

Compiling a Selection of Films is not an Artistic Strategy, it Brings Such a Strategy to Light

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The fact that I never, or almost never, compile film programs by myself hardly qualifies me to write about curating. I am a compiler of films in the common sense of the word, but I am not a curator. A compiler of films steps behind the films; a curator positions himself in front of them. A compiler of films becomes invisible behind the films, the program itself becomes anonymous; a curator attracts visibility above the program, which becomes personified, so to speak, precisely because it is his creation. This does not imply that I do not take a stance towards the programs I help to assemble. But I do not vouch for them alone, and I do not vouch for them unconditionally. More often than not, I even endorse the program only reluctantly, because much that is accomplished in cooperation with my colleagues does not completely – or not at all – appeal to me. Every now and then I am even embarrassed by one or two decisions that are made. I therefore have to vouch for something I do not fully agree with. This fact distinguishes me from many of my colleagues and from the curators in the art world. This is due to the idiosyncrasy, which at least holds true for the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, that we arrange the programs for competition as a group of several people. Watching six thousand or more films in just a few weeks is rarely amusing, and usually exhausting, often very much so. Many tears have been shed in the past and many doors slammed. That has nothing to do with art, but rather more with asceticism. What results from this is not harmony, nor is it a compromise among equals. A weighing of interests, yes – but not a compromise. It is an involuntary summing-up. It is the invariably questionable result of a configuration of people who have watched something. The program resulting from this process inherently mirrors what we have just seen. To select means to compare – I am almost inclined to speak of a self-comparison. The process that leads toward this outcome is more phlegmatic than creative.

The group protects me from articulating my own preferences regarding the situation we find ourselves in. The group is my corrective. The others protect me from becoming private in public. They protect me from having a particular taste – and even if this taste were incredibly refined, it would still only intimidate people. The group challenges me and forces me to justify my individual choices, in this way the group represents those that our selected program addresses. In other words, the group demands an initial dialogue. This is the reason why I have always defended Oberhausen's practice of choosing among equals the films in competition, instead of following the model of artistic directorship or curating as it is common in the arts. Under no circumstances did I want to do this work on my own; not because of laziness or fear of responsibility, but to learn: about myself and the

things we watched together. Aspiring to learn from others, and to reflect the results of this process in our selection – that is what it is all about! The selection becomes an expression of confrontation, addressed to an imaginary audience. This approach prevents premature canonization or self-imposed restriction resulting from one's own individual viewing pattern.

Roger M. Buerger says: "My own ideas only interest me to a certain degree; I find it more interesting to reach as part of a group a level I could never attain by myself."¹ This is also the criticism I level at many programs: again and again, the same names, the same standards of aesthetic codes are reproduced. Many programs are guided by the cultural conventions of the West: non-European, non US-American cultures hardly ever receive attention. A few seminal avant-garde festivals comprise films from three or four countries at the utmost, and the emphasis always lies on North America. The greatest danger lies in an eerily uncritical canonization – in film criticism as well as in film studies and on the part of film festivals – of so-called masterpieces, in the worst case.

Many a critic turns up their nose when looking at the competitions we present to our audience, because they are too heterogeneous, because they do not represent a clearly identifiable position, because they are not part of a pre-established discourse. However, they fail to recognize that there are two different guiding principles when it comes to putting together film programs. Watching films for competition, or at least watching those submitted following a call for entry, is based on a self-imposed overload, a confrontation with a myriad of perspectives, which do not at all correspond with mine. By exposing myself to this process – in which hundreds, even thousands of works voicing a concern want to be seen and appreciated – I force myself to transcend my own habits, the range of my perception and taste. This procedure confronts me with something new each time; it is a regulated loss of control. Much of what I see is not yet part of a system of values. In this sense, I cannot always claim they are "good" pieces of work, because to designate something to be "good" presupposes a form of communication that is initiated only once I select it. Viewed in this light, any selection comes with extreme risk, because, out of the great volume of submissions, I try to uncover unfamiliar or at least unguarded positions, which remain irreconcilable even though I place them alongside each other. No one tells me what I am supposed to think of them, nobody guarantees that others will like them.

The curator primarily offers a promise of intimacy, to provide a work with a suitable space, and secondarily they offer a value proposition, in which the work will receive the space it duly deserves. Basically, this is a symbolic piece of business entered into by the curator, the films and the artists, which must avoid uncalculated risk. The art world tends more to be part of a system than a market, because the communication it generates continuously creates limits and inclusions: which film is (good) art and which is not? However, this is an issue that does not interest me in connection with compiling films.

Compiling films – within the art world, where it is seen as a career called curating – is not an artistic strategy; it brings such a strategy to light. It does not transmit knowledge, it vanquishes knowledge with knowledge. A program must be difficult, as difficult as the world around us. It is therefore joyful when a program succeeds: fictional but not narrative; ideal yet not idealistic; a thought not put into words even though it seems fervently ready to be spoken at any moment, to become language and be transmitted; with one work calling another into question; a desire to collect differences in that moment in which the program itself ceases to

be thought about because it is the works themselves that think. A program is a speculative exercise, not an art historical treatise. The program saves me from forced consumerism for a certain amount of time, albeit deceptively. This process necessitates a special, cognitive space: the movie theatre.

At the movies, we are transported into time. There, we are able to judge ethically, not just aesthetically. At the very least, this is where one thing cannot be so clearly distinguished from another as it can in art. This is what art has never understood about film. That which has always been so vigorous about film, making it suspicious to the critical eye, is the compulsion to a certain perception – that someone forces me to commit myself to their perception, Juliane Rebentisch's "imposition of duration"². The thing about film that has never really fallen under esthetics is the obscene, unstructured remainder left over from the world within the film; that which does not quite completely take shape. This experience has always been more painful in the movie theatre than in the museum – having to share these kinds of perception with others and attempting to transmit them.

In the past film programs were compiled, today they are curated. In the past, programs were dedicated to filmmakers, today the curator's name takes top billing over the filmmakers' programs. This is an expression of the strong increase in the "creative imperative"³, as described by Andreas Reckwitz's. Reckwitz shows how many social spheres are collected into a "creative dispositive" and thereby esthetized. This feeds an increasing level of "attentiveness-terror", in which new stimuli must continuously be created. In addition, Reckwitz shows how especially the experience of art becomes part of an "event structure". This term refers to Harald Szeemann, who was arguably one of the first curators to turn art compilation into a form of intervention that presented the curator as an artistic figure. "The entire scope of social elements of symbols, narration and emotion, including all available media formats, is transformed into potential material for art. At the same time, the arrangement of this material is linked to the skilful mobilization of the audience's attention."⁴. This coincides with – at least in the arts – a trend towards rapidly increased deregulation in working conditions and significant pressure in social distinction within a field that no longer has clear job descriptions, let alone options for employment. Everyone is more or less creative and somewhat artistic, but they are especially well informed and linked into the network.

The division between artist and curator is disappearing. There is no presentation without performance, no program without "criticality". The oddest performance I have experienced in the last few years, was during a talk where an artist needed no less than three assistants to go around the room with video cameras, while the results were projected onto several screens. This performance enveloped the discourse in an artistic process. Within this system, curators tend to become stars themselves – aesthetic apparitions, new ideal egos, role models of an advanced industrial society: "The creative effort is perceived as an aesthetic event, as a sensual-emotional end in itself."⁵. I believe this claim can easily be transferred to postmodern museums, which have become events in themselves, staging the art itself as an event. Especially since the art world has taken over the sovereignty of definition for art films, it has become necessary to present film programs according to its rules. Reckwitz responds only fleetingly to the homology between the social form of the market and aestheticization with regard to the creative dispositive, but in my view he nevertheless defines the relationship precisely: "The widespread strategy of capital accumulation consists of producing ever-new, different products to avoid reaching the point where the needs of consumers have been completely satisfied."⁶. "The fact that, in this sense, creativity becomes a performance require-

ment applies to a creative lifestyle for aesthetic work in one's profession just as much as it does to personal relationships, in which (...) in a broader sense creative performance (stimulus potential, event production, etc.) is essential."⁷

However, the event is the work, not its presentation. To again quote Reckwitz: "profane creativity"⁸.

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Translated by Laura Walde, Katrin Gygax

Biographies: See introduction

Notes

1 As quoted in the German original: "Supermarktsystem Biennale", in conversation with Susanne Boecker, *Kunstforum International*, No. 219, January – February 2013

2 Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 202

3 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität* (transl.: "the invention of creativity", Berlin 2012

4 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität* (transl.: "the invention of creativity", Berlin 2012, p. 118

5 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität* (transl.: "the invention of creativity", Berlin 2012, p. 240

6 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität* (transl.: "the invention of creativity", Berlin 2012, p. 336

7 Ibid p. 346

8 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität* (transl.: "the invention of creativity", Berlin 2012