

CURATORIAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

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That what I have to offer is kind of in the nature of a prospectus putting together things that have already been put in play. But I'll kind of deflect this possible weakness of my presentation by presenting it as a confession and a sort of apology for what I do, which is to straddle at least two disciplines in my relationship with the visual arts. On the one hand, I do theory, for lack of another description. I'm a theorist. On the other hand, I also function in the real world of art events as a curator. This is not an easy relationship. It's actually quite problematic.

So what I want to try and do is to explore what it means to be pulled in two different directions when you work as a theorist and as a curator. I want to try and quickly talk about what I do as a theorist, what it is I do as a curator, and just crave your indulgence for this, because it's going to go quickly from beyond the personal thing to looking at the larger questions. Now, as a theorist, what I would like to do, ideally, and what I do do, is to engage in a wide diversity of semiotic practices and situations where cultural meaning gets produced. The range of that goes beyond pictoriality, goes beyond what we've been talking about, gallery spaces, because it would mean that I get interested in visualities of different kinds. They could be folk, so-called, they could be demotic, they could be artisanal, they could arise from the world of science. And what this involves is a way of looking at expressive practices that may even go beyond the sensory horizon of the visual. So as a theorist, I'm looking really at forms in their context, in their cultural and economic context. In many ways, my work as a theorist takes me outside the conversation that makes up the art world. I've done two talks of how the art world is actually a conversation, it's when people talk about art, it's the boundary of that conversation within which art objects get made. Things outside it are not technically art in our sense. So I want to try and go out of that and look at narratives, events, institutions where cultural meaning is produced but for which we have no name. That's what I do in one aspect.

But as a curator, I suddenly become something else. I become a creature of the art economy like most of us, I suspect. Which is that I would then mount exhibitions that take the form of surveys, retrospectives, internal reports, or documentary accounts. What I have to do is to embody this research that I've done in the non-art world in forms that are acceptable to the art world, on the rare occasions that I can actually do that. Most often what I do is to bear witness to things that happen within the art world.

So what is that, where does that take me? To embody that in a very clear question, the point is, who am I responding to when I talk of somebody called the artist? Am I talking about, am I working with artists who are designated as such because of their academic training and the circumstances of their career? Or am I then going out of the art world to confer the title of artist on various people? Just because I've brought them into the gallery, just because I've brought certain practices into the gallery, do I then turn those people into artists? And this is where, as I go along, I hope to be able to look a little at these questions of power, responsibility, the consequences of naming, and what this might mean for someone in this kind of situation.

As a theorist, I might like to believe that I am pushing the envelope of the art world, bringing into it practices that demand renewal of attention, a recasting of criteria, a revision of received art historical wisdom. But in curatorial practice, as somebody working in a system armatured by a studio, gallery, museum, and auction house, I would tend to reduce these cultural producers from outside the art world to the art world's material and symbolic economy. And I want to try and explore the paradox of practice which attends to this.

What happens to many of us who have taken the now inevitable step of abandoning formal art history for the more experimental and inventive approaches of what is called visual studies now, for lack of another term? In so doing, I want to try and trace the wider implications that such a disciplinary shift bears for the manner in which we conceive of our activity as observers of cultural production in its aesthetic and political contexts. How, for instance, does this shift influence the way in which we tell the story of our own discipline? What kind of evidence do we regard as admissible? Now, as art historians or art critics turning into people involved in visual studies, what kind of evidence are we looking at? And what kinds of frameworks are we going to develop to take into account this wide spread of cultural production, going from classical painting and sculpture to interactive and intermediate forms, to such practices as we've seen here in the previous presentation?

I think this is the first sort of proposition that I'll offer you. I would suggest that what happens when you pass into this discourse of visual studies, of which we hear so much, is that you have all the answers. In some sense, there are too many answers. Your problem then is to frame the question. With the visual studies approach, everything is evidence. All cultural production, all visualities are evidence. The world is full of evidence for your discipline. What does that do for your discipline, is my first question. That's the proposition I'm going to offer to you. When your evidentiary material is ubiquitous, what kinds of research are you going to engage in? How are you going to turn this into some kind of production of knowledge? That to me is a major problem. What forms of attention, what forms of knowledge do we hope to establish around this embarrassment of riches in the form of stimuli that call for explanation, details that do not fit into holes?

Now I'm aware that when I offer this kind of account, it sounds almost melodramatic. It is like, I'm ashamed to say this, but Freud had a major case, did he not? It was the man called Weber. He was so paranoid that absolutely every stimulus began to mean something to him. Whether it was a key turning in a lock, or the flight of swallows taking off from the belfry, everything had to have meaning. And he was obsessed that he could not find the meaning in it. This to me is what happens to the visual studies person today. Everything is evidence calling for account, and they don't even provide it.

Now having made this as melodramatic as it can possibly be, I'm trying to be a little more reasonable. How does one go about it strategically? How do I, as a theorist and curator based in India, but practicing largely in translation and European contexts, take up a position intermediate between two extremes? And I put to you two extremes that are possible, for certain on my condition. On the one hand, I have a formal art history, which in a context such as India is dedicated to a specific and deplorably limited narrative concerning Euro-American modernism and its unfolding discontents. And the conventions of this are linked really to Western late capitalism. We are all aware of this. So even when we talk of a post-colonial narrative of art history, it tends to be hamstrung on what has gone before it from headquarters out in the West. That's one set of problems. The other extreme is that you have opening before you a conceptual terrain that we might provisionally call the anthropology of provision. Now that is not without its own problems, because you're then looking at the ephemeral, the enduring, at installations, at ritual artifacts, at festivity, craft, spectacle, things that are not formally recognized by the art world's institutional location.

So you have on the one hand a fairly closed rigid structure with its rules, on the other hand something that can open out vastly and illimitably. How does one deal with these extremes? And I'm suggesting that all you can possibly do here is to shift along the extremes. That it is no longer possible to commit yourself one way or the other, but that you are always in a condition of tacticality.

Let me just sketch out briefly what this kind of tactical position between these two extremes entails. First, I think I would like to short-circuit the formal art history that I've talked about. In any case, I'm not especially committed to it as a paradigm, but I think that it can actually be an active hindrance, both to the development of art practice, because many artists take this as a starting point in their own minds, but worse, an extremely linear renaissance through enlightenment of the post-learning present kind of model that we have.

Because otherwise, it's not going to be possible to make situational accounts, if you like, of things like what we see here. I mean, we have to be able to look at other social, political, and cultural histories to do that. At the same time, I would resist the anthropology and the visual, because that has its own mythologies of sign-making and semiotic transactions. Because then the great danger is that you will always allow certain artifacts and certain practices, because they emerge from a light world for which you have great reverence, but which may not always be sung. I know this is very politically incorrect, but when one is looking at, for instance, folk developments, one is looking at so-called tribal art, and one has a certain aesthetic regarding the kinds of structures from which such art emerges, that is not necessarily progressive, not necessarily empowering. They might actually be fairly retrogressive and backward.

I think one should retain the freedom to say this. So this is the sort of negotiation that I think a visual studies person would have to really take into account. What I'm looking at here is a manoeuvre, really, it's a gesture by which one is able to foreground interplay and counterpoint as the mode of creativity in a curatorial schema. So instead of collapsing into a demonstrative either-or situation, where on the one hand you have the artist as hero, whether that is Joseph Beuys or Clemente or Ruben Carter, or on the other hand you have the cultural phenomenon, you know, demotic mysticism, popular culture, kinship. You have these ready-made labels into which you can lapse if you go to the other end. I'm suggesting that you could just bear this in mind and take it a long way through. The notion that as a theorist-curator, you have on the one hand the model of the artist as hero, and the entire curation is dedicated to examining that. Or you have a cultural phenomenon, in which case you have another curatorial schema, which is kind of disembodied. So it's like you have figure on one hand, ground on the other. How do you get a fit?

As we all know, the space between disciplines is the space of hazard, which medieval Italian cartographers would have marked with the caveat, "here there be monsters." So, someone in my position would have to address certain urgent issues while preparing to answer the question. This is the question on which this presentation is based. What is a case study for visual studies? What I've been trying to approach in my labyrinthine way is really, you have certain possibilities of discipline, you have a great deal of data. The point is, can you do such a simple thing scientifically as to identify a valid case study for this kind of visual studies practice?

I'll just open up the kinds of questions that one would ideally have to ask to answer this question really. First, what sort of criteria of description develop in this intermediate domain between so-called formal art and so-called non-art? I would foreground that question, what criteria, the description, how do you judge? Secondly, are we likely to be able to draw any sort of boundary in or determinant as to what sorts of practices, artifacts, processes, and frames we would admit as valid objects of research? Children's art, technical diagrams, digital output, where do you draw the line? What sort of explanation can you really bring in, in a field that has such high variability and differentiation?

Further, given the kind of shifts that I've outlined, we're also moving out of the classical dispassionate academic scrutiny to other forms of engagement with your area of study. We're

looking at empathy, we're looking at enthusiasm, We are looking at activists as spousal, and I have to say with respect, I felt a little of that in your presentation, that there was an identification with alternative cultural producers. So I think one has to consider this when one is asking this question about case studies and visual studies. Are we able to have that, however we think it may have been, this dispassionate scientific inquiry? Does one get involved with the material one is studying, the people one is looking at? I think that this question will continue to haunt us because it really colours the way in which we describe what we're looking at.

So, I'll round off this section by saying that what we're looking at here is a shift from artistry to visual studies, but also a shift to definitional authority. Because the locus of authority so far as formal art is concerned is really the artist. And I'm not saying this to please this assembly of artists, but frankly, given the kind of metropolitan academy-trained socialization that many of us have in the art world, it really is the artist in its contemporary form that is the locus of authority in terms of how art is to be looked at, who is the final arbiter of what art means. I think at some subliminal level, we all assume that the artist knows best, to put it bluntly. And I'm suggesting that once you shift out of formal art to this kind of visual studies approach, there's actually a kind of shift of power to the theorist, to the curator, because then it's a question of who's making the frames, who's creating the criteria, who's deciding what can be judged.

I think that this was incredibly dramatized in the last documentary, Kassel Documenta11, in which Okwui Enwezor, the curator, more or less turned the making of art upside down. That what was on offer was not necessarily an artwork as an artifact, but really an artwork that was symptomatic of a cultural situation. So instead of texts, there were contexts. To my mind, that is an extreme in any case, but I'm just suggesting that this is one of those unlooked-for outcomes of such a shift as I've tried to describe. To use a phrase that Lenin loved, there's a kind of seizure of institutional power that can happen when theorists and curators can begin to decide what are the frameworks of viewing and judging. And I suspect that what gets produced out of that is more controversy than knowledge. That's a question we might return to.

I think this is the moment in this account to discuss the extension of the scope of significant visuality in relation to the kind of radical historic change that has come over art practice globally. We're looking here at a long period from the late 1950s to the present. I think it's really a technological change of unprecedented magnitude that has completely altered the sociology of the viewing situation. I want to dwell a little here on presentations, that eventually what one is looking at is a certain drama of relationship between the person making the art, the art itself, and the viewer of art. It is important to see how the sociology of the human situation has been transformed, especially by technological change. I want to introduce here a kind of bent notion of mine, which is that of tropism. How do the senses move towards the stimulus? Does canvas stimulus, on the other hand, move towards the senses? We all now take for granted the notion that the sovereignty of the eye, presumed universal, which has long governed art and art history as defined from a Eurocentric perspective, has been seriously challenged. The challenges have been posed by a series of proposals towards art that is made in relation to the bodily movement, to cycles of fragmentary awareness, to the passage of time, to the rhythms of the environment.

Now that's on the side of artistic address, the creation of artworks that question the sovereignty of the eye. I'm also wondering whether we still have a sovereign eye on the side of purely reception. I think in many ways, with these new kinds of art addresses that we have, the so-called I has been replaced by the I, the ego, the full-bodied self, in many ways. So that what the viewer brings now is not the sovereignty of the I, but the vulnerability of a bodied, sensorial I to negotiate this kind of multiple, versatile art.

I think the locus of visuality has changed. It has been blurred; it has been intersected by other sensory and disciplinary trajectories. So that whilst 40 years ago, 30 years ago, even 20 years ago in India especially, you had an elevated major key of formal painting or sculpture. Now this has given way to what I like to think of in the best possible way as minor keys. Keys of art-making that are deliberately not major in this inflated, grandiose way. I think that in these keys not as a sovereign eye looking at a clearly framed thing, or a clearly positioned art object, but as something that, where the viewing experience can be held, if you like, not just as an encounter in a gallery, but as something that can happen in the street, on a computer monitor, on a wharf, in a theatre, and that could then be remotely activated and accessed through modes of delegation or surrogacy, rather than necessarily by that encounter where the viewer stands in the oratorical presence of the artist for the artwork.

Now, in such a scenario, I think art makers may well delegate artistic agency to collaborators who may be human, who may be machine, who may be cyborg, who may be close, who may be remote, who may be connected to them as being in the next room, or who might be halfway across the globe. I think these circumstances of art making have crept up on us, especially in the last five or six years. allowed for the sorts of changes in our viewing, in our accounting of the aesthetic experience that they demand. Because what we're looking at is what I like to think of as a distributed trapezoid. How the work gets made, how it's received, how it's disseminated and talked about, everything is far more distributed than it ever was before. So in plain words, the viewer no longer waits upon the artwork in the viewing situation. Instead, a viewing situation is developed in which it's much more than a viewing situation. It's far more protean than the actions of connoisseurial or patronal reading can hold.

Indeed, in the context of the contemporary, the artwork as an object to be received has been displaced by the work of art that is treated as an act to be grasped, a trace to be detected, a provocation to be interrogated, or a platform to be shared, or indeed, in British Land Artist Richard Long's phrase, a wraparound environment in which one can transform oneself. I said a little earlier, that the emphasis has moved from the art work as a noun to the work of art as verb. I think that one is far more likely, as the years go on, to look at the work of art as something that is cast as an improvisation, as a situational entry, as something tactical, whether in the public sphere, whether as a composite of old and new technology. In encountering such manifestations, one is not waiting for an annunciation, one is actually wrestling with the angel. The physiology of the viewing experience having been changed radically, the focus is no longer really on an intended effect.

I want us to look again at an occasion of art where the emphasis has been moved completely from intended effect to a very active body and notion of collaboration. The eye that now participates in the viewing experience is not limited to an informed eye, but enriches itself, as it were, in viewer-ly performance. I'd like to direct attention here towards what I've called this complex occasion of art. Because whilst we, even as we reconfigure our study of art practices in terms of purpose, location, and semiotic negotiation, I think we find ourselves confronted with forms that play at the edge of the visual, that look at the tactile, the elusive, the inter-sensuous, and the synesthetic.

I now want to move what I've been saying to a further proposition. I began by looking at how we've shifted from art history to so-called visual studies. I'm saying that even this notion of visual studies, which is gaining ground, in which people seek to make careers, even that does not correspond to what we're looking at, because we're moving really beyond the visual. So it's at this point that you begin to wonder whether we're still visual artists primarily, or whether that visuality is giving ground to other kinds of sensory visual studies or visuality. We need to acknowledge this as we

reach out to experience, describe, classify, and analyze the range of expressions and performative practices that have staked their claim to the status of art during the last few decades. At the risk of causing further disciplinary latitude and lack of discipline, I think we need to be able to have a mode of knowledge-making that can take into account these evolving, even if temporary, contexts.

This is eventually not just a question of what discipline we're working in. It's really a question of who we are. Who is asking these questions? Who is reflecting on these themes? What are the altered conceptions and executions of self that are operating when we come into a space where we're responding to these kinds of forms? And really, what is the order of relational understanding? What kind of competence of reading and tactical flexibility are we looking for? Should we simply now reverting to an old-fashioned term and phrase, think of ourselves as experiencers of the aesthetic. Because part of what I've been saying, one of the subtexts also has to do with what are we called, how do we name ourselves, and as we connect expressive culture and performative choice, how really do we redefine ourselves as actors in a common space of art?

Admittedly, my treatment has been somewhat fragmentary, notational, because I don't really want to systematize it beyond a certain point. I want to sum up a little of what I've been saying by talking of how asking these questions turns us into people involved in a certain politicization. Because we're actually politicizing our practice as people looking at art, as people writing about art, certainly. For one, we would have to engage in a certain revisionism within art history. And this has been done largely elsewhere. It's not necessarily been done in universities here. We have to revise art history and move it away from the image-making practices of metropolitan, academy-trained artists and fine arts, and move it towards the kinds of things I've been talking about. I think we also need an ecumenical move within art history. And that too is underway in many ways. We have to be able to accept that there are cultural producers who come from beyond the circuits of production and dissemination that we in this room might share. So, however tentatively and cautiously we do it, we have to move out of this standard linear narrative and even move out of this linear narrative of post-colonial Indian history that we have. Move out really and be able to integrate other kinds of practices in how we think of these things. These are confessional, much delayed gestures from within art history.

But I think we should also look at two other sorts of politicizations, one of which is what I think of as visuality as evidence. Now, if visuality has been emancipated from the canonical stranglehold of art history, it suddenly becomes available as a renewable resource to the ingenuity of the sign maker as an archive of subject matter around which new discourses can be formulated. Now positively, this means that we can really strategically realign our expertise and our research interests. So that, you have everything from television soap operas, which can be viewed as propaganda, we can look at the festival as an expression of hate politics, we can look at satellite photography as evidence of surveillance and geopolitical usage, and we can question television reality as proof.

This is to offer a few examples of the kinds of things I've been talking about earlier, which is how do you translate evidence into knowledge? The negative side, of course, is that this keeps the PhD machine going. There are endless numbers of things that can be admitted as evidence and sought to be translated into knowledge. On the other hand, there still is space, for we've all realized, I think, that our life world is constructed by dominant mechanisms of visuality. So it becomes almost a moral duty, and certainly a political necessity, to acquaint ourselves with the technological underpinnings of the new visualities.

This is the converse of what I talked about earlier, where I think it becomes almost a part of our armament as citizens, as people living in this globalized world, visuality as entertainment, as

incidental background stuff happening in our lives, but we are able to read it as evidence of what surveillance regimes can do, as evidence of how information is controlled, as evidence of deception warfare, if you like, what I think of as weapons of mass deceit. And here's where I think we make at least one extremely important transition from the life that we lead as people responding to art, to the life we lead as citizens of this kind of world that we live in. I think that reflexes or forms of viewing that we can develop in response through tropism if you like, to the new forms of art, have a direct bearing also to the kinds of mental processes we need to develop to be able to tell deceit from reality, or at least to indicate, to recognize that something is deceit. Here's where I think that in some ways we would be able to bring these into the circuitry of our lives again.

I mean, the question was asked as to when is an artist an artist? I would respond to that by asking the question, when is a viewer a viewer? And when are viewerly responses directly connected to the responses that you have as a citizen? This might involve us in a productive line of questioning. In particular, I think of three artists whose work has meant something to me in the last five or six years. I'm thinking of Harun Farocki, the German artist, Eyal Sivan, the Israeli artist, and Alfredo Jaar, who divides his time between Latin America, Argentina, and the US.

I wish I had images here, but to sum up, and I'm sure that many of you are familiar with some of this work, for Harun Farocki, the visual is something he responds to as a means of controlling space and movement. He looks at camera footage from prisons, which at one level is footage that records the normal life of wardens and prisoners. But when it's seen in a gallery, when it's seen by a citizen or a viewer, suddenly you have evidence of enormous violence, enormous control, and that begins to become a metaphor of how life gets led in our kind of world.

For Eyal Sivan, the visual is an instrument of history because he takes up historical documentary footage and presents it in a way that shows us how such footage is a tool of nationalist mythology. For him, as an Israeli, he is in a dangerous place doing this. He particularly has been reflecting on the camera footage of the Eichmann trial. The archive which really does belong to Israel. It is the state, it is part of the Israeli state's foundational mythology, the trial of the Nazi war crime. But what he's showing you at once, in the light of the Palestinian crisis, is how this, at one level, a very important footage of a monster gets used, gets manipulated by the Israeli state to produce for itself a justification for what it's doing to the Palestinians. So that's my second example of this crossover.

And Alfredo Jaar dedicates a lot of his work to decoding and exposing the manner in which the visual is deployed as a means of withholding vital information. So he looks at points of crisis where you're being told that there is something here that is enormously visual that you can see. And actually, it's all about things you can't see. For instance, he reflects on the fact that apparently the US Army either bought or demanded control over all global satellite photography at a certain point when it was waging war against Afghanistan. So once again, you have here a vast archive of visual data, which is not available.

So, in dealing with such manifestations of art as I've talked about, I think we as practitioners of whatever you want to call it now, visual studies, post-visual studies, I think we have to grapple with practices that engage with visuality as an immediate, pervasive feature of the light world, and see it in some kind of relief, as something that you're shown and something that you're not shown. Which is why I think one goes beyond now, one goes beyond pictoriality, visuality, visual evidence, and one moves into a the domain of the social project, the collective work based on synergy. And it's really here that we're looking at, as we've seen in earlier and earlier presentations, we're looking at the

ways in which activism, political theory, technology, and finally the body viewer come into some kind of kaleidoscopic interaction with life.

I want to try and bring this around to some kind of sense where what we preserve really is from one discipline that is closed and move to another that's open. What we should be trying to do is not simply replace one set of artifacts, practices, and criteria with another, but to really see if we can remain in a continuous state of excitement, if you like.

Is it possible to engage with sensitivity to moments of interpretation, theatres of engagement that open up on every side? What I'm trying to lead to and what I've tried to go through by struggling with some of these questions is that what we're really looking at again with some attention is the fact that it's not disciplines or sets of criteria or ready descriptions or judgments that are going to define what gets done. What gets done comes out of a semiotic contract between those who make, those who see, those who respond, and those who talk. I think that it's only by taking account of a socialization that keeps reproducing itself, it's only by this ever-renewed socialization in response to certain objects and practices that perhaps we can get somewhere.

As I usually tend to do, I begin with a paradox and end with another paradox. I'm thinking that what I'm calling for now is not a new discipline, not a new tablet of judgment, but just the sense that one should, as someone looking at art, writing about art, curating art, perhaps what people like us, or anybody else in this room, what we might need to do is to abandon the very certitudes that underwrite what might be called a case-by-case basis, and that we should be able to sensitize ourselves to what I think of as the moment of interpretation. And I think this would involve actually a dismantling of God.

I began by suggesting that in this new situation, the shift from art history to visual or post-visual studies, the locus of authority moves from the artist to the theorist or curator. What I've tried to do at one level, the subtext of what I've tried to do through this presentation is to see why and how such interpretive power is actually a dangerous thing to whoever holds it. I'm saying that, and this is a metaphor I love, I would like to think instead this entire semiotic contract, these theatres of interpretation, as dances really, as a dance from what is made to what is seen.

What I would end with is this notion of how eventually all we can commit ourselves to is mutual viewing, if you like. And that's really the best we can do as people in a condition of response and of excitement. It seems like one is giving away decades and centuries of critical authority. I know that this is not a popular stance for writers because it gives theorists and curators an enormous sense of power to be able to contextualize, to be able to draw lineages to posit genealogies, and all this is certainly an extremely important activity. But I think that what we might lose out in so doing is a certain sort of intuitive grasp of pattern.

Why I would say this has an ethical dimension is because finally it is the person bearing witness to cultural production who also has a certain responsibility. I think that if one is able to give up one's descriptive power, if one is able to give up one's authority, it's only then that one is able to engage more freely with what is on offer. So whilst on the one hand I might seem to be saying something very ancient, if you locate that within the institutional matrix in which we all work, you will see why this is possibly a way of opening ourselves up to what in fact is actually happening.

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