham. We were visiting an exhibition of west coast American (mostly Californian) minimalist art. It was not the usual canonical treatment of minimalist-era artists. Neither were the works conforming to austerity or rectilinear in form. I did not recognize many of the artists, while Dan recognized many of them and would offer comments such as: “Good to see the work of artist ‘A’ again. He was a very good artist. Artist ‘B’ influenced a number of artists who became better known. Artist ‘C’s work did not really fit in then but now it looks completely relevant to our understanding of that period. Artist ‘D’ was one of the very few woman artists who received some recognition within
this group.” Graham’s comments about these artists brought to light the anomalous place of artists within the art system in any given time and the precariousness of artistic lives as they are subject to the reductionism and conformity of the historical canon. Many of the artists in this exhibition withered to near obscurity in the light of art historical remembrance, their difficult and often enigmatic work that exuded formal radicality all but forgotten. The challenge to art since conceptualism has been one of a persistent unraveling or extension of art in terms of its institutional prescription.

In recent years, this is where the curator’s influence has been growing. Leaning toward institutional theory, the curator insists that a modicum of recognition is necessary for an artwork to be known as such. Today’s art world is rather like what is happening in one sector of the music world. A curator occupies a similar function to the DJ in music. A curator has become like Dimitri from Paris or DJ Spooky, mix masters of CDs based on current dance floor trends. The practice of straddling art and non-art by many artists is corralled by the DJ/curator, as the curator’s role is expanded into creator of high art. Aristotle said that “a thing can be said to be in many ways” but ultimately it is the curator who channels this dictum of multivalent speech through the prism of art.

Since the arrival of conceptual art, artists have notably extended the reach of art into multiple and overlapping public and private domains, with art taking multiple forms and penetrating many media, including, more recently, the Internet and community-based practices. As such, the artistic tendency is toward decentralization but also democratization, as interest in contemporary art is disseminated the world over and new participants enter for the first time into artistic discussion and practice. Over the last decades, for example, practices in “art in public space” have shifted from a contested category within contemporary art to conceptually informed artistic practices that challenge the limitations of artistic production’s formats of presentation, distribution, and space. This reflects a shift in emphasis from aesthetic concerns to social issues, from object oriented to site specificity, and from static to temporal processes or events. However, processes of ever-expanding global capitalism, corporatization of culture, and the dispossession of public space and dialogue by privatization challenge the status of art and its mutual relationship to notions of “publicness” today.

In conjunction with social and political activism and emergent anti-globalization movements, critical practices and institutions are looking for new modes of production and participation, and new spaces of critique in the overlapping fields of culture, urbanism, and politics. The purpose of a curator is to reinvigorate the exhibition medium by
idealizing public space as something that can be unified, a place in some ways akin to Jürgen Habermas’s idea of a true public sphere “where true public opinion could be formed.” In difference to Habermas, whose definition of a true public sphere was bereft of commercial or private interests having any authority, I would argue that an exhibition medium—as it is largely understood today—is not only implicated but also defined by the terms of the art system and is always, in large part, a measure of the function of private interests.

In an increasingly corporate world, the curator’s role is also one of mediator between patrons and producers. The expansion of art not just in terms of form but also geographic reach has meant that the flow of information about art, especially on the part of the West, requires a radical reconfiguration of the historical literacy essential to its understanding. In other words, the expansion of art represents a diffusion of art both in terms of spatial dissemination and a diffusing or unsettling of the stabilizing categories of normative measurements of art. This diffusion is a good thing because of its fecundity of approaches toward the production and display of art—a fecundity that is often difficult to categorize in terms of movement and even legibility—as this art (that which is diffused) often exists at the margins of the art system.

This diffusion has also been read negatively as a threat to the historically standardized authorship of discourse surrounding art, which seeks to perpetuate certain bases of power (such as major museums and corporations with collecting programs). In other words, the centre erects standards not only to define itself as centre but also to define all of the production that takes place outside of the centre. In so doing, expectations are validated about what is to be seen so that, for instance, so-called Beijing Pop, which emerged immediately after the arrival of Deng Xiaoping’s liberalization policy in China, is seen from the perspective of the centre as a movement at worst, derivative of, and at best, affirmative of, American pop art. To think otherwise would mean taking seriously the question of what Egypt would be without the pyramids—or, what would art be without the Centre Pompidou or the Museum of Modern Art?