

About Urgency and Quality in Contemporary Art

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Hands: Collaborative Practices in Contemporary Art, as well as the report *European Cultural Policies 2015* and *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*. Among her recent co-edited publications are *Contemporary Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios* and *Performing the Curatorial: With and Beyond Art*. She is the 2009 recipient of the Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Achievement. In the fall of 2010 *Selected Maria Lind Writing* was published by Sternberg Press.

WHEN THE CURRENT secretary of culture of the municipality of Stockholm keeps repeating how happy she is that during her mandate much more art than before has been made possible, there is reason to raise an eyebrow or two. Her redirection of funds has increased the volume of art around, is the claim. And according to her, more art is a positive thing in and of itself. However, the problem now is not that there is too little art but that there is too much substandard art. Today, in Sweden, as well as in other places, we are flooded with rubbish art. Whereas in fact the only thing we need is more *good* art. The flood of substandard art that I have in mind is not “airport art”, “hotel art” or even “art at the doctor’s office”. Instead it is visible in supposedly professional contexts, in art institutions and beyond, in outdoor and indoor public space, in academia and other educational situations. The commercial art market is supporting this development, as can be expected, but so are public funding sources, both centrally and locally. The latter have taken the lead in a place like Stockholm promoting populist programming in municipal art institutions, alienating most of the professional art world. In this way they exemplify the fact that it is how you spend on art and culture which matters, not that you spend. Within the sphere of education the so-called new public management has left its marks on what procedures are allowed, often leading to administrative concerns and generalist approaches taking over.

Hence, the old division between public and private structures in the art world has become less and less tenable, one sign being precisely how their tastes and interests intermingle and even merge. In both cases, what is on offer is not publically discussed, debated or in other ways scrutinized. Instead, the prevalent culture of promotion keeps highlighting and praising whatever art has the biggest budget. The obvious explanation is the decay and partial disappearance of the public media sphere where such deliberations used to take place. Only a few critics keep publishing within mainstream media, and the professional arenas are becoming increasingly self-centred. This can be described as a forking of paths, where the mainstream and the side streams depart from each other with less and less contact between them. The former have the budgets, both public and private, and the media attention, while the latter have the new ideas and ways of working. It is muscles versus brains.

This is one reason why it is necessary to talk about quality again. Not quality in terms of eternal values and canons, quite the contrary. Distinctions should be welcomed, not in order to separate high culture from low culture à la Bourdieu, but in order to distinguish between what is instrumentalized by the commercial and the public sector alike. In a cultural condition marked by assessments and control driven by quantitative measurements, it is urgent to propose and insist on other values than the ones that the commercial market as well as new public management impose on us.

Today quality is about arguing for our case, in relation to the case of others. In this struggle of values curators and directors have to make conscious decisions and communicate their choices of artists, themes, methods etc. Quality is about openly supporting and fighting for something, insisting that this “something” is more important, necessary, and/or relevant than everything else and to constantly revise the criteria driving this. Thus, it is about distinctions, about arguing for “this” and not “that”, but not as arbiters of taste. Instead, it is distinctions as markers for urgency. This urgency can pertain to aesthetics, i.e. articulation and the “how-question”, to subject matter, conditions of production, context, etc. But it requires a certain amount of courage, to be tough and stake claims, which under new public management does not come without literal risks.

This notion of quality is clearly situational, depending on the context and the time, and thus it is performative. It relies on public deliberation, debate and conflict around its definition and constant redefinition. As for myself, I am an eclectic, a “situationist” with a predilection for precision combined with poetics, the bizarre paired with intensity. Art, which in some way pertains to lived reality, whether conscious or unconscious, often manages to engage me. But working curatorially means that this work is set in motion in such a way that the status quo is not taken for granted. As opposed to curating which tends to be “business as usual”, fulfilling the demands of the system and logic in place in ways not dissimilar to apparatchiks. Therefore, how, where and when you make a specific art work go public is at the core of working curatorially. In this there should be space for both affirmation and critique.

In the wake of the establishment of cultural theory and critical studies, and in light of post-structuralism’s deconstruction, old hierarchies have thankfully crumbled. This

1. See B.H.D. Buchloh.
Conceptual Art 1962–1969:
From the Aesthetic of Ad-
ministration to the Critique
of Institutions. *October*.
Vol. 55. Winter, 1990. pp.
105-143.

is yesterday's news. However, today's need to debate quality is different from fifteen years ago, when the crowd around *October* magazine warned precisely against the erosion of knowledge as their canons were questioned. This time around it is to do with publicly asking and challenging what we decide to do, and to acknowledge that absolute notions of quality are being replaced by mutating, context-sensitive negotiations which generate qualities in the plural. So please, don't offer us any more art per se, all we need is *good* art.

Where do revolutions happen nowadays? In the streets, is the most immediate answer. On Tahrir Square, in Zucotti Park and most recently on Maidan Square too. But, just as often, they happen behind closed doors far away from the visibility of outdoor public space and the transparency of democratic decision making. In fact, some of the most profound revolutions take place where iPhones are switched off and TV-cameras are absent, at board meetings and on the desks of bureaucrats.

A revolutionary plan which changed the course of both economy and politics in Sweden was shaped on 21 November 1985 in a villa in the countryside near Stockholm. The board of the Central Bank of Sweden met there in order to come to terms with the weakening economy, decreasing profits for the industry and increasing unemployment. The solution of the board was to make the banking sector autonomous by deregulating the credit market, an initiative endorsed by Olof Palme's social democratic government at the time. This unspectacular, and largely unknown albeit radical, event is the object of the artist Andjeas Eriksson's work *1985*. The work takes the shape of a play featuring the characters who participated at the board meeting, conceived for the villa itself and its surrounding picturesque landscape. It was commissioned by IASPIS (The International Artists Studio Program In Sweden) which itself is part of the state authority The Arts Grants Committee, sorting directly under the ministry of culture.

That the influence of bureaucracies has been growing rapidly since the advent of New Public Management in Western Europe is palpable in most sectors of society, whether the influence is revolutionary or not. Power has moved from the representatives of parliamentary democracy to public and private bureaucrats. A prominent feature in this process is the ever present and impressive volume of reviews, assessments and controls of different kinds. We count, weigh and measure more or less everything, and evaluate the results. The protocols for doing so go by various names: reviewing, inspection, certification, revision and quality control are some of them. The field of contemporary art is as affected by this as anybody else, it is felt in both art works and how organizations operate. But in contrast to art historian Benjamin Buchloh's "the administration of aesthetics", describing conceptual art's attitude towards procedures of bureaucracy¹, it is more to do with methodology, protocols and rituals than visual aesthetics – it is the performance of bureaucracy.

But why do we review and assess so much today? And what are the consequences? One explanation is that the public sector since about twenty years has gone through

a process of “organization making”, i.e., agencies and other entities have strived to become proper organisations. Then it is necessary – understandably – to be definable, measurable and manageable, characteristics coming from steering mechanisms borrowed from business management. In addition to this there has been a tendency to decentralize, which has led to responsibility having moved downwards in the hierarchies. Making sure that this freedom is not used in the wrong way or for disorder to occur, reviews and assessments are useful. This is a prescriptive use: unless you inspect and assess, problems might occur so you better take care of that yourself. But, as we know, reviews and assessments often lead to a demand for more – and presumably better – reviews and assessments. And they then become an instrument of control – to make people do what you want them to do.

When this logic of assessment starts to dominate over other logics, for example, professional logics which are specific to each field of activity, an *imaginary rationality* comes about. Especially when the reviewers and assessors can implement sanctions. As reviewers and assessors rarely can delve into the activities themselves they have to rely on reports, which in turn make the bureaucracy grow, stimulating rituals of control. However, reviews and assessments are often made too narrowly to be learning experiences and the new knowledge which they might produce don't enter the relevant arenas – at the end of the day, change in organizations happens through established power relations and ideology. Not through reviews and assessments. And yet, whereas politicians hang on to the idea that reviews and assessments signal action and engagement, they are in reality replacing political responsibility. The society of reviewing and assessing has in and of itself revolutionized everything from the workday of many a civil servant to how activities in the public sector are understood. A new kind of society has emerged in the wake of the performances of bureaucracy.

For Eriksson this is a fertile ground for his work, how bureaucracies become sites of condensed influence and revolutionary power, a force to reckon with. However, 1985 still waits to be staged. The Arts Grants Committee, through a high-ranking bureaucrat, suddenly erased the play from the board agenda of art projects by IASPIS which had to be approved, not by its director but by its board according to the logic of administration. This makes the context of the commissioning of the play, a state agency which has gone from in the 1990s being a model, one of the most vivid and artist-centric platforms in Europe, to now essentially being ruled by the bureaucracy, even more interesting. In all its banality. Furthermore, IASPIS happens to be the place where in the 2000s the word “bureaucracy” was banned from official use – as already Foucault taught us: real power always tries to conceal itself.

“We are all going to go to hell as a result of reading this,” says one of the members of the Joycean Society in a 2013 film by Dora García that takes the group's name as its title.² Since 1986 this band of enthusiasts has met every week in Zürich to read James Joyce's last novel, *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), together. It took the serious-looking participants eleven years to get through the book, and they are now on the third lap. The

2. Auguste Orts. *The Joycean Society*, Dora García. URL: <http://www.augusteorts.be/projects/73/The-Joycean-Society>

pioneers have aged with the collective reading, remembering when the stairs leading to the meeting room were not an obstacle. Newcomers have joined along the way, and when García and her crew come to spend time with the society, a couple of youngsters were present.

The camera sits in the middle of the room, gently following a humorous prereading chatting about the effects of artists earning too much money and about how to make sure that people are dead before they are buried. The conversation then turns into a discussion based on a close reading of the notoriously opaque book, literally word by word. They debate the meaning of ‘onon, onon’ on page 201 and move on to ‘shabby genteel’, ‘joys of ills’ and ‘peduncle’. Maybe ‘great Scott’ is another way of saying ‘great God’? Meanwhile squeaking chairs and rustling snack-bags contribute to the soundscape, a snow-covered bronze statue of Joyce smoking a cigarette fills the frame and the person holding the suspended microphone suddenly becomes visible.

The atmosphere in the film is intense. Each person has his or her own way of dealing with the text, but it is the extremely concentrated common endeavour of decoding it and, to some degree, understanding the limited number of rules that Joyce supposedly employed in writing the novel, that stands out. It is clear that the participants enjoy what they are doing and that they are unusually knowledgeable – the way nerds tend to be – without being professional historians of literature. Most of the readers are men. Witty and fascinating comments, suggestions and questions pertaining to specific terms fly fast across the room in a performance of collective intelligence at its most beautiful.

Dora Garcia has captured something rare and yet urgent in *The Joycean Society*, even overwhelmingly so: individual passion and commitment being shared and debated with others under strikingly consistent conditions. The scenario could be seen as irrelevant navel-gazing but it is the opposite. It speaks to a contemporary need for depth, continuity and pleasure, without having to think about consequences, whether the time it consumes or the absence of palpable outcomes. It is about a way of acting in the world, a sort of approach that allows for things to mature slowly and precisely.

By doing so, the people involved in reading Joyce not only place art centre-stage at a time when art itself often ends up in the margins of even the art world itself, being pushed aside by celebrity culture, art as an asset class and entertainment. Among so-called critical circles, art has been overrun by discussions on infra-structure and conditions of production: an effect of an increasingly precarious situation for art in general. Like true nerds, the members of the Joycean Society also perform a continuous collaborative engagement without necessarily reaching a conclusion. And the result is an outstanding art work, where the final film benefits from the process of the participants and vice versa. It is an example of urgency and quality at work.

The Silent University (TSU) is an alternative knowledge platform, initiated by the artist Ahmet Ögüt. *The Silent University* is aimed at asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants who, despite having professional backgrounds, cannot practice their profes-

sional skills in their present situation. Like many other initiatives within the so-called educational turn, *The Silent University* adopts the form of an academic program by arranging courses, lectures, and seminars for and by its members and for the general public. At the moment, a group of five lecturers are connected to the university's Stockholm branch; their talks connect to their specific educational backgrounds. The lectures have taken place at ABF (Workers' Educational Association) in Stockholm, as well as at Tensta konsthall, and they have been given in Arabic, Kurdish (Sorani), and Uigurish. Topics have ranged from Kurdish literature and learning techniques to Sharia laws and Syria's legal system.

Listeners who do not speak these languages are also invited to participate—in other words, knowledge will not be made accessible to all. This approach aims at illuminating the loss of knowledge caused by the social structures that silence it. Six mentors are part of the network that *The Silent University* has built up in Stockholm. These mentors work in various ways within core areas of *The Silent University*: asylum activism, local organizing, migration, and antiracism. A reference library is housed in Tensta konsthall and the accumulated knowledge bank is also available on the university's website. To be a member, it is required to donate time and knowledge. In this way an alternative currency is invented—exchanging knowledge instead of money or unpaid voluntary work—through which *The Silent University* generates an alternative form of exchange. At present the university exists in Berlin, Paris, and London.

This project is just one among many educational initiatives making up “the educational turn”. Artists and other cultural producers have, since the late 1990s, started alternative schools, academies and universities, literally across the globe. The impetus is a discontent with the established forms of education and the prevalent understanding of knowledge. In Europe “the educational turn” is intimately linked to the Bologna process and a critique against the standardization and economization of both education and knowledge. A desire to take the matter into your own hands has also fueled this development which as one of its latest examples includes *Open School* in London, a self-organized art education without tuition in a country where fees are pushing away many potential art students.³

Perhaps it is here, in the realm of “the educational turn”, or at least with inspiration from the many recent self-organized educational initiatives, that we can begin a phase of public wrestling over definitions of quality? In this we need to wrestle away the ever more pervasive quantitative notions of quality from the politicians, bureaucrats and other funders who impose them on us. We will not be able to escape the society of assessment and control but we can try and change the terms on which the assessments and the control are being exercised, toward qualitative ones. At the same time as this is a question of hands-on argumentation on the work floor of, on the one hand, art and art institutions and, on the other hand, the media, it is something for academia to take on board.

3. Open School East. URL: <http://www.openschooleast.org/>