

# CURATING IN THE COMMERCIAL CONTEXT: A QUESTION OF SERIOUSNESS

By Robin Peckham (with Cosmin Costinas and Huib Haye van der Werf)

Although the application of original art historical research to the commercial gallery system has been a point of discussion for a much longer period of time - owing largely to secondary market dealers with a penchant for hiring newly minted doctors of philosophy in uncertain times - the position of the nominally independent curator in the context of the selling show seems to have become cause for greater consternation. Interestingly, however, within the last few years there has emerged a sense of disillusionment with the notion of the roving curator as a bastion of institutional standards. And for good reason, the independent curator chooses the position, in many cases, precisely to avoid the strictures of the public institution; admittedly separately but certainly in parallel, a new fascination with the possibility that the gallery may not necessarily be such a mercenary instrument after all. Witness, for instance, the ongoing establishment of the "Gallerist [training] Programme" at the De Appel Arts Centre - the same institution that hosted the first serious "Curatorial Programme" prior to the current boom in curatorial graduate education - even though the reputation of the training has since lost some of its impact due to wider dilution in the field.

The fundamental premise of this training course, and the assumption of many idealis-

tic young dealers and gallerists opening new spaces today - particularly in the current economic climate - is that the relationship between artist and gallery or artist and gallerist can be a productively creative and - dare we say it - positive curatorial locus. After all, when the curator herself turns from a largely custodial role to the coproduction of cultural practice, she defines her work in part through her proximity to the studio of the artist and distance from the halls of bureaucracy and finance (although this is increasingly shifting back towards a position of para-institutionalism). Some independent curators develop close relationships with a core stable of artists with whom they work throughout their careers. This status is only stabilised and standardised by condensing the group into a gallery roster. This provides a further collaborative ecology in the same way that an ongoing exploration of a set of certain spaces, including both the studio and the gallery, can function as an impetus for new directions in - and external support for - the work itself. The gallerist who physically arranges exhibitions, researches a wide circle of artists and discussed work concepts and strategies prior to and during production already performs much of the daily labour of the curator. What is missing, of course, is institutional negotiation; a facet that no small number of independent figures would prefer to do without.

Cosmin Costinas, newly installed director of Para/Site art space, says, "There is a particular kind of relationship between the commercial and non-commercial spheres in contexts lacking the solid institutional structures of the West (i.e. Romania, but also Hong Kong) where these spheres overlap, sometimes engaging the same individuals and initiatives all in the name of a romantic cooperation for 'building a scene together.' From the perspective of the



Illustration by Kna.

- mainly Western - institutional left, which functions on the basic principle of maintaining art's autonomy from the private sector (the domain of capital) with the support of the state (the ad-

ministrator of the public good), this is hard to process. But the situation is not always so easily distinguishable along ethical lines outside of the West. Sometimes this cooperative ►

spirit in a scene leads to interesting hybrid situations where art's independence (independence to express critique; I am not interested in art's independence for the sake of it) needs to be secured from significantly more dangerous agents of power - corrupt, conservative or outright dictatorial states - and this might be most easily and effectively achieved through the venues of trading art, to put it bluntly. And yes, sometimes the results of such collaborations are nastier, with the commercial realm capitalising on this voluntarist spirit, capitalising on the economy of attention fostered internationally around such an 'emergent' context and leaving that context bereft of any relevant non-commercial and critical practice."

Costinas continues, "If we believe that art's function is to produce aesthetic experiences that articulate intellectual propositions, it is very difficult to reconcile that with the very clear and obvious motivation behind a commercial gallery that ultimately needs to sell clearly defined and finite 'objects,' because the aesthetic experiences and intellectual propositions are often difficult to reduce to an object in space and time - the only thing a gallery can sell. So what a gallery can sell from an art experience is often only a reduction, either the physical remains of an art experience or the symbolic capital of having hosted in its premises an art experience that otherwise created no objects to be sold later on - like in the case of proper curatorial projects hosted by commercial galleries, which gain in return an increase of their 'cool factor'. This critique has been pointed out in the Western art system at least since the 60s, though it is in many ways a continuation of even earlier critical discourses on the bourgeois taste, and, even if we should constantly be aware of it and state it clearly all the time, we should also constantly try to examine critically the entire system. And if the concern is to avoid art being just an instrument serving

the general political and economic system, I often wonder; what serves better and deeper the system? The commercial realm, which at its worst serves individual vanities, some business plans (necessarily irrelevant when compared to the scale of the real economy), and some branding strategies? Or the non-profit field that sometimes uses public money in order to execute concrete steps in concrete and dubious policy plans (like urban redevelopment of many sorts, gentrification, and mainly the opening for business of cities / countries - often through biennials - with some of which I have also been personally involved)?"

Both the potential power of the artist-gallery relationship and the attendant possible conflicts emerge from the status of autonomy. For many, the modernist call to autonomy remains a mandate that the artist refuse imbrication in any kind of commercial or, for that matter, political system. In other readings however, the attachment to the autonomous and therefore collectable object appears as a crutch that at best distracts from - and at worst obscures - the supposed true core of art entirely; something about eternity, affect, and relations. It is largely true that curating in the commercial realm is primarily a material endeavour, in that exhibition projects not centred on making groups of objects speak, either to one another or to the viewer, instead often become intangible marketing efforts celebrating the purported radical nature of the gallery programme. If all works of art, from sculpture to performance, are seen equally as objects, however, it may be interesting to note that, almost paradoxically, the historical and future (and therefore relational) validity of the object depends far more on its selfness than upon the conditions of production, modes of circulation and other relationships that may have defined the way in which it originally entered visual culture. As much as there is a distinction between the

autonomy of the artist and the autonomy of the artwork (and, even more so, the autonomy of art writ large), so too is there a broad gap between the aspiration to autonomy and the inevitable ontological withdrawal.

Huib Haye van der Werf, curator at Skor (Foundation for Art and Public Domain), approaches the idea of the commercial realm through his experience with public art: "Commissioning art in the public domain is obviously a tricky undertaking as the audience which is to be confronted or enlightened - preferably both - by the artwork is unsuspecting. This type of work has to inherently presuppose its urgency to a larger public, more so than to those who pay and choose to go to an institution to see art; and also, to 'invent' the topic which is to be urgent. The tactics in doing this can be critical, anecdotal, supplemental, and affirmative. What is missed in the discourse on art in the public realm is that all of these tactics are bound to the commissioner and are therefore also an instrument of a certain position. Most artists, curators, critics and so on, believe that only critical art in the public domain - one that questions that domain itself or the parties that use it or represent it - is autonomous of a certain agency, but this is a false premise. All art is an agent of its commissioner, and commercial art - that which is commissioned beyond the institutional realm - has just as valid a position as an actor in the discourse and realm of contemporary art. What is critical here, however, is the way this commercial work manifests itself - or how any work of art manifests itself in the public domain. For example, in recent years there have been many high-end commercial enterprises which have used tactics that seem underground in terms of visual language, but nothing could be further from the truth; think Bacardi, Coca-Cola, G-Star Jeans, Levi's, and so on. They are, as far as I am concerned, a compliment to contemporary art and its lan-

guage. When the commercial has borrowed the language of art, it has done something right. The next step - and I hope this one comes soon - is that art recognises this intrinsic value and demands back from the commercial enterprises a stake and/or share in the profits, whether it be a direct claim through intellectual property or further support in other projects."

If the relations of curatorial practice are unavoidably contingent, the question then turns from how curatorial strategies and techniques - either in the gallery, in the institution, or independent of these structures - affect the viability or integrity of the work itself (they do not) to how they are situated within a wider system of value. Our key mantra here must constantly ask; what kind of value is created through this action, and for whom? When we realise that the object is not the object of curatorial practice, the field must be reorganised, at least on a personal level, in order to better reflect its ongoing movements of value and power. At the same time, one of the key stakes in the problem of curating in the commercial sphere remains the possibility of independence. No small number of curators, particularly in China, where it sometimes seems as if all of the most successful makers of exhibitions have turned to the operation of commercial galleries, choose this route. Some claim that the opportunity for independence from institutional funding in an ethically and politically compromised system may actually manufacture a heightened potential for fidelity to creative work. This proposition, always, should be met with skepticism; ultimately, as with any exhibition situation, it is a question of the rigour and seriousness brought to the table by the curator involved. ■