
This text is an expanded version of a symposium contribution during the exhibition Telling Histories at the Kunstverein München in 2003. Other contributors to the symposium included Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barbara Steiner and Maria Lind, who co-edited the resulting book. The text is structured exactly the same way as the spoken and improvised lecture, with editing for clarity and the addition of notes.

NT TO TALK ABOUT WHAT COULD BE DESCRIBED AS A CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE 'SEMI-PUBLIC' AND 'SEMI-PRIVATE' ENVIRONMENT AND ASK HOW WE MIGHT FIND NEW STRATEGIES TO PREVENT THE ULATIVE FORCES IN SOCIETY FROM COMPLETELY TAKING CONTROL OF OUR COMMON GROUND.¹

Now the other way of explaining this is that it will be an attempt to touch on the vast and seemingly ever-expanding issue of the shortage of money and access within the cultural sphere. This will be offset by comments about the spaces apparently available for producing art in parallel environments such as public spaces and new urban developments where support seems high and ever increasing, but seems to bypass the critical codes that have developed around artistic production. It will be an examination of those spaces in new corporate headquarters and
the spaces inside subway stations, and how art is supposed to be useful in these environments.\footnote{2}

Of course, there is a great deal of literature on what we used to think of as 'public art' and a lot of this literature is somewhat pedestrian. You could almost argue that it has become entirely irrelevant over the last few years with the new explosion of art in relation to new development, while remaining an instructive set of historical documents from the recent past. I am thinking particularly of the American experience and the MIT book from a few years ago that focused almost exclusively on projects like Richard Serra's Titled Arc, a work that was removed from Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan due to alleged objections from some people working in the building, and John Ahearn's self-conscious decision to remove his own work in the Bronx when faced with opposition from people who didn't appreciate his sculptures of young people. He was accused of glamorising the most delinquent people in the area, rather than representing the hard-working class of the neighbourhood. His sensitivity and confusion is instructive but appears strangely naive and old fashioned in light of the continued expansion of the field and the concurrent shift away from too many moments of self-induced anxiety.\footnote{3} So we are familiar with these discourses about public art which are locked into a particular time and connected to failure but do not seem to have halted the continued expansion of the idea of art in new semi-public, semi-private locations. Relationships have shifted; the terms of engagement have been complicated. We have to examine the potential of these new resources and the way they are primarily ignored in a dynamic curatorial context despite the fact that they involve millions of euros that could be crucial within the contemporary art discourse. One project alone can exceed the yearly budget of a place like the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.

Now, I don't really want to talk about the specific art/quality aspect of this. I want to talk about the curatorial aspect, because it seems to me that it is important to look at some recent historical perspectives, and maybe examine some assumptions that I might make and by association certain other people
might make, in order to try to get to the bottom of a particular anxiety that seems to exist around the expansion of semi-public projects in a relatively unchecked way.

It is generally assumed, certainly in Anglophone cultures, that there has been a shift from the critical to the curatorial as the dynamic position in relation to the discourse around art. Meaning that bright, smart, intelligent people who we might have come across functioning as critics in the past have tended to avoid exclusively critical positions and have become involved in curating in order to create a whole new matrix of meta-critical gestures. This has become an accepted route now and it is often one that people are a little bit unsure and sceptical about, and they wonder if there is a critical lack at the centre of discussions around art at some level. Although it is very hard to identify quite what that lack might be and whether the apparent absence is a good thing or a bad thing. But maybe the issue is a bit more complex than this, and instead of just looking at things as a shift from the critical to the curatorial, maybe we can find an analogy in the shift away from public ownership of state property, what you could call the victory of speculation over planning. The neo-liberal project of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan is an exemplary case here, aided and abetted by Kohl and Mitterand, distracted by their focus on a European Super State. No centre-left government in Europe has been able to transcend the paradigm and we have to face a Blairite continuation of the overt privatisation of public property. There is a feeling that even Social Democrat politicians have to continue this neo-liberal project because it's part of a choice laden with (i.e. not pragmatic) re-imaging or re-imagining of what might be needed or necessary to make society less alienating. Of course this illusion of hyper-choice is merely an illusion, but it creates a white noise that is distracting enough to prevent revolution or collapse. The drift from autonomous critical positions into a neo- or meta-critical curatorial discourse could be viewed as a parallel paradigm shift. A blurring of boundaries, in this case for the right reasons, but an apparently inescapable blurring all the same.
Hillary Wainright has written about this a little bit in her recent book Reclaim The State,' which is intellectually a little bit low grade, but in an informative and practical sense it's (mite useful because she uses specific examples. And the dilemma really is the fact that people felt that the State-run organisations were corrupt, disorganised; that they were hierarchical in a dysfunctional way and that they didn't really serve the people they were designed to serve, and so on. The people who might benefit the most from public services felt that they were not benefiting from them. There was a feeling that there had to be some kind of change. Yet the shifts were sweeping and destructive at the same time. Analogously, people who desired a critical engagement with the culture were dissatisfied with the increasing detachment of the critical voice and decided to become involved in the multiple model of curating. Yet they are the ones who benefited the most from an autonomous critical environment, whatever that might be, which was always mutable and illusory, yet provided a complex foil to the notion of the institution.

And you could say that this shift between a bright person being involved as a critic, to a bright person being involved as a curator could, at worst, be analogous to the idea of shifting from a responsible universality of idea application, towards separation and embedded forms of relativism, which at its best means you have a choice of telephone providers, but at worst still needs unpacking in very specific ways which cannot be resolved. And I think that this question of art in the semi-public, semi-private environment is something that exposes some of these problematic questions. Do we face new forms of polarisation? Do we have a situation now where you have art and art history, on the one hand, which has taken over and consolidated older forms of critical positioning away from the autonomous critic, and curating on the other, which provides a new form of functional and engaged parallel discourse? But that again casts a veil over the true complexity of the actions that surround and underscore art-like behaviour. We are also dealing with a whole sequence of 'becomings'. 'Becoming' art-like; 'becoming' an artist; 'becoming' institutional-like; pitched against the fluctuating reception of
those activities. We sense that there is a degree of polarisation, but we also sense that there is a strange flow of something a bit more confusing than that. It can't be that simple, it can't be that polarised. So maybe we have to look to the mutating position of the magazine in a post-critical environment and examine the idea of the place of the art magazine or the journal today.

Maybe we have to question the survival of the art magazine or art journal in a relativist environment. Whereby an attempt to break out of the idea of the art journal is often mistaken for a loss of brain, or a loss of ideas in the sense that if we decide that there is a kind of polarisation that seems to have survived (that the art, art history and the curating positions still seem to be there), then maybe the non-magazine or the dysfunctional magazine is an option. But I think we're all familiar with the idea of the problem of the relativist magazine, the culturally promiscuous magazine that flicks between broader cultural questions and a focus on what people are doing; the magazine that introduces the idea that artists might present something in an unmediated form alongside parallel texts or documentation. I think a lot of us feel that these things are very interesting, and that they add to the flow of neo-critical stuff in the society. But the magazines are often somewhat indistinguishable from the journals and magazines that come from the 'other side', where the primary function is to act as a backdrop for advertising. So it becomes very difficult to tell what is an art production that's trying to reach out, and what is another kind of production that's trying to reach in and develop a parasitical relationship with art.

And this constant fluctuation between the two kills time. It's a suspension of criticality that is productive at some level, but also creates new forms of anxiety. So maybe we should look at the idea that everyone is happy with the situation the way it is. But simultaneously, they might also be described as being depressed and full of self-loathing. So, this is a very hard position. We have a form of polarisation, the artists, the art historians who are left to do the 'long writing' and the 'big writing', and finally the curators, who are moving in a fluctuating and
pulsing way, recasting themselves and re-imagining themselves all the time. Maybe that's great, maybe it's really perfect. But somehow, it can create a form of depression due to the competing contradictory pressures they have to face.  

So maybe the questions are: 'Where is the critical flow? Where are the roots of the context in relation to the discussion around art?' Maybe the critical flow now resides within the curatorial text, that is, it resides within the text by the curator. It also resides in the notation, and the signage, and the editing - the whole matrix of curatorial signification. Maybe, it comes out in smaller asides - little gestures, little notes, little addenda, little footnotes. Maybe it comes out in texts where it's essential and necessary now to read between the lines to find moments of autonomous critique. And I think this is a phenomenon that we are all familiar with, that is, it is important to read between the lines of the multiple role that the curatorial text has to provide, which is both informative and an interface. It's also often aligned alongside the artist, so it has a slightly softer quality than it would have in a critically autonomous environment.  

Maybe the new critical flow emerges through what you could describe as pre-apologies and post-justifications. The setting up of something and pre-apologizing for it. One of the important roles of a curator in a dynamic context now is to pre-apologize for something; to try and set the scene and to qualify expectations, and to make sure that there is no excess of expectations; there is no standing back besides the audience saying 'What do we have here?' but standing back, then hopping to and fro between the artists and the multiple publics around the work, while getting involved in a sequence of pre-apologies both to the artist or the artists, or the group of people involved and the multiple audiences simultaneously. Managing the flow of justifications, managing the way in which there's an a-critical dimension to reflecting on a setup or matrix of situations.

There are moments when people take a secret pleasure in these reversals, they take a secret pleasure in the dissolution created by a new set of flickering hierarchical positions. Maybe
the artist and the multiple publics take a strange pleasure in watching the curator, who is trying to reframe things via these jumps and pre-apologies and post-justifications, and maybe historically, it's a moment when the focus has to be this way. Critical discourse is heightened and crushed simultaneously.

One of the things that I'm really not properly qualified to talk about - among many other things - is the state of art-history education in Germany, Britain or America. But what's clear, certainly from talking to young art historians and students, is that they often feel the nature of their education is somewhat irrelevant. This is of course a common factor to all discussions around education. There is a coquettish relationship to the notion of how to survive or to be relevant in terms of an art-historical education. And maybe this behaviour is required in order to address the actual concerns and interests of contemporary intellectuals during a perverse education process. Now, of course what happens as a result of this is that people complete their studies, and through a very problematic recognition of its failure they produce a whole phantom body of texts and ideas and often unwritten projects that circulate in a translucent way around many of the discussions in Germany and function as a critical double but in a non-formalised way. We witness, therefore, the influence of young art historians upon the activities of the most interesting contemporary curating, via the recent art-history graduate's presence in the Kunstverein, private gallery and artists' studio. There's much more polarisation and tension in curatorial positioning than there is among certain groups of artists. Obviously, this is a simplistic generalisation, but the process is taking place while the new generation is still becoming embedded in the cultural structure.

So, these are some basic points about the dynamic contemporary curatorial position. Now in order to look at this question of the semi-public, semi-private space, we might have to turn instead to the desires of architects and city planners - people who have decided to create some situations where they can be free, due to the pressures of their work. What you find in these semi-public/semi-private sites is a sequence of non-spaces to be
dealt with in collaboration. Architects are sophisticated about the creation of situations where there can be relative freedom. A team of architects might have built a large office block, which has to be developed within a coded set of concerns and desires on the part of the clients, whether that's a city or a corporation or a combination of the two. Certain architects and city planners enjoy presenting spaces to artists, because they can collaborate with the artist around a variable flow of indecision. There is often talk about being free, doing what you want, being totally open, yet some of this freedom is constructed through crisis. A situation often exists where places of flow, passage, entrance, exit, gathering, distribution, meeting and consolidation are deliberately left in a state of crisis in order for there to be a super-constructive conspiracy between architects and artists in order to resolve a set of loose self-generated vaguenesses apart from the highly determined specifications of the job. There is often an ironic use here of what you could call legislated concerns, meaning that there are laws that concern the situation of art in relation to the broader society, which maybe is an unexpected result of neo-liberal thinking. The situation that leads to the creation of an apparent crisis is partly a result of the fact that there is an obligation to think about spending part of the budget of a new building on something 'art-like', so the art question becomes part of a crisis of incompletion - a legislated absence during the planning stage of a project, yet one that will potentially completely reconfigure the appearance of the building or space. The combination of the setting aside of the issue by the most dynamic curators, combined with the desire of architects to create a crisis in order to be free, combined with the problem of what to do with art that you are required to have, should lead to unexpected results. The situation is compounded by the apparent irrelevance of most writing from the 1970s and 1980s in relation to the idea of public art and a rejection and suppression of it, and an increasing sophistication of architects about the issues around contemporary art discourse."

One of the big questions is whether or not the new model of curatorial thinking gets engaged enough in this incredibly
important, visible and heavily funded element of art's presence in society. It's certainly an area where there is a great deal of money being sloshed around in a peculiar grey area that requires more careful examination and potentially requires redirection. In what way will this parallel public sphere develop, if we assume it will continue at all? People tend to look towards spaces like the Kunstvereins and interesting private galleries, museums and other art centres as locations that are open to challenge. They're supposed to be the correct recipients and producers of new forms of critical theory and practice. We think it's normal to come here and have a discussion. But maybe while we're doing this, there are public spaces that are being taken over and being occupied by semi-art via processes that need to be investigated more thoroughly. The trouble for some artists, myself included, is that the possibility of working in a context-heavy environment like a subway station or a plaza, or even an office building, is incredibly interesting because it gives you new multiple audiences and access to influence complex power structures. But more importantly, it gives you a disinterested audience. Even if we are a bit bored, sitting half comprehending and half bothering to listen to each other here in the Kunstverein, we are not inherently disinterested, we're semi-interested, which is already quite interested. Compared to this, if I do something in Deutsche Bank's private banking headquarters in Frankfurt, most people working there are relatively disinterested in my work, which is not the same as being hostile or negative. The art is just there as a fact. Maybe it's this idea of the link between the disinterested audience and the somewhat re-marginalised/re-factualised art presence that energises or makes these contingent spaces special.

If we say that the Kunstverein, or the private gallery, or the museum, or the artist's space, is the focus of critique, and we have a critical relationship to it, it's ironic that the re-marginalisation of art, turning it back to being just old art stuff, somehow creates a tone of pragmatic functionality for some people.

I've spoken to many architects about this, they often have a strong desire to use these semi-public, semi-private
crisis situations to remind us of early modernisms and also to
veil the purpose of the structure in question. Even with someone
Like Norman Foster, you often get the feeling he would like to
veil the true purpose of the bank or the headquarters he is de-
signing. He is quite happy to get involved in something that
Feels like something else, that reminds him or reminds certain
people of something earlier. It's arguable that there has to be
in expansion of the role of the curator to include taking over
these formerly coolly contested territories of art production.
certainly the new model of curator, and the constantly changing
dynamic curator, is affecting the ideas of the artists. So, if the
artists are then going and discussing things with the architects
in the city planners without the curators, maybe they are bring-
ing the ideas in a mutated and corrupted form that have already
seen discussed with the curators in more dynamic contexts; but
is this enough? The briefing and the think-tank work takes place
in the Kunstverein and then everyone splits up for the moment
of temporary engagement. The artist, who is still allowed by
society to perform an 'artist-like' role, is the messenger not just
of their own ideas, but of the ideas that get discussed in places
Like this. But is that enough?

Are these projects too important in terms of budget and
scale to be abandoned to the hands of speculators and advisors?
What would be the effect of paying closer attention to these
projects? Is the apparent problem a phantom, and is the produc-
tion of work in these semi-public/semi-private environments just
an inflated part of the ongoing discourse of artists, but one
that perversely frees them temporarily from the restrictions of
gallery-generated income or super reliance on working alongside
institutions? I shall try and explain this more clearly. Is it one
of these situations that no one is really concerned about? Is it
not really such a big problem but a great big nothing, a great
big non-problem – merely a sequence of inflated, aggrandised
nini-ideas pushed into a semi-public/semi-private environment?
What do we do about the apparent irrelevance of the discussion
from the 1970s and 1980s about public art and the ongoing take-
over of public spaces by speculators, alongside the dynamic
changes in curating, towards a marginalising of the discourse around these extensive potential projects that are truly visible to people on a daily basis? How do we come up with new ways to talk about refusal in relation to this sphere of ideas and paradoxes? How can you be involved but not involved simultaneously? How can you be involved in moments of competition (these things are always competitions) yet find a way of coming up with methods of refusal? How can you stop a project? How can you be inside and a corrupting influence simultaneously?

At what point will dynamic and interesting curators find strategies to take over this aspect of art in relation to society? And move beyond the think-tank moment of a Kunstverein to find out what might be taking place in the urban fabric around the institution, and move to control and influence those resources in a transparent way? Maybe we should find out what is planned, and what is being done in the name of art and push the rhetoric of a situation to where it becomes impossible for things to be pragmatic, to where it becomes impossible for art to only be a crisis solution. At what point can these structures be problematised to the extent that artists are forced to be responsible for what they're doing and to take a bit more care with what they agree and don't agree to do? I can imagine myself sitting in the audience now thinking quite clearly that such territories should be neatly exposed, corrupted and rejected, that we should immediately set to work and do this. Yet vast amounts of public money, public resources and energy, alongside corporate money, that would otherwise be used in different ways, are being designated for a form of art. So while the idea to merely reject it seems to be a necessary position in some ways, I am not convinced that people should not be allowed to get away with merely looking away from such enormous potential resources and social responsibilities.

Maybe there should be a revision of the discussion around architecture from our perspective (where, paradoxically, the veiling of the architectural practice is exposed by the pragmatism of the applied artwork), to the point where artists cannot take refuge in the reassurance that they are improving compromised
semi-public space. With a typical public/private sphere project, art is always confronted with sequential forms of soft crisis. Artists are often asked to do something to modify things and ameliorate situations. Maybe we need to look more carefully at the question of architecture in these situations in order to expose the pragmatic trap and the sexy blur. Maybe we need to combine and side-step certain questions in a more sophisticated way than in the general architectural discourse of multiplicity, sophistication and banality, and stand alongside the best architects in a coalition of potential. How do you unpack moral and ethical paradoxes and use think-tank times (like this one) to reconstruct a way to somehow problematise relationships and create new ways to slide around?

Where I grew up they used to dredge the river every now and then, digging out the mud and putting it by the side of the river. I suppose they were making the river deeper. I always thought they were cleaning it. (This is a sign of my tragic suburban mentality - 'Oh, they are cleaning the river, that's nice!') But of course they were making it deeper so that boats could still use it. But anyway the muck would bake in the sun and it would develop a crust of stuff that you could run across. But if you were not careful your legs would get covered in organic river cake, which is particularly nasty. When you are trying to work your way through these things it feels a little like running across the dredgings. Because talking about control is the difficult thing. Maybe it's not just a question of 'taking over'. There have been ten years of new, dynamic, curatorial models, and now it is a moment to expand into territories where people are carrying on regardless, as if nothing has happened.

I came to Munich to be involved in a discussion about mobility and lightness, that I am very happy to be involved in because I think it's important and necessary. But I'm also aware at the same time that there are so many of these public art projects in Munich, right now, that they constitute an enormous territory of resources and art signification that we have to address in one way or another. I realize that I've been trying to respond to individual requests to get involved in semi-public projects on
my own. *I don't call Barbara Steiner* and say, 'Let's have a discussion about what to do in the underground station at Marienplatz.' The question is, 'Why don't *I* do that?' Instead of emptying the curatorial load we need to find new ways to re-combine our focus in order to ensure that the physical art markers of our time are not devoid of the critical intensity of the best contexts now.
NOTES

1. The multiple and schizophrenic nature of public and semi-public space does not necessarily imply a total passage of collective space from the old notion of public to the new constellation of private/public, but in most European and North American contexts it does so in terms of new urban development.

2. Recently I have been involved in projects at Fort Lauderdale International Airport in Florida; The Telenor Headquarters in Oslo, Norway; and varied projects and proposals for other 'semi-public', 'semi-private' situations such as Dekabank and Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt-am-Main, the main public library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the earliest public housing in Brussels.

3. The book is probably Dialogues In Public Art by Tom Finkelpearl, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2001, but could be an earlier book. Finkelpearl certainly focuses on some well-known examples: Vito Acconci, John Ahearn etc. The US experience does tend to be specific in all discussions of art. With 'public art' the artist is usually a subcontractor who is liable for every stage of the project including insurance, sub-sub contracts with her/his own fabricators, and has to guarantee the work. These conditions appear alien and destructive in a European context and usually work against the artist if there is any doubt about the work. Therefore many discussions of public art in the US tend to focus upon notions of failure and removal, which are usually perfectly legal within the terms of the signed contract, but potentially against the spirit of the initial relationship. Ironically, most of these legal 'protections' are a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s when many artists pressured for more precise relationships. But they are of questionable relevance when the artist is mainly held liable by them rather than being inherently protected by them.

4. There is a general melding of roles between artist, curator and critic with a concurrent diminution of the role of the semi-autonomous critical voice.

5. Documenta 11 and the most recent Berlin Biennale are examples of critical positioning through large curatorial structures. They are both instructive and productive but there is a sense in which a layer of independent critical assessment appears to be missing from these multi-homogenising moments for it has been thoroughly internalised. Meaning that the presence of a relativistic, neo-critical structure that embraces multiple forms and correct discourses can also seem to create an excessive core of ideas that sweeps past a sufficiently effective response to it. As with some art and artists, the exhibition is itself and its context simultaneously. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but can lead to a sense in which the crucial discourses at the heart of the show are too neatly wrapped in their own self-justificatory structure. Intelligent people can deal with this but it means that the hegemonic 'system' of exchange and commodification is capable of marginalising the whole enormous enterprise and continuing on regardless, as it is not prepared to slow down and address the issues. Returning to a Jan Hoet/Rudi Fuchs model would of course be pointless.

7. A change analogous with the shift towards public/private partnerships in the social sphere because all the relationships now become blurred and the lines of control are complicated by the melding of the market, the critical voice and the location of the art. This forces curators into direct contact with sponsors, trustees, members, donors and pressures from private galleries, all of which might have hardened the terms of engagement and driven some critics/curators to seek alternative models/communities.

8. In the United States, for example, a feeling of general anxiety is provided via heavy focus upon stock market speculation which is accentuated as the main indicator of relative socio-economic success or failure. This overexposure through 24-hour cable news includes people in cycles of crisis that don't actually affect them on a daily basis apart from to remind them that their future is insecure. The relatively recent issue of shareholder value and the destructive chaos this has caused to people's daily lives is a good example of the fetish of the anarchic and ideologically determined 'market-place'.

9. The fashion/design/art model Purple, Surface, O, the latest incarnation of Domus and V pitched against the journal models of October, Parachute, Metropolis M, Texte zur Kunst etc.

10. There are of course new forms of cultural production emerging all the time that attempt to evade inclusion in any contemporary model. In these cases the work embraces forms of refusal as a primary element. A great deal of recent art in New York has this sense of super-sell conscious ultra-subjectivity as a way of evading all forms of categorisation. Something that has been more common in Germany for a longer period of time.

11. This idea of autonomous criticality really refers to the self-described positioning of a critical community. During a conference at the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 1999 devoted to the question of contemporary criticism and organised by Christophe Blase, it became clear that most of those involved felt reluctant to emphasise the autonomous role and in attempting to realign themselves either with the past, their magazines' identity, artists in general or the future, they mainly slipped into a semi-dormant position in relation to the critical terms defining the period. The important essays do not seem to be appearing in art magazines any longer but in exhibition catalogues and publications from art centres and museums, which have often become super-magazines performing all the functions that most magazines had skipped while waiting for the Internet to sweep over them.

12. Even in an American context non-spaces tend to get highlighted. There is a big project announced for the West side of Manhattan to build a new vague model of urban/leisure regeneration. The idea is to build a sports stadium, combined with an existing conference centre all held together by a big plaza. The first renderings and images of this project highlighted the plaza even though they had resolved a great deal of the specific architecture. The plaza rendering is full of non-specific art-like signifiers that indicate a desire on everyone's part to accept this space as an excess of vagueness that will somehow resolve itself through art-like interaction and placement. But the nature of this setting aside is not clarified, and there is a certain perverse play in this situation that is extremely common.