

The Curator and Her Double. The Cruelty of the Avatar

by Ellen Blumenstein

Echte Kultur wirkt durch den Überschwang und durch ihre Kraft, das europäische Kunstideal hingegen zielt darauf ab, den Geist auf eine von der Kraft geschiedene Haltung zu verweisen, die deren Überschwang zuschaut.

Antonin Artaud, *Das Theater und sein Double*¹

“True culture operates by exaltation and force, while the European ideal of art attempts to cast the mind into an attitude distinct from force but addicted to exaltation.”

Wir werden uns fragen, was diesem Schicksal der Grausamkeit entsprechend “ausstellen” (exposer) bedeutet, und es wird darum gehen, etwas eher Schlägen als Blicken “aus-zu-setzen” (ex-poser).

Jacques Derrida: Artaud²

Why do people visit museums? What specific impact are exhibitions able to achieve? General as these questions may seem, they nevertheless underlie all curatorial activity—or at least they ought to. For, occupied with their impassioned and self-centred rivalry over “authorship”—that is, over visibility and recognition—those engaged in the art world are neglecting a far more significant present-day problem, namely the fact that the museum, reduced to having to justify itself in economic terms, is increasingly degenerating into a temple of amusement for bored consumers and thereby losing sight of its social function and the responsibility that comes with it. In the spirit of Antonin Artaud and his concept of cruelty, which demands that one should relentlessly call into question one’s own ideas about reality and [man’s] poetic place in reality and force the spectator to do likewise, the “avatar” represents an attempt to become aware of those ideas oneself and to make them visible and palpable to visitors. This project, a collaboration between an artist (Ulf Aminde) and a curator (Ellen Blumenstein), sets out to champion the role of institutions by providing art with options for action and room to maneuver.

What does a visitor, a critic, an artist, or a colleague expect when a curator introduces [his or] her program? Very few tend to reflect on their own—probably differing—expectations, but most of them nevertheless react according to them, since these necessarily precede any reception of both the broader outlines and the single projects within an institutional program. Anticipating these expectations, the curator will base her decisions on the institution’s profile—an implicit, but consensual image formed by the members of the field (which, by agreeing upon a limited set of rules, qualify as a group through the very same process). She will aim to mark (and prove) her rank, and develop a program on the basis of those inner-circle expectations.

On the one hand, these kinds of conventions are necessary for any existing structure, because not a single proposition can be made without the distinguishing

borders between one field and the next. On the other hand, though, if invariably applied, the same rules would obstruct any development or change within that given field. All players in a defined context are therefore constantly negotiating their roles between protecting the status quo and testing its boundaries.

In today's art world, however, this balance has been upset, as the burden for keeping the system in flux has been delegated exclusively to the artist, while the position of the other members is strictly regulated: the curator facilitates the artist's interests, the institution provides space for artworks to unfold their "presence", the critic communicates the latest trends, and the visitor is elevated by the sublime experience.³ At first sight, at least, this situation seems to be comfortable for the artist. But if s/he is the sole appointed agent of experimentation and the only one permitted to claim authorship, then any attempt to truly renegotiate the terms of activity and provide differing perspectives is rendered impossible, since there is no one left to counter this challenge. As a result, not even the artists themselves benefit from their seemingly privileged position—and the art system remains paralyzed like a see-saw with only one side occupied.

Consequentially, I do not think that the seeming loss of art's relevance can be blamed upon the increasing dominance of the art market alone, but that this dominance is instead another effect of the art world's fixation on the artist as *the* exceptional subject of society. Reducing recognition to a dog-eat-dog-competition for visibility, we either over-achieve the capitalist mandate ourselves—in rivalry with the artist—or delegate the burden of *jouissance* to him/her and thereby postpone the essential question of meaning, or the sense of what we are doing, into an ever-more-distant future (which is, of course, also in line with capitalism).

This difficulty is by no means a new one, seeing as the demand to call into question one's own "ideas about reality and [man's] poetic place in reality" was already formulated, amongst many others, by the French author Antonin Artaud in the early 1930s. As one of the most vehement critics of the modern cultural institution, he drafted several manifesto-style texts on a "theater of cruelty"⁴ to confront the spectators with the performing arts' deadening conventions and to force them to assume a self-aware position towards culture and themselves. "Cruel" in Artaud's sense is a physical attack on the viewer, which deprives him/her of his/her expertise and exposes him/her to his/her own lack of inquisitiveness. Art's task, as Jacques Derrida analyses on the occasion of a presentation of Artaud's paintings and drawings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York,⁵ is to perpetrate a blow on the spectator. In his lecture, Derrida transfers Artaud's ideas on theater to the museum and questions its function today, taking into account the role of the artist and the artwork, as well as of exhibition organizers and the audience, and subsequently developing ideas for a new understanding of the museum's place in society, according to Artaud.

Following Artaud, I consciously disappointed the expectations on my programming at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin – only to wholly fulfil them in a successive step: in 2013, I opened with a *Relaunch* of the institution—which was both the project's title and its programme—before the first "proper" exhibition, which was a solo show by the Berlin-based, French-Algerian artist Kader Attia that opened a month later.

Relaunch consisted of a number of interventions, which all called into question unconscious automatisms in the art world: The first act was to empty out the entire building and to present KW as a framework, which has been determined by a

particular history and general expectations, channelled through the political, social, and cultural contexts within which it positions itself—but which is also theoretically free to be imagined anew at any given moment. This idea was implemented through the specifically commissioned project *Markierung* by the Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov, who inscribed stories about the past of the building and the institution, about real projects to happen soon and my fantasies and plans for the future, as well as his own observations, onto the institution's empty walls. *Markierung* was conceived as a collaboration between an artist and a curator: while walking through the building, I told him everything that came to my mind or that I thought was important for people to know, and Nedko transformed it into the same form of scribbling he usually makes for his own works. Additionally, he took the freedom to comment on our conversations and made them partially public, so that we became visible as individuals negotiating our interests—and as a by-product, showed that there is nothing natural about how any exhibition appears, since any display / exhibition architecture responds to an implicit set of conventions and rules that differ widely across periods and contexts.

Another part of *Relaunch* introduced so-called *Teasers*, which referenced future projects without being artworks in themselves. The twenty *Teasers* presented different ideas or exhibitions, some of which have already happened by now, others which were abandoned at some point along the way. The idea here was to use them—like Nedko's markings—as moments of irritation, confronting the usual art-goer's unconscious anticipation to see the newest contemporary art and at the same time gain reconfirmation as a connoisseur who recognizes a great deal of those works. Likewise, the teasers functioned as ice-breakers that resonated with non-professional visitors who might not immediately understand the codes of contemporary art, and through them they had the opportunity to learn something about this partially secret language...

One of the teasers, for example, was a model of a fruit fly, two meters wide, which is part of the collection of the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. The future plan at the time was to collaborate with the museum and present objects from their industrial and educational collection, set in contrast to contemporary artworks, in order to unsettle each type of the objects' status in relation to each other. Unfortunately, and for different reasons, this project could not be realized and was abandoned, at least for the time being.

Another teaser announced the show *Real Emotions. Thinking in Film* (co-curated with Franz Rodenkirchen and Daniel Tyradellis, 2014), which dealt with cinema's potential to create emotions and originate new images of the world: we asked twenty different people to describe one scene from the iconic film *Vampyr* by Carl Theodor Dreyer (1932) in just a few lines. The written descriptions were presented on stands in front of a loop of that very scene, and showed in a very simple way that film not only intentionally constructs our emotions, but also uses them to open our minds to new experiences.

The most far-reaching project within *Relaunch*, however, was the Avatar. The avatar, aka Sabine Reinfeld and Ulf Aminde, accompanied the entire process of re-positioning and introducing my plans for KW and the institutional interests I wanted to pursue. The idea of this project goes back to an informal conversation between Ulf and myself, in which we discussed strategies for creating a self-reflexive, but not self-contained, moment in each of our practices to understand the restraints we were working with on a daily basis, without even being aware of them, and how to make these accessible to the audience. An avatar seemed to be a playful

and timely tool in which to blend artistic and curatorial strategies and to place authorship somewhere in between the two, in order to uncover our respective desires for recognition (amongst other things), on the one hand, and the often implicit and unconscious expectations of our colleagues and the audiences on the other.

Our objective was to move beyond the self-referentiality of the system in which we are working and to strive for a kind of art that we – the artists, the curators, and the institutions as responsible stakeholders – consider relevant today. Within the long-term collaboration *Insistere*, Aminde recruited Reinfeld and together they created the project *Don't Fuck with my Name. Hacking the Curator*, introducing my alter ego Ellen Bluumenstein (spelled with a double “u”) as a real person and as an online presence parallel to my own emergence as a “public figure”. The intervention started at the press conference of *Relaunch*. While I presented my program and future plans to the attending press, the *Avatar* held court downstairs in the yard and in the exhibition spaces and greeted regular audiences and passers-by. We had agreed on not being at the same place at once, so during the opening later we were both present but tried to stay on different floors. In her public appearances, which were sometimes coordinated with the artistic office or with me, but sometimes not—Ellen Bluumenstein first focused on representing or interpreting the public figure of a curator by visualizing and commenting on both her/my professional self-image and the public’s projections onto her, and also opened her own website and Facebook account. A few months later, she also translated a curatorial speech into a spoken word performance. A participant of this performance commented on Facebook: “Even more intriguing for me is the fact that it is unclear, if the letter from Ellen Bluumenstein addresses the real Ellen Blumenstein, or if it is written to herself as the Avatar, just as it is unknown whether or not the real Ellen Blumenstein has read this post and is indeed reflecting on her position as chief curator.” Of course, it is not clear either whether any of the content of this speech was ever said by me or if the artists completely made it up—or whether it is a mixture of both. The avatar therefore marks the intersection point of curatorial and artistic imagination, expectations, and concerns. Apparently, I can only reflect on my own perspective—if the artists would reflect on this project instead, their contribution would likely not adopt a textual format.

This essay intends to make the ambivalent character of the project fruitful by addressing both positions: I will track my current fantasies of what I would have done had I been the artist conceiving of the Avatar Ellen Bluumenstein, and I will imagine what could have been the maximum consistent outcome of the project from a curatorial perspective.

My first immediate fantasy when revisiting the video documentation of my double’s performance in preparation for this text was: I wish we curators would all perform our public appearances in a more artistic sense and turn our speech acts into reasons to develop coherent formats more than we currently do. Needless to say that the occasions on which we are obliged to speak are so numerous, that it appears absolutely unrealistic to put in the same effort as into a proper performance piece. (Again, this argument resonates both ways: maybe curators should not only notice the fact that our input often lacks depth, but also take appropriate action? And, we may assume that it is not only us who are overworked, so that a bad performance may either just be the result of too little time, or a good one shows that the artist prioritizes differently...).

In any case, I found the idea that the *Avatar* could literally double the presence of the chief curator very tempting, and that she could therefore not only reduce my work load and split the public attention between us, but also make visible the curatorial persona as an institutional agent, which is not identical with the individual taking that position. The curator inevitably acts as a symptom of an institution, representing what the organization wants from the inside, but is also addressed from the outside as the one who is able to fulfil any kind of wish or demand. Thus she is like a doorkeeper who makes sure the house is open and accessible, but also controls who comes in and which role is assigned to each person. I very much liked the image that *Insistere* gave to this function, namely the woman in a black frock literally greeting visitors at the entrance. She was standing at the entrance door in a black coat, shook hands with people very seriously, pretending that she could close the door at any time and keep somebody out or lock someone else inside. At the opening reception, the *Avatar* over-affirmed my representative duties and glamorously bathed in the masses – joyfully shaking her hair over and over again in front of the people watching her.

As embarrassing as both the guests and myself found this appearance, it was just as telling to consider my own ambivalence about being proud of my program on the one hand, and anxious of being rejected and overwhelmed with the attention both of us were getting on the other. Why not admit to enjoying these moments of recognition? The larger part of curatorial work is less gratifying, in fact.

Other interventions remained partially invisible to the external viewer, but video and photo documentation was presented online. The *Avatar* gave guided tours of the exhibition and showed people around the building, staged an argument with one of the guards and posed at my desk in the artistic office in a Zombie-like outfit.

It very quickly became apparent in the process that any space that I did not have control over personally was not accessible to the *Avatar*. I had fantasized, for example, that she would host events, write my press releases, give public interviews or take over strategic or fundraising appointments for me. Not only had I wished to share the burden of this time-consuming labour, but I was also curious to see how the audience, press, politicians, administrators, or funders would have reacted when confronted with a doppelganger of myself, having to decide if they should actually address this individual in front of them as a curator or as an artist, as me or as Sabine Reinfeld, or maybe even as Ulf Aminde. Expectedly, none of those institutions were open to the experiment, and at this early stage of my employment I could not handle the confrontation either—and did not dare to. Even leading an internal team meeting proved to be impossible, as my colleagues outside of the artistic office rejected the *Avatar's* interference into our daily routine. One of the funniest incidents thus occurred at the Venice Biennial of that year, when Ellen Bluumenstein posted on Facebook that she had missed her flight. I was not informed about her activities and rarely use social media for private purposes, so I was more than surprised when my colleagues were startled to see me in town—the story became the running gag of the opening weekend.

The final presentation of *Don't Fuck with my Name. Hacking the Curator* was staged as a participatory performance lecture in which each visitor co-acted as KW's curator, so there were many *Avatars*. The event turned out to be disastrous, from Ulf's perspective, because the audience immediately started questioning what he was doing—something that is very rare in artistic performance today, because the general art audience has become accustomed to artists' provocations over the last four decades of performance art. Hardly any professional attendee would be offended today, because s/he knows s/he is part of an artwork and would feel

narrow-minded if s/he didn't comply with the ideas of the artist who is considered the beholder of truth, knowledge and/or innovation. I thus claim that Ulf made himself consciously vulnerable—a strategy he frequently applies in his work—by blurring the boundaries between an artistic and a curatorial position, and that the audience unconsciously reacted to that fact.

Apart from it being stressful and uncomfortable for Ulf, as well as for me, who was partially being addressed through the critique of him or of the project, the evening was a success from my point of view in the sense that the positions of artist, curator, and audience were visibly shifting during that night. If there was any problem in the arrangement of the evening, it was that we had failed to anticipate the aggression produced by this loss of a clear role.

While the subjects of today's art prefer to challenge established structures or hegemonic discourses, the experience with the *Avatar* shows how difficult it is to confront one's own convictions, routine, or habits or even to let go of them. It is very easy to comply with the curatorial role—even if it is sometimes exhausting or nerve-wracking: We make the discourse, we define who partakes in it and who does not, and we also form careers; many times, our own careers are connected to how well we accommodate the expectations of the system in which we act. Thematic curating is increasingly reduced to the context of biennials, where our *left, ecological, feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, political*, and so on positions are asserted in vague concepts including a safe-guarding reference to a philosopher, some name-dropping of well respected artists, and a somehow intuitive arrangement of single works each visibly matching the topic. We, as art world practitioners, share the same conduct, which we consider truer than that of any other approach. But this attitude tends not only to bore the audience (and ourselves, if we dare to admit it), but also to stop at merely reassuring our own position—other than that, it frustrates everyone.

As diverse as curatorial activity is today, the core expertise is still in exhibition making, since exhibitions are public interfaces theoretically open to anyone and thus extended beyond the reach of internal or professional debate. Exhibitions are ways to bring an argument into space, which means that someone claims authorship—along with the possibility of being criticized for it.

Therefore, the insertion of an *Avatar* into a curatorial routine certainly has to take on the challenge of actually organizing a show as a curator, not as an artist. This distinction in positioning is crucial, since what the artist gains from a curatorial perspective is the potential of being evaluated for his or her proposition. What s/he reversely makes visible is the assumption that valuable content can actually be produced not only by a single artwork, but also by a constellation of objects of any kind in space.

For more information on the *Avatar*, check:

<http://ellenblumenstein.de>

<https://www.facebook.com/ellen.blumenstein?fref=ts>

<https://vimeo.com/86791983>

Ellen Blumenstein has been chief curator of KW Institute for contemporary art, Berlin since January 2013. In her first year, she realized the exhibitions "Relaunch", "Kader Attia: Repair. 5 Acts" and "Real Emotions: Thinking in Film", as well as launching comprehensive public programs and professional partnerships. In her second year she premiered the first solo exhibitions in Germany of artists Ryan Trecartin, Kate Cooper, Channa Horwitz and Elin Hansdottir. Before KW, she was an independent curator, member of the curatorial collective THE OFFICE and founder of the project space Salon Populaire. Between 1998-2005 she worked as a curator for KW Institute for Contemporary Art, where she realized the exhibition project "Regarding Terror: The RAF-Exhibition" (with Klaus Biesenbach, Felix Ensslin, 2005). Since, she curated the exhibition "Between Two Deaths" at ZKM in Karlsruhe (with Felix Ensslin, 2007), and in 2011 she curated the Icelandic Pavilion at the Venice Biennial (Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson).

Notes

- 1 Antonin Artaud, *Das Theater und sein Double* Fischer Verlag, S. 13. / English Version, p. 10, 1958 Grove Press edition, trans. Mary Caroline Richards
- 2 Jacques Derrida: *Artaud Moma* Passagen Verlag S. 63.
- 3 Compare, for example, Reinhard Hoeps, „Gott ist nicht die Lösung, Gott ist das Problem“, IN: *Religion, Magazin der Kulturstiftung des Bundes* #24, Frühling/Sommer 2015, S. 17-18.
- 4 dt. Antonin Artaud: *Das Theater und sein Double*, Frankfurt am Main, 1969.
- 5 Jacques Derrida: *Artaud Moma*, Passagen Verlag, Vienna, 1996.



1,2,3 Relaunch 28.4.–25.8.2013, *Insistere #7*,
Don' Series of Performances © Sabine Reinfeld/Ulf Aminde

4 Relaunch 28.4.–25.8.2013, *Insistere #7*, *Don'*
fuck with my name (Hacking the Curator), Series of
 Performances, Foto: Petrov Ahner © Sabine Reinfeld/
 Ulf Aminde