

Curating Context – Beyond the Gallery and Into Other Fields

By Magdalena Malm

In the novel *Remainder* by artist and writer Tom McCarthy a man has lost his memory after being hit in the head by an object falling from the sky. The man has one single memory left, a fragment which includes a crack in a bathroom wall and the smell of sizzling liver. He sets out to re-enact this memory, buys an apartment building in east London, renovates it to exactly the right style, employs a large number of extras and makes sure a black cat is walking across the roof of the building across the street. The project grows to enormous proportions and the house is always kept ready to be in on-mode for when the man wishes to go there.

McCarthy's narrative of the laborious production of the re-enactment describes, in an exaggerated way, what it is like to curate context, to create an entire situation which constitutes or surrounds an artwork.

Curating Context has grown from my own experience as founding director and curator of MAP, Mobile Art Production (a platform for context specific art production) and presently as the director of Public Art Agency Sweden. It is an independent continuation of the publications *Imagining the Audience* and *Mobile Art Production*. This anthology is also part of a sustained conversation with colleagues around the world who work in a similar ways. In our various locations we sometimes find ourselves quite lonely struggling with difficult issues, renegotiating our working methodologies. Over many years we have been helped by a dialogue in which we exchange concerns, engagement and solutions. The book as an attempt to share some of these thoughts. It relates to a number of previous contributions describing this field of art from different angles, among them *Visible, where art becomes visible as part of something else*, *Out of Time and Out of Place*, *Living as Form*, *Locating the producers* and *From Studio to Situation*¹ What this book sets out to do, which the others have not, is to articulate the curatorial methodologies and considerations in the production of these works. Trying to articulate the how and why. As of yet, the curators who work in this field are few and have learned

their skills from numerous trials and an equal number of errors. A negligible number of curatorial courses focus on the specifics of curating context.

Curating Context collects reflections on a field of curatorial practice where the setting of the work is never given but needs to be created anew every time. While this kind of practice often appears in artworks that take place outside of the gallery, it is not implicit in all such situations; its interest is in particular kinds of artworks, which demand very specific conditions. Works, which need to be staged, programmed and activated. Works which for different reasons transcend the frames of the duration of an exhibition or the space of the gallery. Works, which are not isolated objects that contain their meaning within themselves, but which gain their meaning in relation to a surrounding context, or which need a specific structure in order to act out.

All curatorial practice of course relates to artistic development. But in this field the intervention with artist is in the centre. Projects and even organisations are structured not in line with the logic of institutional frameworks, but to follow the logic of the artistic or curatorial concepts. The situations in which these art projects play out are not invisible backdrops, but they will affect what the artwork comes to express. This demand of specificity therefore brings curators across cities, street, parks into building, news media and engagement with local NGOs. The texts presented in *Curating Context* tell the story's of such engagements and the key role they play for realisation of engaging artworks.

In the last ten years one can see an increased engagement in questions of the civic. When society is experienced as increasingly divided, public space has moved back into focus and aspects of the common and the civic have gained new relevance. As Maria Mur Dean reasons in this volume, "we think of the public sphere as a potential; as an opportunity for diversity and dissent. [...] public space is not only a place for discourse; it is also *discursively constructed* place." That is, art does not only raise issues of public space, it also has the power to perform it. This concern for the social is reflected also in the work of other contributors. The direction in which Nato Thomson has taken Creative Time during the last years is very clearly towards social practice; his dialogue with Suzanne Lacy describes that process, stepping right into the streets and the issues of black

women in Brooklyn. Claire Doherty cites Edward Soja's Thirdspace as a "Lived Space portrayed as multi-sited and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine. [...] It can be mapped but never captured in conventional categories; it can be creatively imagine but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully lived." Doherty shares with us the experience of curating Theaster Gates performative event *Sanctum* in Bristol, where such a Thirdspace was created, a durational process of becoming for those who participated.

The work of these and various other colleagues can be described as a field of practice, a space in which a certain number of common themes emerge. Yet, at the same time it is a space inhabited by different curatorial temperaments and desires; to think of curating context as a field of only political engagement would be very misleading. Projects also explore and embody our pleasures and desires and give room for fantasy. The text of RAQS Media Collective displays the joy of imagination and play. In the dialogue with Raimundas Malasauskas we talk about the *Hypnotic* show which takes place inside the mind, and in which the participator allows the hypnotist to enter into her mind and lead the way, to discover the pleasure of letting go and following someone else's imagination. And in Miryam Lefkowitz' work the participant is lead around the city by a host, eyes closed. Both these works rely on close intimacy and trust. Both works place the participant in the centre of the artwork rather than as observer. The particularities in how these situations are reached is discussed in the dialogue, either as how to establish a frame of trust or how to employ a strictly choreographed structure to be able to offer that experience to the participant.

Artistic and curatorial practices concerned with staging and enacting situations not only offer a variety of formats and settings, but also allow for many different roles for the audience. The audience can be spectator, standing in the streets listening to the Brooklyn women taking; they can be participants as in Theaster Gates' *Sanctum*; they can be producers of new narratives as in Loulou Cherinet's dinner conversations (discussed in the dialogue with Elvira Dyangani Ose), or protagonists as in *Hypnotic Show*.² As projects appear in various locations and media, the issue of the audience is

² This subject is further discussed in my text *The viewer in the center of the artwork* to be published by Koro, Norway in the anthology *Critical aspects of Public Art*.

always present. Who are they, how are they to be reached or will they rather be an inherent part of the project? In many of the projects the audience is the main character of the work, without who the project cannot take place. This means that audiences become a curatorial issue, which needs to be carefully considered into the conceptual framework and produced accordingly.³ The audience is not considered a object of outreach at the end of a production, but inserted from the very start. Along with this practice also comes an urge to involve not only with the art audience, but all different groups in the city. But as the method always returns to specificity, it is not the megalomaniac idea of “art for all”, in stead the sentence coined by Swedish art/architecture collective Mycket (Much) is more relevant: “In order to be inclusive one has to specific”. Filmmaker Andrej Tarkowski has once said that he makes art for those who are receptive. Those who are receptive is not a certain kind of people, not those who know the codes of contemporary art, instead they are the once who are concerned with the issue at stake. In contextual curating the receptive ones can be housewives, a transsexual citizen in Lebanon, those interested in riding with imagination or anyone who is struck by the force of a specific work.

To curate is to offer, metaphorically speaking, not just old wine in new bottles, or even new wine in no bottles, but also all that is entailed in so far as the cultivation of a vineyard, running of a distillery, maintenance of a cellar and the animation of a tavern are concerned, and all at the same time.

In their text Raqs Media Collective capture the specific aspect of curating in context. The production, service, facilitation is an inherent part of the curatorial practice. As the artworks either function in a specific context, or require a certain set of conditions, the facilitation of these conditions has a decisive effect on how the artwork, or situation plays out and what it comes to mean. Maria Mur Dean makes the same point in her “rather peculiar interpretation of the typical survival guides that might help you stay alive on a mountain or in a zombie apocalypse.” This production is not a matter of finding just any dilapidated building, or stepping into any random street. It is a matter of finding the exact venue, which will create the specific atmosphere for the work. The selection of site for Suzanne Lacy in Brooklyn was considered in relation to the local

³ This aspect is developed more in depth in the publication *Imagining the Audience*.

community and their stories and had to avoid the trap of adding to the ongoing process of gentrification. With each new project the considerations of time and place are rethought. What part of the day or night, how long it will last, all of these considerations will “färga” the understanding of the work. For instance in my own MAP exhibition *Life a Dream*, the concept of the exhibition was the sense of unreality. This project took place at night time, in buildings which were normally closed to the public, all to enhance the emotion of the unreal and dreamlike.

Being brought to new locations, producing new collaborations, entering into new areas of knowledge, the curator in this field needs to constantly learn new things, to negotiate with theatre directors, property developers; to clear permissions with local authorities; to understand legal structures under Napoleonic law. Each project demands new knowledge, but skills can be learned and accumulated. Collaboration and negotiation are central. Yet, the major skill perhaps is to keep the artistic intention of the project extremely clear, while swiftly being able to shift the route in the moments where obstacles appear on the road.

Maria Mur Dean also emphasises the role of production as part of the curatorial practice, and explains how an understanding of production can reveal issues in a different field – which she exemplifies with “issues that remain present in the capitalist system of production”. This transferral of methodology, applying skills in other fields, is worth dwelling on. The curatorial processes developed in contextual curating can be transferred, and inserted into these other adjacent fields of society. This is eloquently articulated by Visble Art Award as their sub-title of their practice: “Visible – where art becomes visible as part of something else.”⁴

Departing in the work of Council in Paris, Gregory Castera outlines a curatorial methodology in different steps where an investigation is the starting point for a process, and from that process the issue is formulated. This working process can then be transferred into fields of law or ecology, for instance. This transferral is also a cause of the way the role of the artist has changed. Where many artists previously acted as

⁴ Matteo Lucetti and Judith Vielanders were invited to write, but were unfortunately too busy in curatorial production to appear in this book. Hopefully they will be in the next.

critical independent actors, a new strategy of criticality has emerged where artists enter into a situation to change it from within. Another transfer of curatorial methodology is that of curating urban development. Contextual curating can start in an artistic concept, or it can depart, as Council's method does, in a situation, sifting and listening, out the issues or thematic to work around. Those issues then lead to the invitation of an artist. That process of understanding the situation, of a collective process with people of different disciplines, exploring what the common thematic is, in many ways resembles the planning of a new area in a city. What is the history of the place, what existing places and structures are interesting, how do people take use of it etc?

In the dialogue between Jessica Segerlund and Joanna Zawieja an emergent field between art and test-based architectural practice in urban development is captured. Here the curatorial methodology is expanded both in scale and in time. The marked difference from an ordinary planning process is that in this field the plan is not imposed from above, but starts in an investigation of the context, and in this context also the inhabitants of that place are included. The process, run by among others MUF and Raumlabor, involves the inhabitants and finds the themes, articulates needs of infrastructure from what is there. It is a process based planning process where temporary tests may be made permanent or lead to reconsiderations, and where the production for the curator means understanding and docking into the heavy legal and logistic process of planning and building. Referring back to Thirdspace, this is an attempt to build areas for lived space, which are not static and which can harbour complexity.

One thing which emerges in all the texts is a what in Swedish you call "lyhördhet". This beautiful and untranslatable term suggests an ear to the ground, an ability to listen, but also an empathy; a statement of position in that listening. To be lyhörd is to be an involved listener. This sensibility is a key quality in contextual practices, because these art works are not concealed, but in some way porous, reflective - mirroring the shifting images or their surrounding. The works presented in these projects often have a precarious nature. In the work *Reharsal* artist Santiago Mostyn, for instance, steps onto a temporary stage in one of the most diverse squares in Sweden, Möllevången in Malmö.⁵

⁵ The artwork was part of *The Smile of Malmö*, curated by Edi Muka for the Public Art Agency in fall 2016, www.statenskonstrad.se.

Having lived in Sweden for a few years he attempts to sing the national anthem until he knows it by heart. A violin and cello play along and Mostyn tries to enter. He tries again and again, reflecting the difficulty to step into the continuous codes of a country. In a gallery space this work would have been strong but in the square, alone on stage without protection with an random audience both of populist nationalists and Swedes with foreign background, the vulnerability is daunting. Yet, this vulnerability is also what opens the work to its varied audience.

In *Precarious Lives* Judith Butler describes this precariousness as central for the dialogue between individuals as well as between states; because we are vulnerable we are dependant and need to be in dialogue. This basic notion of vulnerability creates a foundation for works which are made in relation, in dialogue. Both artists and curators are reminded of this inter- dependence through individuality. Elvira Dyangani Ose describes this beautifully in our dialogue:

Looking back now, I realized that I have spent most of my adult life —and probably my entire professional career– trying to engage with and formulate that sense of recognition, of togetherness, of collectivism, trying to define public-ness, searching for ways in which the public sphere is constituted and experienced — as I have experienced it, not only in Bata, but since then, in many other African cities.

To work in context is to work in a relation. To work in the relationship between the artwork and its surrounding context, the relation that different participators or viewers have to the work, the relations that are formed in the production of the work. To work in a constant process of learning, where the exact meaning of the work only comes out in the moment the work is situated in its context. This work is relational in the way meant by the Caribbean author and philosopher Eduard Glissant: in which relation always embodies, allows the articulation, confrontation and orchestration of difference.⁶ A relevance that is created between that which is different.

As illustrated in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* curating context is rather a laborious process, which requires a next to infinite passion for problem solving and

reconsideration. Why is it worth it? Perhaps it is this liveness, the metamorphosis of development, the shifting and developing relations that make it all worthwhile. We work for the excitement of understanding not only art, but society, human interaction, how the social fabric is constituted. It is not a coincidence that many of the institution of contextual curatorial practice also engages in knowledge production – Consonni runs a publishing series and arranges large seminars while Creative Time conducts an annual global summit on social practice. Situations was originally part of the university and continues to produce publications and reflections, along the same line as does Council. MAP focused on the knowledge produced which could be drawn from practical experience, and in the Public Art Agency this is taken further, where this book is one example. This knowledge production reveals something of the key to why it is worth it. Because curating context offers this constant learning, to take part in in process of transformation: it allows for every production to transform the organisation, for the projects to affect the specific context in which they appear, and also for ourselves to be transformed by that process.

I would like to thank all the contributors of the book as well as the many other curators and artists who are also part of this larger conversation. Especially I would like to thank the amazing curatorial team and office at the Public Art Agency where we together explore new curatorial methodologies, while at the same time transferring them, as a means of restructuring a state agency.

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