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CUMULUS

From America

IN EVERY EDITION OF PARKETT, TWO CUMULUS CLOUDS, ONE FROM AMERICA, THE OTHER FROM EUROPE, FLOAT OUT TO AN INTERESTED PUBLIC. THEY CONVEY INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS, ASSESSMENTS, AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS—AS ENTIRELY PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ISSUES.

KATE FOWLE

GROWING PAINS

If the nineties can be said to be synonymous with relational aesthetics, then this current decade will go down as the era that the curator came of age.

While there are ongoing arguments as to whether curating should be regarded as a profession or a passion, it could generally be said that the role of the curator has shifted from arbiter of taste to connector of art, space, and audience. Increasingly compared to an artist's practice, the position is less engaged in upholding an institutional mandate than in trying to transform it through experimentation with processes and materials. Key factors by which curating is measured today include the extent to which activities address and

confront artistic, social, or political issues; the responsiveness of projects to the situations in which they occur; and the viability of exhibitions and events as platforms for both the curators' and artists' philosophies and interests.

Though I currently work in the U.S., I have recently spent time in both Asia and Europe, where I have conducted much research on this topic. Through conversations with artists and curators, together with articles I have recently read in the art press, I have been led to reflect on the current emphasis of the curatorial role and the different ways in which curators are positioned in relation to an evolving art world that is increasingly locating itself within larger sociopolitical arenas.

Harald Szeemann was regarded as the first "independent curator"; his career spanned nearly five decades and

established precedents in terms of exhibition making and building relationships with artists, which are now regarded as integral to the current understanding of the curator's role. His passing in 2005 may have spurred more obituaries and articles in the non-art press than any curator has ever received, which reflects the way in which curators are being recognized in the media as celebrities newsworthy beyond their field, and quite apart from the conversations going on within it.

The onslaught of "viral" publishing, through blogs and websites, has also proliferated. The internet, once the domain of governments, activist organizing, gaming, and commercial sales, is now also the site for the proliferation of discussion over recent events in art—from fair openings and auctions

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to resignations and protests. Through this mass availability of information, the curator has, in recent months more than ever, begun to be heralded in the news and even seen as a radical figure, with opposition to museums and other art institutions discussed in the same framework as other activist gestures. This was made evident when Chris Gilbert abruptly resigned from the Matrix position at the Berkeley Art Museum in California as a stand against what he calls the “imperialist capitalist values” of the art institution. The case attracted international attention through the viral dissemination of his essay-cum-resignation letter, which in turn provoked numerous blog discussions and therefore late-night bar conversations. The art press followed the frenzy most recently in the pages of *Artforum* in September 2006, where, inspired by Gilbert’s resignation and the ongoing media attention, Liam Gillick questioned the potential for curatorial rhetoric to instill change.

Similarly, the cancellation of Manifesta 6 in Nicosia, Cyprus and the ensuing legal battles attracted much attention via the Manifesta website and various independent writers on line as well as in the mainstream art press. In this case, the curators of the Manifesta Foundation chose to take on a contested region as its subject. Where Gilbert reportedly resigned over the museum administration’s clamp-down on his solidarity with the Bolivarian struggle in Venezuela, shown by his choice of language on the labels for his exhibition program, the Manifesta team chose to use the positioning of exhibition-making and events to transcend political borders, which in the end proved to be beyond the current power and ability of the curatorial role. While all of this makes for good reading and conversation, the question is to what extent the curator, working in mainstream politics or even established art institutions, has succeeded in implementing meaningful statements or

actions and laying groundwork toward future practices for artists, curators, and audiences.

An article in the September 2006 issue of *Frieze* suggests that curators have been able to radicalize centers for contemporary art in Europe.¹⁾ This phenomenon, currently being termed “New Institutionalism” or “Experimental Institutionalism,” involves previously independent curators taking on the directorship of public spaces and transforming their programs by placing equal emphasis on publishing, research, residency, and lecture series, as much as exhibitions. In the U.S., a comparison could be made with the hires being made at universities—from Robert Storr as Dean of Yale School of Art to Lawrence Rinder as Dean of California College of the Arts. Most recently, the San Francisco Art Institute has taken this current “faith in the curator” a step further by hiring Okwui Enwezor and Hou Hanru to transform not only the academic programs but



ZHOU TIEHAI, *VENICE - ST. MARCO SQUARE*, 2005, mixed media on paper, 102 1/4 x 131 3/4" / *VENEDIG MARKUSPLATZ*, verschiedene Materialien auf Papier, 260 x 335 cm. (PHOTOS OF ZHOU TIEHAI'S WORK: SHANGHART GALLERY, SHANGHAI)

also the exhibitions and lecture series, with a similar “New Institutional” impetus. In effect, this is a transferal of roles: institutional critique, which has been the domain of the artist from the seventies on, is now in the hands of curators and directors, who are taking direct responsibility for questioning the mechanisms and activities of the institution in which they work.

While an increasingly large percentage of column inches in art magazines, journals, and the Internet are taken up with the processes and politics of curating, additionally, since 2000, there has been a proliferation of books specifically focused on the topic. Generated by people working within the field and emerging out of symposia, on-line discussions, diaristic accounts, and interviews, the commentaries and publications are indicative of the inherent self-reflexivity that comes from simultaneously initiating, producing, disseminating, and evaluating multiple projects. This accumulation of texts and articles is creating the beginnings of a critical framework, as well as establishing a rationale through which curatorial practices acquire a kind of autonomy from their social and cultural contexts and from the funding and bureaucratic structures that give them shape. But, while this can be regarded as important groundwork in identifying particularities of practice without due consideration of the bigger picture, it has the potential to inflate the value and importance of certain exhibitions, projects, or people, as in the case of the above-mentioned Manifesta project or Chris Gilbert’s resignation.

For example, while attention is paid to artistic practices and the burgeoning art market in Asia, there are few articles in the Western press (and even

fewer books) that discuss or compare parallel developments and changes in curating. The concept of “New Institutionalism,” for instance, takes on a different meaning in view of developments in China. On one level, the climate is similar to that of Europe and the U.S., with institutions now being headed up by internationally recognized independent curators, such as Fan Dian at the National Museum in Beijing, Pi Li at a space called Universal Studios-Beijing in the East End Art District, and Gu Zhenqing at the Zhu Qizhan Art Museum in Shanghai. But this is only a subtext to the larger narrative of China’s building boom. Since the turn of the century, the country has entered what curator Gao Minglu calls “the art museum age.”²⁾ Depending on which report you read, between three hundred and one thousand new venues, financed by both corporate and government funds, will be opening across the country by 2010, making

China the world’s fastest growing market for museums. And the entrepreneurial interest is not only local—it is now confirmed that the Pompidou will build a new museum in Shanghai, and both the Guggenheim and MoMA are currently considering sites for their China branches.

Such frenetic activity is also fanning interest in the question of who will run these spaces, quite apart from the issue of where the funds will come from in order to maintain programming. Academies are now setting up arts management and curating courses, of which the first was established at the Central Academy in Beijing. Now with over one hundred students enrolled and pilot programs running in Shanghai, the curriculum has the task of providing both management and curatorial training that is not only relevant to needs in the national context, but that also reflects the burgeoning international exchange. In talking with curators and



YAYOI KUSAMA, *LADDER TO HEAVEN*, 2006, *installation view*

Singapore Biennale / HIMMELSLEITER, Installationsansicht.

(ALL PHOTOS OF THE SINGAPORE BIENNALE: NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL, SINGAPORE)

artists in Shanghai, I came to the conclusion that it is predominantly artists who have the greatest knowledge of contemporary strategies and a vision for the future of institutions. Shanghai-based artist Zhou Tiehai, for example, has been traveling, selling, and exhibiting internationally for the last ten years. As a result he has more first-hand experience of a variety of curatorial, art market, and management practices than many curators based in China. Although Zhou isn't about to become a curator, he is currently working with a consortium to organize the Shanghai Art Fair next year, and his position highlights the unique situation the country is in, whereby the prominent artists of the last decade are potentially the untapped advisors to the curatorial field today.

Radicalism also takes on different guises in the Asian context. It is common knowledge that curators and artists have experienced censorship from the Chinese government for years, the most well-known example of which is the infamous closing of the 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Gallery in Beijing only hours into the opening. The situation is improving, but censorship is still a concern, albeit one that is largely unreported in the U.S. and European art press. In the last year, the authorities in Shanghai closed two exhibitions for including what was deemed pornographic material—the first at the newly opened Zendai Museum and, more recently, a project organized by the alternative art space BizArt. Resigning from curatorial positions to protest such censorship is not a common strategy, not least because it would have little effect in terms of causing change or fueling a larger debate in the long

term. This is due, in part, to the absence of broadly read reporting both on-line and in the print media. Instead people find ways to negotiate with the authorities and navigate the political system in order to advance the cause of contemporary art and build a viable art scene.

Another recent case in point is the first Singapore Biennale (2006), for which the artistic director Fumio Nanto and his curatorial team spent hours meeting with government officials to negotiate permission for the presentation of works in non-art sites, or to have the content of works approved. Largely unaware of this behind-the-scenes activity, the international art world used a predominantly western-centric lens to review the project, commenting more on the originality of the concept, the roster of artists, and the location of works, than considering the project in relation to the political climate that artists and curators in Singapore confront on a daily basis. From the curators' perspective, the fact that the biennale opened with all selected artworks on display was an achievement that continues to pave the way for more public freedom of expression in the country, a point that was made all the more pertinent with the censorship of freedom of speech that took place during the IMF meeting in the city in September. In contrast, there was an unusual display of bi-national curatorial solidarity recently when David Ross and Charles Esche both retracted their participation in curating projects for the Korean "guest country" program at the forthcoming ARCO 2007 in Madrid. They made this move in support of Sunjung Kim's resignation as the country's appointed Commissioner of Artistic Programs, following the Korean

Cultural Ministry's intrusive involvement in determining what cultural activities should be presented in Spain. This has, however, gone largely unreported in the Western press.

As 2006 draws to a close it could be said that the process of the curator coming of age is one of transforming the legacy of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art institutions and finding a voice within broader social, cultural, and political arenas. It is also a time when political awareness, on all levels, is heightened through increasing viral activity and the media, which at least provide rhetorical support. But, regardless of the chat, as opportunities open up internationally and curators take on increasingly politicized exhibition topics and roles, the growing pains are centered on the development of skills that enable face-to-face communication with a widening array of professionals, arts supporters, and collectors, as well as an ability to multitask between creative and bureaucratic activities. If the curatorial role is to create space for art to have a truly political and cultural impact, then the reality for the curator is that of sustaining a practice on the frontline.

1) Alex Farquharson, "Bureaux de change," *Frieze* 101, Sept. 2006, pp. 156–59.

2) Gao Minglu is currently a faculty member in the Art and Architecture department of the University of Pittsburgh. He was editor of China's leading art journal *Meishu* in the 1980s, and a key figure in reporting on the "85 Movement" in China. In 1989 he curated the "China/Avant-Garde" Exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. He left China for the U.S. in 1991 where he is now a leading researcher, writer, and authority of twentieth century East Asian art. Gao curated "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" in 1998, which was the first major show of Chinese art to tour the United States.