Active Cultures

MARIA LIND ON THE CURATORIAL

Is there something we could call the curatorial? A way of linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space? An endeavor that encourages you to start from the artwork but not stay there, to think with it but also away from and against it? I believe so, and I imagine this mode of curating to operate like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions—owing much to site-specific and context-sensitive practices and even more to various traditions of institutional critique. The curatorial would thus parallel Chantal Mouffe’s notion of “the political,” an aspect of life that cannot be separated from divergence and dissent, a set of practices that disturbs existing power relations. At its best, the curatorial is a viral presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas, whether from curators or artists, educators or editors.

This proposition demands that we continue to renegotiate the conventions of curating. And it asks that we look closer at recent curatorial projects to find potential avenues for curating during the decade ahead. In this regard, the 2012 São Paulo Bienal, cosponsored by Iva Mesquita and Ana Paula Cohen, was exemplary. Of the two hundred or so biennials in the world, São Paulo is the second oldest (the first being Venice); since its inception in 1931, it has been one of Latin America’s most important platforms for both international and local modern and contemporary art. It has introduced and renewed connections among artists, visitors, and curators; it has stimulated crucial debates. Now that a number of art institutions and organizations have developed in the region, however, the biennial’s original role as popular educator is less pertinent. This changed landscape was taken as a starting point by Mesquita and Cohen: If it was no longer necessary to initiate new audiences, could the goal instead be to revisit the very role of the biennial itself?

The curators thus focused on artwork that reflexively engaged collecting and archival practices—the kind of art, in fact, that does not garner much attention in mainstream venues. The biennial invited viewers to study Laya Mita Brandal’s “many detailed and deeply personal computer prints in low vitrines. It allowed you to read about Jean-Luc Godard’s engagement with television networks in Mozambique, in a sculptural installation by Angela Ferreira. You could select photographs from Armin Linke’s archive and print your own booklet on-site. Most significantly, when it came to the exhibition’s overall structure, the “department store model” of previous biennials—

was to a large degree driven by curating, rather than by criticism or art history. Seen from this perspective, curating is not so much the product of curators as it is the fruit of the labor of a network of agents. The outcome is a stirring of smooth surfaces, a specific, multilayered way of agitating environments both inside and outside the white cube. The curatorial involves not just representing but presenting and testing; it performs something here and new instead of merely mapping something from there and then. It is serious about addressing the query, What do we want to add to the world and why? In this sense, the curatorial is a qualitative concept, just like the political in Mouffe.

An unavoidable question arises, however: Has the curatorial produced more than an irritation in the art world, more than a temporary frisson? Has it had any lasting effect on how we think about art and the rest of the world? It is too soon to say. If the curatorial can be taken up by practically anyone within the field of contemporary art, this expansiveness could also appear to be just another instance of job diversification in the experience economy. Yet I do know that the business of traditional curating, like the car industry, needs to rethink its modes of production. With the proliferation of academic curatorial programs across the globe, creative thinking is needed to create professional opportunities—but also to torque the profession itself. The existing positions for curators simply won’t suffice.

MARIA LIND IS DIRECTOR OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM AT THE CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES AT BARD COLLEGE IN HUDSON, NY (SEE CONTRIBUTORS).