

Between Hype and Attitude. Motivations, Presentation Strategies and Fields of Conflict for “Curartists” Winfried Stürzl

Winfried Stürzl looks back at the symposium, “Why Artists Curate” held by the Kunstbüro der Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg in cooperation with Columbus Art Foundation, 8/9 July, 2011

Two years ago an article in the magazine “Monopol”, referring to an exhibition curated by Adam McEwen in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, was headed “The Trend towards the Curartist”. The subheading added, in somewhat sensational vein: “Why artists make better curators”.¹ Precisely because the article was restricted to a list of some famous names, failing to provide the answer it heralded, the reader’s attention was drawn to two things: first, that artists have indeed been appearing increasingly as curators since the 1990s at the latest, and the media take pleasure in reacting to this (as re-confirmed by the last Berlin Biennale in 2012 with Artur Żmijewski). Second, that there are reasons for this development, but they cannot be summarised as easily as the popular journal would have us believe.

The publication of the article came during preparation for a symposium by the Kunstbüro der Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg on this very subject. Ramona Wegenast (the director of the Kunstbüro) and I had decided to realise this symposium as it seemed important to us to take up such an omnipresent phenomenon as the artist-curator in the context of the Kunstbüro’s offering to improve artists’ professionalism.² After all, in the south-west of Germany, the Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg’s sphere of influence, more and more artists were becoming active simultaneously as curators. Among other things, this was expressed towards the end of the century’s first decade by the foundation of a large number of project spaces or off-spaces.³ In this context we had noted that these foundations had seen the development of differently accentuated cooperations between artists but also between artists and art theorists⁴ – not always entirely without conflict, as can be seen from the sensitivities voiced here, in particular with reference to the problem of authorship.

In order to react to this diversity, we decided to invite artist-curators who work in very different models of cooperation together for the symposium. Besides performance artist Byung Chul Kim (Stuttgart), who intervened into the running of the symposium, our initial guests were artist, curator and critic Andreas Schlaegel (Berlin) as well as artists Gunter Reski and Marcus Weber (both Berlin), who – as a duo – had also been curators of the exhibition “Captain Pamphile” in the Falckenberg Collection in Hamburg shortly before. Andreas Baur (Esslingen) gave insights into his cooperation with curating artists in his function as director of Villa Merkel. And artist Tilo Schulz (Berlin) reported in conjunction with Jörg van den Berg (Ravensburg) on the possibilities for cooperation between artist and exhibition-maker. Dorothee Richter (Zurich) provided an introduction to the symposium, examining questions of artistic and curatorial authorship on the basis of historical examples. The symposium took place in the still existent Kunsthalle Ravensburg of the Columbus Art Foundation⁵ on 8th and 9th July, 2011 – an ideal cooperative partner and event venue thanks to its director Jörg van den Berg.

We knew that the phenomenon of the curartist had long been giving occasion for reflection against the background of a general rise of the curator figure in the art system. In the report by the German Association of Artists, for example, the subject was examined from a wide range of perspectives in the 2003/2004 issue.⁶ Power relations and the distribution of roles in the art system were the focus there, as well as questions of whether artists as curators could make a different contribution to “traditional” exhibition-makers or whether curators were perhaps making use of artistic strategies in their work that had led to their rise in the first place.

The art system has changed in recent years. The profession of the curator has become so popular meanwhile that in the German weekly newspaper “DIE ZEIT” shortly before our symposium one could read under the ironic title “Die Macht der Geschmacksverstärker” (The Power of the Taste Enhancer) that the curator had taken over from the artist, poet or director as the “dream job of the youthful avant-garde”.⁷ This hype, as we all know, has been followed by not only a popularisation but also an increasing professionalising of the work, so that now study courses in “Curating” are offered at many colleges and universities all over the world; there are also a large number of important curator’s awards or residency programmes. And last but not least, “curating” has also been long established as a fixed concept outside the narrower field of art.

Against the backdrop of these changes, today questions are being posed once more about the ambivalent relationship between artist and curator – and thus about the curartist’s understanding of self, as well. The June 2012 issue of the magazine “Texte zur Kunst”⁸, for example, was entitled “The Curators” and devoted to the topic of the relationship between artist and curator in detail. In this context it appears very informative that in many contributions and in many different ways, a plea is made to shift attention from the person of the curator to the activity of curating (Beatrice von Bismarck), to the “curatorial” field (according to Maria Lind, the field of “moving boundaries” as opposed to the more technical-organisational role of “curating”⁹), or to forms of collaboration or collective cooperation (Oliver Marchart). In his statement on the phenomenon of the artist-curator against the background of debates on authorship, Dieter Roelstraete even suggests dropping “categories specific to the art world such as artist and curator” completely – in favour of “the art worker”.

Ideas were mooted in the presentations and discussions of the symposium in Ravensburg that took up the current discourse as well as some fundamental questions. As suggested by the title of the symposium – “Why Artists Curate” – they included in particular consideration of the (individual) motivations behind artists’ inclinations to work on a curatorial basis at all. In addition, as a direct result of the speaker-structure, a strong argument was put from the vantage point of artistic-curatorial practice.



“Ruthless Openness” (Andreas Schlaegel)

Andreas Schlaegel cited three possible motivations in his (self-)discussion and – as he called it – plea for “ruthless openness”: “Why do artists create exhibitions? First for the girls, second for the show, and third for the money – that’s rock and roll”, according to his provocative theory (based on a song by Lüde und die Astros).¹⁰ He referred to the concept of “curating” as “almost devalued”, as our “culture of permanent showing and equally rapid forgetting (with constant virtual availability on demand)” makes the curator’s profession and his original task – that of collecting and preserving – largely obsolete. Due to a declining willingness to subsidise culture on the part of the state and the pressure for “corporate/private” partnerships with museums, the picture he drew of contemporary art was that of a “battle field through which cultural terrain may be occupied and instrumentalized.” He suggested that this development in the art system forced curators into freelance activity, where they had no more to lose in principle – since they had no building or budget anyway.

Andreas Schlaegel felt it was logical that in such an environment artists are being called into action. After all, for them it was legitimate *per definitionem* to act in a subjective manner: the severity of an exhibition by an artist-curator could always be attributed to his/her artistic creative production and thus granted legitimacy as

Captions

1 Participatory performance by Christina Schmid in the performance bus. © Daniela Wolf

2 Presentation by Dorothee Richter © Daniela Wolf

3 Presentation by Andreas Schlaegel © Daniela Wolf

4 Presentation by Andreas Baur © Daniela Wolf

an extension of his or her work. And so ultimately, Andreas Schlaegel sees the basis for the growing importance of the artist-curator in the need for self-presentation as it encounters the imperialistic effects of our neo-liberal economic system. In connection with the media's increasing fixation on the artist-curator, however, he also pointed out a latent danger of falling for the out-of-date myth of the "artist genius".

"Competition, Collaboration or Teamwork?" (Dorothee Richter)

This worry, however, could definitely apply to today's freelance curators as well – though Andreas Schlaegel avoided further detail in this respect. After all, star curators like Hans-Ulrich Obrist, it has been possible to note for some time, experience an exaggeration in their perception and reporting as quasi-geniuses equivalent to many an artist. This close connection led Dorothee Richter in her opening talk to tie the phenomenon of the rising artist-curator into the historical development of the complex relationship between artist and curator. Starting out from Haralds Szeemann's self-staging in the course of "documenta 5", under the heading "Artistic and Curatorial Authorship – Competition, Collaboration or Teamwork?" she discussed the ways in which curators adapt "the various procedures of artistic self-organisation" and the ultimate consequences of this. As Richter demonstrates, there is also a gender aspect inherent in the established power relations. Her comments led to a question that became characteristic of discussions during the symposium: Are artists and curators competitors or collaborators "in a field where attributions are becoming uncertain but also mobile and negotiable as a result?"

"Why I became a performance-curator" (Byung Chul Kim)

The framework to the symposium took up these questions in the form of performative interventions thanks to the artistic and curatorial efforts of Byung Chul Kim. In 2009 the Korean artist living in Stuttgart already caused a sensation beyond the region with his "Performance-Hotel": there was no need to pay money for a night's stay if you presented a performance.¹¹ The same applied to the "Performance-Express" that Kim initiated from Saarbrücken to the Centre Pompidou in Metz (2010)¹², on which the subsequent concept for a Performance-Bus from Stuttgart to Ravensburg was based. In these two cases, the service provided – the journey in each case – could also be paid for with a performance.

In respect to the symposium, part of the performance took place in the bus, another during the event at Columbus Art Foundation. Byung Chul Kim structured the pattern of the contributions so as to make it seem that the work was left entirely to the artists while the "power of organisation" was restricted to the curator alone (alias Byung Chul Kim). Resting on the laurels of the artistic contributions, he ended his appearance with the words: "Now you know why I became a performance-curator." This was a remark that not only thematized, with a sidelong wink, the problem of power relations in the artist-curator relationship but also put it up for re-disposition with exaggerated irony.

A second performance, which Byung Chul Kim realised under the title "Intermezzo" together with Andreas Baur, director of the Galleries of the City of Esslingen (Villa Merkel), later approached the topics at issue from a completely different perspective. Both jacked up their racing bikes and went cycling together (as they do occasionally in "real life"), bit by bit, going to the limits of their strength, whereby verbal references between the top echelons of sport and the art business were generated: "Art is endurance / assertiveness / a battle with oneself / you need

targets / self-doubts / there are also rankings – top-class artists, first in the rankings” etc. At the same time, terms were used such as “teamwork” or “system of shared interests”, which culminated in the statement that the “curatorial situation” could also consist in mutual accompaniment – even “in an exchange of roles, that is, the artist becoming a curator and the curator an artist.”

“Specific Inner Viewpoints” (Andreas Baur)

In his subsequent contribution “A Gift of Iconological Comparisons – Wrapped in the Mantle of Institutions” Andreas Baur made it clear that such an exchange of roles could only take place to a limited extent, however, in an institution like the Galleries of the City of Esslingen – and from his point of view: when artists curate, the result is often “not compatible with the masses”.¹³ “Recourse to intensive, subjective experiences in the field of artistic practice,” according to the trained artist and art historian, could “not be shared, basically” with a wider audience: “The limit of exclusion” lies “simply in the depth of the experience, activity and reflection on it.” However, as Baur made clear using examples from his practice as a curator, it is certainly possible to place parts of an exhibition in the hands of an artist. In this way, for example, it may be possible to highlight colleagues of the artist-curator or to offer “specific inner viewpoints”, upon which he would not have focused as the director of an institution. The exhibition “5000 Jahre Moderne Kunst – Painting, Smoking, Eating” (2008) was such a case, curated by Andreas Baur together with Marcus Weber, whereby the curator invited an artist (also represented in the exhibition) to collaborate with him.

“Supplementary Show-Format” (Gunter Reski and Marcus Weber)

At this point Marcus Weber had already had some experience as a curator, as was indicated by his contribution to the symposium developed and presented together with Gunter Reski.¹⁴ Under the title “Almost without a Borrower’s Ticket between Prosumer and Author” the two artists presented exhibition projects that each had curated independent of the other in the last 15 years, but also their jointly curated exhibition of painting “Captain Pamphile – Ein Bildroman in Stücken”, which had taken place in the Deichtorhallen Hamburg/ Falckenberg Collection in 2011. The exhibition concept was based on the pirate novel by Alexandre Dumas. On the basis of this work, Gunter Reski and Marcus Weber had made a storyboard with possible pictorial motifs and then asked artists that they knew well whether they might be interested in working with them on this “picture story”.

This example illuminated some aspects regarding the motivation behind organising exhibitions parallel to one’s own artwork: for Reski and Weber, becoming active in this context resulted from “dissatisfaction” with the fact that specific artists – or even exhibitions – that one would like to see, could not be seen. In the retrospective study based on many concrete examples, however, it also became obvious that this development should be seen as connected, among other things, with the “powerful emergence of self-organised exhibition spaces and fanzines in the 1990s and first decade of the millennium” that “were sprouting rapidly all over in Cologne, Düsseldorf and Berlin” at the time. New forms of exhibition presentation or displays were developed in this context, which served to achieve a “new perspective”, positioning “one’s own work in a real sphere of reflection” or in relation to a “virtual circle of friends”.

Gunter Reski and Marcus Weber presented exhibitions curated by artists as a “supplementary show-format” that had lost the “after-taste of self-help” comple-

tely. Today, they said, “professional” curators were also making use of these “free artistic approaches”.¹⁵ At the same time, however, it was made clear in this contribution that the question of artistic authorship in a project like “Captain Pamphile” held potential for conflict and called for that very open and responsible dealings with one another. There is a need to inform all those participating quite clearly from the outset that they will have to be prepared to employ an “unusual, applied and commission-oriented working method”. The conditions of participation and presentation were openly negotiated in advance, therefore. In this special case, it may also have been helpful that ultimately the entire project was based on a story by a third party, i.e. Alexandre Dumas, which shifted the focus away from the curators to some extent.

A Question of “Attitude” (Tilo Schulz and Jörg van den Berg)

A year before the symposium, we were provided with a very obvious example of how differently an exhibition appears when an artist works as a curator following a powerful urge to stage his own work in John Bock’s exhibition “Fisch-GrätenMelkStand” (2010) in the Temporary Kunsthalle in Berlin: despite the more than 60 artists participating, ultimately this exhibition could only be perceived as a comprehensive installation of John Bock himself.¹⁶ Directly before this, artist Tilo Schulz had shown the exhibition “squatting. erinnern, vergessen, besetzen” in the Temporary Kunsthalle in cooperation with exhibition maker Jörg van den Berg – a truly «complementary» contrast programme when seen from today’s standpoint.

Schulz and van den Berg – in accordance with the title of their contribution – reflected on the «Relation between Artwork and Exhibition». Thanks to specific ways and means of staging, in exhibitions by this duo of curators who have been cooperating for some years now the viewer is caught up in an active process of perception: here, the focus is directed towards the «presence of the individual artwork», from which is spun «a web of formal and content-oriented references» to the other works being shown. In the case of the exhibition «squatting» with its total of 22 works by 17 artists, complex viewing axes and spatial situations emerged; but this was not all – the Kunsthalle had to be entered through three different entrances and exited again in order to experience the full exhibition. In this way the «space of art» and the «space of political remembrance» (Schlossplatz) remained separate, it is true, but also became interlocked «in the movement of the viewer».¹⁷

By contrast to the other contributors, Tilo Schulz and Jörg van den Berg thus focused on the art and exhibition practice in itself and managed without detailed discussion of authorship and power relations in the complex constellation existing between artist and exhibition maker. Ultimately, according to their thesis, it is not a matter “of the difference between curator and artist but of one’s attitude to the artwork, to the artist, and to the viewer.”¹⁸ This opinion puts Tilo Schulz and Jörg van den Berg close to the tendency presented at the outset: a tendency to direct the focus less towards the protagonists of today’s art system and instead towards the processes of curating in themselves. Even Dieter Roelstraete’s suggestion to refer to the “art worker” reappears here, albeit in an altered form.

Conclusion and Epilogue

The symposium “Why Artists Curate” proved to be – not least because of the participants’ very different experiences in curatorial practice – a forum for controversial discussion. While Andreas Schlaegel saw the artist-curator – definitely motivated by an urge for self-presentation – as a possible way out of the dilemma

of an art sphere corrupted by financial interests, Andraes Baur attributed to the curating artist a greater degree of special competence but doubted that his ideas and concepts could be conveyed in a manner suited to institutions and “fitting for the masses”. In turn, Gunter Reski and Marcus Weber presented the artist-curator as a necessary corrective in the art system, capable of filling empty spaces and serving as a model to “professional” curators as well. Tilo Schulz and Jörg van den Berg, finally, saw the traditional distinction between curator and artist-curator as obsolete and instead shifted the focus towards the attitude of each actor with respect to the artwork, the exhibition as a whole, and the viewer.

Seen from the vantage point of practice, the hype surrounding the artist-curator in the popular press mentioned above gave way to entirely different questions, directed increasingly towards specific competencies. Conversations in the run-up to this publication give a similar picture. Hans D. Christ (one of the two directors of the Württembergischer Kunstverein), for example, sees a perhaps slightly different approach adopted by curators with an artistic background («not purely discursive»). But the potential for conflict, he says, lies less in questions of authorship and far more where there is a lack of shared competence, e.g. when «there is no sensitivity, an inability to read things that are relevant to practice from one’s theories».¹⁹

The work of the curator – as Jakob Schillinger sums up, for example – consists in “mediating between works of art and the public by making them relevant, situating and contextualising them in a specific moment for the visitor.”²⁰ The claim that artists are fundamentally better suited to such a task than others is probably one we can banish confidently to the realm of popular press fairy-tales. But the idea that competent partners need to cooperate as sensitively as possible for the success of an exhibition, ensuring that the shared artistic-curatorial intention comes across to the public: this is a challenge that needs to be mastered afresh – in whatever constellation – with every new exhibition.

Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg

The Mission: The aim of the Kunststiftung is to support young artists in taking the first steps in their professional careers by awarding them stipends and providing them with publicity. Since its foundation the Kunststiftung has helped over 900 artists from fine art, music, literature and the performing arts. Besides awarding stipends, the Kunststiftung focuses its efforts on organizing exhibitions, concerts and readings.

The Model: Founded in 1977 above party lines by a group of members of Parliament and private individuals, from the outset the Kunststiftung GmbH has always had 200 partners. The Kunststiftung is primarily funded by donations. Donations come from all sectors of the population: businesses, city councils, private individuals. The federal state of Baden-Württemberg lends its backing to this model with complementary funding that doubles the sum of the donations – this structure ensures that private engagement is rewarded by public coffers.

The work of the foundation: Up to 10,000 euros are awarded annually in the form of stipends. Juries of experts decide on who receives the stipends. Stipends are awarded to artists under the age of 35 who live or were born in Baden-Wuerttemberg. As of 2012 the art foundation is also awarding stipends for art criticism, a first in Germany. Since 2009 the Kunststiftung has maintained a ‘contact office’ for the professionalization of fine artists (see footnote no. 2). The Kunststiftung maintains two studios in Berlin.

www.kunststiftung.de

Footnotes

1 Silke Hohmann: „Der Trend geht zum Curartist“, in: *Monopol – Magazin für Kunst und Leben* (online edition: www.monopol-magazin.de/artikel/20102189/Der-Trend-geht-zum-Curartist.html, 16.9.2010)

2 The Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg (see above) has been running the Kunstbüro since 2009. Besides individual counselling sessions, it organises workshops, seminars and lectures that deal with professional questions, discuss current topics and are intended to promote direct networking. These events take place all over Baden-Württemberg. The Kunstbüro of the Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg is funded by the Ministry for Science, Research and Art of Baden-Württemberg. In the years 2010 and 2012 the Kunstbüro was provided with additional funding from the state, which made it possible to carry out many larger symposia in the whole state, including the one presented here (www.kunstbuero-bw.de).

3 Cf. e.g. „Außerhalb – Ein Projekt zur Vernetzung und Förderung von Projekträumen in Baden-Württemberg“, ed. by Kunstbüro der Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart 2011 as well as Nicole Fritz: „Plötzlich war der Raum da – Aufbruchstimmung in der Stuttgarter Off-Szene“, in: *Junge Kunst* No. 74 (2008), pp. 44–46

4 Cf. e.g. www.interventionsraum.de, www.hermesundderpfau.de or www.kunsttresor.net

5 After 16 years, Columbus Art Foundation has had to discontinue its activities until further notice, apart from its cooperation with the ADV regarding the Förderpreis / promotional award; further information at www.columbus-artfoundation.de

6 *Kunstreport 2003/2004*. At this time, the managing director of the Deutscher Künstlerbund was Bernd Milla; today he is manager of the Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg (see above).

7 Tobias Timm: „Die Macht der Geschmacksverstärker“, in: *DIE ZEIT*, 5.5.2011, No. 19 (online edition: www.zeit.de/2011/19/Kunst-Kuratoren, 12.5.2011)

8 Cf. e.g. *Texte zur Kunst*, issue 86 (June 2012; special theme: „The Curators“)

9 On this approach, cf. also Maria Lind (ed.): *Performing the Curatorial – Within and Beyond Art*, Berlin 2012

10 The sections of text marked as quotations are taken from Andreas Schlaegel’s handout for the symposium.

11 <http://performancehotel.wordpress.com/>; cf. also Tobias Becker: „Performance-Hotel: Wo sich Singen unter der Dusche lohnt“, in: *KulturSPIEGEL* 3/2010 (online edition: www.spiegel.de/kultur/

kulturspiegel/performance-hotel-wo-sich-singen-unter-der-dusche-lohnt-a-683568.html, 22.2.2010)

12 <http://performanceexpress.wordpress.com>

13 The sections of text marked as quotations are taken from Andreas Baur’s handout for the symposium.

14 The sections of text marked as quotations are taken from Gunter Reski’s and Marcus Weber’s handout for the symposium.

15 Beatrice von Bismarck recently noted once again that the rise of the curator figure in the art system can be seen as fundamentally linked to the artistic practices at the beginning of the 1990s („interdisciplinary, interprofessional working methods“). The emerging visibility of the exhibition as a medium („site-specifics, post studio practice and institutional critique“), as Jakob Schillinger added, played a part in this: after all, it is difficult „to imagine an artwork independent of the way in which it is presented. On the level of presentation, reflection and construction of meaning,“ this leads to a „very close interaction between artistic and curatorial practices“; cf. the series of discussions „Zwischen Kunst und Öffentlichkeit“ in: *Texte zur Kunst*, issue 86, pp. 63–87, here pp. 63 and 69

16 Cf. e.g. www.artnet.de/magazine/fischgratenmelkstand-in-der-temporaren-kunsthalle-berlin

17 www.columbus-artfoundation.de/caf/extern-temp-kunsthalle.php

18 Handout for the symposium by Tilo Schulz and Jörg van den Berg

19 This conversation with Hans D. Christ took place in the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart on 21.1.2013.

20 Jakob Schillinger in the discussion „Zwischen Kunst und Öffentlichkeit“ in: *Texte zur Kunst*, issue 86, pp. 63–87, here p. 63