

CONFERENCE REPORT

Demystifying Curation

JOHN GAYER REPORTS ON 'MAVIS CURATORIAL SESSION: INQUIRIES INTO CURATORIAL PRACTICE' 2 MAY 2009, PROJECT ARTS CENTRE, DUBLIN.



Speakers and audience at 'MAVIS Curatorial Session'



From left to right – Bart De Baere; Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev; Raimundas Malasauskas and Tone Olaf Nielsen



The audience at 'MAVIS Curatorial Session'

WHEN I read the announcement regarding an open session in which four international curators would answer IADT's MA in Visual Arts Practices students' questions on the current state of curatorial practice, I immediately registered for the event. My interest was piqued as I've always found the notion of 'the curator' and 'curation' mysterious, and this seemed like a welcome opportunity to familiarize myself with current curatorial issues and approaches.

In preparation for the discussion I downloaded an introductory text entitled *Curatorial Session: Reader – Inquiries into Curatorial Practice* from the MAVIS website (www.mavis.ie) and sifted through the 17 students' questions. The range of questions leapt from considering the type of biennial most suitable for Dublin to speculations about curators as cultural anthropologists. Overall, the questions looked at the evolution of the concept of the curator, away from a custodial occupation to more of a culturally trailblazing role akin to that of a film director, cultural producer or public intellectual.

In terms of patterns and rationales underpinning the questions and citations included in the reader, the main focus was on the last five years. Manifesta 6 (www.manifesta.org), – slated for Nicosia in 2006 – but that never happened, stood out as the most frequently cited exhibition; as did the names of curators Okwui Enwezor, Raimundas Malasauskas (one of the invitees) and Jens Hoffman. But outside of these points, no obvious patterns presented themselves. Besides the notion of the exhibition as a subject of critical inquiry, overall the reader text emphasised the idea of the art exhibition as an increasingly complex phenomenon.

'Inquiries into Curatorial Practice' took place at the Project Arts Centre Dublin on 2 May. The four contributing panelists were – Tessa Giblin, Curatorial Seminar Module Leader MAVIS and Curator of Visual Arts, Project Arts Centre; Bart De Baere, director of MuHKA, the Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art; Tone Olaf Nielsen a member of the curatorial collective Kuratorisk Aktion; Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Chief Curator at Turin's Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea; and 'speculative curator' Raimundas Malasauskas.

In light of the complex and contradictory positions outlined by the reader, I did wonder how all these issues could be adequately addressed in a single meeting, by just four speakers – however knowledgeable they might be. As it happened this predicament never transpired. As Tessa Giblin, Curatorial Seminar Module Leader MAVIS and Curator of Visual Arts, Project Arts Centre, noted in her opening statement, the participants had been invited to respond to the questions that interested them. This allowed the curators to respond in greater detail to a few select questions or address the host of them.

The ensuing discussions offered a whirlwind tour that took the audience through a range of current and past projects, ideas, opinions and observations. Bart De Baere, director of MuHKA, the Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art, spoke of "culture with continuity" and noted the importance of collaboration, whilst also stressing the need for ever-changing relationships with audiences as a way of keeping

institutions close to society and preventing petrification. MuHKA is currently temporarily closed for technical upgrading and renovation; the collection has been dispersed throughout Belgium and abroad. Bart De Baere observed that this has led to a contradictory situation – while the programme of special exhibitions makes the collection more accessible by extending its reach, it also moves the focus away from its traditional space of attention, thus to some extent reducing visibility.

Tone Olaf Nielsen responded to the notion of the curator as public intellectual, whilst also addressing the importance of input and collaborations with non-art publics in projects dealing with issues of colonialism, xenophobia and globalization. In what seemed to be a delicate balancing act between politics and art, Nielsen's presentation consisted of an outline of Kuratorisk Aktion's activities and goals – the primary purpose of which is to engender sustainable change by addressing inequalities in class, gender and race. Seeing the input of the non-art public as an opportunity to avoid blind spots, she noted the incidence of questions such as "where is the art?" that this type of work generates.

Raimundas Malasauskas began his presentation by distancing himself from his introductory tag as a 'speculative curator'. He went on to reflect upon analogies for curatorship, as well as the connection between a conscious suspension of disbelief and being a willing viewer to the unexpected with regard to viewing exhibitions. In Malasauskas' view, the creative terrain occupied by the curator has parallels with that of the author, more than a film director. He also talked about the precarious position of freelance and independent curators – noting specifically that because one's track record was what led to more work, there was a danger of overly working to meet other's expectations and requirements. In Malasauskas' view, curating with a view to offering the viewer the unexpected was crucial. And in relation to this he noted that the current trend for transparency and access was sometimes at odds with this – stripping work of its content and ability to surprise.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev delivered the final presentation. Utilizing a 17 minute long time lapse video of Pierre Huyghe's 2008 Sydney Biennial installation as visual counterpart to her comments, Christov-Bakargiev revved through answers to all of the questions posed in the reader. She followed this with readings of three texts on the subjects of composition; 'what are artworks?' and understanding artworks and their contexts.

Overall this event shed light upon the multifaceted and multidirectional nature of curatorial practice, and emphasized the inherent complexity of what is an increasingly dynamic field. Curation has evolved from its classic definition as a managerial and custodian role, to now comprise a hybrid activity encompassing the roles of impresario, theorist, critic, producer, director, anthropologist, researcher, author and talent scout

An issue that to my mind that was overlooked was that of the consequences of the global proliferation of large-scale biennale style

events. One might well wonder if another is really needed? For example the first Brussels Biennial, held in 2008, failed to attract audiences in sufficient numbers and was forced to close prematurely⁽¹⁾. This was more than disappointing as the artistic director had devised the event to be critique of the biennial system and utilized the innovative model of inviting a range of international art institutions to create a series of exhibitions relating to the theme of 're-used modernity' – which also served as the title of the exhibition. Also the subject of the privileged position and status of the curator within the contemporary art world was not tackled. Some form of debate on notions of curatorial ethics, I think could have enriched the discussion and added an interesting additional dimension to the proceedings.

The general discussion following the presentations turned to the current economic crisis and the increased professionalism of curators. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev who has been appointed artist director of the upcoming Documenta 13 (2012) conceded that much would have to be rethought. A key point was made by Tone Olaf Nielsen, who observed that there are many crises today and that the effects of the financial crisis do not affect everyone in the same way. The professionalisation of curation and the art world was also questioned – and the validity of curatorial studies programmes, such as MAVIS, also came under criticism. The chief concerns being the use of overly programmatic methods and turning curatorial studies programmes into trade schools for an overly commercialized 'art industry'. On the plus side, MAVIS was deemed to be a healthy model. In general it was recognized that good curators come from various backgrounds and that diversity within the student body should form an important component of curatorial programmes.

Offering an abundance of opinions, observations, pregnant pauses, half finished sentences, plus the occasional admission of incomprehension, the curatorial session provided anything but a tidy summation of current curatorial practice. This event served to underline how curatorial practice is a constantly evolving entity, that is intent on responding to various contexts, societal shifts, as well as its own history. Moreover, the participants conveyed a sense of mutual acceptance and of a common purpose – despite differences in interests and experience.

Interestingly, my prior uncertainty about the curation was actually added to by this event – but in a constructive way. The MAVIS Curatorial Sessions, for me, underlined how curation is akin to art practice – multifaceted, complex, inconclusive and necessarily always explainable – and thus open to audiences to draw their own conclusions. As an educative experience, I found the curatorial session provided a lot of food for thought.

John Gayer

Notes

1) Niels Van Tomme/Sam Steverlyncx, *Crossroads: two critics' assessments, Brussels Biennial 1: Re-used Modernity*, Art Papers, vol. 33, no. 2 (March/April 2009), pp. 44-47.