Dimitrina Sevova & Alain Kessi

Identifications of curatorial practices in media space
A critical review of the figure of the successful media curator in the first decade of the 21st century

Abstract

Despite its root in the pre-digital era, media art as we know it is a new phenomenon from which a number of artistic and curatorial practices and discourses have come about, which have completely changed the landscape, relations and practices of the global artistic scene, uncovering new territories for art.

This context has been traditionally favorable to artistic and curatorial experiments that are often not possible in other artistic contexts. Correspondingly, it has been used as a kind of primordial soup by the art system – a source of many a powerful trend, defining tendency, fashionable curator, fresh ideology or tamed revolution. This has led to a gradual privatization, professionalization and institutionalization. And still, the soup is boiling, and next to the high-rise media art backed by the great institutions, there continue to be manifold resources, opportunities and relations escaping the grip of the system. The completely commercial has not ruled out the completely non-commercial.

After the end of ideologies and the crisis of representation, there is growing pressure from both institutions and audiences on the curator's work demanding innovation and criticism – a paradox in the contemporary art of the last decade with which all curators must deal, within the limits of etiquette.

There is one group of curators that is innovative and critical not only because the system demands it, but because they have chosen it as their strategy for survival. They work constantly in extreme and radical conditions, in many cases outside the comfort of institutions. The curator is part of a complex "art chain" comprising exhibition space, institutions, artists, art, audience, trends, context, discourse. In this group, several elements of the "art chain" are often missing. The role of the curator can be taken by artists' collectives who create a platform for presenting the work of other artists, collectives, sometimes also of curators.

We distinguish between three fundamental approaches to curating new media art, which often overlap, but in some respects clash with each other. We'd like to propose an analysis of the intersections and interactions between the three categories of curatorial figures that have visibility at the moment, with a special focus on Approach 1).

1) The approach we're most interested in here: Independent and alternative curatorial practices on the boundaries of the art system or scene, but also on the rim of technologies, and tactically mix different approaches (e.g., art and politics; questions of globalization, gender, migration, control, spectacle, pleasure ...). Linked to digital media and critical discourses. With a broader understanding and

conceptual usage of digital technologies. Often the curators in this context or discourse cannot offer a "pure" curatorial character (remember the ultracurators often disguised as miracle workers, matchmakers, plumbers, babysitters, B&B owners or interior designers). The archetype of the artist changes. The artist is required to play numerous roles. Correspondingly the curator also needs to change if they want to hold on to their relevance. Sometimes they are collective bodies, float between the figure of the artist and the curator, or between that of the curator and the political activist, or between that of the theorist/writer/philosopher and curator, rely on guerilla communication, etc. (examples are Monochrom, The Centre of Attention, 0100101110101101.ORG, The Yes Men; or coming from a more curatorial background Ursula Biemann, the Berlin-based queer research collective k_b_l, Peter Spillmann and Marion von Osten). There the art system opens the curtain for some of these and pushes them to center stage for a short time, at events like Manifesta, the Venice Biennale or other established events from the arts circuit. Curators with this approach are sometimes invited by the top curators of the major events to participate as authors, whose curatorial work is subsumed as an art piece (e.g., Rosa Martinez invited Centre of Attention to participate in the Arsenale 2005).

2) Those who are drowned in the depths of technology. Some of these have started out in Approach 1). Some end up in pure research and technology industry or utopian technological trends outside the system of reference of the art system and critical discourse. These are the circles around Ars Electronica, some of the cyber-feminists, etc. There are also some, which are very much focused on technologies, but find possibilities to offer different interpretations and contextualize between different approaches (between Approaches 1), 2) and 3), although they'd themselves be counted towards Approach 2). An example at this moment is Andreas Broeckmann's work at Transmediale.

3) Those who can count on the institutionalized art system. The system of the Hallen, the major museum spaces, etc. Some curators, like the new curators of Shedhalle in Zurich, who come from critical media discourse, have over the past years imposed a very specific politics linked to the politics of representation of tendencies that have come up in Approach 1). Another great example is Inke Arns, with her curatorial project "Dispersed Moments of Concentration" on RFID technologies. Or Marion von Osten with her "Project Migration," etc.

Of course, the players can regroup, and in time change from one of the approaches to another. The field of media art is filled with the noise of a great variety of approaches and is prone to interdisciplinary work, which may sometimes be difficult to define as belonging to the sphere of art. We propose that these approaches and the actors involved should not be singularly separated from other contemporary art practices and from the rest of the art scene. This would lead to a self-restricting fragmentation, a loss of reality and a narrowing of the horizon.

Cf. Iliyana Nedkova, Inside Out / Curating the New Media Culture of Bulgaria, <http://www.cfront.org/cf00book/en/iliyana-inside-out-en.html>.