Curating Activism: Art, Politics and Exhibitions (In, Around, and Beyond Institutions)

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Curating Activism: Art, Politics and Exhibitions (In, Around, and Beyond Institutions)

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REFERENCES

Michael F. Leruth, *Fred Forest's Utopia: Media Art and Activism*, Cambridge : MIT Press, 2017, (Leonardo)

Maura Reilly, Lucy R. Lippard, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, Londres : Thames & Hudson, 2018

Daniela Poch, Arcadi Poch, *Artivism*, Londres : Carpet Bombing Culture, 2018

Curating as Anti-Racist Practise, Helsinki : Aalto University, 2018. Sous la dir. de Natalie Bayer, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, Nora Sternfeld

- 1 To associate the words “activism” and “curating” in the same sentence may seem an oxymoron, as in: curating activism, curating from an activist perspective, curating as activism, curatorial activism, and so on. This is the case if we consider, on the one hand, activism as an act capable of exceeding the limits of representative politics and transposing conflicts into the public sphere; and on the other, curatorial practice as a highly institutionalised activity that aims at guiding the viewer’s experience and that tends to produce a type of knowledge recognised within cultural circles. But such is no longer the case. At least since the end of the 1990s, in many different contexts, activists have tried to establish a critical dialogue with institutions, which usually meet their demands and even appropriate their competences in the orientation of social transformation processes. Curators become the mediators in collaboration with projects that try and make visible the problems of minorities and marginalised communities, aligning their work with the agendas of different social movements. As for artists, they abandon their traditional means of action and disciplines in order to

merge their work with the magma of demonstrations one refers to when speaking of activism.

- 2 In parallel to the expansion of academic literature on curating and to the increasing symbolic weight of politics in general and activism in particular in the field of contemporary art, several books have been published that aim at connecting these two concepts through very different perspectives. In a recent publication, Maura Reilly, founder of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (Brooklyn Museum) and curator of exhibitions such as *Global Feminism* (2007, with Linda Nochlin), coined the expression *curatorial activism* by examining a selection of exhibitions from the 1970s to the present which allegedly participated in the struggle against the sexism, racism and homophobia rampant in the art world. Reilly's work rests on a concept of activism not so much as a subversive activity aiming at making dissident bodies vibrate together in the public space, than as a statement in the regulated space of art – museums, galleries, biennials – that aims at solving problems inherent to representation. In this case, activism is not curated – although some of the exhibitions she analysed do resonate with this –; the idea is to do activism through a curatorial practice that takes ethical commitments into account: “My driving force as curator is therefore wholly activist; my aim is to be consistently counter-hegemonic.”¹
- 3 In order to do so, Maura Reilly examines several curatorial strategies, emphasising their strong and weak points. Among those strategies, the revision of the “canon” in order to expand its limits, the production of exhibitions based on area studies (women artists, Afro-American art, Middle Eastern art, LGBTQ art, and so on), or the construction of non-linear historic narratives that are capable of incorporating different voices without avoiding their frictions. Her curatorial activism, however, is limited to rethinking the working methods used by curators in – media-friendly and usually well funded – major exhibitions in Europe and the United States; and attempting to make visible the production of women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ persons: “How can we get people in the art World to think about gender, race, and sexuality, to understand that these are persistent concerns that require action? How can we all contribute to ensuring that the art world becomes more inclusive?”² The questions posed by Maura Reilly, supported by a precise diagnosis of persisting inequalities in contemporary art, are doubtlessly relevant. Her research, however, presented as a sort of “manifesto for change in the art world”, reinforces the central role of the curator in the art system, ignoring collaborative curatorial processes and projects developed in non-conventional formats, in spaces far removed from hegemonic circuits and centres. One could even think that curators, as emblematic figures of the art world, were at need to reinforce their position, by attracting part of the symbolic capital at stake in recent social movements, connected to a much more dangerous and much less glamorous type of activism.
- 4 The book published by Natalie Bayer, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński and Nora Sternfeld, *Curating as Anti-Racist Practice*, deals in depth with some of the questions raised by Maura Reilly, concerning the structural marginalisation that racialized subjects suffer in our societies. The book compiles essays, case studies and conversations between artists, curators and researchers that present a global overview of the dilemma all curators fighting racism should be able to deal with. The book is situated in a political moment characterised by the “refugee crisis in Europe” – which worsened in 2015 – and the worrying increase of xenophobic behaviours and organisations. Whereas

Maura Reilly tried to fashion a genealogy for her *Curatorial Activism*, from exhibitions produced in museums and art centres, Bayer, Kazeem-Kamiński and Sternfeld suppose that an antiracist curatorial practice should be able to transform the DNA of institutions curator works with. Curators cannot be seen as heroes fighting the establishment to give more visibility to a minority, whether they take its members into account or not. They are agents that must question the very structures in which they operate, and from there, their role and legitimacy in making others visible. It is only based on this radical questioning that they can produce curatorial apparatuses and discourses that are capable of transforming the social context of hate and inequality that institutions and other agents of the cultural field have to manage.

- 5 Although certain curatorial projects are indeed reviewed in the book, the editors are conscious that there is no easy recipe to reach the proposed goals, and that it is necessary to invent strategies and new ways of working. Natalie Bayer writes: “In my opinion, anti-racist curating consists of taking seriously the demand for equality and acting accordingly. For this to happen we need different constellations, methods, concepts, references and goals than those that are at present still found in the cultural field.”³ Looking for solutions would imply a critical taking into account of Europe’s colonial past and the diasporas that live there now, as well as short-circuiting Western narratives tainted with colonialism. At the same time, it would also be necessary to initiate a deep change in the functions assigned to museums as institutions created during the Enlightenment and affected by 19th century liberalism, colonialism and nationalism. Given that the exhibition apparatus such as we know and consume it is connected to the aesthetic regime engendered by the enlightened museum, defeating the racism inherent to these cultural institutions would signify facing and overcoming the model’s flaws. Several of the contributions compiled in *Curating as Anti-Racist Practice* move in this direction and suggest that a good starting point would be to highlight ways of working – the process – rather than emphasise the exhibition itself as a product ready for mass consumption.
- 6 The recoding of institutions – in particular those connected to representative politics – was one of the goals of the forms of activism which forcefully emerged in the 1990s, and whose sphere of action exceeded the battlefields delimited by trade unions and political parties since the 19th century. The street, Internet and social media have been claimed as spaces of dissidence, at a time when public space is being privatised and neoliberal globalisation is progressing. The aesthetic self-awareness of the anti-globalisation demonstrations – their performative, playful and creative aspects – was at the root of the generalisation of the concept of activism (art+activism) at the beginning of the 2000s. In a recently published book entitled *Artivism*, Arcadi and Daniela Poch gather basic information about a very heterogeneous ensemble of creators and projects, without ever defining their subject or justifying their selection. “What we can say is that this book is about people who have placed their trust in protest as a form of happening. This is a book about things that happen.”⁴ These things happen mostly in the street, directly in the urban territory as new field of creative dissent. This directory of names and images, even though it lacks a substantial working hypothesis, will be very useful for curators who want to explore the realm of politics.
- 7 Peter Weibel’s editorial and curatorial project, *global aCTIVISM*, explores this same area. The exhibition, which opened in late 2013 at ZKM, brought together a wide array of material – videos, installations, objects, photographs and material documenting direct

action in the streets and interventions on social media – produced by collectives, NGOs, activists, filmmakers, intellectuals and artists from around the world. The bulky catalogue edited by Peter Weibel collects essays by several renowned theoreticians working on social issues (Latour, Negri, Sloterdijk, Žižek, Mignolo among many others). They all attempt to determine ways in which to surmount the limits of present-day democracies, at a moment when citizens are starting to understand that states, left in the hands of capital and its interests, have not succeeded in protecting their rights and liberties. According to Weibel, the festive protest movements organised by citizens with a desire to participate in political life are at the root of a “performative democracy” connected to a neo-avant-garde tradition: “Performative interventions by activists coupled with mass media online distribution have shown how citizens can – and want to – play a tangible part in overcoming crisis situations: practices of artistic performance and those of audience participation, which have existed in art since the 1960s, are now descending into the world of politics, as it were.”⁵ Perhaps the most problematic element of Weibel’s declarations is that he considers activism as the ultimate art form of the 21st century, as if direct action in the public sphere were the only possible horizon for whoever wants to become an artist on the international art scene; or as if only the more or less spontaneous actions of critical citizenship were able to offer us intense and emancipatory experiences.

- 8 From a somewhat techno-utopist point of view, Peter Weibel considers new media as the perfect environment for this avant-garde-inspired global activism. One of the precursors of neo-medial experimentation in the field of art was beyond doubt Fred Forest, to whom Michael F. Leruth has just devoted a monography, *Fred Forest’s Utopia: Media Art and Activism*. Forest, a French artist the Centre Georges Pompidou dedicated an exhibition to during the summer of 2017 has been working since the end of the 1960s on projects concerned with social communication. His work mostly consisted of media actions, video installations or legal battles around nature and the role of art; his projects were permeated by the constant desire to stir the viewer’s conscience through different apparatuses. Fred Forest was a founding member of the Collectif d’Art Sociologique (1974-1980), with which he studied the problems of the art system and the interactive possibilities of media. In the 1980s, he developed an interest in the aesthetics of communication, and from there he attempted to expand the limits of experience and perception. Leruth’s book emphasises the concept of “interface as utopia”. Forest thought of the interface as a threshold making it possible to go beyond the accepted and recognised limits of each media, opening communication possibilities in a hyper-technological world⁶. This aim doubtlessly constitutes a kind of utopia *per se* that is worthy of being pursued. However, I am not sure that Forest’s work fits in the concept of activism suggested by the title of Leruth’s book. In any case, the will to associate Forest to this concept could be interpreted as a symptom at once of the increasing symbolic weight of activism in the field of contemporary art and of the difficulties in determining what the term actually describes.
- 9 The works I have examined bring new elements to the discussion on the relationship between art and activism. The political work identified as activism continues to encourage us to reflect on the way to integrate this activity – labile, energetic, and always guided by the desire to intervene politically in reality – into the space of contemporary art. How can we integrate its transforming force to the work dynamic of agents implicated in the field? How can we bring it to the present time – how can it be

exhibited – without betraying its aims, so we can understand its meanings and experiment at least a fraction of its intensity in the very field of art?

NOTES

1. Reilly, Maura. *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2018, p. 21
2. *Ibid.*
3. Bayer, Natalie. Kazeen-Kamiński, Berlinda. Sternfeld, Nora. “Where’s the Contact Zone Here?! A conversation”, *Curating as Anti-Racist Practice*, Helsinki: Aalto University, 2018, p. 26
4. Poch, Arcadi. Poch, Daniela. *Artivism*, London: Carpet Bombing Culture, 2018, p. 7
5. Weibel, Peter. “People, Politics, and Power”, *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, Cambridge: MIT ; Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2014, p. 58
6. Leruth, Michael F. *Fred Forest’s Utopia: Media Art and Activism*, Cambridge: MIT, 2017, p. 182