

Cultural practitioners who challenge and critically engage this milieu and subvert it to their creative purpose exposing its contradictions and dynamics can effect a radical shift in the way we regard our relationship to other cultures. A proper understanding of other cultures can only be enabled by an appraisal of our own legacy- to put it euphemistically- of absorption and appropriation, and how we continue to be implicated in their exploitation.

HOMEOPATHIC

CURATING

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First of all I would like to thank the organizers of this symposium. I do not know whether everyone here is aware of the fact that when we speakers were asked to take part in these discussions, we were given a text on which to base our essays. This text presents a concise survey of the situation of contemporary art in recent years: the proliferation of spaces- both physical and in the media- devoted to art and their consequent assimilation of the general public in the form of gigantic biennials and blockbusters. Presenting us with this situation and wondering whether it has a positive effect on “the overall education of the citizen”, the text I mentioned asks us: Curating: how, who by, for whom?” besides the fact it is impossible to answer this question due to its ample scope, what I find frankly problematic is the way it relates curating –and thus art- to such a grotesque abstraction as this “overall education of the citizen”. Imposing a bit on your patience, in the following essay I will broach these topics, though answering the question curating in a categorical manner is, I must admit, beyond my abilities. My response limits itself to defining what I call homeopathic curating, presenting it as a broad strategy of cultural interaction for the concrete and electron jungles that we call contemporary societies.

“How, who by and for whom?” Faced with these questions about curating, we might first ask “where?” And here I am not necessarily refereeing to a specific country or city, but rather to a “place” within culture. I do not believe that the goal is for the curating of exhibitions to be carried out in the same in Sao Paulo museum as the Guggenheim Bilbao. Each context requires different answers to this question. Alternative or improvised exhibitions spaces have different goals and methods than museums, and state-controlled museums have different obligations than private one. In addition to these complex issues, which are enough to make anyone's head spin, the question also changes

depending on who is asking it. It would be silly to give the same answer to a twenty year-old art student and a cultural bureaucrat. Let us imagine, however, that is this citizen, demanding his or her “overall education” who is asking this question, in other words: nobody, an abstraction. And yet a powerful abstraction. We can now say (I hope we can agree on this point) that in the context of this conversation, i.e. Mexico in 202, the state finally –though precariously- represents a national will. We cannot take time here to sketch out how in Mexico the notion of art has been developed as an educational requirement since the days of Vasconcelos. But it is important to be keenly aware that this requirement responds to circumstances specific to this country, and to blindly acknowledge it as universal, vaguely political narrative is somewhat irresponsible.

Thus we have determined that it is the State that is asking the question, though one detail is missing: who answers it? And well, that is where I come in: as it turns out, I have curated a few exhibitions, have made a few allegedly artistic works and have written about other people’s work in a public forum. And I allude to this not because I am falling into narcissistic monologue mode, but rather because in contemporary art practice .and we know well that Mexico’s is no exception- many people perform different functions as different personal needs and circumstances arise in such a way that one is practically forced to approach the carrying out of a single activity in a multidisciplinary fashion. Those of us who work in this manner often come across apparent conflicts of interest: if we are artists and we write a somewhat praiseworthy text about a certain gallery show, we will be viewed with great suspicion when we criticize exhibitions that other people have organized. Therefore, as strange as it may seem, I do not know which one of these “individuals” is being asked the question about curating. The conflict of interest does not only occur vis-à-vis others, but also within our own multiple personalities. You will not have any choice but to consider the following ideas as if you were speaking to a charlatan who, like all charlatans, is rather street-smart and could thus come in handy, but who is also the kind of person with whom you must be rather cautious.

Of all the different meanings given to the word *curador*- the Spanish term for curator- the one I like best is the one that links it not only to the caretaker of an art collection but also to someone taking care of any exhibition space whatsoever, including a zoo, or even a circus sideshow. This perspective comes closer to the character of how I understand the possibility of art today. The zoo curator is in charge of selecting those beasts that are interesting because they are beautiful, ugly, elegant, grotesque, big, small, friendly, dangerous, ancient, new, etc. To fulfill his or her task he or she has to keep their cages clean, feed them, know what makes them feel more at ease, observe their habits and be able to tell when they are ready to breed. We should mention that the animals in this “art zoo” are easier to take care of because they usually want to go inside their cages, unlike irrational animals who often have clearer concept of the meaning of freedom. But it turns out that in case of contemporary art, calmly staying put in the zoo taking care our pets is not enough –we also have to put on our hunting hats and Bermuda shorts and go on a safari. Here we have the independent curator who, instead of overseeing a zoo, goes out looking for specimens. Now then, let us consider the case of an interested viewer who asks the curator “excuse me, but what I see there is a totally normal dog, it’s

nothing special, neither really horrifying nor all that pretty, nothing much, really... I paid the entrance fee to see something I do not see everyday, so why did you put it in the show?" The curator may answer several things. One, he or she might give the viewer a stack of taxonomy books and tell him or her that it is a rare specimen of the dog species that is worth preserving. He or she might even tell the viewer that this animal looks like a dog but it is really a toucan or some other beast. Or something else he or she might say is "oh, but this dog can talk". And if it is clear that the dog can only bark, the curator might still tell the viewer "look, don't worry: I'll sell it to you, and you'll see that after living with it for a while, you'll understand it". In the worst of the cases, the curator might say "well, the thing is this dog didn't have anywhere to go so we put in the cage because we felt sorry for it, poor little thing!"

I know the caricature I have just sketched out may appear overly cynical to some of you. But it seems to me that it says something about the problems we are facing – those of us who work in contemporary art on a daily basis. The curator not only selects and takes care of what is shown, he or she must also inform us or explain why what is being shown is interesting. In the case of contemporary art, the curator is a figure who is constantly faced with the situation of explaining his or her criteria for selection. But wait a second! There is another variant of the curator which manifests itself a temporally when the curator asks him or herself too seriously, "and what is this good for?" it is a variant that relies upon another etymological twist of the word: the curator as *curandero*- as witchdoctor or faith healer. We should note that in the case of curatorial work's teratological or spectacular interpretation (which I described in the zoo metaphor), the selection criterion is based on the premise "this is interesting". But the "this is important" premise does not appear in the metaphor, the *curandero*-curator, unlike the zoo curator, believes or wants to believe that what he or she shows is not only interesting but also important – very important. Let us say that he or she supposes or behaves as if what he or she exhibits were so important that it is nothing more nor less than a starting point, a cutting edge, avant-garde or a spiritual healing agent so the rest of society. Contemporary art curators are forced to face this duality of what is interesting and what is important on a daily basis. Note how loaded these two words are: "interesting" implies a certain generosity and lightness, an attitude of curiosity towards what we have in front of us. "Important", on the other hand, sounds much weightier, like something that we must respect and somehow obey. I should clarify: these characters I have sketched out do not refer to anyone specific- they are parodies of fragments of which we are made, of the various discourses that across the minds of all of those of us who, at some point, considered the issue of curating.

We have to give *curandero* some credit. After all, institutional art has most often been a parasitic activity, always at the service of some religious, philosophical or ideological project that it both makes use of and claims to be useful for. We should not go on too much of a tangent, yet...how can we forget so many twentieth-century avant-garde art movements? There we have an enormous collection of foundations and programs for artistic activity- a bestiary from which we cannot exclude artists who, like Picasso, certain surrealists or most Mexican muralists, were seduced by the promise of Marxism, but which also includes esoteric or theological discourses like those of artists so unlike each other as

Piet Mondrian and Joseph Beuys. These programs viewed art activity as part of a revolutionary or messianic standpoint that would eventually have repercussions on the rest of society. It did not matter how long the road was- artists were able to dream up better worlds, utopias whose existence was closely tied to the execution of their individual works. Yet another version of avant-garde movements defends the cause of autonomous art, “art for art’s sake”- a movement that we can perceive in the critical work of José Ortega y Gasset and Clement Greenberg and that was finally called Modernism, with a capital “M”. Certainly, there are projects in twentieth-century art that were not utopian, but it is nonetheless true that the notion of art as a social catalyst enjoys a hegemony to which we can attest in forums like this one.

We can interpret maliciously this proliferation of discourses and programs, this liberation from the bonds of conventions, this “orgy”, as Jean Baudrillard called it at the end of the last century. The proliferation of programs and the almost compulsive break-down of ancient myths and hierarchies did not show us a coherence of objectives, nor a visionary capacity that allows to present avant-garde art today as a fundamental element of transcendent social changes. It is not the viability of real programs that impelled twentieth-century art-it is the unbearable void, the nausea caused by the loss of meaning and inefficiency of the paradigms of societies as a whole, societies immersed in a crisis while ways out of this crisis are becoming increasingly harder to find. What we call contemporary art today cannot be seen as one of contemporary societies’ representative cultural manifestations. From the point of view of political activity, we have managed to realize that it is very hard for art institutions to achieve real results. Despite large-scale exhibitions and the amount of money spent on spectacular museums, despite the hackneyed messianic attitude of some of the people involved, we must admit that the world of galleries, museums and independent spaces constitutes today a marginal cultural manifestation-a minor art, to use an old fashioned expression. And yet it is a minor art that in its main channels of distribution suffers from the control of powerful hegemonic groups that have slowly transformed contemporary art in more version of the world of the spectacle. At the end of the twentieth century, we were left with a nausea, an inefficiency of paradigms and a lack of meaning which in a certain way resemble those that existed at the dawn of avant-garde movements. Not long ago a critic reviewed a recent compilation of art manifestos. In it he (Greil Marcus) noted that none of these programs had been carried out-fortunately.

This is where the *curandero*-curator is stricken with melancholy. What he or she is not as important or as viable for transforming society as he or she thought. It is even worse if he or she is a museum curator: to raise funds, he or she will have to explain to politicians how what he or she exhibits benefits the rest of society. And he or she wonders: “how does this benefit the overall education of the citizen?” And at this point one of my personalities jumps out-the so-called artist. The artistic ghost says: “Look, I know a lot about artists and I want you to realize something. Art is not a political program, nor is it a morality an even less a religion that promises results. Don’t be fooled by the way we act or by our delusions of grandeur, and even less by our plans. While we promise harmony we only have tricks up our sleeves, images, constructs. The Apollonian order is only our own desire for unity, as we suffer from a lack of it. Our rabid Dionysian rage is a product of our incurable isolation. Our ideas are more like excuses and the result of our delirium than the fruit of rational development. If most of us have

problems administering our own pockets what role could we play in organizing your society? Art is very important to us, but not in the same way as land reform. Rather than seeing artistic sensibility as a good thing, we struggle with it and against it every day. It's tyrannical, doesn't obey any laws but its own, and if one day it finds another law that suits it, it perverts it, and sometimes we don't even realize it. Believe me that prestige and money and your c.v. aren't important-what's important is your ability to test your freedom, to rearrange all the bricks in order to find the best way to self-destruct, symbolically. If other people see something useful to them in what we do, well then let them come forward. It's not merely with a mind to eliminating competition that we don't think that everyone should be like us and do what we do, but if I can convey that energy in the face of conflict, that enthusiastic faith we need for our whims, then let everyone come along: give us your money and everything of value that you own, and we'll figure out a way of destroying it together".

Poor *curandero*-curator. And how will he or she follow through with his or her progressive motto if we artists adopt such childish attitudes? But you should not lose heart: indeed, you might consider the possibility of undertaking homeopathic curating. As you know, this practice distinguishes itself from allopathic medicine in that while the latter administers a different substance than the one which is causing the organic imbalance, homeopathy offers the same pathogenic element as a cure. If the patient suffers from existential anxiety, depression, problems related to depersonalization, alienation and schizophrenia, we will give him a little more of the same. Of course this cure is not suited to all cases. We recommend homeopathic curating in the context of countries like Mexico that do not have such structured art institutions as those of large Western economies. If art can only blossom in its spectacular aspect, if the public and resources only come our way in vague dreams of a shining, quasi-metaphysical contemporaneity, don't worry! A rudimentary star system can easily be built to dazzle, attract and seduce the citizenry. Forget about those heavy discussions, those tales of our shortcomings and lack of training as professionals. Come and assert with Machiavellian zeal that this art is fantastic, that what it preaches is good or at least liberating and that everyone must support it. If you do not find anything in contemporary theory or philosophy books that legitimates your practice, then make it up. Improvise, adapt if need be, put existing theories on their head. Contrary to popular opinion, the best causes require more enthusiasm than wisdom. What I needs is criticism and reproach. Perhaps indulging a little in today's art market might allow us to acquire the necessary resources to build an academic machinery that will enrich and not try to regulate what we do. You say we will make mistakes? Well that is almost certain, but if we manage to construct a field of activity by means of trickery and deceit in order for the monster to bloom, others will come and point out our wrongdoings and fix what we built. You probably fell into the trap I set a moment ago-a diatribe that belittled in a simplistic manner twentieth-century cultural achievements. You can however, even without contradicting me, admire the delirious will and amazingly good and bad ideas of all those artists whose work we now enjoy viewing with awe and disbelief. This art must be valued, not as a series of solutions, which it indeed never was, but as an inconclusive attempt to lend aesthetic meaning to life in the face of the most horrible imaginable: twentieth-century history.

Homeopathic curating has its risks. We have to be careful with dosage so as not to kill our patient. Some things must simply and plainly not be done. The first rule is caution, above all in the face of the vacuous repetition of mottos which are interpreted as universally righteous. The second rule is disobedience. What good does no good at all. Homeopathic curating's applications are local and therefore require local solutions. Isn't true that the cause of underdevelopment in many countries is demographic explosion, due partly to the premature availability to Western medicine among their communities? The Curator selects the system's carcinogenic, virulent, depressive or poisonous elements and carefully administers them in their place of origin. It is extremely important to be aware of the fact that one place's solutions can be fatal elsewhere. It seems fair to admit that the ideas we use in considering homeopathic curating may sound rather strange to our societies. There has been talk of worldwide standardization, of an ever-encroaching globalization that tends to unify regions. In my experience, I grant that there is a spectacular way of perceiving the world and an inescapable capitalist axiomatic, but each place experiences these issues in differing intensities and, above all, absorbs the influences of what it perceives as the center in a peculiar fashion. The notion and importance of what is perceived as a center also differs, and often a totally flawed construct of the center can be hegemonic. On the other hand, as far as contemporary art is concerned, the alleged centers are as yet so far from being global it's ridiculous. We must not succumb to discourses that, under the pretense of criticism, give another turn of the screw to Western cultural arrogance. Of course all of us in our country can read imported magazines with the latest trends in art fashions, and we can learn to drop a few names. But the curator cannot believe that simply because something seems pertinent to a magazine editor, it therefore automatically seems pertinent to everyone. This elemental issue does not require much knowledge of critical theory, it is simply common sense. No traveling exhibition is seen all over the world and I, at least, have never set foot in any blockbuster or biennial, nor do I think that these exhibitions, hosted elsewhere, concern me much. Of course I will go if I am invited. But we must stay focused-nor is it true that art behaves in the same way as technological progress does, though this is an almost-unconscious prejudice that continues to exist within many art movements' basic principles. In matters of culture, a form of expression which is in the end hegemonic can arise in the place that is suffering from the worst marginalization, and in fact, feigning this kind of marginalization has practically become a generalized strategy. But I do not want you to mistake what I am saying for a nationalist inclination. Nothing could be further removed from my goal. Operations focusing on the regional can be undertaken with singular efficacy by a foreigner who because of his or her situation and point of view has a fresh outlook on a place. We have already seen a multitude of these specimens around here. Becoming an active part of a cultural place does not equate complying with the various national narratives, quite the contrary.

Here we have to confront the question about the "citizen" and his or her overall education. And the answer I give is that artistic expressions have always been the cultural capital of a reduced group and cannot become massively consumed if they are not adopted, deformed, reduced-if we do not cut a piece off or soften them so that the general public can absorb them. In mentioning this I do not mean to

say that we are in favor of cultural elites that promote themselves as authorities in order to legitimize the structures of power-even if some of the art products coming from these elites can have a value for us. As we have seen time and again, these cultural elites impose parameters of legibility and coopt the dissemination of works and ideas. But it so happens that it is precisely in the name of this anonymous "citizen" that the principal economic and political groups in control of mass media worldwide coopt and impose specific parameters of legibility in contemporary societies. We reject the mandate to be diluted in abstract notions. We prefer to interpret democracy as a series of rights which in turn imply a series of responsibilities, but it does not dawn on us generosity to be able to be interested in something. Contrary to what many people feel as they walk through museums or are in any way involved with art, it is never about obeying anything. Homeopathic curators will be forced to solve the enigma with savvy and imagination, in the location they choose, evading mediocrity and distillation, but also rejecting intellectual arrogance and sectarianism.