Martha Rosler

Someone Says…

Someone says "the next Documenta should be curated by an artist!" and artists everywhere clap their hands over their ears and run out of the room keening "nonono." Artists, low on the proverbial totem pole, do not know what to make of this offer of the power of choice. Even if the fairy tale could never be realized, just the idea makes some artists snappish and indignant (while commercial gallerists mutter,' they should, they should... Anyone could do a better job than curators!," professional curators might respond with indulgence. After all, it was a curator who thought this project up!) Artists may not want to condescend to gate keeping, even as only a conceptual exercise. They show a marvelous respect for a modernist division of labor that could also be encapsulated as "Render unto Caesar..." Besides, this is a big-stakes exhibition. Some artists may be worried about cronyism—or the opposite, reserving the right to turn down one's friends. But would you select your "enemies," those whose artistic stance is completely antithetical to yours? Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. If artists are shy about taking on this master role, it may simply be because to do so would be a tacit admission that they have too much time on their hands—not enough time spent in the studio, too much bureaucratic calculation and wrangling, too much business.

The power thing pulses like an undercurrent. Artists—who remain, in popular view, romantically childlike creators —drive a hard bargain only at their peril (with a few, mostly male, exceptions). Artists may channel mysterious energies, but others get to make the choices. Choice trumps creation, and choice is linked to all rewards, including an enlarged audience for the chosen artists' work. Choice—which, according to those who formally exercise it, veers between a sophisticated deployment of meticulously organized knowledge and sheer inspired poesy—is a metafunction. In an era of information overload, metafunctions that organize and interpret data, refashioning it and boiling it down for the ultimate recipients (the audience), are accorded more power, if not respect, and those who wield it are courted by all sides. The critic, the reviewer, the curator, all find their object and bring them to the world's attention. In the past decade or so, in response to the burgeoning demand of greatly enlarged classes of buyers in quite a few countries, critics have been displaced by dealers in the hierarchy of gate-keeping. Curators remain in place—though relying more and more on dealer services, duly acknowledged on wall labels. Some curators are rationalists, others flit about elfin-like, lining up art objects in their exhibitions into little aesthetic concussions.

But Documenta? It is the art world's five-year plan, the collective breathing of an international art world observed in the act of a changing self-definition. (What is internationalism after modernism?) Documenta must do more than nod to the philosophical tangles of the art world as it responds to a fast-changing world picture. What is international after modernism is geopolitics, as the world moves from old to new colonialisms. Documenta is a diagnosis and an ethical compass more than a poetically inspired walk through a garden of aesthetic delights. Advanced curatorial tastes are insufficient in a grand exposition; something more is required to differentiate such shows, and its artists, from a fashion industry catwalk.

Right now there is a protracted tussle within the art world over a basically conservative aestheticism, a refurbishment of Kant, and the more conceptual-rationalist work from the latter part of the past century. So far, this aestheticism is less hysterical and precious than the other fin de siècle aestheticism, but its intentions are just as revanchist, and pernicious. Documenta needs to evade this temptation; the last two curators did a mostly excellent job of this, but this job is obviously too big for one person, and there are always sub-curators, assigned to sub-regions, I suppose. This means regional factionalism and favoritism, inevitably subverting the grand design with outrageously extraneous inclusions.

So should artists do this sort of thing? I've organized an exhibition cycle of three shows and four related public forums, and it was hell, but it is doable. But what mentally competent artist would want to do Documenta?...not unless it could be something completely unlike its present heavily physical manifestation at proliferating sites in Kassel and environs, unless it could be a book, a web-site, a set of conferences, and a
series of far-flung shows—wait—that is where it is moving! Now we can see that Documenta is a compendium of new product lines. Well, then, the boundaries are down. By all means, let a team of fifty artists in fifty cities in fifty countries put on shows all at once, in whatever form for whatever length of time. I propose the first one be organized by the artist Thierry Geoffroy/Colonel, with his project of a "curator lifting running competition" in which artists must run with their curator-partners on their shoulders, as proposed on tiny pieces of paper at the present Venice Biennale.

But I have a question. It seems that curators get paid well for their work at these big exhibitions, and of course artists get paid not at all. If artists do the curating, will we get paid for our labor, or is this more free inspiration, freely given?

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