

Book Review

Curating dramaturgies

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By Janek Szatkowski

Peter Eckersall and Bertie Ferdman (eds.), 2021.
Curating Dramaturgies. How Dramaturgy and curating are intersecting in the contemporary arts.
London and New York: Routledge.

Peter Eckersall and Bertie Ferdman have interviewed 16 agents involved in designing inclusive artistic communities, festivals, empowering art, cultural critique, and innovation of creative interdisciplinary arts practices. Out of the 16 agents, at least six has their own artistic careers besides their curatorial functions. The agents are moreover from nine different countries spread across the continents to present a diversified global perspective.

In their short introductory essay, Eckersall and Ferdman presents the central observation of how contemporary art look for possible new intersections in arrangement and dissemination between visual art, performance and theatre. The past 30 years have seen visuality and theatricality in mutual and fruitful collaboration creating new poetics. The next step in this development includes the programming of festivals, museums, art galleries, and performing art spaces where contemporary art is presented to an audience. The need for museums to rethink their exhibition strategies for visual art and for the performance art to consider new dramaturgical forms that includes audiences in participation or immersion is seen as possibility for extraordinary exchanges between the two fields of a “performative turn in museums and galleries” and a manifest “interest in visuality in contemporary arts practices” (p.5). The interviews are all conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The book is one amongst many contributing to the expanding concept of curating. A survey of articles and books from the last ten years show us how curation has been adopted by e.g. music, opera, art, dance, performance, and theatre. This tendency may be seen as a reaction towards the diminishing social importance of art in the broad sense in contemporary societies.

As part of their introduction, Eckersall and Ferdman have chosen to select and present a set of 26 keywords derived from the interviews as a generative way of thinking. When Raymond Williams in 1976 published his ‘keywords’ they were built upon a lifelong work on cultural theory. Thus the book functioned partly as an index to his thinking, but it also provided the reader with an almost rhizomatic experience, where words were nodes connected to a multitude of supplementary words. Whenever a selection is made, a structure appears (unless randomness is strived for). Therefore, one might look for the structures that emerges in the selected keywords. I suggest that one of the structures may be visible by showing how four of the chosen keywords (in the following marked by *cursiv/bold*) refer to a trope common to many contemporary art poetics and to the thoughts of Chantal Mouffe. Let me try to illustrate this by referring to two of the finest interviews one with Gurur Ertem and one with Florian Malzacher.

Contingency, conflict and hope

Curating and dramaturgy as described in the book seems to share a desire to wrestle free of conventionalities in exhibition and theatre practices. The different interviews exhibits a plurality of considerations concerning this search, and by its broad international scope it also makes it abundantly clear, that no uniform strategy may be formulated. However, some common features

can be identified. One is the reference to Chantal Mouffe and her book *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, London & New York: Verso 2013. The idea of the theatre as a political space, where agonism and agonistic spheres are present, seems to sit well with the general orientation.

If the importance and impact of contemporary art are in fact diminishing, it seems like a reasonable strategy to expand by appealing to new (and more) audiences. If curating and dramaturgy shall help to reach that goal, it demands answers to how visual art and theatre generates the possibility of creating *polis* as Hannah Arndt suggests. Malzacher states: “The space of togetherness is the main feature of theatre” (p.148). A *polis*, understood as an *assembly*, creates exchange of different opinions that exists among the citizens. As such, the *polis* is a place for struggles *agon*. If the conflict is seen as binary, it invites a split between us/them, but if binary thinking could be transformed to thinking in prefixes like “hyper”, “poli”, “pluri” and “trans”, the *fluidity* may help counter the economic fluidity characteristic of neo-liberal politics. Theatre has provided examples of *agon* on stage. Now the ramp between stage and auditorium is fluid, and the spectators become “participants or at least witnesses”. In dire times, we need *hope*, criticality but also propositions of how things could be different. For Chantal Mouffe the existing differences between agents rests on the fact of *contingency*, there will always be differences of opinion creating *conflict*. Democratic systems will accept this and try to avoid conflicts turning into brute violence; the hope is to establish *peace*. What happens when we are dealing with societies where democratic politics are impossible? *Censorship* with its arbitrary codes and norms are part of everyday life in societies where the state is the truth, where no contingency is allowed, and where opposition is treason and sharply attacked.

Art’s challenges are of a more or less permanent status. However, art as a social system is exposed in the era of a new media matrix, which has given us the digital alphabet, computers with extreme capacities, and the internet as a new social system. In combination with economic pressure on the art system relying on state subventions or other sources of finance, the need to expand and enhance the impact of art has become a driving force for the idea of curating – of ‘caring for’ audiences and artworks. It is a field with many pitfalls and paradoxes. Or, in the words of Bertie Ferdman (Ferdman and Stocic 2020), the obvious change in economic and labour practices rounding performance art “is reflective of capitalist approaches to art and event production”. She identifies “an ‘oxymoronic status’ of performance art – where it is simultaneously precarious and highly marketable”. The introduction and the interviews are cognisant of the fundamental and conflictual issues.

Against the dark horizon of arts diminished impact on society any hopeful articulation of new forms must be acknowledged as important input. Modern art seems to have become a niche in social life. The audiences are dominated by privileged citizens; hence, art reaches out for new audiences, with aspirations of building new communities and formulating propositions and hopes for another future.

The editor Peter Eckersall state his belief in the interview with Florian Malzacher:

PE: I always look for how the work of dramaturgy can be taken into social, political, visual and performative practices, which I call “expanded dramaturgy”, and I am captivated by the term “performative curating” that you (FM) used in one of your publications. You talk about it as outing the social and relational aspect of art at the centre of your curating strategy (p.147).

Malzacher responds that relational aesthetics stayed very much within the fields of art, more concerned with aesthetics than with ethics. Performative curating ought to deal with reality changing capacities of cultural utterances, and refer to works and situations that are theatre-like

but not theatre. This theme is further developed in Florian Malzacher new book *Gesellschaftsspiele: Politisches Theater heute*, Berlin: Alexander Verlag (2020), which is an important source for the study of the rationale in this trend in poetics of contemporary theatre.

Agonism in non-democratic societies

What becomes clear in the interview with Gurur Ertem from Turkey is that agonism on state level may have the power to dismantle an uprising, but only through violence. They could not silence the popular, internet supported, spreading of political, humorous, and artistic counter attacks. Ertem is sociologist, dancer, performance studies scholar, who took inspiration from dance and performance in USA, France and Belgium, and curated dance festivals in Turkey. She has written on the social protest in 2013 in Istanbul (the protest in Gezi-park) as a performative democracy (Ertem 2017). The protests started at Gezi Park, however, it quickly transformed into a nationwide revolt with 3.5 million people participating in events across the country in 79 cities out of 81.

By May 31st, “Gezi” had become the overarching signifier, standing for a multiplicity of frustrations such as the growing authoritarianism of the government, interventions of the state into people’s lifestyles and choices, the commodification of public goods and spaces under neoliberal policies, nepotism and partisanship, police violence, and the abolition of the democratic mechanisms of checks and balances (p.84).

The uprising was crushed by prime minister Erdogan commanding the park to be cleared on June 16th. According to Chantal Mouffe, the most important question of politics is to find a way to moderate the extent to which different groups are hostile to each other. It is important that different groups are no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary’, that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question (Mouffe 2000). Ertem in her interview dryly remarks, “I don’t have an artistic practice now in Turkey. I would say that I have withdrawn. [...] We were left in limbo. Personally, I felt this almost irrational urge to stay and bear witness to what was happening”. Gurur Ertem has a sharp analytical mind, amply demonstrated in her interview, e.g. with her remarks on how Flemish dance, became “European Dance” in the 2000nds, and made its own colonial impact. “I question if the aesthetics and discourse that have been appropriated and disseminated throughout the EU networks in dance and theatre imply a homogenisation within the field. [...] It is legitimate to ask whether this implies a colonialism of sorts, an aesthetic colonialism, perhaps” (p.99). Gurur Ertem now tries to document, analyse and research how art “in the understanding of poesis, of transforming trauma into tangible form” maybe the important ‘why’ that directs tools and forms of Festivals and artistic expressions. To avoid curating and dramaturgy becoming aesthetic colonialism it is important to accept the differentiated pictures drawn by the interviews by Eckersall and Ferdman.

If art should not be seen as mere entertainment or resilience medicine for a troubled world, art must find ways to resonate with a broader audience, inventing new ways for the audience to (inter) act with art. Curators in traditional museums “‘acts as intermediaries between producers of art and the power structures of our society” (Vidokle, 2010)”. We might add that dramaturges in major theatre institutions often find themselves working for the well offs, intellectuals, and as providers of a comfortable playground for well-educated upper and middle class citizens. Contemporary art with a wish to be “countercultural and radical, or art that makes visible the vectors of power and inequality in economy and society” must face the fact that artworks “are ineluctably produced by these very same systems” (p.7).

The general assumption that Art can reach out to a broader audience if works, exhibitions, and performances are curated is, seen from the perspective with which I observe, a sensible part of artistic thinking. However, if curating is not sustained by a theory of dramaturgy (Szatkowski 2019) incorporating the lessons we have learned from European art and its problems with autonomy, it might become another buzzword.

Art struggled to find its own domain in the first hundred years of European modernity (1750-1850) it found comfort in the belief that art was meant to do something, that none of the other systems in society could do. Art gradually became aware of the freedom in this, and consequently cared for the autonomy that would make it possible to be independent of religion, rich Maecenas, and politics. The thrust of art found impetus in the rise of the bourgeoisie, and consequently discovered and criticised the paradoxes inherent in the new social order. In theatre it is worth noticing the national differences in cultural policy: where theatre in England were totally dependent on the new golden cow: the market, theatre in Germany benefitted from a bourgeois states interest in using theatres in an educative function (as in Schillers “moralisches Anstalt”). These differences created two separate forms of theatre, still noticeable today. In the hundred years to follow (1850-1950) the historical Avant-Garde reacted forcefully against what they saw as the separation of art from social life, and the rise of monumental institutions with power to influence the ‘good taste’. Now their works are exhibited in museums, and sold for high prices. Modernity was not destabilised or even shaken by the Avant-Garde movements. Is art powerless in effecting wider social changes? Has art ever been ‘autonomous’ in any sense of the word?

Curating Dramaturgies contains many important perspectives on how creative strategies are applied to contemporary art. The wide scope of representatives provides the reader with possibilities to compare how American or South African curators think and work. In interviews with Ana Janevski from MoMA and Philip Bither from The Walker Arts Centre, you get an impression of how these monumental institutions approach the more ephemeral art of performance, and how they function as all-important Maecenas for the dance and performance scene. Their endowments and donations allow them to commission work: “[I]t has been a tremendous pleasure to have a platform that is entirely committed to vanguard work and to artists who are attempting to push the boundaries of the forms they are working in. I am proud of the more than 150 commissions we have made”, says Philip Bither, as he also acknowledges the weight of his gatekeeper freedom.

Gabi Ngcobo works in South Africa, Johannesburg, as educator, artist, and exhibition maker. Besides her local work, she has had curatorial leadership of the 10th Berlin Biennale and the 32nd Sao Paulo Biennale. She takes the knowledge of life in South Africa with her, as she tries to make sure that “our voices have an impact on society. It is important to know who you are talking to or who you are addressing with your initiative”. For Ngcobo the curator’s role is “a way of undoing”. “We exist in this society where a lot has to be undone, and in Berlin, we tried by all means to not use the term ‘decolonization’ and ‘post-colonial’”. The reason she offers for this approach is carried by her realist conviction: Funding has a tendency to choose a theme of focus for five years, and then on to something else. “I don’t believe in that. I believe that it is a process that is going to take hundred of years. [...] It is humanity’s duty. Because we are black immediately people thought that we are going to fix everything – that we’re going to decolonize the shit out of Berlin! So, we were like “no, there is a mess, It’s our mess and we all have to do it. It was a way of distributing responsibility”.

This reflects the positive results of the editors’ choice of a global perspective on a trend in contemporary art. It documents the diversity of dramaturgical curatorial performances.

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