

Abstract

This thesis proposes and articulates innovations in curatorial research and methodology. The terms and applications were elucidated in practice in an exhibition of contemporary art mounted at the Haus der Kunst in Munich from November 7, 2003, to February 15, 2004. The author of this thesis created and curated this exhibition, *Partners*, as the inaugural show for the museum's incoming director, Chris Dercon, and its chief curator, Thomas Weski.

For the past three decades, the author-curator has focused on the exploration of modern and contemporary culture in relation to world memory through the more than 100 contemporary-art exhibitions she has presented over that period. Her practice-based projects are anchored in her contemporary-art scholarship.

Partners offers a particular diagnosis of twentieth-century history and culture. The curator assembled individual artworks and placed them in a visual arrangement—the exhibition—with significations, insights and meanings arising out of her specific curatorial approach.

The title, *Partners*, signals the interdependencies of human beings in their tendency to congregate under the safe-seeming umbrellas of myths, moralities, conformities, philosophies and ideas. The title also suggests that group consensus determines world memory.

From an art-historical point of view, the title articulates a three-way partnership—a co-ordination between the curator, the space and the objects she has selected to interpret that space.

This curatorial practice celebrates art that has urgency in the moment of the exhibition, while also seeking to transcend that moment by integrating events in political and cultural history as essential elements of the exposition.

In the manner of artists, this curator presents exhibitions that can be seen as summoning counterparts to the artists' intuitions about life. The exhibitions are not expressions, opinions or illustrations of reality, but reveal their own truths in the creation of a parallel world through the arrangement of art objects and artifacts.

Given that focus, the curator took special note of Haus der Kunst's historical and physical space. Originally called Haus der Deutschen Kunst, the gallery played an important role in Nazi propaganda and is

well known in art history for its place in the German cultural scene of the 1930s. In response to the challenge to reactualize the museum in a new century, the curator made a composition that addressed the history of the past with specifically chosen examples of art and artifacts that foregrounded the present.

Partners proposes an innovation in curatorial methodology in that it is a “curatorial composition,” one that has its own unity and point of view, like an individual work in any artistic medium. In a curatorial composition such as *Partners*, the individual works stand in specific relationships to each other, both in terms of their physical placement and in terms of their cognitive consonance, dissonance and resonance. The media in which the artworks are made and the place in which they are set all provide the curator with opportunities to mine artworks for meaning, knowledge and insight beyond the possibilities inherent in the individual works themselves.

This curatorial composition was a direct function of the curator’s intellectual and experiential engagement with specific objects, as well as the history that informed their location. In other words, the autonomous elements on display have dual roles—as fixtures that pin down the cultural-diagnostic content of the show in its historical space and as provocative contemporary-art gestures that hold positions in history, as well as in the history of art. While each work or object has content, it takes on additional meaning when placed in a specific space with other works. As a result, a dialogue occurs between the works themselves along with the arena in which they are placed. The voice of each artist is not only heard through each work, but amplified by the works around it, as well as by the architectural context surrounding and situating it.

Rather than assembling a body of examples from a chosen roster of artists to express a curatorial concept, *Partners* exemplifies a model of curatorial practice that expresses itself by putting particular works together in a particular space. These pieces are then assembled alongside iconic objects and artifacts from other disciplines and media, such as photography, photojournalism and contemporary-art photography, images from popular culture, as well as a performance of a pop song by an Elvis Presley impersonator. The curator also included *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, an archive assembled from a source unique to our time (the Internet auction site, eBay) as both a contemporary-art work and as a context to present a contemporary sculpture. Also included are vernacular objects such as antique teddy bears and a rare tin toy. It is fundamental to the curator’s practice that she may explore any media to make her own work.

Two influential and pioneering predecessors, Harald Szeemann and Rudi Fuchs, are discussed in the Introduction to the thesis, not only in terms of their contributions to modern curatorial practice but also in the ways their practices have contributed to, but also differ from, the author’s own. Szeemann pioneered the idea of curating group shows around a theme, a methodology that has now become the norm. Naming his shows was the start of his process, based on his intuitive appreciation of what artists were producing at the time. He was receptive to the art he saw, and created engaging titles that offered a broad opportunity for artists to make or provide works as interpretations of his initial concepts. He created exhibitions in the form of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*

(total work of art), analogous to the late music dramas of Richard Wagner.

Like Szeemann, Fuchs also worked closely and poetically with artists. A virtuoso curator, he made organic, coherent shows whose form and content derived from his deep understanding of and response to what artists and their artworks were saying. Both curators exhibited art and antique artifacts in imaginative juxtapositions that were engaging and illuminating and that created correspondences between objects of both the same and different periods of history.

Both were highly receptive to the visual arts through their empathic relationships with the works and with the artists whose work engaged them. Neither approached art as a theoretician. They celebrated the practices of artists in their own practice-based work as curators.

While acknowledging her indebtedness to Szeemann and to Fuchs, *Partners'* curator presents a more relational perspective that calls upon the history of the architectural space as a cultural context and the diagnostic possibilities arising from the interplay of works from different disciplines. Szeemann and Fuchs also exhibited art and artifacts together, imaginatively and with juxtapositions, making for arresting shows. The author of this thesis, however, unites the art and objects chosen as essential and specific parts of a narrative that puts an equal focus on what each object is saying in and of itself, in its context and in its location.

Partners created a dialogue with the museum in which it was mounted, and that relationship between locale and content was itself designed to elicit insights into art's place in history and in world memory. The author-curator has long striven to unmoor works from the realm of art history and allow them to come to life in association with popular culture or icons of history. Instead of building an exhibition around a specific group of artists or theme to make a statement about the art of our time, *Partners* examined twentieth-century culture through a multidisciplinary group of works and artifacts whose physical, intellectual and emotional interrelationships in a particular space, when co-ordinated together, created the potential for a transcendent experience in the viewer.

The author-curator's approach of reading a work through the frame of several contexts alters the discourse between the artist and the curator; it increases the intensity of the partnership while taking it to a new metaphorical plane. The curator's practice engages in an alternative partnership with the artist, precipitating a new kind of conversation about the interpretation of specific works, as well as a different and mutating relationship with the viewer that provokes insights into the work of art and what history can tell us about ourselves that goes beyond the literality of information. Indeed, the viewer may think the show is about one thing, when a closer consideration, through the lenses of contemporary-art expectations or the lenses of other disciplines, might reveal that it is actually about another. Meaning becomes a matter of perspective and how you look at things. In fact, the image of the tin toy, *Minnie Mouse Carrying Felix in Cages*, which served as the poster identifier for the show, metaphorically encapsulates the notion of attempting to capture that which is

fugitive. Felix, the partner of Minnie Mouse, is both “there” and “not there.”

Partners as an exhibition proposes a new concept of curatorial composition and practice. Its development and exposition, presented through the written component, *Notes on the Exhibition*, constitute critical elements in the research that underlie the author's conceptual framework and program. The text is not intended to translate the exhibition's meaning or the feelings it evokes into words. The thesis is about the arrangement of art objects and artifacts to be experienced in real space, in real time.

Alongside other introductory material, the text, *Notes on the Exhibition*, was written as a guide to the terms and forms of the exhibition. The text provides the theoretical underpinnings and practical exegesis of the thesis. Themes are stated, then repeated or restated when necessary as the text progresses, to compose a verbal representation of the components of the exhibition and the interrelationships between its constituent parts.

The exhibition, mirrored by the text, is divided into three narrative-allegorical passages designed to give the viewer the most engaging experience. The three passages, flanking each other in a classically laid-out floor plan, suggest journeys for the viewer, providing the means to experience the items in the exhibition as well as the exhibition itself in ways that are both immediate and retrospective. The exhibition's narrative power unfolds as the viewer proceeds through the passages for the first time, then reviews and re-examines what has been seen on returning through them. In this way, works are re-contextualized and nudged into new realms of interpretation that arise from the viewer's progression while also hearkening back to what was already experienced. The show not only sets up the viewer for a new experience, as occurs in life but also allows for a deeper consideration with the eyes of someone willing to contemplate the past by reconsidering what was just seen. Both in terms of the particular artworks assembled and their considered and contextualized layout, *Partners* was designed and constructed to offer viewers the opportunity, through contemporary art and culture, to have an embodied experience that addresses human nature in relation to world history and world memory. The curatorial practice is a direct and physical manifestation of the author-curator's own exploration of this relationship. While all viewers are partners in the exploration, the exhibition encourages an individual engagement by each.