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CONSTITUTIVE EFFECTS: THE TECHNIQUES OF THE CURATOR

Simon Sheikh

In contemporary art a great deal of attention is given to the activity of exhibitions. Exhibitions are one of the primary vehicles for artistic production. However, this activity of exhibiting and exhibition making is largely predictable and repetitious, involved in specific circuits and structures, as well as economies (both symbolic and real). Perhaps we could even speak of a typology of exhibitions — specific modes of address meant to produce certain meanings and audiences, and we could discuss these modes of address according to history, contingency and potentiality. In the following, I shall try to do so according to the three premises outlined in this book: the past, the present and the future.

Past:

Historically, exhibition making has been closely related to strategies of discipline and enlightenment ideals, not as a contradiction or dialectic, but rather as a simultaneous move in the making of the 'new' bourgeois subject of reason in 19th century Europe. Exhibition making marked not only a display and division of knowledge, power and spectatorship, it also marked a production of a public. By making museum collections open to the public and by staging temporary exhibitions in the salons, a specific viewing public was imagined and configured. What we would now call curating, in effect this organizing of displays and publics, had constitutive effects on its subjects and objects alike.

The collection and display of specific objects and artifacts according to certain curatorial techniques, represented not only the writing of specific colonial and national histories, but also crucially, the circulation of certain values and ideals. The emerging bourgeois class was simultaneously positioning and assessing itself, and thus extending its world-view onto objects — things present in the world, both historically and currently — and therefore onto the world. But this dominant, or hegemonic, gaze was not to be seen nor visualized as a sovereign dictum, or dictatorship, but rather through a rationalist approach, through a subject of reason. The bourgeois class attempted to universalize its views and visions through rational argument rather than by decree. The bourgeois museum and its curatorial techniques could not articulate its power (only) through forms of discipline, it also had to have employ an educational and pedagogical approach, present in the articulations of the artworks, the models of display of the objects, the spatial layout and the overall architecture. It had to situate a viewing subject that not only

felt subjected to knowledge, but was also represented through the mode of address involved in the curatorial technique. In order for the mode of address to be effectively constitutive of its subjects, the exhibition and museum had to address *and* represent at the same time.

The cultural theorist Tony Bennett has aptly termed these spatial and discursive curatorial techniques, 'the exhibitionary complex' as a means of describing the complex assemblage of architecture, display, collections and publicness that characterize the field of institutions, exhibition making and curating. In his article of the same name, Bennett has analyzed the historical genesis of the (bourgeois) museum, and its production of relations of power and knowledge through its dual role, or double articulation, of simultaneously being a disciplinary and educational space:

The exhibitionary complex was also a response to the problem of order, but one which worked differently in seeking to transform that problem into one of culture – a question of the winning of hearts as well as the disciplining and training of individual subjects. As such, its constituent institutions reversed the orientations of the disciplinary apparatuses in seeking to render the forces and principles of order visible to the populace – transformed, here, into a people, a citizenry – rather than vice versa. They sought not to map the social body in order to know the populace by rendering it visible to power. Instead, through the provision of object lessons in power – the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display – they sought to allow the people, and *en masse* rather than individually, to know rather than to be known, to become subjects rather than the objects of knowledge. Yet, ideally, they sought also to allow people to know and thence to regulate themselves; to become, in seeing themselves from the position of power, both as the subjects and objects of knowledge, knowing both power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as (ideally) known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and, hence, self-regulation.⁽¹⁾

Whereas the 'strictly' disciplinary institutions (in a Foucaultian sense), such as schools, prisons, factories and so on, tried to manage the population through direct inflictions of order onto the actual bodies

1. Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', in R. Greenberg, B. Ferguson, S. Nairne (Eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 1996, p.84.

and thus behavior, the exhibitionary complex added persuasion to coercion. Exhibitions were meant to please as well as to teach, and as such needed to involve the spectator in an economy of desire as well as in relations of power and knowledge. In a sense, the exhibitionary complex was also meant to be empowering, in that you could identify with the histories on display and act accordingly. In this way, exhibition making was directly connected to the construction of a national body, and as such it was involved in identitarian as well as territorial politics of representation. The knowledge that became available to the subject was a means of inscribing that subject within a given nation-state, of cultivating the populace into exactly that: a people, a nation.

Access to knowledge then also involved an acceptance of certain histories and ways of understanding them. The exhibitionary complex not only curated histories and power-knowledge relations, but also indicated ways of seeing and behaving. Hence the specific rules of conduct in the museum: slow-paced walking, lowered speech, no physical contact with the objects on display, a general discretion. In this way, regulation gets added to representation, interpellation is coupled with identification, and the bourgeois subject of reason becomes both subject and object of power in a complex relation of knowledge. In fact, representation of your values and histories goes hand in hand with proper behavior — relations of power and knowledge become internalized through behavior and empowerment: *self*-regulation and *self*-representation. You must behave properly in order to be (allowed) in the museum. Not touching the objects indicates not only respect towards them and their status, but also an acceptance of the rules, of given prohibitions and, more crucially, an intimate knowledge of your own position: that one is in the know, capable of watching, of being cultivated, in both the active and passive sense of being. And thus the importance of the art opening, the *vernissage*, as a bourgeois ritual of initiation and cultivation: one is not merely the first to watch (and, in some cases, buy) but also to be watched: to be visible *as* the cultivated bourgeois subject of reason, in the right place and *in* your place.

Present:

In an attempt to describe how this history has also conditioned present day exhibition making and institutional foundations, as well as its critique, Frazer Ward has described the museum as 'haunted'. This

has to do with certain histories and contingencies, and how the museum continues to construct a specific subject, not only individually, but also collectively as a public:

The museum contributed to the self-representation of and self-authorization of the new bourgeois subject of reason. More accurately, this subject, this "*fictitious identity*" of property owner and human being pure and simple, was itself an interlinked process of self-representation and self-authorization. That is, it was intimately bound to its cultural self-representation *as a public*.⁽²⁾

The modes of address in exhibition making can thus be viewed as attempts to at once represent and constitute a specific (class-based) collective subject. This also means that a double notion of representation is at play, at once the narrations and sensations of the displayed artworks themselves — the aspect most commonly referred to in both curatorial discourse and criticism — and the representation of a certain public (as spectator), being represented, authorized and constituted through the very mode of address. Making things public is also an attempt to make a public. A public only exists 'by virtue of being addressed', and is thus "constituted through mere attention" as Michael Warner puts it in his recent book *Publics and Counterpublics*.⁽³⁾ What is significant here is the notion of a public as being constituted through participation and presence on the one hand, and articulation and imagination on the other. In other words, a public is an imaginary endeavor with real effects: an audience, a community, a group, an adversary or a constituency is imagining, and imagined through a specific mode of address that is supposed to produce, actualize or even activate this imagined entity, 'the public'. This is of course crucial to exhibition making, to the techniques of the curator.

However, as Frazer Ward points out, the spaces in which such exhibitions are produced and received are conditioned by certain histories, by certain residues of imagination, behaviour and reception. It is not my point to endlessly repeat a project of institutional critique, but rather to point out how the construction of a certain site was complicit with a certain subject, what Ward called 'the bourgeois subject of reason', and how this

2. Frazer Ward, Frazer Ward, 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', *October* 73, 1995, p. 74.

3. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York: Zone Books, 2002.

has produced the plethora of strategies and responses we see in contemporary exhibition making. Within the history of institutional critique, art institutions are mainly seen as the instruments of the bourgeoisie, and as a machine that can include and thus neutralize any critical form through its exhibitionary techniques, such as the infamous 'white cube' of the gallery space. This is a process also known as cooptation, indicating that the institution needs, even desires, critique in order to strengthen itself and its neutralizing gaze. But this needs to be examined more carefully, and in the context of the historical appearance of museums, salons and galleries during the bourgeois revolutions, where the exhibition place functioned as a space for cultivated discussion, for self-representation and self-authorization through a rational-critical discourse. In other words, the discourse (including criticism) was rational and the objects (and to some extent the artist subject behind them) were irrational. The objects had to be irrational in order to be rationalized, which, in turn, produced the rational-critical subject whose values and judgments were represented by the exhibition. Exhibition making then became the staging of this discourse, of this debate, making curators caterers of taste and the artists as much objects of the gaze as the artworks. Seen in this light, so-called institutionally critical artworks were allowed into the institutions by default, as products of more or less rational artist-subjects, as mere contingency.

We are thus resting on the pillars of tradition in more than one sense, and in a sense of articulation and representation not always reflected in contemporary exhibition making. If the historical role of exhibition making was to educate, authorize and represent a certain social group, class or caste, who is being represented today? Arguably, the bourgeois class formation of the 19th century cannot be directly transferred to today's modular societies, neither as the goal for representation nor for critique or counter articulation(s). So which groups – imagined as real – are being catered to by contemporary exhibition making and institutional policies? And what modes of address would be required and desired to represent or criticize these formations? Answering this question directly will, partly, require a turn to the futuristic section, and partly a reversal: to ask what spectators can be said to be represented by the current strategies of exhibition making, whether reflected or not by the exhibition makers, since these strategies can be analyzed as modes of address, and thus as operating through specific articulations and imaginaries. This will require, though, a certain typology of exhibitions.

As mentioned in the beginning, the exhibition format is the main vehicle for the presentation of contemporary art, but this does not mean that the exhibition is a singular format with a given public and circulation of discourse. Rather, the format of the exhibition should be pluralized; obviously different types of exhibitions are speaking from different locations and positions, with different audiences and circulations, be it the self-organized group show in a small alternative space or the large scale international biennial. What they do share is a sense of a double public: the local, physically present (if only potentially) audience as well as the art world public (if only potentially). Exhibitions find themselves placed within an ecosystem as well as a hierarchy of exhibitions (and exhibition venues). This can, naturally, be employed strategically and cynically, but the important issue here is how – within the given exhibition format – to reflect upon its placement and potentiality in order to stretch it, circumvent it, sabotage it, or, if you will, affirm it, which happens to be the most common usage of a given exhibition format these days. The notion of ‘alternative’, for example, is infused with a large degree of symbolic capital within the arts, and is potentially transferable into real capital, thus making ‘the alternative’ into a stage within artistic-economic development, into a sphere placed on a time line rather than on a parallel track.

Exhibitions often seem tiresome, their use-value given and predictable in an endless repetition of the same formats and intentions. We find this in the very fixed format of historical museum exhibitions, retrospectives of either: 1) a specific period (always a ‘golden’ age), 2) a specific movement (preferably a clearly definable painterly style) or 3) a specific artist (the monographic exhibition of the artist as genius). Such exhibitions exist in more or less luxurious variants, usually curated by museum experts rather than freelancers, and feature some sort of art historical research. According to the prestige of the institution or theme/artist, a catalogue book of some substance accompanies this exhibition type: the prestige and importance can be directly measured in the volume of the publication. One is often led to believe that such exhibitions have the most un-reconstructed notion of their publicness, expressing a discrete charm of the tradition, but actually this format has proven extremely adaptable to changes in the public sphere from the bourgeois model of enlightenment to the current culture, or even entertainment, industry. Such exhibitions offer a feeling reminiscent of bourgeois rationality and taste in the form of light entertainment for the

family; spending a couple of hours in the museum, with its gift shop and café, as an alternative to a trip to the mall.

Although exhibitions of contemporary art are not always popular, populism is as present within such exhibitions as it is in the retrospective museum shows. Again and again, we are offered the 'new' — the generational show being an ever-popular and career-building move, just as we constantly are subjected to the most retrograde exhibition format of all, the national show, regularly combined with the generational, producing 'new' miracles in the discovery of new happening scenes. Not only do such shows fit seamlessly into the demands for new trends and products of the art markets, but they will very likely also receive assured funding from national cultural agencies, making them a perfect example of the currently ever-so desirable merger between corporate and public funds. If such shows do not guarantee large numbers of visitors the way certain retrospective shows do, they tend to privilege that other imagined public, the art world, and give access to the strange circuit of magazines, discourses, word-of-mouth, curatorial attention, teaching jobs, galleries and money.

A merger between funds, economies, national interests and the production of art world trends are also at issue in the most international of all formats, the ever-growing biennials. It would not be difficult to be critical, even dismissive, of the biennial circuit and its relationship to market and capital, and lack of reflection on 'local' audience — indeed such a critique is almost commonplace among art professionals, often in a cynical form of fatigue (it must be the jetlag...), but this would be overlooking the potential these biennials actually offer for a reflection of the double notion of publicness, for creating new public formations that are not bound to the nation-state or the art world. By being perennial events, both locally placed and part of a circuit, they have the potential for creating a more transnational public sphere, with both difference and repetition in the applied mode of address and implied notion of spectatorship and public participation.

Future:

In order to alter the script of the existing formats, we need more rather than less reflection on the conception of publics, and the contingencies and histories of various modes of address. As I have tried to argue, all exhibition making is the making of a public, the imagination of a

world. It is therefore not a question of art for art's sake or art for society, of poetics or politics, but rather a matter of understanding the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetic dimension of politics. Or, put in another way, it is the mode of address that produces the public, and if one tries to imagine different publics, different notions of stranger relationality, one must also (re)consider the mode of address, or, if you will, the formats of exhibition making.

There not only exist public spheres (and ideals thereof), but also *counterpublics*. According to Michael Warner, counterpublics can be understood as particular parallel formations of a minor or even subordinate character where other or oppositional discourses and practices can be formulated and circulated. Counterpublics have many of the same characteristics as normative or dominant publics — existing as imaginary address, a specific discourse and/or location, and involving circularity and reflexivity — and are therefore always already as much *relational* as they are *oppositional*. A counterpublic is a conscious mirroring of the modalities and institutions of the normative public, all be it in an effort to address other subjects and indeed other imaginaries. Where the classic bourgeois notion of the public sphere claimed universality and rationality, counterpublics often claim the opposite, and in concrete terms this often entails a reversal of existing spaces into other identities and practices, a queering of space. This has indeed been the model of contemporary feminist (and other) project exhibitions that use the art institution as a space for a different notion of spectatorship and collective articulation that runs counter to the art space's historical self-articulations and legitimations, what Marion von Osten has described as 'exhibition making as a counter-public strategy'.⁽⁴⁾

An exhibition must imagine a public in order to produce it, and to produce a world around it — a horizon. So, if we are satisfied with the world we have now, we should continue to make exhibitions as always, and repeat the formats and circulations. If, on the other hand, we are not happy with the world we are in, both in terms of the art world and in a broader geopolitical sense, we will have to produce other exhibitions: other subjectivities and other imaginaries. The great division of our times is not between various fundamentalisms, since they all ascribe to the same script (albeit with a different idea of who shall win in the end...),

4. Marion von Osten, 'A Question of Attitude — Changing Methods, Shifting Discourses, Producing Publics, Organizing Exhibitions', Simon Sheikh (Ed.), *In the Place of the Public Sphere?*, Berlin: b_books, 2005.

but between those who accept and thus actively maintain the dominant imaginary of society, subjectivity and possibility and those who reject and instead partake in other imaginaries, as Cornelius Castoriadis once formulated it. For Castoriadis, society is an imaginary ensemble of institutions, practices, beliefs and truths, that we all subscribe to and thus constantly (re)produce. Society and its institutions are as much fictional as functional. Institutions are part of symbolic networks, and as such they are not fixed or stable, but constantly articulated through projection and praxis. But by focusing on its imaginary character, he obviously also suggests that other social organizations and interactions can be imagined:

[The] supersession [of present society] – which we are aiming at *because we will it* and because we know that others will it as well, not because such are the laws of history, the interests of the proletariat or the destiny of being – the bringing about of a history in which society not only knows itself, but *makes itself* as explicitly self-instituting, implies a radical destruction of the known institution of society, in its most unsuspected nooks and crannies, which can exist only as positing/creating not only new institutions, but a new *mode* of instituting and a new relation of society and of individuals to the institution.⁽⁵⁾

It is thus not only a question of changing institutions, but of changing how we institute; how subjectivity and imagination can be instituted in a different way. This can be done by altering the existing formats and narratives, as in the queering of space and the (re)writing of histories – that is, through deconstructive as well as reconstructive projects, *and* by constructing new formats, by rethinking the structure and event of the exhibition altogether. Either way, I would suggest that curating in the future should center around three key notions: *Articulation*, *Imagination* and *Continuity*.

By *articulation* we shall mean the positioning of the project, of its narratives and artworks, and its reflection of its dual public and placement both in and out of the art world. An exhibition is always a statement about the state of the world, not just the state of the arts, and as such it is always already engaged in particular imaginaries, whether or

5. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, London: Polity Press, 1987, p. 373. (French original published 1975).

not it claims to be so engaged. A work of art is, at best, an articulation of something as much as it is a representation of someone: it is a proposal for how things could be seen, an offering, but not a handout. Articulation is the formulation of your position and politics, where you are and where you want to go, as well as a concept of companionship: you can come along, or not. In cultural production, there is no separation possible between form and content, between means and ends: modes of address articulate and situate subject positions, and where you want to go and how you get there are one and the same question. Thus, the more clearly the articulatory element is stressed, the more productive it will be in partaking in other imaginaries and subject positioning.

By *imagination*, we shall take our cue from the thinking of Castoriadis, and his analysis of society as self-created, as existing through institutions. It is, as stated, a question of imagining another world, and thus instituting other ways of being instituted and imagining, so to speak. To say that other worlds are indeed possible. For our present situation, we can also say: another art world is possible (if we want it). Secondly, the imaginary, as articulation, naturally has to do with the processes and potentialities of artistic production itself: to offer other imaginaries, ways of seeing and thus changing the world. An artwork can indeed be seen as new modes of instituting, of producing and projecting other worlds and the possibility for the self-transformation of the world: An institutionalization that is produced through subjectivity rather than producing subjectivity. It can, quite bluntly, offer a place from which *to see* (and to see differently, other imaginaries).

By *continuity*, we shall refer to the very work processes of curating itself, and how it can appear as lost in repetitions and trends. Rather than feeding the market, repetition could be transformed into continuity, literally doing the same in order to produce something different, not in the products, but in the imagination. I propose not only working in the same field or theme as a researcher, but actually radicalizing this aspect, as well as the resistance to the market, by working on a long-term plan. Not a five-year plan, but rather a ten-year plan; constantly doing the very same exhibition with the same artists. Imagine this: constantly asking the same artists to contribute to the same thematic exhibition, thus going into the depths of the matter rather than surfing the surface. Indeed, going off the deep end as it were, by refusing the demands for newness, for constantly new (re)territorializations — ‘painting now!’, ‘the return of the political’, ‘new British art show’, etc. — and insisting on working on

the very same show, whether it is traveling or within the same institution or city. Now, one could argue that this is what a lot of curators are already doing, regardless of the fact that they might change topics, scenes and generations regularly; but rather than dismissing or hiding this fact, I would suggest articulating it, and through this self-imposed and self-transformative continuity, going deeper into the artists' production and thinking, as the artists then would with the curator's thinking and methods, as well as developing – quite literally, and for better or for worse – long-term relationships with one's imagined audience, constituency and/or community. Producing a public is making a world. It is also making other ones possible ...