

When attitudes become professions

I would like to share a few remarks, doubts and personal observations from the perspective of the visual arts scene, referring to the changes of the status and role of the curator as a professional in her /his field. This will not deal with the much debated shifts between the curator as an artist, or artist as curator, or starship of the curators, or fall of the curators as such – although we may discuss and consider if all those have impact on the nature of the creative work process which I would like to focus on. What exactly prompted me to talk about it were my mixed feelings and concerns about my own status, potential of the self-development and contribution to the arts scene.

It is a bit perverse as well – since whenever I start to read a book on curating, I feel somehow deep disinterest after a few pages. The same goes for curatorial studies, workshops and seminars – on one hand one is enthusiastic about self-education, meeting the peers, collective discussions, but the framework, jargon and professionalism all leaves one often disappointed. Maybe because sharing knowledge and experience is often put into a very precisely constructed and defined framework as well, so that one is participating in what is described as sharing, discussing, etc. but one is not necessarily really sharing, discussing or experimenting at all. What we touch and move around are safe discursive spaces.

Having worked since quite a while in the cultural scene, with special focus on the visual arts I have a possibility to observe the way myself and my colleagues work and develop their professional experience. The explosion of professional formats in the contemporary art scene, which define after all, how art is presented to the public and how it is connected and made visible within the culture, based very much on promotion and culture policies goes together with the professionalization of the figure of curator. Curator, who, since a while is no longer only exhibition maker, but a professional working in all sorts of activities – festivals, competitions, etc. in other words – he/she is the new decision maker, door keeper and selector, whose name is the label itself and guarantee of the quality of the offer. What is more, it seems curator became a prominent and desirable professional position – as Peter Greenaway recently remarked: *When I was travelling round the world ten years ago, everybody wanted to be filmmakers. Now everybody wants to be a custodian or a curator. Museums have become the largest industry of our times.*

Maybe it is a highly personal impression, which cannot be generalized, but somehow I find interesting the specific dichotomy which started to develop in the curatorial field. That track seemed to me a mode of engagement with contemporary art due to the deep interest in multidisciplinary connections between different art and culture disciplines, and with lack of any other better or more interesting way to research, challenge and develop modes of supporting and presenting visual arts understood also as a practice of culture/social communication.

I have never been fascinated by the *profession* of a curator as a position in itself – though I have always thought that it might be a perfect strategy for someone who wants to explore, learn, research, think, collaborate with artists, designers and architects or produce innovative forms of visual representation. A position, which allows to link different culture disciplines, meet interesting people and first of all – may allow to join the discussion on contemporary world, may contribute to the development of new discourses, might help to reflect upon and propose new directions.

So, in a way, as those who are devoting not only regular working hours, but contribute almost all private time as well (since, as we all know too well, we treat our work as part of our real life, from which it is so hard to take holidays off), of course we would like to be professional – meaning we would like to be treated seriously and seen as qualified and experienced enough to do our work in a trustworthy way.

The question of professionalization in the art world is always two-folded: on one hand we need tools to implement one's ideas smoothly, to communicate our concepts, to collaborate with different institutions. A certain standard set and followed by all, a certain common language and points of reference are definitely desired in that sense. On the other hand, for many of us, and for me personally, a certain hermetic and self-referential "professionalism" of art world seems very hard to approve.

Haunted, especially in Eastern Europe, by the phantom of cultural underdevelopment and lack of solid structures and formats, we prioritize the professionalization of the field. Self-accusation of non-professionalism is especially harmful, as it strikes at once at the very complex of lack of developed art system with powerful, established institutions resulting in the weak social reception and low position of visual arts in the cultural hierarchy. This tendency is strengthened through project-based cultural policies and system of funding. It is based on the conviction that we still miss the key players: globally powerful institutions, culture managers, art market. However, it is not that long way from standard to routine, and the standard hardly tackles any difference of another dynamics and sensibility that every artist and every show creates. Still, professionalism means first of all Western model of art system. On the other hand, non-governmental sector is growing and becoming more important than ever. As a counter-tendency to huge events, biennials and curatorial starship, collaborative values and collective process/authorship are juxtaposed again.

However, it was exactly in the Eastern Europe, where alternative forms such as galleries in private apartments, independent collaborative forms, alternative structures to traditional academies were developed. Artists often literally live till today with their archives, which are a unique potential source for the still non-written history of contemporary art. Is it a professional or unprofessional attitude then?

One is at the crossroads – expects up-to date forms of work within art field and growing prestige which opens professional possibilities for artists and curators. At the same time, one feels that never-ending catching-up with, places us always a few steps behind, always in the role of the one who lacks something. Observing the stable and developed art system one also sees its weak points and deficits. Too strong and too quick professionalization of art students and young artists, as well as curators follows too often and too easily the market model, which generally eliminates experiment and long-term process as burdened with the risk of failure. More often one starts to think about some third-way options, based on the belief that the starting point is not the handicap, but is even privileged in some way by the flexibility and self-made, open models which seem to be already eliminated in the mainstream.

One of the most notorious and prominent fathers of today's curatorial boom is Harald Szeemann, who strongly influenced the way we think about the potential of creative work with art and artists. The first 'independent curator without a home'. It is striking how he explained his decision of working as an art curator: *Sick of intrigues and jealousies, I began to move away from ensemble work until I was doing everything by myself - a one-man style of theater that reflected my ambition to realize a Gesamtkunstwerk*, he explained in the conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, another curatorship icon, known for being the most proliferate interview producer, who often has quite limited knowledge about the oeuvre of the artist he is talking to, and turns the talk itself into a way of learning. Szeemann admits here that the reasons for he left theatre ensemble collective work for the individual creation and solo professional performance were of personal or even psychological nature. It underlines as well his performative background he transposed into the exhibition making, which he further expresses: *The intensity of the work made me realize this was my medium. It gives you the same rhythm as in theater, only you don't have to be on stage constantly.(...) from the beginning meeting artists and looking at important shows was my education – I was always less interested in formal art history. (...) In putting together an exhibition, I took both connoisseurship and the dissemination of pure information into account and transformed both* (quotations from: Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, Zurich 2008).

It seems that individual practice of the curators and art historians like Szeemann, who build their own methodology upon diverse sources and backgrounds over years becomes now the scarce luxury. Individual authorship with freedom to experiment and taking the risk of it, as well as the risk of failure is hardly transferable into a repetitive system. In a way, its oversimplified version, adopted pragmatically to the conditions of the art production resulted in the models of biennale curatorship, simulations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where due to the limited time, huge scale and not always genius ideas we get overwhelming productions. The problem is, that such an individualistic approach as Szeemann's, if it is going to be still vivid, cannot be simply copied, extended without limits, adopted to every context and conditions.

One can wonder if today, in the age when 'private mythologies' and 'obsessions' are being codified, and taught as part of the profession, there is any space left for visionary art and ways of transmitting / presenting / communicating it.

If we all become 'art professionals', skillfully reusing the developed formats and counter-formats, will there be any place for 'amateurs' and those who want to seek their own way?