

## On the Curatorship

The work of the curator consists of placing artworks in the exhibition space. This is what differentiates the curator from the artist, as the artist has the privilege to exhibit objects which have not already been elevated to the status of artworks. In this case they gain this status precisely through being placed in the exhibition space. Duchamp, in exhibiting the urinal, is not a curator but an artist, because as a result of his decision to present the urinal in the framework of an exhibition, this urinal has become a work of art. This opportunity is denied to the curator. He can of course exhibit a urinal, but only if it is Duchamp's urinal—that is, a urinal that has already obtained art status. The curator can easily exhibit an unsigned urinal, one without art status, but it will merely be regarded as an example of a certain period of European design, serve as “contextualization” for exhibited artworks, or fulfill some other subordinate function. In no way can this urinal obtain art status—and after the end of the exhibition it will return not to the museum, but back to where it came from. The curator may exhibit, but he doesn't have the magical ability to transform nonart into art through the act of display. That power, according to current cultural conventions, belongs to the artist alone.

It hasn't been always so. Originally, art became art through decisions of curators rather than artists. The first art museums came into existence at the turn of the nineteenth century, and became established over the course of the nineteenth century as a consequence of revolutions, wars, imperial conquest, and pillage of non-European cultures. All kinds of “beautiful” functional objects—previously used for various religious rituals, decorating the rooms of those in power, or manifesting private wealth—were collected and put on display as works of art—that is, as defunctionalized, autonomous objects of pure contemplation. The curators administering these museums “created” art through iconoclastic acts directed against traditional icons of religion or power, by reducing these icons to mere artworks. Art was originally “just” art. This perception of it as such is situated within the tradition of the European Enlightenment, which conceived of all religious icons as “profane,

secularized things”—and art solely as beautiful objects, as mere artworks. The question is then, why have curators lost the power to create art through the act of its exhibition, and why has this power passed over to artists?

The answer is obvious: In exhibiting a urinal, Duchamp does not devalue a sacred icon, as the museum curators had done; he rather upgrades a mass-produced object to an artwork. In this way the exhibition's role in the symbolic economy has changed. Sacred objects were once devalued to produce art; today, in contrast, profane objects are valorized to become art. What was originally iconoclasm has turned into iconophilia. But this shift in the symbolic economy had already been put in motion by the curators and art critics of the nineteenth century.

Every exhibition tells a story, by directing the viewer through the exhibition in a particular order; the exhibition space is always a narrative space. The traditional art museum told the story of art's emergence and subsequent victory. Individual artworks chronicled this story—and in doing so they lost their old religious or representative significance and gained new meaning. Once the museum emerged as the new place of worship, artists began to work specifically for the museum: Historically significant objects no longer needed to be devalued in order to serve as art. Instead, brand new, profane objects signed up to be recognized as artworks because they allegedly embodied artistic value. These objects didn't have a prehistory; they had never been legitimized by religion or power. At most they could be regarded as signs of a “simple, everyday life” with indeterminate value. Thus their inscription into art history meant valorization for these objects, not devaluation. And so museums were transformed from places of enlightenment-inspired iconoclasm into places of a romantic iconophilia. Exhibiting an object as art no longer signified its profanation, but its consecration. Duchamp simply took this turn to its final conclusion when he laid bare the iconophilic mechanism of glorification of mere things by labeling them works of art.

Over the years modern artists began to assert the total autonomy of art—and not just from its sacred prehistory, but from art history as well—because every integration of an image into a story, every appropriation of it as illustration for a particular narrative, is iconoclastic, even if the story is that of a triumph of this image, its transfiguration, or its glorification. According to tradition of modern art, an image must speak for itself; it must immediately

convince the spectator, standing in silent contemplation, of its own value. The conditions in which the work is exhibited should be reduced to white walls and good lighting. Theoretical and narrative discourse is a distraction, and must stop. Even affirmative discourse and favorable display were regarded as distorting the message of the artwork itself. As a result: Even after Duchamp the act of exhibiting any object as an artwork remained ambivalent, that is, partially iconophile, partially iconoclastic.

The curator can't but place, contextualize, and narrativize works of art—which necessarily leads to their relativization. Thus modern artists began to condemn curators, because the figure of the curator was perceived as the embodiment of the dark, dangerous, iconoclastic side of the exhibiting practice, as the destructive doppelgänger of the artist who creates art by exhibiting it: the museums were regularly compared to graveyards, and curators to undertakers. With these insults (disguised as institutional critique) artists won the general public over to their side, because the general public didn't know all the art history; it didn't even want to hear it. The public wishes to be confronted directly with individual artworks and exposed to their unmediated impact. The general public steadfastly believes in the autonomous meaning of the individual artwork, which is supposedly being manifested in front of its eyes. The curator's every mediation is suspect: he is seen as someone standing between the artwork and its viewer, insidiously manipulating the viewer's perception with the intent of disempowering the public. This is why, for the general public, the art market is more enjoyable than any museum. Artworks circulating on the market are singled out, decontextualized, uncurated—so that they have the apparently unadulterated chance to demonstrate their inherent value. Consequently the art market is an extreme example of what Marx termed commodity fetishism, meaning a belief in the inherent value of an object, in value being one of its intrinsic qualities. Thus began a time of degradation and distress for curators—the time of modern art. Curators have managed their degradation surprisingly well, though, by successfully internalizing it.

Even today we hear from many curators that they are working toward a single objective, that of making individual artworks appear in the most favorable light. Or to put it differently, the best curating is nil-curating, non-curating. From this perspective, the solution seems to be to leave the artwork alone, enabling the viewer to confront it directly. However, not even the

renowned white cube is always good enough for this purpose. The viewer is often advised to completely abstract himself from the work's spatial surroundings, and to immerse herself fully in self- and world-denying contemplation. Under these conditions alone—beyond any kind of curating, that is—can one's encounter with an artwork be regarded as authentic and genuinely successful. That such contemplation cannot go ahead without the artwork's being exhibited, however, remains an indisputable fact. Giorgio Agamben writes that "the image is a being, that in its essence is appearance, visibility, or semblance."<sup>1</sup> But this definition of artwork's essence does not suffice to guarantee the visibility of a concrete artwork. A work of art cannot in fact present itself by virtue of its own definition and force the viewer into contemplation; it lacks the necessary vitality, energy, and health. Artworks seem to be genuinely sick and helpless—the spectator has to be led to the artwork, as hospital workers might take a visitor to see a bedridden patient. It is in fact no coincidence that the word "curator" is etymologically related to "cure." Curating is curing. The process of curating cures the image's powerlessness, its incapacity to present itself. The artwork needs external help, it needs an exhibition and curator to become visible. The medicine that makes the sick image appear healthy—makes the image literally appear, and do so in the best light—is the exhibition. In this respect, since iconophilia is dependent on the image appearing healthy and strong, the curatorial practice is, to a certain degree, the servant of iconophilia.

But at the same time, curatorial practice undermines iconophilia, for its medical artifice cannot remain entirely concealed from the viewer. In this respect, curating remains unintentionally iconoclastic even as it is programmatically iconophile. Indeed, curating acts as a supplement or a "pharmacon" (in Derrida's usage),<sup>2</sup> in that it cures the image even as it makes it unwell. Like art in general, curating cannot escape being simultaneously iconophile and iconoclast. Yet this statement points to the question: Which is the right kind of curatorial practice? Since curatorial practice can never entirely conceal itself, the main objective of curating must be to visualize itself, by making its practice explicitly visible. The will to visualization is in fact what constitutes and drives art. Since it takes place within the context of art, curatorial practice cannot elude the logic of visibility.

The visualization of curating demands a simultaneous mobilization of its iconoclastic potential. Contemporary iconoclasm, of course, can and

should be aimed primarily not at religious icons but at art itself. By placing an artwork in a controlled environment, in the context of other carefully chosen objects, and above all involving it in a specific narrative, the curator is making an iconoclastic gesture. If this gesture is made sufficiently explicit, curating returns to its secular beginnings, withstanding the transformation of art into art-as-religion, and becomes an expression of art-atheism. The fetishization of art is taking place outside of the museum, which is to say outside of the zone in which the curator has traditionally exercised authority. Artworks now become iconic not as a result of their display in the museum but by their circulation in the art market and in the mass media. Under these circumstances, the curating of an artwork signifies its return to history, the transformation of the autonomous artwork back into an illustration—an illustration whose value is not contained within itself but is extrinsic, attached to it by a historical narrative.

Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name Is Red* features a group of artists searching for a place for art within an iconoclastic culture, namely that of sixteenth-century Islamic Turkey. The artists are illustrators commissioned by those in power to ornament their books with exquisite miniature drawings; subsequently these books are placed in governmental or private collections. Not only are these artists increasingly persecuted by radical Islamic (iconoclastic) adversaries who want to ban all images; they are also in competition with the Occidental painters of the Renaissance, primarily Venetians, who openly affirm their own iconophilia. Yet the novel's heroes can't share this iconophilia, because they don't believe in the autonomy of images. And so they try to find a way to take a consistently honest iconoclastic stance, without abandoning the terrain of art. A Turkish sultan, whose theory of art would actually serve as good advice for contemporary curatorial practice, shows them the way:

an illustration that does not complement a story, in the end, will become but a false idol. Since we cannot possibly believe in the absent story, we will naturally begin to believe in the picture itself. This would be no different than the worship of the idols in the Kaaba that went on before Our Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, had them destroyed. . . . If I believed, heaven forbid, the way these infidels do, that the Prophet Jesus was also the Lord God himself, . . . only then might I accept the depiction of mankind in full detail and exhibit such images.

You do understand that, eventually, we would then unthinkingly begin worshipping any picture that is hung on the wall, don't you?<sup>3</sup>

Strong iconoclastic tendencies and currents were naturally to be found in the Christian Occident as well—twentieth-century modern art in particular. Indeed, most modern art was created through iconoclasm. As a matter of fact, the avant-garde staged a martyrdom of the image, which replaced the Christian image of martyrdom. The avant-garde put traditional painting through all sorts of torture, which recall first and foremost the torture to which the saints were subjected as depicted in paintings in the Middle Ages. Thus the image is—symbolically and literally—sawed, cut, fragmented, drilled, pierced, dragged through the dirt, and left to the mercy of ridicule. No coincidence, then, that the historical avant-garde consistently employed the language of iconoclasm: avant-garde artists speak of demolishing traditions, breaking with conventions, destroying their artistic heritage, and annihilating old values. The iconoclastic gesture is instituted here as an artistic method, less for the annihilation of old icons than for the production of new images—or, if you prefer, new icons and new idols. Our iconographic imagination, which has long been honed by the Christian tradition, does not hesitate to recognize victory in the image of defeat as depicted by the image of Christ on the cross. In fact, here the defeat is a victory from the start. Modern art has benefited significantly from the adoption of iconoclasm as a mode of production.

Indeed, throughout the era of modernism, whenever an iconoclastic image been produced, hung on the wall, or presented in an exhibition space, it has become an idol. The reason is clear: modern art has struggled particularly hard against the image's illustrative use and its narrative function. The result of this struggle illustrates the sultan's premonition. Modern art wanted to purify the image of everything exterior to it, to render the image autonomous and self-sufficient—but in so doing only affirmed the dominant iconophilia. Thus iconoclasm has become subordinate to iconophilia: the symbolic martyrdom of the image only strengthens our belief in it.

The subtler iconoclastic strategy proposed by the sultan—turning the image back into an illustration—is actually much more effective. We have known at least since Magritte that when we look at an image of a pipe, we

are regarding not a real pipe but one that has been re-presented. The pipe as such isn't there, it isn't present; instead, it is depicted as being absent. In spite of this knowledge we are still inclined to believe that when we look at an artwork, we directly and instantaneously confront "art." We see artworks as incarnating art. The famous distinction between art and non-art is generally understood as a distinction between objects inhabited and animated by art and those from which art is absent. This is how works of art become art's idols, that is, analogously to religious images, which are also believed to be inhabited or animated by gods.

On the other hand, to practice art-atheism would be to understand artworks not as incarnations, but as mere documents, illustrations, or signifiers of art. While they may refer to art, they are nevertheless not themselves art. To a greater or lesser extent this strategy has been pursued by many artists since the 1960s. Artistic projects, performances, and actions have regularly been documented, and by means of this documentation represented in exhibition spaces and museums. Such documentation, however, merely refers to art without itself being art. This type of documentation is often presented in the framework of an art installation for the purpose of narrating a certain project or action. Traditionally executed paintings, art objects, photographs, or videos can also be implemented in the framework of such installations. In this case, admittedly, artworks lose their previous status as art. Instead they become documents, illustrations of the story told by the installation. One could say that today's art audience increasingly encounters art *documentation*, which provides information about the artwork itself, be it art project or art action, but which in doing so only confirms the absence of the artwork.

But even if illustrativity and narrativity have managed to find their way into the halls of art, this entry by no means signifies the automatic triumph of art-atheism. Even if the artist loses faith, he or she doesn't thereby lose the magical ability to transform mere things into art, just as a Catholic priest's loss of faith doesn't render the rituals he performs ineffective. Meanwhile the installation itself has been blessed with art status: installation has become accepted as an art form and increasingly assumes a leading role in contemporary art. So even though the individual images and objects lose their autonomous status, the entire installation gains it back. When Marcel Broodthaers presented his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf in 1973, he placed the label "This is not a work of

art” next to each of the presented objects in the installation. The entire installation, though, is legitimately considered to be an artwork.

Here the figure of the independent curator, increasingly central to contemporary art, comes into play. When it comes down to it, the independent curator does everything the contemporary artist does. The independent curator travels the world and organizes exhibitions that are comparable to artistic installations—comparable because they are the results of individual curatorial projects, decisions, and actions. The artworks presented in these exhibitions/installations take on the role of documentation of a curatorial project. Yet such curatorial projects are in no way iconophilic; they do not aim to glorify the image’s autonomous value.

“Utopia Station” is a good example—curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, this exhibition was presented at the Fiftieth Venice Biennale in 2003. Critical and public discussion of the project stressed the issues of whether the concept of utopia is still relevant; whether what was put forward as a utopian vision by the curators could really be regarded as such; and so on. Yet the fact that a curatorial project that was clearly iconoclastic could be presented at one of the oldest international art exhibitions seems to me to be far more important than the above considerations. It was iconoclastic because it employed artworks as illustrations, as documents of the search for a social utopia, without emphasizing their autonomous value. It subscribed to the radical iconoclastic approach of the classical Russian avant-garde, which considered art to be documentation of the search for the “new man” and a “new life.” Most important, though, “Utopia Station” was a curatorial and not an artistic project. This meant that the iconoclastic gesture could not be accompanied—and thus invalidated—by the attribution of artistic value. Nevertheless, it can still be assumed that in this case the concept of utopia was abused, because it was aestheticized and situated in an elitist art context. And it can be equally said that art was abused as well: it served as an illustration for the curators’ vision of utopia. Thus in both cases the spectator has to confront an abuse—be it an abuse of art or by art. Here, though, abuse is just another word for iconoclasm.

The independent curator is a radically secularized artist. He is an artist because he does everything artists do. But he is an artist who has lost the artist’s aura, who no longer has magical transformative powers at his disposal, who cannot endow objects with artistic status. He doesn’t use objects—art

objects included—for art’s sake, but rather abuses them, makes them profane. Yet it is precisely this that makes the figure of the independent curator so attractive and so essential to the art of today. The contemporary curator is the heir apparent to the modern artist, although he doesn’t suffer from his predecessor’s magical abnormalities. He is an artist, but he is atheistic and “normal” through and through. The curator is an agent of art’s profanation, its secularization, its abuse. It can of course be stated that the independent curator, as the museum curator before him, cannot but depend on the art market—even lay the groundwork for it. An artwork’s value increases when it is presented in a museum, or through its frequent appearance in the diverse temporary exhibitions organized by independent curators—and so, as before, the dominant iconophilia prevails. This iconophilia can be held to be understood and acknowledged—or not.

The market value of an artwork doesn’t correspond exactly to its narrative or its historical value. The traditional “museum value” of an artwork is never the same as its value on the art market. A work of art can please, impress, excite the desire to possess it—all this while having no specific historical relevance and, therefore, remaining irrelevant to the museum’s narrative. And conversely: many artworks may seem incomprehensible, boring, and depressing to the general public but are given a place in the museum, because they are “historically new” or at the very least “relevant” to a particular period, and therefore can be put to the task of illustrating a certain kind of art history. The widespread opinion that an artwork in a museum is “dead” can be understood as meaning that it loses its status as an idol there; pagan idols were venerated for being “alive.” The museum’s iconoclastic gesture consists precisely of transforming “living” idols into “dead” illustrations of art history. It can therefore be said that the traditional museum curator has always subjected images to the same double abuse as the independent curator. On the one hand, images in the museum are aestheticized and transformed into art; on the other, they are downgraded to illustrations of art history and thereby dispossessed of their art status.

This double abuse of images, this doubled iconoclastic gesture, is only recently being made explicit, because instead of narrating the canon of art history, independent curators are beginning to tell each other their own contradictory stories. In addition, these stories are being told by means of temporary exhibitions (which carry their own time limitations), and recorded by

## On the Curatorship

incomplete and frequently even incomprehensible documentation. The exhibition catalog for a curatorial project that already presents a double abuse can only produce a further abuse. But nevertheless, artworks become visible only as a result of this multiple abuse. Images don't emerge into the clearing of Being on their own accord, where their original visibility is then muddied by the "art business," as Heidegger describes it in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. It is far more that this very abuse makes them visible.