

IRELAND

SWITCH

CONTEMPORARY VIDEO ART

in a public context



edited by Triona Ryan, Harald Turek

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Since 2008, the *switch* project is a continuing investigation into place locating art in public space in a contextually focused way. International film and video artworks are back-projected for one week onto the windows of shops and other spaces throughout the town. *switch* locates itself outside of the big city and applies itself to the rhythm of smaller places. The events initiate conversations between artists and audiences, artworks and their sites. *switch* fosters a dialogue between diverse positions. Triona Ryan and Harald Turek, the initiators of *switch* and editors of this publication, gave account of the first three years of *switch*. Authors, curators and artists Thomas Horak, Michelle Browne, Marcus Graf, Julia Draganovic and Alfredo Cramerotti contributed with insightful critical reflections on both *switch* and the challenging questions generated by engaging through video art with public space. **www.s-w-i-t-c-h.org**



The transformation of curating: three terms

by Alfredo Cramerotti

December 2011

Abstract

The last few decades has seen an increasingly central preoccupation for a way of researching, producing, and distributing 'knowledge' about people, histories, and situations through artistic practices. This shift was at the same time inspired by and consequential of the raise of the curator as author (no longer only as conservator).

Curatorial agency became central for questioning both the selection of the material presented to us and the specific reasons for why it is selected, and furthermore through which channels this material is delivered to audiences, leaving to the final user of that information the space to engage and 'digest' what is experienced.

I propose herewith three terms to 'unpack' the contemporary notion of curating: participation, time and shifting. They possibly are the most precise to put curating in perspective, especially in reason of the reach of a (specialized) worldwide audience: the public of the globalized circuits of art exhibitions, biennials, film festivals. This reception and redistribution of 'knowledge' has affected, and still does affect, our idea of the way we know things about the world and about ourselves.

The transformation of curating: three terms

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Cultural production is increasingly at the forefront of how we understand the world we live in. If, in past decades, the economic mechanisms were the main referent for our experience as members of a given society (either in terms of conformity or antagonism), now this is no longer the case. Today, criteria for economic achievement and wellbeing are no longer sufficient for a proper comprehension of phenomena such as the hyper-flagged 'clash of civilisations.' We are in need to re-address our referents in cultural, even aesthetic terms. It is telling that multinationals and businesses re-invest their profits in cultural and artistic projects in order to create a 'culture' that can travel beyond national schemes and monetary value – a way of fidelization of the customer with enormous potential. In this context, the work of the curator assumes particular relevance since not only it produces and mediates the work of the artist and contextualizes it in a bigger picture, but generates the very conditions for its sustainability and ultimately helps to establish its social and political relevance. In time, curatorial practices first developed a 'taking care' trait to make sure artworks were available and accessible; then it has expanded the art's grasp on life, helping to make it relevant and a practical tool to understand stories and situations, not only to contemplate them. Like artists, many curators feel they cannot leave research into and a commitment to social and political meaning outside their practice, and therefore engage with structures of production and distribution outside the specific constraints of art.

I will discuss further three different terms which I believe are important in order to grasp contemporary curating and the scope of exhibition-making: participation, time and shifting (perspective and understanding). It's not an exhaustive list of the main features of curating and curators' practice – it's only a partial, subjective view. But hopefully this will give ground for discussion and injection of antagonistic views.

1. Participation

As curator and director, I'm responsible for the exhibitions programme of a publicly funded art institution in the UK. I used to be sceptical about the format exhibition. I thought that a book, for instance, would be a more efficient and practical tool to both spread and host knowledge. After years of arguments and experience, I'd say exhibitions *can* be a precious host of knowledge. But a lot depends of the way they are delivered.

An artistic event, in its ideal form, would allow the reader to make her/his own story out of the material offered. This rarely happens, and I include my artistic and curatorial work in this critique. It's far more common to have a certain line of exposing things; alternative types of information if the producers' purpose is political, more simply aesthetic if they're pursuing other goals. In any case, exhibitions do read things differently to mainstream sensibility, inviting the viewer to read along.

One thing that needs to happen for the *possibility* to read things in a certain way would be not to pass on to the visitor, or reader, something we consider important *as* statement. It's true we're all here because there are things we want to say, and that we want to make it public. But to transfer knowledge to someone 'unacknowledged' might ultimately result in a sort of inverse propaganda. Can we call this participation?

A public becomes an audience when it takes the liberty to add something to the narrative offered by the work of art, the documentary film, or the journalistic reportage. As an audience member, I should be able to analyse the relation between 'what happened' and its representation, be it a video projection in a gallery or an article in the morning paper. There is no gap between producer and audience, since each part knows something the other doesn't know. That's nothing new. (Umberto Eco in 1962 based his essay on the 'open work' on the same argument. Jacques Rancière followed up. And so on.) What's important, in my view, is that awareness *is* the essence of participation. An artwork, or a curatorial project needs to prove, if any, one

thing: there is no need to fill a gap, since the gap in knowledge is the normal condition, and not something to correct.

I wonder at this point, what is the aim of participation in art (curating and making)? Does it allow participants (artists and audiences) to read each other knowledge at the same level – in a mutually beneficial way? I admit the difficulty of putting into practice the awareness mentioned above. To reach a point in which everyone is equally ready to perform, might take more than art and literature are capable of. It might take time, a lot of time. To get each other's knowledge, we need to get access. To get access, we need to generate points to enter and participate in culture. We need to find the key to enter, and possibly more than one. Passion is one key. Irit Rogoff speaks about passion as a principal means to get access. Passion for something is what unlocks the potential in the spectator and producer (artists and curators) alike.

What else? Necessity. It's a powerful drive to enter culture, at different level. Less physical necessity than social necessity. The push to go beyond the values of the environment we grew up within. But here again, books rule. The question of access cannot be separated by that of the gates, and of the gatekeepers. James Rifkin wrote an entire book on that; himself making an interesting double pass. He gives the examples of the book as the metaphor for the gatekeeping policy: anyone can write a book (provided s/he has access to the means), but will stumble upon the first gatekeeper: the publishing house/Internet bookseller that can distribute the book. Once passed the first, there's the second gatekeeper: the editor/marketing person. S/he might never grant access to the book, for whatever reason (economical or ideological), therefore blocking access. If even the second level were to be passed, our author will get across a third level: the reviewer/critic (in print or online), who might never review the book, therefore denying the book to a potential audience. This is how it works, in publishing. Isolated cases of successful

bloggers and works 'discovered' online are only confirming the rules, not (yet) subverting them.

Interestingly, these considerations are published in a book. For Rifkin the metaphor doesn't really work. What about exhibition curating then? Is it a gatekeeper or a point of access? An opportunity or a limitation? The book is an efficient image for cultural production and participation in general, and especially for the notion of being 'on stage' and performing: like an art exhibition, or a cultural festival. It gives the idea of the work behind; it discloses on one hand, the difficulty of making us all 'aware' (since one is writing and many are waiting to see the book on sale). On the other hand, it shows the very possibility that exists for anyone to read something, which is not written. I wonder, in our case of curators and curating, which role can harness passion to push that gate. And which one harnesses necessity.

2. Time

Delaying or anticipating the act of decoding information can lead to the re-appropriation of aspects daily life. Acting and being implicated through art in a non-synchronized way is an act of critical engagement rather than a cognitive act. For instance, reading an old daily broadsheet can actually give you a chill, whether out of fear or excitement, about how history – as the historicization of facts and opinions through mainstream media outputs – is an ongoing construct. I partake in this process only if I decide to seize some distance and use this 'gap' to constantly undermine and reconstruct its proceedings. Here, curating and curators can be highly effective in proposing narratives that embrace this time-space distance and seriously consider an artistic reading of reality - the here and now seen tangentially. Indeed this puts what has been said, done or thought into a wider perspective, which in turn allows space for 'lateral thinking'. This extra layer of thought ultimately

informs and gives insight into what to do next, rather than what was done before. In treating the reality of the world as a series of constructed events, I reinvent my daily reality. I read any landscape, fact or situation as though it were an artwork. (As a note, this approach is central of the work of writer and theorist Jalal Toufic and artist Walid Raad.)

To show an image that does not reveal its content but refers to another time, something else outside the picture; and to not show an image at all in the actual time of the viewer's engagement can both be wealth in terms of curatorial practice. It is important to open up the possibility of seeing something different in what is told, not claiming to tell, 'what is all about,' but rather proposing a selection of reading possibilities. To read life in *non-real time* is not a matter of fabricating (the present), documenting (the past) or imagining (the future) but simply about embracing one among the many possibilities of awareness; being *aware* is the essence of participation – see first term above. I wrote in another text that we start to get closer to the core of our reality not when we represent it (or absorb its representation) but when we consider it as a possibility among many others and not as a given, irreversible fact. I do think this is a crucial. Only when I engage with the possibility of something can I try to change what is important (for me). It is a matter of adding knowledge, connecting what I already know with what I do not know, placing the new (old) in time-sequence with other knowledge. If we, as interested public, accept the opportunity to 'develop' this or that topic in time, as part of our own story, we activate a sort of witness process, and we become audience(s). By accepting the relativity of time, I embrace the idea that life is not so much about who I am now, but who I will become – it is projected towards the future rather than an agency of the past. It is a question about how I choose to think of myself; by extension, how artists and audiences think of themselves while producing, engaging or fruiting of an art exhibition. Nobody possesses time, neither can one dispose of it; s/he can only

inhabit it wholly. In this moment, while you read these words, I *am* your time. We are never really able to remove ourselves from within it. Today's reality becomes not a fact to be understood but rather an effect to be produced, in which you and me are embedded.

3. Shifting (perspective; thus, understanding)

Let's consider finally the role of the curator as a service-provider in the cultural industry, and open the discussion about its potential, its benefits and also its contradictions. As an artist, one embraces the challenge to engage with communities, however physical or incorporeal; present, past or future, using a variety of media, venues and methodologies. As a curator, one is engaged in creating and taking care of the situations originated to determine and allow the artists' work – realising a project interdependent on audience, artists, work and medium. Ideally, this turns out to be an exhibition, festival, symposium or other 'platforms' where audiences have actually a complex control over the content. Curators, artists and producers' perspectives will be tested, subverted and used 'against them'. The viewer, reader or listener owns the capacity to consider what it is that they are intended to see, read or hear and in which way is intended to be experienced. I subscribe to this. I'm sceptical about curatorial projects (including my own) where I tend to see the authorial position excluding the antagonistic space, or the possibility of shifting perspectives. Where the content and the way of experiencing it is dictated, either by the artist, the curator, the set-up, the interpretation material or other.

Curatorial agency not only has to raise questions but also inhabit the problem and being skilled in problem-definition. One effective method to achieve this is to decentralise a field of inquiry, shifting ideas across multiple borders – physical and metaphorical. In my experience, a fruitful approach is

to expand the existing boundaries of art by introducing the notion of mass media. Media channels are a site for artists and curators to push boundaries beyond comfort zones and commit to new ideas making them readable, accessible, distributed and diffused. To be sure, mass media is only *one* system to engage with; others may think of science, law, economics etc. to fulfil the potential of their ideas. Furthermore, it is also important to discuss the intentions of these ideas to audiences. The bottom line is that both curators and artists, who want to effectively work *with* an audience rather than *for* one, are better off considering different perspectives by pursuing collaboration with other systems (so to speak), rather than expecting the ad-hoc opportunity, meanwhile working more or less effective-less within the art world (because this is what is experienced for the majority of art projects, in retrospect). It is definitely worth the attempt, since reciprocal influences are not foreseeable and will depend upon a significant reception by the audience.

Note

The text is a newly elaborated essay for curating.info; some passages of the text were originally developed by the author as part of the Open Dialogues: New Life Berlin critical writing initiative <http://www.wooloo.org/opendialogues> (2008-ongoing); Transmission journal, MAGASIN-CNAC Grenoble (2010); Manifesta 8 catalogue (2010); and Private Investigations, Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen Innsbruck (2011).

Biography

Alfredo Cramerotti is a writer, curator, editor and artist based in the UK. He is Ph.D. Cand., The European Centre for Photography Research, University of Wales, Newport, and former Fellow of Art Theory and Criticism at the

Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen Innsbruck (Austria). He is Director of Mostyn, Wales' largest publicly funded contemporary art gallery and has recently co-curated (CPS) Manifesta 8, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, Region of Murcia, Spain (2010-11). Alfredo is Editor of the Critical Photography book series published by Intellect Books and co-directs AGM CULTURE, an itinerant curatorial agency that produces an annual, expanded form of symposium. Recent publications include the books *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing* (2009) and *Unmapping the City: Perspectives of Flatness* (2010).
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