

Kaja Pawełek:
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 his/her field. I do not intend to deal with the much-debated shifts between the curator as an artist, or artist as curator, or celebrity status of the curators, or the decline of curatorship as such – although one may discuss and consider whether all those have an impact on the nature of the creative process, which I would like to focus on. What prompted me to express my opinion on this issue were my mixed feelings and concerns about my own status, potential for self-development and contribution to the arts scene.

However perverse this might be, whenever I read a book on curatorship, I feel slightly bored after a few pages. The same goes for curatorial studies, workshops and seminars. However enthusiastic one may feel about self-education, meeting with peers and collective discussions, the framework, jargon and professionalism often leave one disappointed. Maybe this is because sharing knowledge and experience is often confined to a very rigid framework, 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. We operate in an environment of safe discourse.

Having worked in the art scene for some time now, with special focus on the visual arts, I have been able to observe how my colleagues and I have worked and developed our professional experience. The uncontrollable proliferation of the professional formats on the contemporary art scene, which determine, after all, how art is presented to the public, how it connects with culture and how it is made visible within culture, to a large degree based on promotional and cultural policies, advances along with the professionalization of the position of curator. The curator is no longer merely a creator of exhibitions, but a professional working in a whole range of activities (festivals, competitions, etc.). In other words, curator is the new decision maker, door keeper and selector, whose name itself becomes a brand and a guarantor of quality. What is more, it seems that the curator has become a valued 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 the specific dichotomy which has started to develop in the curatorial field interesting. I see such path as a mode of engagement with contemporary art as a result of my deep interest in multidisciplinary relations between different artistic and cultural disciplines, in the face of the lack of any better or more interesting ways to research, challenge and develop modes of supporting and presenting visual arts, also understood as a means of practising cultural/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 position for someone who wants to explore, learn, research, think, collaborate with artists, designers and architects or produce innovative forms of visual representation. Such work makes it possible to connect different cultural disciplines, meet interesting people and most of all, to enter the debate on the contemporary world, allowing one to contribute to the development of new discourses, possibly considering and proposing new directions.

Therefore, as with all those who do not work within fixed hours, but devote almost all of their private time to work (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 time off), we would naturally like to be considered 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-fold: on the one hand, we need tools to implement our ideas smoothly, to communicate our concepts, to collaborate

with different institutions. A certain standard established 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, the hermetic and self-referential “professionalism” of the art world is hard to countenance.

Haunted, especially in Eastern Europe, by the phantom of cultural underdevelopment and the lack of solid structures and formats, we prioritize professionalization in the field of culture. The self-accusation of non-professionalism is especially harmful, as it stems from the complexes arising from the lack of a developed art system involving established institutions, which results in weak social reception, as well as from the low ranking of visual arts in the cultural hierarchy. This tendency is reinforced through project-based cultural policies and the system of funding. The prevailing conviction is that we still lack the key players, such as globally powerful institutions, managers of culture and an art market. However, standards can easily become routine, failing to take into consideration the different dynamics and sensitivities of individual artists and exhibitions. Professionalization still mainly boils down to establishing the Western European model of the art system. On the other hand, the non-governmental sector is growing and becoming more important than ever. We are beginning to appreciate collaborative work and the collective process/authorship again, as a counter-tendency to huge events, biennials and curatorial stardom.

However, it was here in Eastern Europe that alternative solutions such as galleries in private apartments, independent forms of collaboration and alternative structures to traditional institutions were first developed. Even today, many artists literally live among their own archives, which are a unique potential source for the still unwritten history of contemporary art. Is this attitude therefore professional or unprofessional?

We are now at the crossroads, waiting for contemporary art forms and increased prestige to open up new professional avenues for artists and curators. At the same time, we feel that we are never catching up with, always a few steps behind, always playing the role of the one who lacks something. When we look at the stable and developed art system, we can also see its weak points and shortcomings. The over-rapid and over-intense professionalization of art students, young artists and curators, is all too often and too easily subordinated to the market model, which generally eliminates experimentation and long-term processes due to the associated risk of failure. Alternative third-way options are gaining increasing popularity, based on the belief that our underdevelopment is not a handicap but rather a privilege allowing us flexibility, as well as our own open models, which it seems are barely present in the mainstream anymore.

One of the most notorious and prominent precursors of today’s curatorial boom is Harald Szeemann, who has strongly influenced the way we think about the potential of creative work with art and artists. The first “independent curator without a home” explained his decision to work as an art curator in a striking way: *sick and tired of intrigues and jealousies, I began to move away from collective work until I was doing everything alone - a one-man style of theatre that reflected my ambition to realize a Gesamtkunstwerk [total work of art].* He said this in a conversation with Hans Ulrich Olbrist, another iconic curator, known for being the most proliferate interviewer, often having minimal knowledge about the work of the artist he is talking to, and who treats the interview itself as a way of learning. Szeemann admits that the reasons why he abandoned work in a theatre company in favour of individual work and solo professional performances were of a personal or even psychological nature. He also emphasized his theatrical background, which he then transformed into creating exhibitions. He said: *The intensity of the work made me realize this was my medium. It gives you the same rhythm as in theatre, only you don’t have to be on stage constantly.(...) from the very 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 Olbrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, Zurich 2008).

It seems that the individual practice of curators and art historians like Szeemann, who build up their own methodology on the basis of diverse sources and experiences over time, has now become an ever-more unattainable luxury. A repetitive system hardly leaves any room

for individual authorship, the freedom to experiment and to take risks, including the risk of failure. In some way, an oversimplified version of such system, adopted pragmatically as one of the conditions for artistic production, results in a biennale-type of curatorship and simulations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Such total works of art are often overwhelming due to the time constraints, the grandiose scale and the not always genius conceptions. If the individualistic approach such as Szeemann's is to remain valid, it must not be simply copied, endlessly extended and adjusted to suit any context or conditions.

We may ask ourselves whether today, when 'private mythologies' and 'obsessions' are being codified and taught as part of the profession, there is any room 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 pursue their own path?