

Complexities of Complexity

Practicing Criticality and Narrative Through Curatorial Models, or Where is the Exit?

How can any art project touch on the sophisticated and haphazard web of life's complexity? Two curatorial models, "criticality"¹ and "narrative"², are both well rehearsed exhibition models and omnipresent in the mediation of art projects (curatorial practice) and in curatorial discourse. Both models fail to meaningfully deal with life's complexity. The model of criticality escapes addressing life's complexity by inverting on itself, mainly by hermetic, often academic language, and, by doing so, dislocating itself from the remits of everyday life. The latter by the given illusion that a partial and subjective narrative (a kind of demagnification of life) can create a common denominator and substantial ground for understanding and thus change. Instead of using the heavy hand of criticality or narrative, I propose to consider curating as a practice through which interfaces and processes can be built to rethink the relationships between art, the curatorial, the cultural and the political.

In this essay I would like to consider the "complexities" of both models, and, moreover, the inconsistencies that arise with such complex structures; to outline the aspects that hinder the emergence of complexity in relation to the organization of their internal structures and remits. For what a-priori and concept-based motivations do these two formats fail to meaningfully deal with complexity? Furthermore, can we speak of a certain rigor of these two curatorial models that allude to life's complexity but actually lead to further sub-categorizations, misunderstandings and simplifications. A falsification or mystification of life's complexity. One should be aware of the conclusions such misleading discourses lead to, while simultaneously distancing oneself from the post-modernist strain of thought that emphasizes ambivalence and indeterminacy. One could argue, the desire for complexity comes from a belief in clarity and determinacy. To what extent could we designate these formats as being too self-contained and over-determined? In other words, does the rigor of these models generate an unrealistic approach to life's complexity: a homogenous equation and singular view that rejects the fact that today's world is too complex to be narrowed down to a discourse of vernacular art-circle criticality or a practice in which a curator underscores his or her version of a story, relying on the anecdotal and monolithic narratives that downgrade the complexities of the ontologies to which art enjoys relating itself. While, at the same moment, we should actually admit that art can no longer be a gestural proxy for disingenuous politics which conceals and decorates itself with art events and cultural products.

One could argue, to arrive at complexity, some sort of disciplined, strategic or tactical act needs to occur. What kind of curatorial act should be engaged with in order to arrive at complexity? A (conceptual) approach that is adequately openly-structured or "democratic" to evolve around and adapt to all the subtleties and nuances life's complexity is comprised of, and, at the same time,

could still be addressed as an art project and not as being life itself? In other words, what properties and parameters of the model should be maintained and what boundaries of the “rigorous model” should be transgressed?

From a general point of view, nobody really knows what is going on. There are many who claim to possess the tools to demystify the situation, but inadvertently end up mystifying it even more. Furthermore, they can often end up trading on their powers of mystification. The ability to demystify has great currency today, and is undoubtedly part of our economy of cognitive capital. Every so often, we come upon times when this economy needs a paradigm shift when things become unsupportive, enter a state of decline.

To my concerns, there is a thin line between the mystification and demystification of life's complexity in curatorial practice, as well as, in some cases, curatorial discourse. It is my intention to further examine the workings between mystification and demystification by taking the prerequisites of ‘criticality’ and ‘narrative’ as the commonly preferred arbitrators of curatorial logic. In the introduction I, somewhat boldly, stated that both models fail to meaningfully deal with life's complexity. In the end, one could argue that there is simply no possible way to encompass and meaningfully deal with life's complexity, by means of curatorial operation, within the remit of the art institute. That life itself and the subsequent constituency of a complex web of processes (relations, operations, and so forth) is infinitely more capacious than we might ever imagine. Although, we cannot neglect the fact that it has been the intention of many curators and their subsequent exhibitions and other art projects to reflect on and render a different, seemingly objective meaning to life's complexity.

It is precisely in this narrowing down of life's complexity: from life, to an aspect of life, to the emphasis on a specific aspect, as addressed by the artist in his or her artwork, to a curatorial modus operandi, and consequently an exhibition, that both meaningful (adequate and adopting) and less meaningful (contrived and rigorous) possibilities and situations can develop. Than again, it is hard to imagine a curator would make a show called “Life - Everything You Could Ever Imagine”. In most temporary institutional exhibitions, an aspect of life's complexity, for example science, religion, literature, morality, and various subcategories thereof, are being emphasized on. As part of the curator's agency, the degree of “narrowing down” or “opening up” the subject, the level of specificity, is a “weapon of choice”. For example, a contemporary art show reflecting on our protestant heritage, a narrowing down of life's complexity as a subcategory of religion, could as well be opened up in the format of a group show in which a manifold of artists emphasize on different aspects, and, by doing so, creating a more elaborate and extensive outcome.

The question remains, by what means and to what extent could an art exhibition and especially the curating thereof, taking either the model of “criticality” or “narrative” or a combination of both, touch upon and meaningfully deal with life's complexity? Both criticality and narration could

be used as instruments for demystification, wherein a critical text has the power to structure elements, to include and exclude information, to present a “coherent” set of arguments. Narration, on the other hand, offers the same possibilities, but takes another form of expressing its ideals or intentions by revolving around a story, a specific line of thought. Both models could be regarded as convenient packages, containing a clear-cut outline, or even definition, a beginning and an end.³ In other words, both models are generally employed to generate answers and outcomes, rather than questions and possibilities, or present themselves as self-contained Q&A’s. When I mentioned the fine line between mystification and demystification, I was pointing towards the danger that lies within both practices. By taking criticality or narration as instruments of a “demystification-practice” there is tendency of moving towards another layer of mystification. In other words, by generating a seemingly coherent exhibition concept or text, by closing in on the subject, and, consequently, adding another layer of meaning to the readily existing resources and subjectivities, the model will immediately prove to be inadequately flexible, incapable of adapting to the ongoing process of life’s complexity. Leaving behind a rather troubled and blurred image of a fictitious, false or oversimplified history. Of course, many interesting exhibitions are or have been based on various fictitious histories or intend to be fictitious by nature.⁴ In this essay, though, I want to focus on exhibitions, and, in hindsight, their respective models and concepts, that are intended to be “objective”, non-fictional, or at least based on day-to-day reality. By its fixed and rigorous nature, both the curatorial models of criticality and narrative unwillingly escape addressing (an aspect of) life’s complexity. In this sense, it is the rigor of the model, in which criticality and narrative take their shape, that hinder the emergence of rendering meaning to life’s complexity.

The curatorial models of criticality and narrative depart from language, in having a textual or linguistic fundament and rationale. Andrew Wilson argues that all writing about art is to an extent about storytelling and as such is subject not only to the particular peculiarities of each authorial voice, but also to the deployment of different narrative or structural devices.⁵ As Foucault states, language represents thought as thought represents itself. Words have been allotted the task and the power of “representing thought”. Representing, in this case, does not mean translating thought, giving a visible version of and reproduce thought in its exactitude. “To constitute language or give it life from within, there is no essential and primitive act of signification, but only, at the heart of representation, the power that it possesses to represent itself, that is, to analyse itself by juxtaposing itself to itself, part by part, under the eye of reflection, and to delegate itself in the form of a substitute that will be an extension of it.”⁶

In terms of curatorial practice one could argue that the “limited vocabulary” of a language always fails to represent reality in the complexity perceived by humans. More ingenious word combinations are needed, not only to rouse memories of oneself, but also to convey others a detailed representation. Literature has often, and willingly, addressed its failure in the face of this

ambition. Yet why should one not also use language in literature for what it is good for: abstraction? So that abstraction is not empty and boring, it must attempt to open up the world theoretically. Ingo Niermann mentions that with literature you can take as simple a method as you wish to arrive at the desired result. What one would usually consider blatantly false, you can grant a plausibility and thereby show how easily everything can also be understood in a completely different way.⁷

We could consider exhibition making as a form of writing too, but a form of writing with visual, spatial properties, and one whose further existence always hinges on its reception and “translation” into academic or critical text. So while there is an abundant production of text in the art world, it would seem that writing rarely appears as curatorial practice.⁸ It is in this type of meta-language that writing as curatorial practice is hard to grasp in a tangible form. A possible consequence of considering curatorial practice as a meta-language is that, within an industry of meta-languages, we tend to impose web upon web of crisis with a critical introspection, resulting in a perpetual feedback loop of crisis and criticality. In other words, criticality should not reach the point of feeling like Stockholm Syndrome. Within an exhibition, the curatorial hinterland, its concept and its subsequent intentions, is present, “perceptible”, but hard to pinpoint by its abstract and absent nature. The exhibition proper could thus be conceived as a curatorial speech act, in which writing as curatorial practice is being communicated to an audience; as Bruce Ferguson mentions, “Exhibitions are the central speaking subjects in the standard stories about art which institutions and curators often tell to themselves and to us”.⁹ Through artworks, texts, guidance by directions and exhibition-architecture, in short, structural elements, a “trained eye” could start to “read” the exhibition as a whole, or perhaps even “hear” the curators intentions in the context of a speech-act. This (mis)reading, obviously, will lead up to “misinterpretations” and individually constructed narratives of its own. Criticality and narrative as examples of curatorial models manifest themselves more or less as “forces at work”, they shape the exhibition from a conceptual fundament; in the actual space, hints of their workings may seem absent. Although, most exhibitions will take shape, take as their point of departure, first and foremost a concept. Consequently, artworks, displays, texts are centered around the exhibition concept, simultaneously structured alongside a curatorial model.¹⁰ In short, as Bruce Ferguson states, “exhibitions are narratives which use art objects as elements in institutionalized stories that are promoted to an audience.”¹¹

In the end, if an exhibition wants to touch upon, to incorporate or address (an aspect of) life’s complexity, one should be aware of the limitations of language and linguistic barriers. To erect a linguistic barrier - by means of, for example criticality - in order to gain a critical distance from society, as a strategy of self-excommunication, is absolutely legitimate. On the other hand, the effect of employing hermetic as well as academic language in an act of rendering a critical image of society, escapes doing so by the very nature of linguistic barriers. Since recently, 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, since, one could argue, the exhibition format is ephemeral per definition - and recorded by incomplete and frequently incomprehensible documentation.¹² Furthermore, rather than presenting a transparent and open presentation of life's complexity, the curatorial models of criticality and narrative mostly impose a fake reality or supposed, "apparent" reality, more of a representation, upon the artwork as well as the audience. Both models add an extra layer of complexity to life's complexity, as the rigor of their models fail to adapt to, simply put, life as being in constant motion.

The question remains, how can you justify your work, curatorial, when the options of criticality and narrative are suddenly unavailable to you? In the current hegemonic cultural-political system one is expected to produce under the imperative that the project "is aiming to do something", be critical, analyse or research something. Through emphasis on process, a temporary time-space could be instated. In this time-space, a project can become a vehicle one can use to discover something that is part of life's complexity but also parallel to it. It thus resists the need for justification - which almost always looks to represent life's complexities but fall significantly short of embodying them - and with that, temporarily breaks-even with the system of which it obviously still remains a part.

To come back to curatorial practice as writing, Andrew Renton states that curating is about "seeing where the creative act can possibly go ... and we don't know where it can go". To Renton, the curatorial obligation to be closely involved in processes further complicates or even eliminates the act of writing, because you are trying "to keep track of what's unknown ... the minute you write it down on paper, it would be redundant almost that second."¹³ Here, it would be interesting to link Jacques Rancière's notion of "in-betweenness" as political subjectification. Subjectification, he writes, "Is the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other ... [a] subject is an outsider, or more, an in-between ... Political subjectification is the enactment of equality - or the handling of a wrong - by people who are together to the extent that they are between. It is a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link ... a being to a non-being or a not-yet-being."¹⁴ Arguably, Rancière and Renton are alluding to a related set of problems: the "being-in-process" of curating could be seen as a crossing of identities where "difference" shares a desire for resistance to that which could bring processes of betweenness to completion.

The necessity for identifying with complexity is felt at the moment one begins to describe something and then realizes that the resulting definition is only ever partial. It can also be that it is constructed by others, or, as mentioned before, confined by the boundaries of language, and maybe even a reaction to imagined perceptions or expectations. If there would be a curatorial model capable of embodying the complexity of life, it would be this model of "being-in-process". The being-in-process rejects completion, the temporary exhibition on the other hand, is bound to a

limited time-span. In other words, the exhibition's process will see its completion, but perhaps this demarcates more of an "happy end", to use Philippe Parreno's expression, than a targeted definition, a result of process. Eventually, we should perhaps not see the "being-in-process" as a *model* for curatorial practice but rather as a *strategic act*. This strategic act could exist of, for example, conceiving, building and implementing a curatorial interface which first outlines those elements that hinder the emergence of complexity, and then describes the parameters of investment into project which seek to embody them. This act of curatorial practice allows to embrace undefined complexity - the complex ways humans position themselves and allow themselves to be positioned in the intricate, intersecting webs of multiple political, cultural, biological, economical and psychological threads. The complexity of life, even an aspect thereof, is infinitely more than what you might ever imagine. It is important that we acknowledge this, without feeling the necessity to try and explain it, to define it. In other words, the desire for representability is quite a serious problem. This cannot be done with everything, so rather than looking to represent something impossible to represent, or forgetting about something to represent, why not attempt to embody something impossible to represent?

As some concluding words on this essay, I would like to mention that I am aware that every exhibition tells a story, by directing the viewer through the exhibition in a particular order; the exhibition space is always a narrative space and never neutral. Although, the distinction I have tried to raise emphasized on the fact that the borders of each narrative should always be the beginnings - the starting points - not the ends of experience. If one intends to render meaning to the complexity of life, the rigor of the narrative model fails short, proves not to be viable. Regarding the curatorial model of criticality I mentioned that it should not begin to feel like Stockholm Syndrome. It is in my opinion that criticality as such should not take shape in the form of a model, again, the effect would be another layer of inversion.

I have described the "being-in-process" as a strategic act of de-instrumentalisation and an opening up of the complexity of life, not just a representation of its possible heterogeneous glory. In addition, art has the capacity to embody absolute multifariousness, to walk the line between the theoretical and the poetic, between criticality and narrative, between demystification and mystification. Unlike the aforementioned more "rigorous" exhibition models, or putting at the forefront the self-importance of the curator, a possible act of narcissism. I have not touched upon the latter point because of its singular, self-explanatory nature. In other words, the contemporary artist is often put on the spot, but for all the right reasons so to speak. This act of process could be interesting for those of us for whom making exhibitions is more than a way of presenting artists or using art to represent curatorial ideas: artwork-as-illustration.

The act of "being-in-process" is a speculative model - neither exhibition mechanisms are neutral; the curatorial subjectivities inherent to this act are evidently not the sole purpose of its

coming into being - which has come to exemplify a form of exhibition making that works between the autonomy of art¹⁵ and the curatorial statement. It maintains the principle that exhibitions can be structured on theoretical grounds, but with a strong sensibility of avoiding the curatorial thesis to overdetermine the works. Most art is a snapshot, which at the very best could only end up as a nostalgic memento. By opening things up, making them more “dimensional”, we could perhaps create a fertile ground that is more relevant and maybe even more appropriate for all our lives today; looking towards more generative dimensions.

Leap into the void (and don't feel like you need to take a picture of yourself doing it).

¹ “Criticality is a recognition that we may be fully armed with theoretical knowledge, we may be capable of the most sophisticated modes of analysis but we nevertheless are also living out the very conditions we are trying to analyse and come to terms with. Therefore, criticality, is a state of duality in which one is at one, and at the same time both empowered and disempowered, knowing and unknowing.”

Irit Rogoff, ‘Smuggling - An Embodied Criticality’, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>, 2006, p.2.

In addition: when Godard spoke of the “reality of art” he meant that the artwork cannot propose solutions, or even conclusions, because its function remains in the space of the statement, of the stating of the problem. This stating of the problem is already an affirmation of the discourse within which the problem is conceived (cinema, art, exhibition making).

² Narrative is how the subjects of history are ordered and how individuals are categorized, as subjects, in a particular order, in the prose of history. The thematically framed art exhibition, however conceived, is, generally speaking, provided with the function of encapsulating reality in order to designate it as something that can be apprehended as a narrative. To refuse narratives is to resist the prosaic ways in which subjectivities are distributed along different categories: aesthetic, political, racial, ethnic, gender, and so on.

³ The open-ended story could be considered as such, but at the same time, is intended as such. Consequently, streamlining one’s thoughts and limiting the array of outcomes.

⁴ “Histories are forever being revisited and most often recuperated in terms of particular present needs and preoccupations. One hope in all this is that Foucault’s view might perhaps be doubly reconfigured in such a way that a new understanding of the ever-shifting contemporary condition might appear each time our relationship to history finds itself drastically changed by the present. This underlines the fact that those objects from which histories of art are largely constructed are best read in terms of events and that such readings are themselves part of a larger and continuing process of translation.”

From: Andrew Wilson, ‘Making New’, p. 200, in: *Curating Subjects*, Paul O’Neill (Ed.), De Appel, Amsterdam, 2007.

⁵ Andrew Wilson, ‘Making New’ in *Curating Subjects*, Paul O’Neill (Ed.), De Appel, Amsterdam, 2007, p. 195.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge, London/New York, 2010, p. 86.

⁷ Ingo Niermann, ‘Presence: Non-Fiction’ in *Manifesta 8. The European Biennial of Contemporary Art*, SilvanaEditoriale, Milano, 2010, p. 75.

⁸ Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, ‘The Middlemen: Beginning to Talk About Mediation’ in *Curating Subjects*, Paul O’Neill (Ed.), De Appel, Amsterdam, 2007, p.28.

⁹ Bruce W. Ferguson, ‘Material Speech and Utter Sense’ in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Reese Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (Eds.), Routledge, London/New York, 1996, p. 176.

¹⁰ “All exhibitionary procedures - labels, didactics, advertising, catalogues, hanging systems, media in their modernist sense, lightning, wall colors, security devices, posters, handouts etc. - combine as aspects of the exhibition’s active recitation. They emphasize, de-emphasize and re-emphasize braided narratives with purposes - fictions of persuasion, docudramas of influence. All are contributive to the ways in which art is more or less understood.”

Bruce W. Ferguson, ‘Material Speech and Utter Sense’ in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Reese Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (Eds.), Routledge, London/New York, 1996, p. 181.

¹¹ Bruce W. Ferguson, ‘Material Speech and Utter Sense’ in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Reese Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (Eds.), Routledge, London/New York, 1996, p. 175.

¹² Boris Groys, *Art Power*. The MIT Press, Cambridge/London, 2008, p. 51-52.

¹³ ‘A Conversation Between Andrew Renton, Sabine Brümmer and Sophie von Olfers’, *Arco News*, 2005, p. 34.

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, ‘Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization’, *October*, N°61, Summer 1992, p. 60-61.

¹⁵ The autonomy of art is of course a myth, but the word “autonomy” is also a horizon. As Ernst Bloch argued about utopia, autonomy should be conceived not as a goal but as a principle.

General Bibliography

- Books / Articles
- Andreasen, Søren and Lars Bang Larsen, 'The Middlemen: Beginning to Talk About Mediation' in *Curating Subjects*, Paul O'Neill (Ed.), De Appel, Amsterdam, 2007.
- Ferguson, Bruce W., 'Material Speech and Utter Sense' in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Reese Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (Eds.), Routledge, London/New York, 1996.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge, London/New York, 2010.
- Gray, Zoë, Miriam Kathrein, Nicolaus Schafhausen, Monika Szewczyk, Ariadne Urlus (Eds.), *Rotterdam Dialogues: The Critics, The Curators, The Artists*. post editions/Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2010.
- Groys, Boris, *Art Power*. The MIT Press, Cambridge/London, 2008.
- Niermann, Ingo, 'Presence: Non-Fiction' in *Manifesta 8. The European Biennial of Contemporary Art*, SilvanaEditoriale, Milano, 2010.
- Norman, Donald A., *Living with Complexity*. The MIT Press, Cambridge/London, 2010.
- O'Neill, Paul (Ed.), *Curating Subjects*. De Appel, Amsterdam, 2007.
- Wilson, Andrew, 'Making New', p. 200, in: *Curating Subjects*, Paul O'Neill (Ed.), De Appel, Amsterdam, 2007.
- Periodicals
- 'A conversation between Andrew Renton, Sabine Brümmer and Sophie von Olfers', *Arco News*, 2005.
- Geldard, Rebecca, 'Patrizio Di Massimo', *MAP Magazine*, N°24, Winter 2010.
- Gevers, Ine, 'Feed in the Mud', *Metropolis M*, N°6, December/January 2010/2011.
- Rancière, Jacques, 'Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization', *October*, N°61, Summer 1992.
- Manifesta Journal - Journal of contemporary curatorship, The Grammar of the Exhibition*, N° 7, 2009/2010.
- The Exhibitionist - Journal on Exhibition Making*, N°2, June 2010.
- Exhibitions
- I'm Not There - An Exhibition Without Francis Alÿs* (groupshow), De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, April 17 2010 - June 6 2010.
- Manifesta 8 - The European Biennial of Contemporary Art* (groupshow), Murcia/Cartagena, Spain, October 9 2010 - January 9 2011.
- Monumentalism - History, National Identity and Contemporary Art* (groupshow), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, August 28 2010 - January 9 2011.
- Morality* (several acts / types of exhibitions), Witte de With, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, October 10 2009 - November 20 2010.
- Niet Normaal - Difference on Display* (groupshow), Beurs van Berlage, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, December 16 2009 - March 8 2010
- Of Mice and Men*, 4th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany, March 25 - June 5 2006.
- See Reason* (Patrizio Di Massimo, Carlos Garaicoa), SMBA (Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam), Amsterdam, The Netherlands, December 18 2010 - February 6 2011.
- Utopia Station* (groupshow), 50th Venice Biennial, Venice, Italy, June 15 2003 - November 2 2003.