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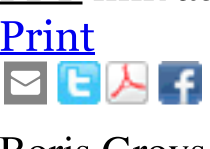

Boris Groys

Politics of Installation

The field of art is today frequently equated with the art market, and the artwork is primarily identified as a commodity. That art functions in the context of the art market, and every work of art is a commodity, is beyond doubt; yet art is also made and exhibited for those who do not want to be art collectors, and it is in fact these people who constitute the majority of the art public. The typical exhibition visitor rarely views the work on display as a commodity. At the same time, the number of large-scale exhibitions—biennales, triennales, documentas, manifestas—is constantly growing. In spite of the vast amounts of money and energy invested in these exhibitions, they do not exist primarily for art buyers, but for the public—for an anonymous visitor who will perhaps never buy an artwork. Likewise, art fairs, while ostensibly existing to serve art buyers, are now increasingly transformed into public events, attracting a population with little interest in buying art, or without the financial ability to do so. The art system is thus on its way to becoming part of the very mass culture that it has for so long sought to observe and analyze from a distance. Art is becoming a part of mass culture, not as a source of individual works to be traded on the art market, but as an exhibition practice, combined with architecture, design, and fashion—just as it was envisaged by the pioneering minds of the avant-garde, by the artists of the Bauhaus, the Vkhutemas, and others as early as the 1920s. Thus, contemporary art can be understood primarily as an exhibition practice. This means, among other things, that it is becoming increasingly difficult today to differentiate between two main figures of the contemporary art world: the artist and the curator.

The traditional division of labor within the art system was clear. Artworks were to be produced by artists and then selected and exhibited by curators. But, at least since Duchamp, this division of labor has collapsed. Today, there is no longer any “ontological” difference between making art and displaying art. In the context of contemporary art, to make art is to show things as art. So the question arises: is it possible, and, if so, *how* is it possible to differentiate between the role of the artist and that of the curator when there is no difference between art’s production and exhibition? Now, I would argue that this distinction is still possible. And I would like to do so by analyzing the difference between the standard exhibition and the artistic installation. A conventional exhibition is conceived as an accumulation of art objects placed next to one another in an exhibition space to be viewed in succession. In this case, the exhibition space works as an extension of neutral, public urban space—as something like a side alley into which the passerby may turn upon payment

of an admission fee. The movement of a visitor through the exhibition space remains similar to that of someone walking down a street and observing the architecture of the houses left and right. It is by no means accidental that Walter Benjamin constructed his "Arcades Project" around this analogy between an urban stroller and an exhibition visitor. The body of the viewer in this setting remains outside of the art: art takes place in front of the viewer's eyes—as an art object, a performance, or a film. Accordingly, the exhibition space is understood here to be an empty, neutral, public space—a symbolic property of the public. The only function of such a space is to make the art objects that are placed within it easily accessible to the gaze of the visitors.

The curator administers this exhibition space in the name of the public—as a representative of the public. Accordingly, the curator's role is to safeguard its public character, while bringing the individual artworks into this public space, making them accessible to the public, publicizing them. It is obvious that an individual artwork cannot assert its presence by itself, forcing the viewer to take a look at it. It lacks the vitality, energy, and health to do so. In its origin, it seems, the work of art is sick, helpless; in order to see it, viewers must be brought to it as visitors are brought to a bed-ridden patient by hospital staff. It is no coincidence that the word "curator" is etymologically related to "cure": to curate is to cure. Curating cures the powerlessness of the image, its inability to show itself by itself. Exhibition practice is thus the cure that heals the originally ailing image, that gives it presence, visibility; it brings it to the public view and turns it into the object of the public's judgment. However, one can say that curating functions as a supplement, like a *pharmakon* in the Derridean sense: it both cures the image and further contributes to its illness.[1] The iconoclastic potential of curation was initially applied to the sacral objects of the past, presenting them as mere art objects in the neutral, empty exhibition spaces of the modern museum or Kunsthalle. It is curators, in fact, including museum curators, who originally produced art in the modern sense of the word. The first art museums—founded in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and expanded in the course of the 19th century due to imperial conquests and the pillaging of non-European cultures—collected all sorts of "beautiful" functional objects previously used for religious rites, interior decoration, or manifestations of personal wealth, and exhibited them as works of art, that is, as defunctionalized autonomous objects set up for the mere purpose of being viewed. All art originates as design, be it religious design or the design of power. In the modern period as well, design precedes art. Looking for modern art in today's museums, one must realize that what is to be seen there as art is, above all, defunctionalized design fragments, be it mass-cultural design, from Duchamp's urinal to Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, or utopian design that—from Jugendstil to Bauhaus, from the Russian avant-garde to Donald Judd—sought to give shape to the "new life" of the future. Art is design that has become dysfunctional because the society that provided the basis for it suffered a historical collapse, like the Inca Empire or Soviet Russia.

In the course of the Modern era, however, artists began to assert the autonomy of their art—understood as autonomy from public opinion and public taste. Artists have required the right to make sovereign decisions regarding the content and the form of their work beyond any explanation or justification vis-à-vis the public. And they were given this right—but only to a certain degree. The freedom to create art according to one's own sovereign will does not guarantee that an artist's work will also be exhibited in the public space. The inclusion of any artwork in a public exhibition must be—at least potentially—publicly explained and justified. Though artist, curator, and art critic are free to argue for or against the inclusion of some artworks, every such explanation and justification undermines the autonomous, sovereign character of artistic freedom that Modernist art aspired to win; every discourse legitimizing an artwork, its inclusion in a public exhibition as only one among many in the same public space, can be seen as an insult to that artwork. This is why the curator is considered to be someone who keeps coming between the artwork and the viewer, disempowering the artist and the viewer alike. Hence the art market appears to be more favorable than the museum or Kunsthalle to Modern, autonomous art. In the art market, works of art circulate singularized, decontextualized, uncurated, which apparently offers them the opportunity to demonstrate their sovereign origin without mediation. The art market functions according to the rules of the Potlatch as they were described by Marcel Mauss and by Georges Bataille. The sovereign decision of the artist to make an artwork beyond any justification is trumped by the sovereign decision of a private buyer to pay for this artwork an amount of money beyond any comprehension.

Now, the artistic installation does not circulate. Rather, it installs everything that usually circulates in our civilization: objects, texts, films, etc. At the same time, it changes in a very radical way the role and the function of the exhibition space. The installation operates by means of a symbolic privatization of the public

space of an exhibition. It may appear to be a standard, curated exhibition, but its space is designed according to the sovereign will of an individual artist who is not supposed to publicly justify the selection of the included objects, or the organization of the installation space as a whole. The installation is frequently denied the status of a specific art form, because it is not obvious what the medium of an installation actually is. Traditional art media are all defined by a specific material support: canvas, stone, or film. The material support of the installation medium is the space itself. That does not mean, however, that the installation is somehow "immaterial." On the contrary, the installation is material *par excellence*, since it is spatial—and being in the space is the most general definition of being material. The installation transforms the empty, neutral, public space into an individual artwork—and it invites the visitor to experience this space as the holistic, totalizing space of an artwork. Anything included in such a space becomes a part of the artwork simply because it is placed inside this space. The distinction between art object and simple object becomes insignificant here. Instead, what becomes crucial is the distinction between a marked, installation space and unmarked, public space. When Marcel Broodthaers presented his installation *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle in 1970, he put up a sign next to each exhibit saying: "This is not a work of art." As a whole, however, his installation has been considered to be a work of art, and not without reason. The installation demonstrates a certain selection, a certain chain of choices, a logic of inclusions and exclusions. Here, one can see an analogy to a curated exhibition. But that is precisely the point: here, the selection and the mode of representation is the sovereign prerogative of the artist alone. It is based exclusively on personal sovereign decisions that are not in need of any further explanation or justification. The artistic installation is a way to expand the domain of the sovereign rights of the artist from the individual art object to that of the exhibition space itself.

This means that the artistic installation is a space in which the difference between the sovereign freedom of the artist and the institutional freedom of the curator becomes immediately visible. The regime under which art operates in our contemporary Western culture is generally understood to be one that grants freedom to art. But art's freedom means different things to a curator and to an artist. As I have mentioned, the curator—including the so-called independent curator—ultimately chooses in the name of the democratic public. Actually, in order to be responsible toward the public, a curator does not need to be part of any fixed institution: he or she is already an institution by definition. Accordingly, the curator has an obligation to publicly justify his or her choices—and it can happen that the curator fails to do so. Of course, the curator is supposed to have the freedom to present his or her argument to the public—but this freedom of the public discussion has nothing to do with the freedom of art, understood as the freedom to make private, individual, subjective, sovereign artistic decisions beyond any argumentation, explanation, or justification. Under the regime of artistic freedom, every artist has a sovereign right to make art exclusively according to private imagination. The sovereign decision to make art in this or that way is generally accepted by Western liberal society as a sufficient reason for assuming an artist's practice to be legitimate. Of course, an artwork can also be criticized and rejected—but it can only be rejected as a whole. It makes no sense to criticize any particular choices, inclusions, or exclusions made by an artist. In this sense, the total space of an artistic installation can also only be rejected as a whole. To return to the example of Broodthaers: nobody would criticize the artist for having overlooked this or that particular image of this or that particular eagle in his installation.

One can say that in Western society the notion of freedom is deeply ambiguous—not only in the field of art, but also in the political field. Freedom in the West is understood as allowing private, sovereign decisions to be made in many domains of social practice, such as private consumption, investment of one's own capital, or choice of one's own religion. But in some other domains, especially in the political field, freedom is understood primarily as the freedom of public discussion guaranteed by law—as non-sovereign, conditional, institutional freedom. Of course, the private, sovereign decisions in our societies are controlled to a certain degree by public opinion and political institutions (we all know the famous slogan "the private is political"). Yet, on the other hand, open political discussion is time and again interrupted by the private, sovereign decisions of political actors and manipulated by private interests (which then serve to privatize the political). The artist and the curator embody, in a very conspicuous manner, these two different kinds of freedom: the sovereign, unconditional, publicly irresponsible freedom of art-making, and the institutional, conditional, publicly responsible freedom of curatorship. Further, this means that the artistic installation—in which the act of art production coincides with the act of its presentation—becomes the perfect experimental terrain for revealing and exploring the ambiguity that lies at the core of the Western notion of freedom. Accordingly, in the last decades we have seen the emergence of innovative curatorial projects that seem to empower the curator to act in an authorial, sovereign way. And we have also seen the emergence of artistic practices

seeking to be collaborative, democratic, decentralized, de-authorized.

Indeed, the artistic installation is often viewed today as a form that allows the artist to democratize his or her art, to take public responsibility, to begin to act in the name of a certain community or even of society as a whole. In this sense, the emergence of the artistic installation seems to mark the end of the Modernist claim of autonomy and sovereignty. The artist's decision to allow the multitude of visitors to enter the space of the artwork is interpreted as an opening of the closed space of an artwork to democracy. This enclosed space seems to be transformed into a platform for public discussion, democratic practice, communication, networking, education, and so forth. But this analysis of installation art practice tends to overlook the symbolic act of privatizing the public space of the exhibition, which *precedes* the act of opening the installation space to a community of visitors. As I have mentioned, the space of the traditional exhibition is a symbolic public property, and the curator who manages this space acts in the name of public opinion. The visitor of a typical exhibition remains on his or her own territory, as a symbolic owner of the space where the artworks are delivered to his or her gaze and judgment. On the contrary, the space of an artistic installation is the symbolic private property of the artist. By entering this space, the visitor leaves the public territory of democratic legitimacy and enters the space of sovereign, authoritarian control. The visitor is here, so to speak, on foreign ground, in exile. The visitor becomes an expatriate who must submit to a foreign law—one given to him or her by the artist. Here the artist acts as legislator, as a sovereign of the installation space—even, and maybe especially so, if the law given by the artist to a community of visitors is a democratic one.

One might then say that installation practice reveals the act of unconditional, sovereign violence that initially installs any democratic order. We know that democratic order is never brought about in a democratic fashion—democratic order always emerges as a result of a violent revolution. To install a law is to break one. The first legislator can never act in a legitimate manner—he installs the political order, but does not belong to it. He remains external to the order even if he decides later to submit himself to it. The author of an artistic installation is also such a legislator, who gives to the community of visitors the space to constitute itself and defines the rules to which this community must submit, but does so without belonging to this community, remaining outside it. And this remains true even if the artist decides to join the community that he or she has created. This second step should not lead us to overlook the first one—the sovereign one. And one should also not forget: after initiating a certain order—a certain *politeia*, a certain community of visitors—the installation artist must rely on the art institutions to maintain this order, to police the fluid *politeia* of the installation's visitors. With regard to the role of police in a state, Jacques Derrida suggests in one of his books (*La force des lois*) that, though the police are expected to supervise the functioning of certain laws, they are de facto also involved in creating the very laws that they should merely supervise. To maintain a law always also means to permanently reinvent that law. Derrida tries to show that the violent, revolutionary, sovereign act of installing law and order can never be fully erased afterwards—this initial act of violence can and will always be mobilized again. This is especially obvious now, in our time of violent export, installing, and securing of democracy. One should not forget: the installation space is a movable one. The art installation is not site-specific, and it can be installed in any place and for any time. And we should be under no illusions that there can be anything like a completely chaotic, Dadaistic, Fluxus-like installation space free of any control. In his famous treatise *Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains*, the Marquis de Sade presents a vision of a perfectly free society that has abolished all existing law, installing only one: everyone must do what he or she likes, including committing crimes of any kind.[2] What is especially interesting is how, at the same time, Sade remarks upon the necessity of law enforcement to prevent the reactionary attempts of some traditionally-minded citizens to return to the old repressive state in which family is secured and crimes forbidden. So we also need the police to defend the crimes against the reactionary nostalgia of the old moral order.

And yet, the violent act of constituting a democratically organized community should not be interpreted as contradicting its democratic nature. Sovereign freedom is obviously non-democratic, so it also seems to be anti-democratic. However, even if it appears paradoxical at first glance, sovereign freedom is a necessary precondition for the emergence of any democratic order. Again, the practice of art installation is a good example of this rule. The standard art exhibition leaves an individual visitor alone, allowing him or her to individually confront and contemplate the exhibited art objects. Moving from one object to another, such an individual visitor necessarily overlooks the totality of the exhibition's space, including his or her own position within it. An artistic installation, on the contrary, builds a community of spectators precisely because of the holistic, unifying character of the installation space. The true visitor to the art installation is not an

isolated individual, but a collective of visitors. The art space as such can only be perceived by a mass of visitors—a multitude, if you like—with this multitude becoming part of the exhibition for each individual visitor, and vice versa.

There is a dimension of mass culture which is often overlooked, that becomes particularly manifest in the context of art. A pop concert or a film screening creates communities among its attendees. The members of these transitory communities do not know each other—their structure is accidental; it remains unclear where they have come from and where they are going; they have little to say to one another; they lack a joint identity or previous history that could provide them with common memories to share; nevertheless, they are communities. These communities resemble those of travelers on a train or airplane. To put it differently: these are radically contemporary communities—much more so than religious, political, or working communities. All traditional communities are based on the premise that their members, from the very beginning, are linked by something that stems from the past: a common language, common faith, common political history, common upbringing. Such communities tend to establish boundaries between themselves and strangers with whom they share no common past.

Mass culture, by contrast, creates communities beyond any common past—unconditional communities of a new kind. This is what reveals its vast potential for modernization, which is frequently overlooked. However, mass culture itself cannot fully reflect and unfold this potential, because the communities it creates are not sufficiently aware of themselves as such. The same can be said of the masses moving through the standard exhibition spaces of contemporary museums and Kunsthalles. It is often said that the museum is elitist. I have always been astounded by this opinion, so counter to my own personal experience of becoming part of a mass of visitors continuously flowing through the exhibition and museum rooms. Anyone who has ever looked for a parking lot near a museum, or tried to leave a coat at the museum checkroom, or needed to find the museum lavatory, will have reason to doubt the elitist character of this institution—particularly in the case of museums that are considered particularly elitist, such as the Metropolitan Museum or the MoMA in New York. Today, global tourist streams make any elitist claim a museum might have seem like a ridiculous presumption. And if these streams avoid one specific exhibition, its curator will not be at all happy, will not feel elitist but disappointed for having failed to reach the masses. But these masses do not reflect themselves as such—they do not constitute any *politeia*. The perspective of pop-concert fans or moviegoers is too forward-directed—at stage or screen—to allow them to adequately perceive and reflect the space in which they find themselves or the communities of which they have become part. This is the kind of reflection that advanced present-day art provokes, whether as installation art, or as experimental curatorial projects. The relative spatial separation provided by the installation space does not mean a turn away from the world, but rather a de-localization and de-territorialization of mass-cultural transitory communities—in a way that assists them in reflecting upon their own condition, offering them an opportunity to exhibit themselves to themselves. The contemporary art space is a space in which multitudes can view themselves and celebrate themselves, as God or kings were in former times viewed and celebrated in churches and palaces (Thomas Struth's *Museum Photographs* capture this dimension of the museum very well—this emergence and dissolution of transitional communities).

More than anything else, what the installation offers to the fluid, circulating multitudes is an aura of the here and now. The installation is, above all, a mass-cultural version of individual flânerie, as described by Benjamin, and therefore a place for the emergence of aura, for "profane illumination." In general, the installation operates as a reversal of reproduction. The installation takes a copy out of an unmarked, open space of anonymous circulation and places it—if only temporarily—within a fixed, stable, closed context of the topologically well-defined "here and now." Our contemporary condition cannot be reduced to being a "loss of the aura" to the circulation of the copy beyond "here and now," as described in Benjamin's famous essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[3] Rather, the contemporary age organizes a complex interplay of dislocations and relocations, of deterritorializations and reterritorializations, of de-auratizations and re-auratizations.

Benjamin shared high modernist art's belief in a unique, normative context for art. Under this presupposition, to lose its unique, original context means for an artwork to lose its aura forever—to become a copy of itself. To re-auratize an individual artwork would require a sacralization of the whole profane space of a copy's topologically undetermined mass circulation—a totalitarian, fascist project, to be sure. This is the main problem to be found in Benjamin's thinking: he perceives the space of a copy's mass circulation—and mass circulation in general—as a universal, neutral, and homogeneous space. He insists upon the visual

recognizability, on the self-identity of a copy as it circulates in our contemporary culture. But both of these principal presuppositions in Benjamin's text are questionable. In the framework of contemporary culture, an image is permanently circulating from one medium to another medium, and from one closed context to another closed context. For example, a bit of film footage can be shown in a cinema, then converted to a digital form and appear on somebody's website, or be shown during a conference as an illustration, or watched privately on a television in a person's living room, or placed in the context of a museum installation. In this way, through different contexts and media, this bit of film footage is transformed by different program languages, different software, different framings on the screen, different placement in an installation space, and so on. All this time, are we dealing with the same film footage? Is it the same copy of the same copy of the same original? The topology of today's networks of communication, generation, translation, and distribution of images is extremely heterogeneous. The images are constantly transformed, rewritten, reedited, and reprogrammed as they circulate through these networks—and with each step they are visually altered. Their status as copies of copies becomes an everyday cultural convention, as was previously the case with the status of the original. Benjamin suggests that the new technology is capable of producing copies with increasing fidelity to the original, when in fact the opposite is the case. Contemporary technology thinks in generations—and to transmit information from one generation of hardware and software to the next is to transform it in a significant way. The metaphoric notion of "generation" as it is now used in the context of technology is particularly revealing. Where there are generations, there are also generational Oedipal conflicts. All of us know what it means to transmit a certain cultural heritage from one generation of students to another.

We are unable to stabilize a copy as a copy, as we are unable to stabilize an original as an original. There are no eternal copies as there are no eternal originals. Reproduction is as much infected by originality as originality is infected by reproduction. In circulating through various contexts, a copy becomes a series of different originals. Every change of context, every change of medium can be interpreted as a negation of the status of a copy as a copy—as an essential rupture, as a new start that opens a new future. In this sense, a copy is never really a copy, but rather a new original, in a new context. Every copy is by itself a *flâneur*—experiencing time and again its own "profane illuminations" that turn it into an original. It loses old auras and gains new auras. It remains perhaps the same copy, but it becomes different originals. This also shows a postmodern project of reflecting on the repetitive, iterative, reproductive character of an image (inspired by Benjamin) to be as paradoxical as the modern project of recognizing the original and the new. This is likewise why postmodern art tends to look very new, even if—or actually because—it is directed against the very notion of the new. Our decision to recognize a certain image as either an original or a copy is dependent on the context—on the scene in which this decision is taken. This decision is always a contemporary decision—one that belongs not to the past and not to the future, but to the present. And this decision is also always a sovereign decision—in fact, the installation is a space for such a decision where "here and now" emerges and profane illumination of the masses takes place.

So one can say that installation practice demonstrates the dependency of any democratic space (in which masses or multitudes demonstrate themselves to themselves) on the private, sovereign decisions of an artist as its legislator. This was something that was very well known to the ancient Greek thinkers, as it was to the initiators of the earlier democratic revolutions. But recently, this knowledge somehow became suppressed by the dominant political discourse. Especially after Foucault, we tend to detect the source of power in impersonal agencies, structures, rules, and protocols. However, this fixation on the impersonal mechanisms of power lead us to overlook the importance of individual, sovereign decisions and actions taking place in private, heterotopic spaces (to use another term introduced by Foucault). Likewise, the modern, democratic powers have meta-social, meta-public, heterotopic origins. As has been mentioned, the artist who designs a certain installation space is an outsider to this space. He or she is heterotopic to this space. But the outsider is not necessarily somebody who has to be included in order to be empowered. There is also empowerment by exclusion, and especially by self-exclusion. The outsider can be powerful precisely because he or she is not controlled by society, and is not limited in his or her sovereign actions by any public discussion or by any need for public self-justification. And it would be wrong to think that this kind of powerful outsidership can be completely eliminated through Modern progress and democratic revolutions. The progress is rational. But not accidentally, an artist is supposed by our culture to be mad—at least to be obsessed. Foucault thought that medicine men, witches, and prophets have no prominent place in our society any more—that they became outcasts, confined to psychiatric clinics. But our culture is primarily a celebrity culture, and you cannot become a celebrity without being mad (or at least pretending to be). Obviously, Foucault read too many

scientific books and only a few society and gossip magazines, because otherwise he would have known where mad people today have their true social place. It is also well known that the contemporary political elite is a part of global celebrity culture, which is to say that it is external to the society it rules. Global, extra-democratic, trans-state, external to any democratically organized community, paradigmatically private, this elite is, in fact, structurally mad—insane.

Now, these reflections should not be misunderstood as a critique of installation as an art form by demonstrating its sovereign character. The goal of art, after all, is not to change things—things are changing by themselves all the time anyway. Art's function is rather to show, to make visible the realities that are generally overlooked. By taking aesthetic responsibility in a very explicit way for the design of the installation space, the artist reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politics, for the most part, tries to conceal. The installation space is where we are immediately confronted with the ambiguous character of the contemporary notion of freedom that functions in our democracies as a tension between sovereign and institutional freedom. The artistic installation is thus a space of unconcealment (in the Heideggerian sense) of the heterotopic, sovereign power that is concealed behind the obscure transparency of the democratic order.

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1 Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 108ff.

2 Marquis de Sade, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 191ff.

3 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 221ff.

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