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* All interviews conducted by Gerd Elise Mørland and Heidi Bale Amundsen

Installation view of Corpus Extremus (LIFE+)
Curator, Boryana Rossa, a fellow of Exit Art's Curatorial
Incubator Program. February 28 - April 18, 2009.
Exit Art, New York, New York
Photo: Oleg Mavromatti

THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF CURATORIAL PRACTISE

INTRODUCTION

Gerd Elise Mørland and
Heidi Bale Amundsen

Can curating make a change? And if so: how? As a result of the expanding market for contemporary art, the upsurge of biennials, art fairs and large group exhibitions, and the construction of numerous new museums for contemporary art during the 1990s, the

role of the curator has undergone profound changes. From being a marginal character working within the confines of the museum, the curator has come to inhabit a freer and more centralized position within the artworld at large.

Correspondingly, the critical focus has turned from the individual artworks to the overarching structure of the exhibition. As there has been a displacement of power from the artist and the curator, critics are now considering the exhibition an utterance in its own right. This has given the curator the means to agitate, speak and to be listened to. As a consequence, within the last few years we have seen an increasing number of curators utilizing their newfound power for political purposes, aiming to change societal structures.

Certainly, political exhibitions can hardly be considered a new phenomenon. What we find new though, is the way of expressing these political concerns. Prior to the institutionalizing of the curator's role and the shaping of it as we see it today, the political was often expressed through the exhibitions' content. But as the role of the curator changed, the curatorial methods changed with it. This implicated what we consider a radically new way of working politically as a curator. While politics had normally been expressed through the exhibitions' content and thematic, curators could now activate art's political potential through curatorial form and structure as well.

And this was what they did, as many of today's curators aim to "change the world" not only through artworks with political motifs or through political exhibition themes, but also through the curatorial strategies themselves. These curators turn the curatorial strategies into meaningful form with intrinsic value, expressing political concerns by the use of processual and often participatory means such as education, organized discussions, interventions, collaborative working methods and text production. This tendency is seen not only in the smaller, radical and independent projects normally associated with political exhibitions, but also as a trait of large-scale exhibitions and biennials which tend to merge art and life in a new way.

Ivo Mesquita's "non-exhibition" for the last São Paulo Biennial (2008) is but one case in point. Leaving the main exhibition space empty as a response to the biennial's economic context, Bonami made the curatorial gesture become a highly politicized utterance. The Tirana Biennial of 2003, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Anri Sala, is yet another biennial example. For this show, the curators invited a number of artists to repaint the city's old and worn-down buildings. This project was not about producing what is usually understood as "artworks", but about contributing to the already ongoing rebuilding of the city - and thereby about bridging the gap between curating and politics.

But is it in the power of the curator to "change the world" and people's minds? This is the main question which will be addressed in this issue of On-Curating.org, through comprehensive interviews with acknowledged curators and art theoreticians. These are curator and forthcoming artistic director of *Documenta 13*, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (Turin, Italy); curator, artist and writer Paul O'Neill (London, England); curator and critic Simon Sheikh (Berlin, Germany) and art historian Mary Anne Staniszewski (New York, USA). Our intention is for these interviews to form a platform for further research into the dynamic relationship between curating and politics, as well as for the second and third part of our project - a forthcoming public discussion and an exhibition concerning the political potential of contemporary curating.

An important point of reference for the discussion of the relationship between curating and politics is the 1970s critique of the modernist "white cube" as a highly ideologically space. This critique was articulated by artist and critic Brian O'Doherty in the book *Inside the White Cube*, a collection of essays first published in *Artforum* in 1976. The other key text when it comes to the deconstruction of the "white cube" is American art-historian Mary Anne Staniszewski's *The Power of Display*, first published in 1996. The book is an analysis of the power structures inherent in the exhibition practise of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Staniszewski is currently the director of the curatorial incubator at the radical project space Exit Art in New York. In her conversation with us, Staniszewski talks about the political potential of curating within the contemporary American institutional context.

Our second interviewee, curator and critic Simon Sheikh, has

written extensively on institutional critique. He has a special interest in O'Doherty's writings and has contributed with the afterword in the Danish translation of *Inside the White Cube* (2002). And in 2009 he published the essay "Positively white cube revisited" in *E-flux*, where he pointed out the relevance of O'Doherty's text even today, more than thirty years later. In our interview, he surveys the role of political curating within today's European curatorial field.

The third interview is based on our conversation with curator, writer and artist Paul O'Neill. For the last few years he has chosen to work semi-independently with smaller exhibition formats. O'Neill represents the expanded curatorial field of today, as his curatorial practice envelops writing, discussions and interventions, as well as exhibitions. He has previously edited the widely read *Curating Subjects* (DeAppel, 2007) and is releasing *Curating and the Educational Turn* (DeAppel) with Mick Wilson this spring. No matter the field, his work is characterized by constant selfreflection and in the interview he discusses the situation of contemporary political curating from the point of view of his own practice within smaller, independent project spaces.

Our last interview is with curator and writer Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Having worked as artistic director at the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin, she is currently the artistic director of the next *Documenta Biennial*. Christov-Bakargiev was also the head curator of the 2008 Sydney Biennial, and our conversation with her takes her practise as a large-scale exhibition curator as its point of departure. This makes our interview with her an interesting complement to our talk with Paul O'Neill.

A sincere thank you to all four interviewees for sharing their thoughts on curating and politics with us, and for their patience and helpfulness in the interview process. Many thanks also to Dorothee Richter at the University of Arts in Zurich for kindly inviting us to guest edit this issue of On-Curating.org, to Siri Peyer and Megan Hall for all helpfulness, to Helmut Batista at Capacete for productive advice, and last - but not least - a warm thanks to the Office for Contemporary Art Norway for supporting our project. We hope that you will find this issue of On-Curating.org an interesting and thought-provoking read!



Installation view of *Corpus Extremus (LIFE+)* Curator, Boryana Rossa, a fellow of Exit Art's Curatorial Incubator Program. February 28 - April 18, 2009. Exit Art, New York, New York. Photo: Oleg Mavromatti

Installation shot of *NoArk II*, 2008, *The Tissue Culture and Art Project* (Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr). Bioreactor, preserved specimens, taxidermy animals, co-culture of living cells from different organisms, nutrient solution, plexiglass. Courtesy of the artists.

DENIAL, DELUSION AND CURATING IN THE U.S.

Interview with Mary Anne Staniszewski
Oslo, May 2009

You have criticized MoMA and major American art institutions for separating art from life through an object-oriented white-cube aesthetic, and for thereby neutralizing the political potential of the exhibitions. How can the autonomizing structures of the museum be overthrown, and can the curator play a considerable part in it?

In the case of MoMA: during its early years, the MoMA was more of an open text and open to cultural influences, but in recent decades, it has turned inward, becoming more autonomous and isolated in terms of the spectrum of possibilities for art and culture. Of course there have been some exceptions to this, but generally this holds true. And in this sense, the museum is in crisis. But hopefully something will happen to this old museum model, so that connectors will be developed between the museum and the culture at large. You see such models working everywhere within our culture. You really can't prevent it, everything just starts to connect. The Internet is a good model for it. I think it is one of the effects of what you'd call globalization.

I think the only way to erode, or should I say enliven this autonomous, isolationist, market-based museum is for the museum to become part of a consortium or network of organizations. I believe museums are going to have to develop in this direction at some level. We have certain things that are failing in the US because of what might be called the "mega culture". In the US independent bookstores were failing because of the mega culture of large corporate bookstores such as Barnes and Nobles. So what the independent bookstores did was to create online consortiums. Although always a part of bookstore culture, more and more independent bookstores have begun to activate their spaces, not only with author's book signings, but also with talks and lectures. There is now this proliferation of independent bookstores in the US that regularly present author's talks and lectures; these even get covered by certain television channels devoted to such activity. So the independent bookstores that have had such special character, and which were often linked to local communities and were important to intellectual life in the US, are surviving through the consortiums and lectures by being more media- and audience oriented. They've become sites, booksellers even put cafés in their bookstores now, and they've become magnets for the public.

So how do you break down the hierarchy, so that the values of the different kinds of entities are raised on a more democratic level?

I don't really know, but the museum, the culture at large, and, I think, curators could initiate this. Really, I think this could be initiated on any level within the museum as an institution; on an administrative, structural, curatorial or educational level – or even through the service and technological staffs! There are so many creative ways to link different communities. There are always some individuals in a population interested in these types of linkages.

So do you think that curating can cause political change?

Curating has political potential in that it is one type of media that contributes to public discourses and the public domain. An exhibition – including those in smaller or alternative spaces – has the potential to seep, spread, influence, transform and change culture. Therefore I feel that curators have a responsibility to engage with the critical issues of our time. The problem with so much contemporary curating is that there is an inability to deal with reality in terms of exhibition making – and this is a mirror of our culture at large.

In the United States, the most important and visible mainstream arenas for contemporary art have for years now been devoid of anything dealing with challenging social issues or politics. Although the Whitney is generally more engaged than the other Manhattan museums, the 2004 Whitney Biennial exemplifies this situation. Despite the fact that we were in the so-called "age of terror", it was just a year after the US had invaded Iraq, the general character of the show seemed to be about escapism, fun and lightness – and it was not even ironic! The show exemplified the delusory denial that has been so prevalent in the US in the 2000s.

Being a curator is a powerful and potentially very influential profession. Throughout history, exhibitions have had tremendous effect on the all kinds of social discourses. But it is unfortunate that so many curators end up producing formulaic shows. I think one of the problems with the curatorial profession is that many curators think of themselves as professionals in a very limited way. They're not thinking of themselves as curators in the tradition of the international avant-gardes from the first half of the century and the great artists, designers, architects, museum directors and curators that have experimented with exhibition technique and created thought-provoking thematic shows. I expect great curators to be as creative as the great artists, and great exhibitions to be as eloquent and powerful as the best works of art.

But in a European context we see how many contemporary curators are turning their back on the traditional object-based exhibition by working more processually, through means such as education, activism and textual work. Do you see a similar tendency in the US as well?

I think you have more of that kind of curatorial experimentation coming from leading curators in Europe and elsewhere throughout the globe, rather than in the US. Of course there are curators initiating those kinds of projects in the US as well, but I would say that those working at the premier museums are still driven by very mainstream art world criteria. While early in the twentieth century artists critiqued the museum for being a mausoleum, I would say that it has now become a bank. An old and rigid museum model

presides, where the market is the meaning and the museum is a preserve for those objects that do well in the marketplace.

That may be the paradox of the curator's position, always having to negotiate the economic and aesthetic concerns of exhibition making. The question is whether the contemporary curatorial departure from the object solves the problem. Do you consider processual and performative curatorial strategies more effective tools for causing political change than the object-based exhibition?

In regards to the museum, I would not go one way or the other. A museum should not be devoted only to preserving, presenting and archiving the object, but I don't think it should be only text-based, performative and interventionist either – with no objects and no collection. A truly radical and vital museum would embrace the full spectrum of the tradition of artistic practice and the full spectrum of current possibilities. I am very much into a transforming and dynamic museum, but I still think you should acknowledge the power of a Frida Kahlo painting or Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup.

What's important in curating is eloquence of expression, and first and foremost is the vitality of the questions asked. The curatorial project must fit the needs of a particular moment: What kind of exhibitions do we need right now? What voices do we need to hear? The truth is, you can have interventionist, theory-informed curatorial work that is just as boring, superficial and inconsequential as a mega art world show. And I see how productions by curators who seem to be the most hip and progressive, often turn out just as formulaic as any traditionalist object-based exhibition. I think it is very important to be sensitive to why you are choosing your strategies, and why you are making this or that kind of exhibition.

Do you think that all curatorial work should be political in one way or another?

Of course, not everything has to be political, with a capital P. But still, self-consciously choosing not to be political is a highly political and ideological act. In terms of aesthetic practice, there is a range of possibilities, and I think that there is a place and a need for really incisive political critique. In the US, for example, we have a president who is saying that we are in an age of terror and infinite war [George W. Bush was President of the US at the time of this interview]. This has led to a strange reconfiguration of the way we treat immigrants in the US, but there is an invisibility to these issues. The major cultural institutions are not dealing with such questions; these issues remain the preserve of smaller, more so-called alternative contexts. This is just one example, of just one problem. But I believe that some curators somewhere should take on these types of issues. Not every single curator has to do this, but someone should deal with these aspects of the cultural landscape.

What do you consider the main reasons for the American art institutions' avoidance of politically controversial questions?

I think the reason is the domination of the market, which has made us very conservative. It is also related to the way we deal with news and information in the US – concerning the war, for example. When looking at CNN internationally, you see a very different picture of war than the one we can see on CNN in the US. In the United States, mainstream television is a very simplistic medium. Leading up to the war in Iraq, the several major US television networks had 400 war-related interviews, but only three of them were with people who were against the US involvement in the war. I think there is a lack of highly visible sources for this kind of alternative thinking.

We have a parallel situation happening in terms of cultural production. In more alternative spaces, artists are certainly engaged with a broad range of issues. But, the question is, are they given opportunities to make their work visible in these other contexts? Considering the mission of museum and politics of its structure, this seems to be an extremely important question. If there are artists taking on the critical issues of our time and addressing challenging, political questions in their work, is there any kind of platform for their projects? And what can be done to bring these kinds of works into the public sphere?

An exhibition can deal with anything. It is one way of communicating. Not everybody has to be a "political" curator and not everyone must make those kinds of exhibitions, but somebody must ask the important, cutting edge questions that most people

are not asking. It is almost an ethical issue. And an exhibition, like a book or newspaper, is a form of very visible cultural production. I think that political questions should be a part of all arenas of society.

What do you see as the major challenges for curators in the US working politically today?

I think the challenge is linking cultural institutions with some of these ideas, and getting funding for carrying out these types of projects as well. Of course, there are many institutions that make politically-engaged work – but these are not the more mainstream, powerful, visible museums. At Exit Art in New York, we have a big gallery space, an auditorium, a theatre and a café, and Exit Art is one such organization known to take on political, social and controversial issues. But it's a bit unusual for an art organization to be so politically-engaged in New York City. We also see related dynamics of this situation when we have problems raising money for our more experimental, challenging and political shows.

An example is this year's Bio Art show, *Corpus Extremus (Life +)* at Exit Art, where we presented work by artists who were using bio- and media technologies to investigate questions of life and death. It's the new frontier of artistic materials, but it's very controversial and it seemed like many people did not know how to react to this show. I think many people in the art-world don't get this type of exhibition, but there is an international subculture dealing with biotechnologies that has been going on for about ten years, and they're taking on some of the biggest issues of our time. These artists are very much on the cutting edge of moral and ethical questions, like what really happens in the laboratory when they inject human genes into lab-rats or as scientists start to create new kinds of living entities of different cellular clusters.

Through art, these issues can be brought into the public sphere, where they can be disseminated and discussed in a variety of ways. But there is a lot of fear around bio-genetic issues in the United States, so we couldn't get any funding for *Corpus Extremus (Life +)*. In the end, it looked like a very expensive show, but that was a result of creative resourcefulness, and our links and collaborations with labs and artists who received financial support from governments and sponsors outside the US. What I'm saying is that making this kind of political show is a question of having a context or platform for doing the work. It's a question of having the resources to do it, and of finding the good questions. It is a challenge, but it's definitely worth it.

Mary Anne Staniszewski is associate professor and acting head of the Department of the Arts at the City University of New York. She investigates art, media, and culture in relation to political and social perspectives. Her work takes the form of writing, editing, collaborative curatorial practices, and, more frequently in the past, collaborative artists projects. Her major research and writing projects form a "trilogy" of interdisciplinary investigations of modern art and culture as articulations of the modern self. Staniszewski is currently working on the third area of investigation, a multi-volume work, which is an analysis of the historical and contemporary sense of self in the United States, featuring three key themes: race; sex and gender; and life and death. She is also the director of the "curatorial incubator" at Exit Art, New York, which gives young and emerging curators, artists, and scholars opportunities to produce exhibitions dealing with critical issues not being adequately addressed by the mainstream art world.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE CURATORIAL ARTICULATION

Interview with Simon Sheikh
Skype, Oslo-Copenhagen, September 2009

The Manifesta 7 and Berlin biennial of 2008, as well as the Mercosul Biennial in Brazil in 2009 interpret economic and

ideological situations. But at the same time these shows are also getting involved in the political situations through the curatorial form; that is, through curatorial strategies like interventions, text production, teaching and other processual activities. How do you read this kind of political curating?

Well, first of all I think you're correct in saying that the crucial connection must be between political projects and the form of the exhibition. I think this aspect is underdeveloped in a lot of curatorial work. It is something that curators are struggling with. The exhibitions that you mentioned are all experimenting with this idea of form, as there are no established methods at this point.

Many curators behind these kinds of exhibitions think of the form as something that not only reconstructs the exhibition, but deconstructs it as well. Maybe the best example is the Cork Caucus project of Annie Fletcher, Charles Esche and Art/Not Art, made in 2005, when the city of Cork (in Ireland) was the cultural council of Europe. What they did was to make a *caucus* instead of an exhibition. *Caucus* is actually a political term referring to the establishment of a political community. The project consisted of reading groups, meetings and other arrangements, but of no traditional exhibition. This project somehow seems to represent a new kind of politics or political engagement within what could be called a leftist or progressive tradition.

This relates to a very important question. When people say political art, they mean art of a leftist tendency. But obviously there are political artworks that do not have anything to do with progressive projects, projects of enlightenment, projects of socialism and so on, but that have completely different politics. One consistent idea seems to have been, that we should completely deconstruct the exhibition, not making an exhibition at all. And that this unforming of the exhibition equates the radicality of one's politics. That is considered, so to say, how you create a political exhibition. Or rather that's how you act politically as a curator.

Do you consider this paradigmatic kind of anti-exhibition an effective tool for causing political change?

What I think that curating should do, is to be implemented in community building and not just be a representation of the

non-object and the non-market. I think that is where the potential of curating lies, in the power to turn the aesthetic into something else. Again you would have to analyse curating locally, and in every case ask what the exhibition is doing and which claims are made for what it's doing. The processual strategies, and there could be more or less difference between them, has different aims than for example the works of Hans Haacke. The political critique of his works depended on the museum context. That is why it is very difficult to compare them and their effectiveness. For which are after all the measures of the political effectiveness, political representations and political actions? These are quite complicated issues that have both very short-term implications and very long-term implications.

But obviously the curator position is always already political, though it might not be political in the way that certain curators like to think, and how certain curators consider themselves political. I think that a lot of curators would like to see themselves as organic intellectuals of the art world. But being a curator and taking on this kind of middle management between economic/administrative and aesthetic concerns is more about *realpolitik*. It is important to acknowledge that curatorial forms are very constrained spaces and not spaces of autonomy. While we might say that an artist can have relative autonomy, though not full autonomy, it is clear that the position of the curator is not a position of autonomy at all. It is a position of complete contingency.

So how can one work politically from this in-between position, negotiating economic and aesthetic considerations?

The basis of my current research is to try to figure out or to analyse how exhibitions articulate politics within the tradition of exhibition making that we have had within modernism. How is the public produced? And how is the subject that is involved in the exhibition, and in the knowledge of the exhibition, conceived? It is important to analyse how exhibitions work, in order to say why they have been found to be so problematic in the last decade. If an exhibition articulates and situates political subjects in a certain way, and gives them access to specific kinds of knowledge, then the exhibition necessarily produces political agency exactly through exhibition making itself.



Cork Caucus: BangCork, by Surasi Kusolwong. Bishop Lucey Park.
 Photo: Dara McGrath 2005 © NSF

It's not that I have anything against the deconstructions of the exhibition. I think that it is a completely valid curatorial method and a very important mode of address. But I think that it is important to acknowledge that the exhibition can do something articulatory, something political, not only by repeating traditional methods and by serving a bourgeois subject of reason. The challenge is, and I suppose especially when you come to the large-scale exhibitions that you mentioned, how you circumvent the logic of entertainment and consumption into something else. It is not that I necessarily have an answer to how this could be done, but the questions I have mentioned are important questions needed to work through the very form of the exhibition.

Do you see the turn away from object-based exhibitions as a way of avoiding market domination, and do you think that it results in a freer position of speech?

Historically the idea of not making object art was of course an attempt to escape the market,

and to a large extent that was what happened. But even though Seth Siegelaub was very good at marketing conceptual art, working with marketing tools in order to promote non-object art in the late 60s and 70s, object-based art still makes up the largest percent of the art market today. About 90% of art fair sales are paintings, and the remaining 10% photography. This tendency is even more evident if you look at the secondary art market, as Neil Cummings has done. The art market is still very much based on traditional objects, and to a considerable extent, not even sculptures or similar kinds of objects circulate through the secondary art market.

What happens then is that non-object art has to find other types of markets, and other types of circulation. But that doesn't mean that it's outside of the market. Instead it goes into another market, which is the market of what I would call "talk-value". This is a term from the business world, meaning that it goes into a market of discourse. The term "market discourse" may sound cynical and

dismissive, but I don't consider this phenomenon in purely negative terms. It is just to say that there is a circulation of discourse that creates some other market, in the sense that knowledge is market oriented, and that universities and academia are also market oriented as well. This is what we have seen in the last ten years, and it is where the art world is not so different from other parts of the economy, moving between commodities and equities.

State institutions, as national funding bodies, are also involved in this market. Grants, prizes, production money and so on follow artists and therefore the curators and the projects, which are also based in a certain market. And state institutions have to accept themselves as being in this market. I hope that a lot of people who are working with the format of non-object curating accept this. This is where I think it connects to the form of the exhibition, because it becomes a way of representing the idea that some things are not typically oriented towards the markets, and thus circulate uneasily within them.

Large-scale exhibitions and biennials seem to have a closer connection to the art market than smaller, self-organized initiatives, as well as there being stronger economic interests involved. But the biennial also reaches a much larger and maybe more heterogeneous audience than the independent projects. Which format do you consider the most effective for causing political change?

I would have to use such a term as *potentiality*, because obviously I think that biennials and large-scale exhibitions have the largest potential. But that doesn't mean that this has been identified, or that it can be identified at all. Maybe it's a potentiality that we can't identify? The selection process of the biennial has its own politics as well. The politics of identity, network and economy play as much a role, if not a larger role, than the political aesthetics of the curator. The selection is based on these other parameters. And there is nothing intrinsically false or a-moral, as is often claimed in certain types of institutional critique, about these parameters.

It is rather that they should be illuminated and discussed more. You mentioned the difference between alternative spaces of self-organization and large-scale exhibitions like the biennial. In a way these are two ends of the economic ladder. The problem is that it's almost impossible to compare them. These two exhibition forms are somehow loosely connected in what we call "the artworld", and certain agents in the artworld are going for both of them. This goes for both artists and curators, you could be in a biennial one day, and in an alternative space the next. Not just at different stages in your career, but also within the same year, or even at the same moment. And both formats might fit well into each other.

But again, the problem is in terms of the reception, that they're presented to the public as if the exhibitions were made as fully formed articulations, and obviously they are not, they are both based on a lot of constraints. And specifically when it comes to alternative or self-organized exhibitions. Here, I am also drawing from my own experience of having worked within this context. The exhibition is perceived in the media, and sometimes by the audience as well, as belonging to the same public and as being produced in the same way as a museum exhibition. And therefore it is considered under produced. But you obviously can't compare these formats because they don't have the same brief or the same economy.

To be able to compare these two formats, all the processes behind the biennial would have to be completely transparent. We would have to know the selection process as well as the political decisions behind it, and even who were the people who were short-listed – not only the artists that eventually participated in the exhibition. And finally we would have to know how the funding was allocated for each of the artists.

For instance, all the Scandinavian countries are welfare states, and all curators know that if you have an interest in an artist from one of the Scandinavian countries, your project can be produced very well. That is due to the almost guaranteed state funding a major biennial receives. So what the curator does is to take the money received from the Scandinavian state and transfer them to an artist who comes from a place where this funding does not exist, or to an artist who doesn't have a major gallery to produce his or her work. So even within the same biennial there might be clear reasons for some works being well produced and well installed, while others

aren't. And these reasons may not be connected to the intentionality of the artist.

So which do you see as the major challenges for curators working politically today?

First and foremost I want to stress the importance of the curator acknowledging that he works politically. This is what I consider the major challenge. I think curators who claim that they're not working politically are extremely political, and it is exactly those unarticulated politics that need to be discussed more. When we are talking about representations we are also talking about economies and identities, and in relation to these issues I don't know how it can be possible to not be political. It may mean that the politics of the given exhibition are not what is the most interesting about the exhibition, I am totally willing to acknowledge that. As connected as aesthetics are to politics, these categories are obviously not synonymous, and often conflict one another. However, this gap is also what gives the field of exhibition-making its dynamics as well as its problems, and I think that we need to acknowledge that we are all working politically, albeit with different politics. And the second thing is this: for those of us who think we have so-called leftist politics, the challenge is to make different articulating forms of articulation. What is necessary is to articulate the difference of these kinds of politics from the "politics as usual", and to develop the methods that clarify these positions.

*Simon Sheikh is a freelance curator and critic currently undertaking doctoral research on the topic of exhibition-making and political imaginaries at the University of Lund, Sweden. He is also curating a FORMER WEST Research Exhibition in connection to this project (September 2010). Recent publications include the anthologies *We are all Normal* with Katya Sander (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2001), *Knut Åsdam* (Zug: Fine Arts Unternehmen, 2004), *In the Place of the Public Sphere?* (Berlin: b_books, 2005) and *Capital (It Fails Us Now)* (Berlin: b_books, 2006). A collection of his essays is forthcoming from b_books. Sheikh's writings can also be found in periodicals such as *Afterall*, *AnArchitektur*, *Open*, *Springerin*, *Texte zur Kunst* and *E-flux*. From 1999 to 2002 Sheikh was the director of *Overgaden – Institute for Contemporary Art* in Copenhagen, Denmark, and from 2002 to 2009 the Coordinator of the *Critical Studies Program* at the *Malmö Art Academy* in Sweden.*



Cork Caucus: RD – Recruitment Drive, 2004 © Art / not art

Cork Retreat with Sarat Maharaj. Glandore, West Cork. Photo: Dobz O'Brien 2005 © NSF

Chantal Mouffe Lecture at the Firkin Crane Theatre. Photo: Paul White 2005 © NSF

THE POLITICS OF THE SMALL ACT

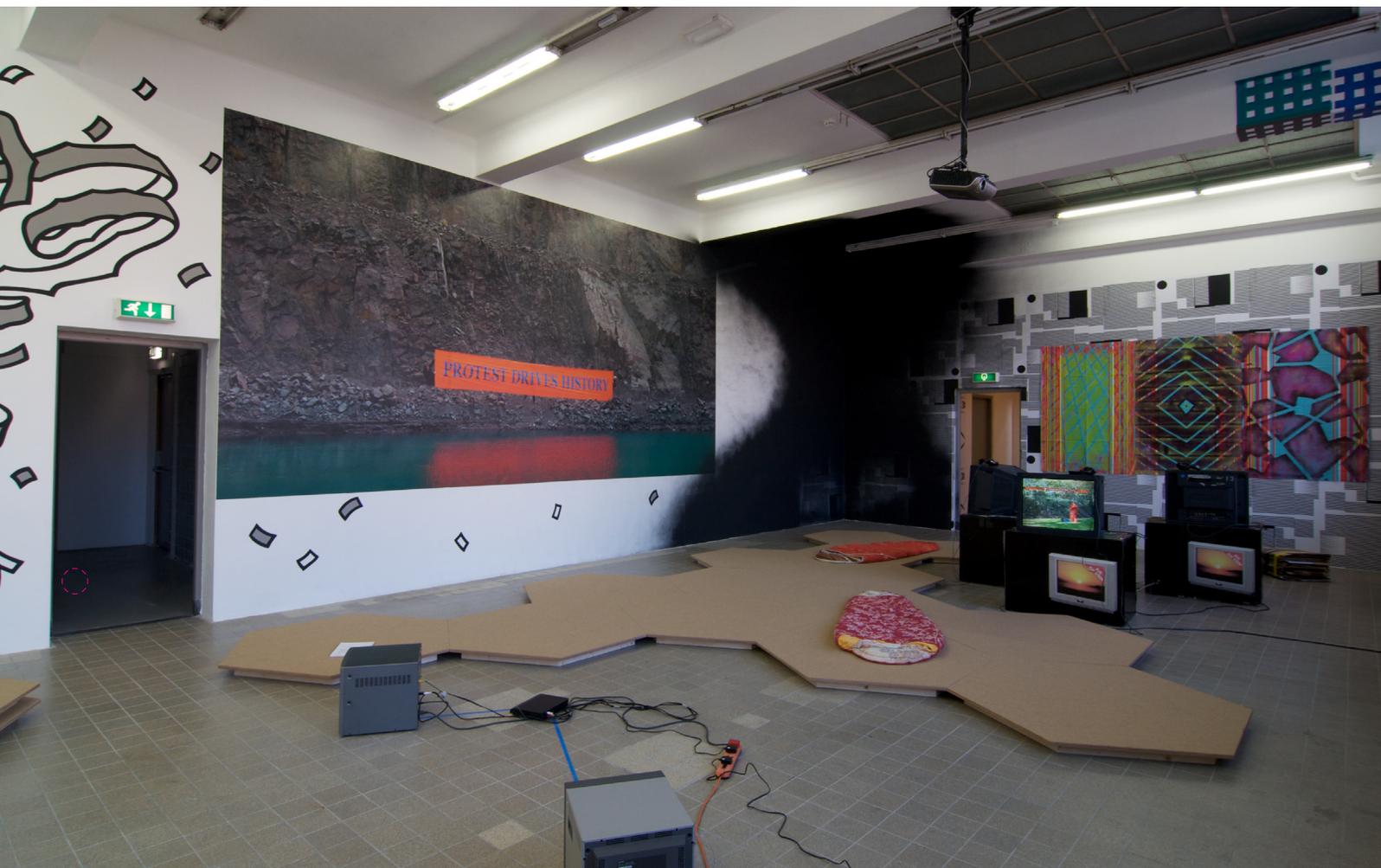
Interview with Paul O'Neill
Bristol, May 2009

How would you describe your curatorial work as a critical practice?

For me the space of the curatorial is no longer about the individual curator as an arbiter of taste or as grand *auteur* selecting artworks and arranging meaningful relationships between them. My curatorial work is based on collaborative processual structures, and often results in a denouncing of the individual author position by contributing to a critique of the myth of the autonomous individual producer and by making the means of production apparent within the final exhibition form. In my work there is a creative multitude in operation that enables the exhibition to come into being and to gather its form.

I am concerned with the critical potentiality of the group exhibition form as a productive space for creating new forms of knowledge, and for questioning the parameters of authorship through co-operative and post-autonomous modes of production. Curating involves varying degrees of co-operation with many different artists, curators and writers, and allows for divergent intellectual positions to co-exist, often in contradiction to one another. So I'd suggest curating as a model of "emergence", as it engenders new practices, new meanings, values and relations between things. But I am not employing the term "emergence" to describe it as something that is a mere appearance of the new. I am using it in the sense of curating being the possible site of dialectical opposition to the dominant, as it has the aspiration of overcoming, transgressing, evading, renegotiating or bypassing the dominant in some small way.

You have said that you are interested in developing new models for cooperation and collectivity through your curatorial practice. Does that mean that you consider the curatorial strategies as meaningful forms in their own right, on the same level as the exhibition itself?



Coalesce: Happenstance, 2009, Curated by Paul O'Neill, SMART Project Space, Amsterdam.

The forming of an exhibition has an accumulative structure, and it gathers shape as private intentions are made public in correspondence with others' intentions. Of course this evolving practice will never fully reveal itself in the exhibition moment, but I try to make the processes of contested negotiation evident in what ends up on public display. This way I try to foreground new ways for the process of exhibition production to show itself. The exhibition project *Coalesce* may illustrate this. It began with four artists in London in 2003 and builded upon the overlapping coordinates of background works (as that which surrounded the viewer who moved through the exhibition space), middle-ground works (which the viewer interacted with only partly) and foreground works (as that which contained the viewer in its space of display). After six distinct exhibition moments, it ended up this year with around eighty artists at SMART project space in Amsterdam. By then it had gone through a six-year period of accretion as new artists became involved at different stages, contributing to the exhibitions' on-going process of accrual, and adding new and productive ideas to the project.

Coalesce is an example of how the accumulative exhibition can create a series of distinct exhibition moments by producing a density of ideas over time. For this kind of exhibition there is no grand narrative, no finite conclusion and no single way of reading the exhibition as a whole or of clearly separating the curatorial and artistic work therein. In each episode, artists responded to a curatorial proposition, strategy or imposed structure. This resulted in artworks that would not have emerged without such orchestration. At the same time, each curatorial approach responded to the artists' practice, making it the starting point for every proposition.

The project was about demystifying arts' meditational processes, and I think the final exhibition moment reflected how the re-configuration of curatorial practice can be made visible in the final exhibition stage. Since 2003, this process of demystification has led to a shift in my curatorial work towards a more collective

curatorial methodology, achieved by working directly with artists on every aspect of the exhibition's production. This is the reason why I wish to put myself forward as an *artist working curatorially*, in that I employ certain principle categories of organisation as the material means for enabling often conflictual forms of artistic production to co-exist with one another.

Curating is normally associated with the task of giving form to exhibitions containing artworks. But today we see an expansion of the curatorial field, as the term now also seems to apply to processual and discursive projects, containing no objects at all. How do you see your own practice in relation to this tendency?

Today, exhibition making is no longer the only way that curating can manifest itself. You are right in pointing at a contemporary turn towards discursivity and discussion and the kind of spaces of display that involves talking heads rather than objects on the wall. Today we see the discourse as a spectacle phenomenon, where speaking or performing one's discourse has become a form of curatorial practice in itself.

Since the late 1960s, contemporary curating has changed from being an activity primarily involved with organising exhibitions of discrete artworks to a practice with a considerably extended remit. Today's curating may be distinguished from its precedents by a new emphasis upon the activities associated with the framing and mediation of art, as well as with the circulation of ideas about art. So it is no longer primarily based on arts' production and display. That is why I support the use of the term "curating" as an expansive category that includes exhibition making, commissioning, editing, discursive production, cooperative working and modes of self-organisation.

In acceding to this expanded reading of curating, I wish to resist the tendency for privileging and policing the boundaries between the *internal* organisation of the work of art – the work of art as enacted by the artist, producer or author and the techniques



Coalesce: Happenstance, 2009, Curated by Paul O'Neill.
 SMART Project Space, Amsterdam.

concerned – and its external organisation. And I try to do that through different modes of distribution, reproduction and/or dissemination. In doing so, curating becomes a wide-reaching category for various organisational forms, co-operative models and collaborative structures within contemporary cultural practice. The significance of curating as differentiated from say art making, is that it acknowledges cultural production as a field of organisation of emergent and open-ended cultural encounters, exchanges, and enactments – and not as a result of the supposed authorial primacy of the individual.

As an artist who curated shows in the 90s, I very quickly arrived at a point where the objects I was producing as an artist or that I was selecting for my shows, were no longer necessary for the exhibitions to make sense. The exhibition for me – whether it takes the form of a book or a lecture, and whether it takes the form of a group exhibition or a solo-project – ultimately is more about the idea of exhibiting and about starting a process of production that gathers its form over time and in correspondence with other people's ideas. Curating at its most productive is also about the idea of how multiple positions come together in the exhibition to give form to this complex durational process of engagement, and by that causing something to happen which could not have happened otherwise.

What I'm very keen on doing is somehow undermining or interrogating what I believe to be a gap in curatorial knowledge, and to interrogate that gap through exhibition making as well as through writing. I don't distinguish between my practise as a curator and my practise as a writer, or as an educator. Someone once introduced me as "the curator that writes about curating, and who curates shows about curating". And maybe it is true that my practise is a kind of twisted interlinking between two forms of curatorial research – writing about curating and practising curating as a research activity in itself.

To write is of course a very different experience from organising an exhibition, which involves a lot of different people. Working with exhibitions involves lots of pragmatics and practicalities which writing doesn't always necessitate. The exhibition moment also marcatates a temporary space for critique and for public discussions that couldn't have happened if the exhibition had remained unrealised. But for this kind of moments to take place, writing is required as a means for establishing the ideas behind them.

The move towards academia which we see in your practice is mirrored by Maria Lind, Ute Meta Bauer and Dorothee Richter, among others. They have all left exhibition making for academic activities such as lecturing and text production. Do you think that this a response to certain societal needs?

From a personal perspective, I decided that by being within an academic setting I could be an eternal student and also have time for the reflection that the constant state of production can disable. But on a more general level, the move towards education is a recognition that the way in which art is taught within an institutional academic context is no longer sufficient, or perhaps it never was. Also there is the recognition that having had a twenty-year period of a proliferation of exhibitions, perhaps this is a moment to reflect upon what has been done, and on how this knowledge might be brought into the academy from the perspective of those who had been involved.

The notable increase in curatorial educational projects has also strangely articulated the moment of educative learning as an authored curated space of knowledge production. This is really problematic for me and an example is the 24 hours interview marathon project of the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. Obrist is a curator I admire greatly, but how the project is mediated suggests a kind of spectacularisation of the discourse as a public medium,

and an ownership of the frames of discursive production which I don't agree with. That is enormously different from say Free Copenhagen University, Paraeducation, 16 Beaver, Unitednationsplaza, Manifesta 6 exhibition-as-school, Proto-academy, and so forth, projects that all emerged out of the initiators' immediate context and functioned as semi-contained counter-public spaces.

These initiatives were part of a more general artistic and curatorial turn towards education which Mick Wilson and I have identified and will present in a book we are putting together with de Appel and Open Editions. It is called *Curating and the Educational Turn* and will be out later this year. The book discusses how education, educational formats, methods, programmes, models, terms, processes and procedures have become pervasive in the practise of both curating and in the production of contemporary art, as well as in their attendant critical frameworks. This is not simply to propose that curatorial projects have increasingly adopted education as a theme; it is, rather, to assert that curating increasingly operates directly as an expanded educational practise.

Too often these alternative educational models are mimicking the classroom situation, but they also effectively – some more than others – open up a space of unpredictability and for speculative



Tonight, 2004, Curated by Paul O'Neill, Studio Voltaire, London.

General Idea: Selected Retrospective, 2005, Curated by Paul O'Neill & Grant Watson in collaboration with AA Bronson, Project, Dublin.

thinking. There is something about that sort of semi-closed yet open circuit that makes them critically effective. I think it is because they are born out of the necessity to have particular discussions, debates or interaction that is not happening elsewhere. These various group initiatives are not primarily performing public discourse for an audience. They are performing discourse within the context of a group that have an interest in participating in the same discourse, dialogue or debate.

Recently you have chosen to work in small scale independent institutions and self-organised initiatives, while you probably would have reached a much larger audience through, for example, the biennial format. How do you consider the political potential of your exhibitions in relation to that of the biennial?

I have curated a number of large museum shows. I ran a public gallery programme where I curated a three-year programme of interrelated exhibitions for diverse audiences. But most recently working semi-independently, I am less preoccupied with quantity, scale or programming for a primarily nomadic art aficionada audience. My curatorial projects are now often a response to immediate conditions and to local constituencies, and in some way contributes usefully to what might already be near at hand. It is about coming up with an appropriate response to an invitation, as there is always a dedicated and involved constituency who invests in most small-scale independent or "co-dependent" projects. You do not have that within a biennial or museum context, because the projects do not feel as relevant to the audience and as close to the public's own investment in cultural practice.

I am keen to develop a practice across a series of exhibitions, and sustaining this development as much as possible. By that there may be a consistency of investment in how the shows relate to one another over time. Seeing my work as a motivated political gesture, I'm more concerned with engaging with people, things and ideas that are close at hand and that also challenge my own preconceptions, rather than looking from afar for exhibition ideas, works and content. This proximity somehow creates an intensity of articulation, with antagonism and generosity being openly permitted as part of a dialogical development of a project. The basis of any critical discussion must be an equal understanding of what is being discussed, and it is necessary to allow for disagreement to become a productive force.

In general, I would say that really good biennials and large scale exhibitions show us things we would not have seen otherwise. They open up new organised networks, enable curatorial and artistic positions to confront one another, and they provide a level of access to the unknown, the far away and the unexpected. They also enable a common point of reference for us to consider. Feedback loops are generated through the continual exchange of travelling spectatorship, but whereby travel becomes one of the determining conditions for the production of art, the question is what happens if you choose to stay – to remain embedded and engage with what is immediately apparent, significant and relevant to the situated context and its audiences.

There is a widely held proposition that what you are experiencing within the biennial context is the so-called "international artworld", and again that this global artworld represents the world at large. This fallible idea that this large international group of works that the biennial curator brings together is representing what is happening in the world at one moment in time, and that it is somehow mirroring society, has been very significant within the artworld. That proposition is very problematic and always contains a sense of impossibility, regardless of the impact of global shrinkage and the accelerated travel of the last twenty years or so.

You have mentioned the strength of the art market of the last 5 to 10 years as a challenge to contemporary curators. The biennial probably is the exhibition format most tightly connected to the art market. How do you consider the political potential of the biennial in relation to this situation?

The biennial structure is indeed very demanding and restricted. It may be said to mirror global capitalism, as anything that is outside the way in which global capitalism operates is immediately consumed as it enters into the space of the biennial. On one level the biennial enables artists or positions from outside the epicentres of the global artworld to be accommodated where they wouldn't necessarily have been given access to prior to that. But on another level they often end up co-opted by the curatorial market and therefore moving towards the centre rather than vice versa.

It is only a few curators who have curated many biennials, and yet this is the exhibition model which has given the greatest level of visibility for curating within dominant art discourses. Curating a biennial may change your career, but it can also curtail the possibility of developing a once critical curatorial practice. On a certain level it is a way of losing control of the direction of your own curatorial practise. Some of the curators that I found the most interesting in the 90s ended up working primarily within the biennial context. But I have usually found the work they have made outside that framework the most interesting. In some cases their practice as biennial curators have ended up being totally oriented towards the discovery and circulation of new global art markets.

From the perspective of your own practice, which do you consider the major challenges for a curator working politically today and somehow trying to change established societal structures?

Like Agamben's *politics of gesture*, I think that curating operates on a micro utopian level – with slight political action. That does not necessarily mean that a slight change of extant structures in the artworld and of our fields of production will cause an enormous effectual change. But making small changes may be sufficient in itself, because on this micro-level you can be certain that something is notably happening. That is why I prefer the politics of the small act. I would argue for the sustenance of the micro revolution and the accumulative effects of the many rather than the few, and for the recurrence of such revolutionary moments as they gather collective momentum over time.

Paul O'Neill is a curator, artist and writer based in Bristol. He is a Great Western Research Alliance (GWR) Research Fellow in Commissioning Contemporary Art with Situations at the University of the West of England in Bristol. Between 2003 and 2007 he dedicated his time to researching the development of contemporary curatorial discourses since the late 1980s, as part of a PhD scholarship at Middlesex University. O'Neill has curated or co-curated more than 50 exhibition projects including *Coalesce: happenstance* (SMART, Amsterdam 2009), *Our Day Will Come* (Zoo Art Fair, London 2006), *General Idea: Selected Retrospective*, *Mingle-Mangled* (part of Cork Caucus, Cork 2005), *La La Land* (Project, Dublin 2005) and *Tonight* (Studio Voltaire, London 2004). He is releasing *Curating and the Educational Turn* (DeAppel) with Mick Wilson this spring.

A TWIST OF PARADOX

Interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev,
Skype, Oslo-Turin, August 2009

*You titled the 2008 Sydney biennial *Revolutions – Forms that turn*, and in an interview regarding the same biennial you said that your goal as a curator is “to change people’s minds and perspectives”. It sounds like you consider the exhibition a political form – do you consider yourself a political curator?*

I would hesitate to describe myself as a political curator. And the reason for that is that declaring something as political, is the same as putting it in a little package. And that little package can be vehicled by a market of cultural products. I think that being political is acting in a way that reflects your politics. Moving in a certain way, or writing in a certain way. And this makes it a question of the visitor's exhibition experience.

In this light, I guess the Sydney Biennial could be considered a radical exhibition. But I'm still not very fond of saying that it was a political exhibition. Actually I would insist that it was not. But there is a paradox here. If you look at each artist that was in the exhibition, people from the Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko to the aboriginal artist Richard Bell from Australia, practically all of them are or have been engaged in society and work or have worked in a way that reflects this. But if you ask William Kentridge if his work is political, he would probably say no.

Actually I think there is only one political issue in the world, and that is that we have developed a culture based on



Michael Rakowitz.

White man got no dreaming, 2008

Drawings, salvaged building materials, video, radio transmitter
Installation view of the 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008) at the Art
Gallery of New South Wales.

This project was possible thanks to the generous support of the
Dena Foundations.

Photo: Jenni Carter

consumption. The problem is that we no longer produce things on the basis of what is needed by people, and that is a consequence of the machine age. We now live in a world of fossil fuel, where oil, carbon and charcoal are consumed to make the world run. It's the same with food, drinks and clothing, which is neither consumed in terms of needs but in terms of maintaining the wealth in society. That is the only real political problem and everything comes down to that.

An art exhibition can not change the fact that we use fossil fuel. But I think that it can change the singular individual visitor, in terms of the way that he or she experiences time or space, or the way in which that person moves from one chair to another. On a phenomenological level it

is about how the audience experiences the world, and about how it processes that experience and constructs knowledge. This means that what is political in an exhibition is how long the wall label is, how the curator use the grammar in it and how high up it is placed on the wall. This is what the politics of the exhibition is all about. And once that is somehow worked upon, in the way that you work with a physiotherapist, then the rest of the life of that individual visitor may be emancipated. And then the exhibition may have made one of the exhibition goers choose differently the next time he or she is going to vote.

So I see the only connection between art and politics on a basic and indirect level. I think that if you made an exhibition



David Medalla
Cloud Canyons, 1967/85
Plastic, tubing, aquarium, pump, pipe
Installation view of the 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki: Purchased 1987
Photo: Jenni Carter



Javier Téllez
One Flow Over the Void (Bala perdida), 2005
Video, colour, sound, 11:30mins
Single-channel video installation view of the 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008) at Cockatoo Island
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich
Photo: Jenni Carter

entitled "We need to support the revolution in Iran" you would not achieve anything. Maybe you would even achieve the exact opposite of what you aimed for. It is important to see that sometimes not acting is a stronger gesture than acting, and that not being political may actually be political.

How do you bring about that idea of politics when working as a curator?

Michel Foucault was very important to me when I was younger, as he made me see how all systems are possible devices for repression. And the exhibition as well, which is a device for repression a priori. But if you deconstruct the exhibition, or if you reconstruct it in an anarchic way like Marcel Duchamp did with his objects, then maybe it will not work repressively after all. One system that I usually use, one could say a methodology, is to work by free association together with artists.

An example is my dialogue with Javier Téllez in relation to the Sydney biennial. It began with me describing how *Revolutions – Forms that turn* was about the paradox of the only possible

revolution right now being one of repetition, of going backwards rather than forwards. When I told him that, his immediate response was "Oh, then I'm sure that you are including David Medalla's bubble machine." But at that point I did not know David Medalla personally and had not planned on placing his bubble machine in the biennial.

But Javier Téllez' comment making sense to me, as well as the fact that Medalla's work actually happened to be situated very close to Sydney, made it seem natural to include his work in the exhibition. I would never have brought an already existing work like that from very far, because it would have meant spending a large amount of the biennial budget on transport. My choice not to do so was of course something that the visitors never knew, but the politics of how the budget is used is always very important to me as a curator. Some curators would do a whole exhibition on politics and then put 50 percent of the budget into advertising and design. To me that is crazy.

If you look at the work that I've done, there will be some recognizable elements. That is true and I will not deny it. I

have worked with great pleasure and desire with a number of women who have all been very important in the history of feminist art, such as Susan Hiller, Joan Jonas and Mary Kelly. And I've worked with artists like William Kentridge and Jimmy Durham, who later on became very well known as so-called "artists from the periphery". My impulse has always been to work with a certain kind of artists, and the story of which tells something of my politics.

But at the same time, there is always a little twist of paradox to my exhibitions, small absurdities. Like in the Sydney biennial, Michael Rakowitz was doing a tower together with the aboriginal community of Sydney right next to Maurizio Cattelan's horse. I have always tried to escape the clichés of what a political curator does, and of which kind of artists a political curator chooses to exhibit, by adding a certain surrealistic twist to my exhibitions. I'm interested in surrealism, and the surrealists were very interested in the relationship between the political and the subconscious. I would say that is my trajectory as well. If you look at the names of the artists that I've worked with and at the

history of my work as a curator, a certain puzzle comes together. And as that pattern is already visibly there, in my exhibitions, it's no point in me insisting that I'm not a political curator.

Many contemporary curators work politically through the curatorial strategies themselves, rather than through objects with a specifically political content. Do you think that your politics are visible in the curatorial strategies you choose, as well as in the objects you present?

Yes, of course! But my politics are not visible in a glamorous way. I would never have left the entire biennial pavilion empty as a curatorial statement, like Ivo Mesquita did in São Paulo in 2008. That is although I think it was a very important gesture at the time, when the art market was bursting and what was important was only the exchange of art, and not the experience of it. I really liked what he did, but I would never have done it myself as I find it too strong a gesture from the point of view of the curator.

Actually this is one of the political problems of our time, that curatorial practise is given way too much weight and

importance. I believe the professionalization of curatorial practise to be one of the most reactionary moments in the history of contemporary art. And that is because it separates the presentation of art from the creation of it. This especially concerns the freelance curators, but it goes for institutional curators as well. Today's curators are the policemen of the artworld as they have the power to allow things to happen or not. And this makes it a reactionary position compared to what it was until the early 1970s.

I see the rise of curatorial practise to the degree to which it is now as really negative, but I think that there's going to be a revolution. I think somebody is going to say that "Either you take on the responsibility of making culture, or you get the hell out!" A large number of contemporary artists feel this problem today; they feel that they do not get enough money to carry out their projects, or the authorization to do so, or they feel against what they end up doing in show after show. This is the reason why I'm not in favour of very visible curatorial strategies, because it moves the attention of the audience towards the curator.

You curated the Sydney biennial in 2008 and will be curating the forthcoming Documenta of 2012. But many curators today are critical of the biennial format as they claim that the biennial system contributes to a globalization of the art market, and

that the strong economic interests involved in creating a biennial decreases its political potential. How do you see this?

You know, I belong to the generation before the corruption of the biennials. When I started working, there was only a limited number of this kind of large scale exhibitions: Documenta, São Paulo, Carnegie, Venice and Sydney. At that time they were the only platforms for exchange of international culture, ideas and art. The biennials gathered artists from all over the world, and they were the only place where a wider artworld could come together and talk. So to my generation, the biennial was the place where culture was made.

This was of course a moment prior to the explosion of the biennials, but this is the reason why I don't consider the biennial in the same way as maybe the younger curators do. I have had the opportunity and privilege to see a lot of biennials all over the world, in rich as well as poor countries and cities. And my final opinion is that they are all fantastic and wonderful. Some people complain about how they some times happen to see the same artist in two different biennials the same year. I consider that a very snobbish thing to say. Today there are 154 biennials in the world, and that way of responding to the expanding biennial culture hides the fear of the old art centres of Europe and the US of losing power and centrality.

I would say that it doesn't matter if a few of the biennial goers have already seen one of the artists represented, because those people are just a few of a very limited number of people with the resources to see many biennials. The large part of the audience is the local population. And they don't travel around the world, but only see the artworks exhibited in their hometown. This makes the biennial a wonderful example of exchange. You know, if you see a beautiful film in New Zealand, why in the world wouldn't you want it to be shown in London, Paris and Buenos Aires as well? That is a strange thought, which I think is rooted in a lack of respect for the local audiences. When going to biennials all over the world, you see artists that you would never have come across otherwise. And this gives you new perspectives, which I find wonderful. Visiting the Gwangju biennial in Korea and seeing the works of a large number of Korean artists, as well as works by artists from the other Asian pacific countries, gave me valuable experience and knowledge.

I don't think that the biennial system has increased the problem of the globalization of the art market, I think it is quite the other way around. The dealers and the galleries, who are the most powerful figures within the art market, don't have time to see the biennials. I know that, because I am there and they are not. I definitely think there is an element of fear of losing power involved. They would

prefer that they were the only people to know which are the new and the most interesting artists. To me, it is extremely sad how many young curators from Europe and America only know what they've seen in the art fairs, because that work has already gone through the filter of a gallery with enough money to buy a stand at Frieze. I do not see how that is any better than me going to Gwangju and seeing a Korean artist that a curator or artist there wants me to see.

This has certainly nothing to do with the negative sides of the biennial culture. The negative side is rather the constant compromise with the tourist industry. To make a biennial, you have to have money, which you get from the city, the region or the country. But you will only get it if you do something that the city feels that promotes tourism or economy in some way. These compromises may be the negative side of the biennial, because it doesn't directly have anything to do with furthering knowledge as a space of freedom.

But the other thing you said, about the biennial contributing to a globalization of the art market, is certainly not negative. It's the only balance. Because if you cancel out all the biennials, all you have left are the art fairs and nothing else. And the art fairs will take over; I think they will even take over the museums soon. You know, there is no public sphere anymore, it is only about investments and money, and that is very dangerous. I find that the biennials around the world have given dignity to so many places, and have given presence to places that don't even care about being not New York or not Berlin. They just do not care anymore. They are like small ecosystems, and I think that is a good thing.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is a curator and writer based in Rome, Turin and New York. Since 2001 she has been chief curator at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Turin; Gift Amici Sostenitori del Castello di Rivoli. Photo: Jenni Carter

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Maurizio Cattelan. Novecento, 1997. Taxidermy horse, metal frame, leather slings, rope. Installation view of the 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Collection Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Turin; Gift Amici Sostenitori del Castello di Rivoli. Photo: Jenni Carter

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