

Notes on the viewer-participant project. The fifth Gwangju biennial, 2004

Charlotte Bydler

There is an ambiguity in matching the title – *A grain of dust, a drop of water* – with the actual exhibition of the fifth Gwangju biennial. Whereas the title prefigures a humble stance in claims and aims, rhetorically invoking humble, perishable or replenishable materials, the exhibition itself is daring enough to challenge the art world by introducing democratic features with the viewer-participant project.

This is the arena for a meeting between several parties; artists and audiences from a great number of countries, professional or popular cultures and subcultures, under the guidance of one or several curators. This calls, I think, for a declaration of faith. Faith – in participation, and in the need (purposeful or not) for communication acts such as grand exhibitions. The communicative scene is hinted at in rhetorics of overall respect and benefits; artists, audience, curators, local townspeople and international professional art community. Faith – in the cultural production within the arts field as a way to agency, and faith in a cultural relevance of visual arts which is also social, and an aesthetic which is really open and takes pride in its social relevance, and in the power of artistic practices to actually achieve some of the fantastic goals stated in the official opening rhetorics. Faith in its achievement through double coding – popular and official-professional art cultures.

Biennials are to no small part cultural production for specialists in the visual arts. As a European, my thoughts of accountability and authority in the Gwangju viewer-participant project started from two points of comparison: the Venice biennial of 2003, and the Documenta in Kassel of 2002. The Venice biennial was titled “The dictatorship of the spectator”, a clever wink at Marcel Duchamp’s thesis that the spectator completes the artwork, but hardly a positive view at the curator-artist-viewer relationship. Several international exhibitions have witnessed the resignation of the God-like position of the general curator. The history of biennials culminates in inflated personae of the curator-organiser of mega-events, including the “humble” proposition of Francesco Bonami at the last Venice biennial to enlist eleven co-curatorial powers. This was not so much a position of authority for each of these, as one for Bonami himself. Venice is of course itself a mega-venue in an otherwise unimportant contemporary art-nation, Italy. The Documenta, on the other hand, went off with several meetings in various continents in advance of the exhibition,

something similar to the Gwangju biennial's preliminary meeting for the viewer-participants. Marcel Duchamp, or Arthur Danto and the institutional art concept are familiar items.

These professional remarks belong to the structural frame for me, and for many specialists with me. But here, I also want to assume that we can agree that the definition of art, hence the authority on art, is an open question. I assume that we are really interested in understanding views of cultural production – and in detecting and investigating conflicting opinions. I assume, too, that that Venice, Europe, or the USA is not necessarily where art history is made.

As art world professionals, we are used to behaving as if the people in the audience need us, even if they may not know it themselves. We are convinced that the audience *will* be interested once they learn what the artworks are *really about*. Specialists are not so interested in asking for the actual varying concerns of various audience groups, beyond those of the immediate professional art surroundings. Art professionals are, of course, *the* omnipresent viewer-participant group. Actually, viewer-participants are (have always been) always available to artists through the artists' own selection, in their close surroundings – family, friends – though these, too, tend to belong to art worlds. The potential of opening up this relation is, I think, to bring the art world some *common-language relevance*. One way to do this is to identify and reach out to the average individuals in the audience groups. The viewer-participants have, interestingly, been selected with the aid of democratic organizations, along demographic and representative parameters.

This connects with my key concerns – *accountability and authority*.

Relational aesthetics, soliciting viewer/audience response and participation, has been less than good at recognizing accountability towards the audience (apart from its professional constituencies). In the worst cases, the audience is provoked and its response is presented for the amusement of the art world. *Accountability* goes to pay respect to *authority*. The general public, *as well* as artists and curators, are probably not so interested in the everyman viewer-participants' opinions. They are rather coming (and not without reason) for the great names among the artists and curators – *the authorities*.

The viewer-participant project will not alter that, nor does it necessarily set out to do so, beyond the individual names of the actual viewer-participants here. The goal could be, as I suggested in positive terms, to broaden the scope of concerns *within the professional art world*. Either the co-operating democratic organizations stretch out the effects of art concerns, or the project simply imports street talk for a while – the result may be good.

It is often asserted that the art world is not democratic. But here, the biennial has wanted to introduce a degree of accountability in democratic terms. It will present the “result” of viewer-participant talks and Grand Discussions in publications and TV, as a way of giving publicity to the selection and to give an idea of the spirit in some of the co-operation teams – importantly, the biennial team also acknowledged that some of the teams collapsed. This puts democratic accountability and authority up against art world authority and accountability, in the guise of aesthetic quality (would the art world freelancers dare to chose “wrong” for fear of upsetting their peers?). Structurally, the conflict is cast in aesthetic *versus* democratic ideals – “democratic” in terms of intelligibility beyond specialist circles.

I will give an example. Vikram Khan, a young British-Indian choreographer, performed in Stockholm the week before the Gwangju biennial opening. His celebrated contributions to Modern Dance (as High Art) include among other things dub, hip hop, and live scat-singing to hand drums and a cello, and occasionally the dance troupe broke into story-telling. The title of the show, *MA* (as in *EARTH*) was actually explained by the choreographer with a personal-biographical anecdote, in plain words.

This interruption/intervention of the artistic medium – dance, bodily movements – for a check on the audience, to make sure that there was a chance to follow the author, Khan, some way, *is often frowned upon* by specialists in the field. The reason for disliking explanations is that, ideally, art should speak for itself, stand for itself, be valued (or “understood”) along special intra-artistic criteria – unless it is lacking something.

Obviously, there is a grey zone of communicative media and modes of understanding in the visual arts as well as in a wordless dance performance, and the contexts of learning (acculturation) beyond the actual aesthetic experiences here. But similarly, the words and (pseudo-)documentary story which Khan sprinkled his performance with are only part of the meaningful elements which he shared with the audience that evening. The stories were rewarded with laughs and hand-clapping in the audience, and so were solos by musicians and dancers. And Vikram Khan, being trained as a classical dancer in India, allowed for those who could recognize *mudras* and other narrative significant sets of gestures, to have *yet another* story. Perhaps such multi-coding is preferable in a democratic sense, to ease the participation of the audience in the rituals of High Art?

This example is a comment on the idea that the *audience needs to learn* in the artistic communication process, and the *artists/curators/specialists need to teach*. But what? Well, methods for decoding or understanding “difficult” High Art; for looking, walking, for talking over, and for getting around with art.

Education is a dear issue to me. I have great respect for the pedagogical aim to reach out to an ever larger audience, with each edition of the biennial, through finding means to capture the imagination of the audience, to inspire and oftentimes also to educate. In the aftermath of the opening of the biennial, when the installation work is finished, when the artists have returned home, when press reviews have appeared – when the great specialists’ silence settles – who looks after the everyday viewer-visitor and her opinion? In general, education officers enter at this stage; often young people early in their professional careers in the arts, yet trusted with meeting the least specialized biennial-audience groups – those who are most likely to require guidance.

Paradoxically, the audience’s need for expert guidance often *increases* with efforts to democratise art and enhance viewer-participation. And of course, a certain familiarity helps improvisation and flexibility, whereas the unaccustomed viewer who is at a loss to find an adequate response to the artistic-aesthetic product could hardly be expected to feel invited to participate. Museums may be dull, undemocratic and hierarchic, but you know what you go there for: recognizable *Fine Arts*, made by recognizable *Old Masters*, collected by *Authorities*. And you go there without risk of making ridiculous mistakes as a viewer.

In conclusion: Under seemingly hopeless pressures of culture industry machinery, what can artistic practices achieve? Jealous of popular culture, High Art has tried dramatizing the event, raising its status, and making it quantitatively impressive and thus interesting – or even made artistic production so low-keyed and everyday so as to be indistinguishable from the *actual* everyday for everyone but well-informed professionals. In the viewer-participant project at the Gwangju biennial, *the accountability – authority axis* has seen the introduction of democratic elements in the identification of “typical” viewer-groups. Is it conceivable that we could have a feed-back process, where response, suggestions and comments by the audience could actually have consequences? Could the introduction of subjects that exceed narrow specialist concerns (and hence shift authority) be followed by a revision of the choreography of exhibition-going and of the kinds of artistic experiences which we participate in? I would find this very interesting.