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When Hans Ulrich Obrist asked the former director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Anne d'Harnoncourt, what advice she would give to a young curator entering the world of today's more popular but less experimental museums, in her response she recalled with admiration Gilbert & George's famous ode to art: "I think my advice would probably not change very much; it is to look and look and look, and then to look again, because nothing replaces looking ... I am not being in Duchamp's words 'only retinal,' I don't mean that. I mean to *be* with art—I always thought that was a wonderful phrase of Gilbert & George's, 'to be with art is all we ask.'"

How can one *be* fully with art? In other words, can art be experienced directly in a society that has produced so much discourse and built so many structures to guide the spectator?

Gilbert & George's answer is to consider art as a deity: "Oh Art where did you come from, who mothered such a strange being. For what kind of people are you: are you for the feeble-of-mind, are you for the poor-at-heart, art for those with no soul. Are you a branch of nature's fantastic network or are you an invention of some ambitious man? Do you come from a long line of arts? For every artist is born in the usual way and we have never seen a young artist. Is to become an artist to be reborn, or is it a condition of life?"¹ With a good dose of humor, "the human sculptors" suggest that art needs no mediation. Because artists refer to a higher authority, no curator or museum is to stand in the way.

If the modern figure of the art critic has been well recognized since Diderot and Baudelaire, the curator's true *raison d'être* remains largely undefined. No real methodology or clear legacy stands out in spite of today's proliferation of courses in curatorial studies. The curator's role, as shown in the following interviews, appears already built into preexisting art professions, such as museum or art center director (Johannes Cladders, Jean Leering, or Franz Meyer), dealer (Seth Siegelau, for example), or art critic (Lucy Lippard). "The boundaries are fluid," Werner Hofmann observes, who goes on to note that this is especially true in his birth place of Vienna, where "you measure yourself against the curatorships of [Julius von] Schlosser and [Alois] Riegl."

The art of the late 19th and 20th centuries is deeply intertwined with the history of its exhibitions. The predominant accomplishments of the *avant-gardes* of the 1910s and the 1920s can be seen—from today's point of view—as a series of collective gatherings and exhibitions. These groups followed the road traced by their predecessors, enabling ever-increasing numbers of emerging artists to act as their own mediators. "One forgets," Ian Dunlop observed in 1972, "how difficult it was a hundred years ago to show new work. The official and semi-official exhibitions held annually in most capital cities of the West came to be dominated by self-perpetuating cliques of artists only too content to benefit from the burst of collecting that followed the Industrial Revolution. In almost every country these exhibitions failed to meet the needs of a new generation of artists. Either the annual shows created their own splinter groups, as was the case in America, for example, or artists formed their own

counter-exhibitions, as the Impressionists did in France, the New English Art Club did in Britain, and Viennese artists did in Austria."²

As we move through the 20th century, the history of exhibitions appears inseparable from modernity's greatest collections. Artists played a defining role in the creation of these collections. Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Katarzyna Kobro, and Henryk Stazewski started the Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz, Poland, with the presentation to the public in 1931 of one of the earliest collections of *avant-garde* art. And as Walter Hopps recalls, "Katherine Dreier was crucial. She, with Duchamp and Man Ray, had the first modern museum in America." However, a progressive professionalization of the curator's position was already becoming evident. Many founding directors of modern art museums, for instance, rank among the curatorial pioneers—from Alfred Barr, first director in 1929 of The Museum of Modern Art of New York, to Hofmann who created Vienna's Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts in 1962. A few years later it came as no surprise that, with the advent of curators such as Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle in Bern and Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum and at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the majority of the most influential shows were organized by art professionals rather than artists.

During the course of the 20th century, "exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known. Not only have the number and range of exhibitions increased dramatically in recent years, but museums and art galleries such as Tate in London and the Whitney in New York now display their permanent collections as a series of temporary exhibitions. Exhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained, and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions—especially exhibitions of contemporary art—establish and administer the cultural meanings of art."³

While the history of exhibitions has started, in this last decade, to be examined more in depth, what remains largely unexplored are the ties that interconnected manifestations have created among curators, institutions, and artists. For this reason, Obrist's conversations go beyond stressing the remarkable achievements of a few individuals—for instance

Pontus Hultén’s exhibition trilogy *Paris–New York, Paris–Berlin*, and *Paris–Moscow*, Leering’s *De straat: Vorm van samenleven* (*The Street: Ways of Living Together*), and Szeemann’s *When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head*. Obrist’s collected volume pieces together “a patchwork of fragments,” underlining a network of relationships within the art community at the heart of emerging curatorial practices. Shared influences among curators can be traced. The names of Alexander Dorner, director of Hannover’s Provinciaal Museum; Arnold Rüdinger, head of the Basel Kunstmuseum; and Willem Sandberg, director of Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum, will become familiar to the reader of these interviews. It is the mention of lesser-known curators—still not present in the profession’s collective consciousness—that will most catch the historian’s attention. Cladders and Leering remember Paul Wember, director of the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld; Hopps points to Jermayne MacAgy, a “pioneering curator of modern art” in San Francisco; and d’Harnoncourt recalls a student of Mies van der Rohe who became curator of 20th century art at the Art Institute of Chicago, A. James Speyer.

Meyer observes that if history fails to remember curators, it is “mainly because their achievements were intended for their own time. While they were influential, they have nonetheless been forgotten.” However, in the late 1960s, “the rise of the curator as creator,”⁴ as Bruce Altshuler called it, not only changed our perception of exhibitions, but also created the need to document them more fully. If the context of an artwork’s presentation has always mattered, the second part of the 20th century has shown that artworks are so systematically associated with their first exhibition that a lack of documentation of the latter puts the artists’ original intentions at risk of being misunderstood. It is one of the many reasons why the following 11 interviews represent a key contribution to the broader approach necessary for the study of the art of our time.

- [1] Gilbert & George, *To Be With Art is All We Ask*, Art for All, London 1970, p. 3–4.
- [2] Ian Dunlop, *The Shock of the New: Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art*, American Heritage Press, New York, St Louis, and San Francisco 1972, p. 8.
- [3] Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, “Introduction,” *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York 1996, p. 2.
- [4] Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Harry N. Abrams, New York 1994, p. 236.