



NORA STERNFELD

EXHIBITION AS A SPACE OF AGENCY

Over the last 20 years, design discourse has fundamentally changed: the Bauhaus idea that design is primarily concerned with improving social relations has been updated and reformulated under post-Fordist conditions. Now, 'social design' is concerned with social processes that intervene in society, finding solutions to conflicts and problems, and with the pursuit of bringing about a positive transformation. Within this new discourse on design, a key shift in the paradigm has taken place away from the product and towards the process or project. 'Participation' is the term now used when speaking of making the users into the development of objects and everyday situations. Against this backdrop, there are a number of interfaces to educational and curatorial practices that have emerged. In addition, numerous links are being forged to new forms of practice-based knowledge production within the art field. The text discusses these intersections from a critical curatorial and educational perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Before prematurely celebrating the processualization and its associated orientation toward social transformation as an end in itself, it appears crucial – particularly at the interfaces to artistic, curatorial and educational practices – to consider some of the uncertainties and differentiations that have repeatedly been addressed within critical and progressive areas within these fields. Let us begin by discussing a differentiation conceived within the context of critical pedagogy in the 1970s: As a teacher fighting against illiteracy in Brazil and as a Marxist and liberation theologian, Paulo Freire developed the idea of a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’, in which a struggle for justice and equality within education is of central importance. He refers to a fundamental decision with regard to every educational project, of the need to take a stand, to introduce a set of beliefs and, rather than assuming their disinterested neutrality, consciously take them through the process of education. He locates this process as ‘tactically inside and strategically outside’ the system (FREIRE 1993).

So, according to Freire, there is no neutral education, it is always political, either in the sense of a consolidation of the existing circumstances or with respect to their change. Peter Mayo, writing about Gramsci and Freire, sums up this idea in form of a simple question: ‘On which side are we on, when we educate and teach, when we act?’ – a question that always needs to be asked, but not necessarily answered (MAYO 2007).

This apparently self-evident question of ‘taking sides’, declaring which side we are on, certainly raises a number of further questions: How do we know that we are on the side of the oppressed? Are we always? Do we always want to be? Who are we when we are in the process of taking sides? Who is nevertheless excluded in this process? And the most classic question: How can we radically change the circumstances from the inside? Thus, the very process of taking a stand and opting for one side grows more complicated. But in order to become complicated, the decision has to be taken in the first place. Only then do the contradictions that beset such a step (which to some extent already haunted Freire) become fully evident and thus active and productive. Because even when we have no foresight of what an education could be on a fundamental level and in the very middle of ‘the system’, it is this very contradiction that could effect an opening to agency, a possible space for action. If we don’t see power relations as one-dimensional blocks, but as battlefields, then the place for learning and teaching can become an ‘embattled terrain’. Education could then become a practice in which the sayable, thinkable, and doable could be negotiated, and, to quote Peter Mayo, ‘the dominant forms of thinking and acting can be challenged in the wide and amorphous areas of civil society’ (MAYO 2007).

If we take seriously this necessity of coming to a clear and open decision,

which was certainly already a motive force for the Bauhaus School¹ then we must also consider some of the logics and conditions of post-Fordist capitalism: two of its key characteristics are ‘dematerialization’ – here, we may be reminded of, for instance, the rampant economization of education and knowledge as well as the immaterialization of labor – and ‘transformation’. In order to respond to the neoliberal call, we must all become flexible, to constantly be ready to transform ourselves, and to leave behind our achievements from previous struggles. What might ‘agency’ look like if we also consider its situatedness within the context of governmentality? The initial reaction may be to shy away from change. However, this is not what I am arguing for here. I do not see ‘doing nothing’ as a way of responding to the fact that something, which we are right in the middle of, has been set in motion. Instead, I would like to propose taking a closer look at the direction the change is headed. From a curatorial perspective, I feel it is important to comprehend the path of processualization within the exhibition context – in light of all the knowledge we have about the possible concurrent complicity with neoliberal immaterialization and capitalist transformism.

CRITIQUE OF THE REGIME OF REPRESENTATION

After briefly speaking about processualization in the design field,

I would now like to pose some questions about the developments within the exhibition field, relating to the theme of this article: Why are we now speaking of transformation within the museum context as well, and no longer only of history? What led to this discussion of processualization within the curatorial field, in the first place? The debates on the logics of representation have been a key impetus for shifting the discourse on artistic and curatorial approaches, from a concern with the ‘object’ towards a concern with the ‘process’. Since the 1960s, representation has been challenged in art and new museology, as well as in cultural studies, in postcolonial and poststructural theory and in activism, both in terms of depiction (Darstellung) and in terms of proxy (Stellvertretung). Representation critique has become an important impetus for conceptual art practices, curatorial approaches and political claims. Let us, for instance, consider the numerous artistic strategies of processualization and dematerialization that have challenged classic ideas of representation. One example here is conceptual artist Graciela Carnevale, part of the Argentinean activist-artist collective tucuman arde, who, in October 1968, locked all the visitors of an art opening in the gallery without any explanation – until they broke out of the gallery of their own accord. At documenta 12, the by now longest and most canonical documentation of the action was shown with the purpose of politicizing the audience. However, not much of the original action’s intent remained at the

d12 presentation, due to the overemphasis of the work's formal aspects.

It would be much too simple now – seeing as it has long since been integrated into representation practice – to claim that the

action was co-opted by the institution.

However, because the institutionalization of such actions has become so self-evident, over the past few years, the simplicity of the dichotomy of a seemingly evil representational 'inside' of the institution and the good, anti-representational 'outside' has been increasingly called into question. In addition, several authors have addressed the fact that representation critique is often unable resist being consumed by representation. For instance, artist and theorist Hito Steyerl has made it clear that even institutional critique approaches that are geared toward dismantling hegemonic exclusion within depiction (*Darstellung*) can contribute to perpetuating identifications and ethnicizations. She speaks of the 'urge to indiscriminately drag underprivileged or unusual constituencies into museums, even against their will – just for the sake of 'representation' (STEYERL 2006).

In a more recent text, Steyerl proposes a 'Withdrawal from Representation' as a way of resisting the regime of representation: 'This shatters many dogmas about the relation between political and pictorial representation. For a long time my generation has been trained to think that representation was the primary site of contestation for both politics and aesthetics.

The site of culture became a popular field of

investigation into the "soft" politics inherent in everyday environments. It was hoped that changes in the field of culture would hark back to the field of politics. A more nuanced realm of representation was seen to lead to more political and economical equality.

But gradually it became clear that both were less linked than originally anticipated, and that the partition of goods and rights and the partition of the senses were not necessarily running parallel to each other. Ariella Azoulay's concept of photography as a form of civil contract provides a rich background to think through these ideas. If photography was a civil contract between the people who participated in it, then the current withdrawal from representation is the breaking of a social contract, having promised participation but delivered gossip, surveillance, evidence, serial narcissism, as well as "occasional uprisings". (STEYERL 2012)

In this vein, curators have also increasingly been exploring what an exhibition is capable of, beyond representation. What needs to be done to cultivate reflexivity that is aimed at agency and not only at mere depiction? What does a post-representative curatorial praxis look like, one that is no longer concerned with valuable objects or objective values and just as little with identitarian claims. To be able to do this we must begin at the link between critique and agency: to simultaneously consider questions of 'Who is speaking?' and 'Why this way?' and 'What to do?'. This means speaking more and more about 'curatorial' (Beatrice von Bismarck) spaces of agency, in which unexpected

encounters (Irit Rogoff) and discursive interchanges can take place. And this must be done in such a way that not only visibility is created, but where agency also becomes possible, and shifts can take place – even in the visible, sayable and thinkable. In other words, the concern is no longer that something should be shown or depicted, but to make it possible for something to actually take place. Because this cannot be planned, the question arises, which curatorial strategies need to be developed in order to create such a space of possibility and agency. Returning to Freire's distinction between the tactical inside and strategic outside, what does it mean to assume there is a fundamental decision and simultaneously doubt the existence of an 'outside'? If we assume it is no longer possible to take a outside stance in regards to critique, 'instituent practices' come into view: with this term Gerald Raunig describes 'practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time, practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions and the institution, their own being-institution' (RAUNIG 2006).

THE AGENCY OF 'PERHAPS'

Some of the first principles of emancipatory educational thought, including its fundamental belief in the notion of 'autonomous subjects' and

'emancipation from immaturity', have been challenged by poststructuralist theory, according to which such concepts are as empty as the idea of being fully on the 'good side' in the context of a debate or a struggle. Against this background, current educational theorists are trying to integrate poststructuralist concepts such as 'event' and 'experience' into the processes of education. With this, the 'impossible' becomes as important and as active a category as the 'possible', providing their discourse with a reflective edge lifting it beyond the pragmatic and functionalist implementation of an idea or a program. And there is always something unforeseeable in education, which cannot be planned: perhaps this is the reason why Sigmund Freud called education (together with politics and psychoanalysis) 'an impossible task'. It becomes especially impossible where education is poised to engage with social change, to consciously effect transformation in the direction of social change. Such a perspective encourages acceptance of a massive loss of control and of the risk of failure. For Jacques Derrida, the impossible is the condition of possibility of the possible. In the context of education this could suggest that there is a dimension of agency in its very uncontrollability. Because when there is only space for the necessary, change is impossible. Thus Derrida integrates the 'perhaps' in his philosophical discourse:
I will not say that this thought of the impossible possible, this other thinking of

the possible is a thinking of necessity but rather, as I have also tried to demonstrate elsewhere, a thinking of the 'perhaps' that Nietzsche speaks of and that philosophy has always tried to subjugate. There is no future and no relation to the coming of the event without experience of the 'perhaps' (DERRIDA 2005.)

The necessity of a taking a stance politically and the attendant impossibility of knowing whether we are intellectually on the right side has a way of producing a mode of impossibility that challenges education with a qualifying 'perhaps', a temporal suspension that we have to assume, not as something arbitrary but as a constitutive component of the very act of making a decision. What consequences might such a concept as the 'decided perhaps' hold for our question about curatorial agency? Derrida himself puts it this way: 'For if this impossible that I'm talking about were to arrive perhaps one day, I leave you to imagine the consequences. Take your time but be quick about it because you do not know what awaits you' (DERRIDA 2005).

So, what we are dealing with here is a task that is at once impossible and necessary. This may at first seem irritating and make action appear more difficult – but we have to consider that there is no such thing as an outside stance in terms of relations, nor any clear, certain direction we can head in... Nonetheless, for Derrida this seems to be exactly the condition that makes agency possible. Because something can only happen and be changed if we do not

already know or predefine what it will be about in the end. And it is exactly this idea of the exhibition as a space of possibility that appears to be receiving more and more attention in newer curatorial approaches. As Hans-Ulrich Obrist, for example, has put it: 'One could say that an exhibition can only take place when it is least expected: given that one ascribes to the idea that it takes place and that when one waits, things can happen that have never happened before' (OBRIST ET AL. 2011)².

In this sense, post-representative curatorial strategies³ may also be described as an agency of the 'perhaps'. Drawing on Deleuze, Irit Rogoff writes: 'to participate is to lay a ground to a claim. And I would say that my entire 'Participation' project is in this spirit of laying a ground to a claim rather than to elaborate a set of strategies by which one intervenes' (ROGOFF 2010).

Against the backdrop of the critiques and reflections discussed here, the aims of the newer design discourses mentioned in the beginning – such as social relevance and transformation – are more complicated. Taking them seriously means we are obviously no longer interested in simply rolling up our sleeves and solving problems. For, on the one hand, the solution is often already part of the problem itself and, on the other, it may sometimes be more important to name the problems in the first place and find new ways to render them negotiable and contestable.

By focusing on post-representative agency, I am arguing for a paradigm shift, from representation to presence. However, I am interested in taking a stance while still leaving the aim open. In this sense, the artist collective Ultra-Red describes their strategy as coming from the future. Under the title 'We Come From Your Future', at the Tate Triennale 2009, Ultra-Red conducted a series of sound investigations in London whose starting point was 'What is the sound of anti-racism?'

We Come From Your Future is a sound investigation into the future of anti-racism in the UK.(...) We Come From Your Future starts today. It takes us to sites of current struggle that are not always aware of their historical antecedents; it listens to stories which we neither know nor seek to know in the present; it claims that those stories stem from a history that is embedded in our contemporary situation, and that belongs already to our experience (ULTRA-RED, 2013)

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NOTES

1 In the 1919 Bauhaus Manifesto, Walter Gropius wrote: 'Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist!'

Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.' <http://www.thelearninglab.nl/resources/Bauhaus-manifesto.pdf>

2 « Robert Musil a dit que l'art a lieu où on l'attend le moins. On pourrait dire que l'exposition a lieu où on l'attend le moins: pour peu qu'on sorte de cette idée qu'elle a lieu ou et quand on l'attend, des choses sans précédent peuvent parfois apparaître. »
Elie During, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Donatien Grau, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Qu'est ce que le curating? Une conversation manifeste*, Paris 2011, p. 43.

3 Together with curators Luisa Ziaja and Natasa Petresin and political theorist Oliver Machart, under the title 'What Comes After the Show', we are currently working on processes and strategies for addressing issues concerned with art and politics after representation.