

RELAYS

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1. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

When I was asked to write a text about the “paracuratorial,” a seminar devoted to filmic paratexts that I attended as part of my film studies coursework immediately sprang to mind. Based on Gérard Genette’s definition of the paratext as the sum of those elements that accompany a text or a book—from the dust jacket to the advertising campaign—the filmic paratext serves as a framing adjunct with the power to guide our reading of a film.¹ The directors of the Nouvelle Vague were characterized above all by their affording this framework almost as much attention as they gave to the films themselves. The opening and closing credits, the poster, and also writing on the subject of film constitute the levels of commentary that coalesce to form the overall space inhabited by a film and render its external and internal references visible and subject to analysis.

Along with its core duty of exhibition making, curating also encompasses a whole series of other activities that are now taken for granted: writing accompanying texts, programming film series, organizing lectures and talks, et cetera. As a (somewhat academic) term, the “paracuratorial” has arisen out of a plane of commentary similar to other paratexts in order to channel the reception of the exhibition in a particular direction and illuminate its inherent systems of reference. In recent years, however, this whole area has developed its own impetus. We are no longer dealing only with fields that go hand-in-hand with curatorial work and ultimately therefore the exhibition itself, but also with arenas that have taken the place of the exhibition: the thematic reader, the academic conference, the philosophical seminar. Curators stage salons and interdisciplinary symposia, and even publish periodicals. They adopt artistic methodologies of research-based activity and present their own institutional history as an interactive archive. They adapt the notion of a collective production of knowledge in the form of temporary academies. We are dealing with an enormous degree of openness nowadays with regard to what is offered by, and what can be discussed within, the context of an institution. As a result, new conflicts, correspondences, and commentaries have emerged

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within the traditional coordinates of art that place the format of the exhibition in an altered, broader focus.

Many of these activities are the result of a series of considerations that relate to how the art institution sees itself, and ultimately also relate to the academic processing of such considerations. To a certain extent, they represent the legacy of New Institutionalism, which has itself become a kind of common property. In its wake, museums, galleries, and art centers have transformed themselves into more open formats. They have tried to foster a more democratic attitude toward their audiences, and to open themselves up to new forms of artistic practice. The institution as “part-community center, part-laboratory, and part-academy” may well belong to the past, but its diverse components are part and parcel of everyday curatorial practice.² In the field of education in particular, diverse models have been developed to reach out to new audiences and (to a certain extent) to make art more accessible across the board. Moreover, there has been a recognition of the institution’s potential to create a public for art and to act as a substitute for those spaces that have become increasingly subservient to commercial interests and are no longer inclusive, but exclusive.

This also implies that different institutional formats do indeed represent “sealed, protected areas” (that would constitute the white cube’s productive legacy) where things can happen that don’t happen elsewhere. The repolitization of art, the focus upon—often already historic—activist formats, and the close collaboration with local communities make it apparent that diverse forums that once existed have now ceased to exist in this particular way. A broadened form of curatorial practice occasionally compensates for this, to an extent.

Classic institutional critique targeted the framework of art’s production as well as the socioeconomic and political conditions of the institutions engaged in its exhibition. It analyzed and questioned the very locus in which art was publicly displayed. Precisely because institutional critique was ultimately a form of criticism that affirmed its own institutional basis—as an “internal” critique referring to the institutional status of art and the system of art institutions (ranging from museums to galleries to art periodicals or indeed the art market)—it was also possible for art institutions to utilize it for their own purposes of self-legitimation. (As indeed it often was, through to the ubiquitous rhetoric plied by curators today that art is permanently “crossing borders” of one kind or another, questioning relationships of power, and unveiling institutional mechanisms.) A follow-up trend emerged later in the form of the so-called *Kontext-Kunst* (Context art), which on the one hand saw itself as part of the tradition of institutional critique, but on the other was attempting to open up art institutions to non-art practices to which it was previously unconnected.

2. Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt, “Harnessing the Means of Production” in *New Institutionalism*, ed. Jonas Ekeberg (Oslo: OCA/verksted, 2003): 78.

3. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "A Curriculum of Institutional Critique" in *New Institutionalism*, 89–109.

Whereas orthodox institutional critique is predicated upon the supposition (and I am simplifying to an extent) that there is an inherent conflict between the artist and the institution, the second phase of institutional critique is a more collaborative affair and utilizes the exhibition as a space to draw attention to its operations. After institutional critique's renaissance during the 1990s made renewed reference from the artists' point of view to the symbolic rules that differentiate art from the broad field of non-art, the institutional context functions nowadays predominantly as a privileged place in which the focus can be directed toward that sociopolitical "outside the white cube" which is itself filtered out of the internal system. By means of targeted interventions, reality outside art has found its way, legitimated as art, into the interior space. The relationship between art and non-art defines itself here just as strategically as it does situationally: There is an outside to which reference is duly made, but this is not contextualized completely as art by virtue of the reference alone. Instead of fundamentally questioning the symbolic borders of the art space per se, its rules and ways of functioning are temporarily transferred to areas that gain a new interest and also a politicization through this very framework.

Art institutions are no longer viewed as sites of cultural and political exclusion deserving of critique and indeed attack. Instead, contemporary critical institutional discourse is propagated—and here we arrive at the subject in question—chiefly by curators and museum directors. The transformation of the institution and the extension of its scope of action have become a shared goal. However, over time the broadened version of institutional critique has also progressed from a critical form of art practice to a more general attitude toward the "operating system," which can in turn be adopted by artists, curators, and critics alike. A command of "the curriculum of institutional critique" has become a matter of course.³

This shift—which is owed in equal measure to both the success of institutional critique and its historicization, so that it has now become part of an art-historical canon as well as curatorial training—engenders a variety of paracuratorial activities. The majority of these activities take place in a field which itself examines the possibilities of curatorial practice beyond (now rare) rigid institutional formats. Whereas there are experts for the classical activities of communication (press officer, art educator), the curator, as auteur, adopts the role of the critic channelling the debate, productively extending the curatorial remit. He or she knows that things are possible within the institutional framing of art that are (no longer) possible elsewhere. This framing is perhaps the most important aspect for the various conferences and publications initiated independently of exhibitions, for the political engagement of individual institutions, and for their contribution to sociopolitical initiatives for change. On the other hand, the academic world hardly has the financial resources

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to publish its research in book form. Institutions publish not only exhibition catalogues but also anthologies, collections of essays, conference minutes, and other kinds of documentation. The likelihood of listening to a lecture by a renowned philosopher held in a museum, a municipal art gallery, an art center, or a conference organized by one of these institutions is significantly greater than doing so in a university.

This development becomes problematic when academic training becomes increasingly market-oriented, generously leaving the fields adapted from the art industry itself to the art industry; when art institutions become places that organize not only exhibitions but also university-level conferences and establish their own albeit temporary academies, and universities are forced to withdraw from these arenas out of political considerations; when cultural policy is only prepared to sanction the funding of the institution's disseminative role and duly cuts structural funding; when conditions are laid down as to which paracuratorial activities need to be performed and which do not. In times when universities are being restructured and the humanities actively curtailed, when art academies are being forced to obey the call for efficiency, one shouldn't redistribute their duties unquestioningly.

With all due sympathy for the extended forms of curatorial activity, the exhibition and dissemination of art should move to center stage once more, and the accompanying apparatuses that frame it and the discourse it produces should be supported by a commonality of interest in these two core elements. That would constitute a plea for broad-based forms of dissemination to a heterogeneous audience as well as for the integration of adjacent fields into a curatorial discourse which itself reflects the political, social, and economic "outside." The art system is in a powerful position at the moment to be able to appropriate many discourses and fields of activity and engagement. We ought not to forget that other places exist where much of what we increasingly find ourselves doing is also done—places like universities, repertory cinemas, community centers, and so on, and which merely await our willingness to cooperate.

The classical paratext is "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition, but also of *transaction*."⁴ As a transitional zone it is part of neither one field nor the other. From the point of view of a text, it belongs to the context, but from that of the context, it is part of the text. At best, it is a switching point and interface, with the capacity to initiate communicative processes. Ultimately it is a profoundly heteronomic, auxiliary discourse operating in the service of a different enterprise, which provides its very justification for existence: "Irrespective of the degree of aesthetic or ideological content, coquettishness, and paradoxical reversals the author may choose to introduce into a paratextual element, it is always subordinate to 'his' text and this functionality significantly determines its composition and its existence."⁵

4. Genette, *Paratexts*, 15.

5. *Ibid.*

Even if the shifts of position within the curatorial per se and its interplay with other spheres of activity and social contexts are indeed irreversible—and are not meant to be reconsidered here at all—the exhibition itself still ought to move center stage more emphatically as a unique format for the production of meaning. Collaborations with experts from other fields are explicitly recommended in this endeavor. The endless extension of curatorial practice itself will lead to a one-sided upgrading of the figure of the curator in the field of the production and dissemination of knowledge. Reflection on, and commentary upon, existing social, political, and economic conditions in the sphere of art must be a joint enterprise—for artists, curators, and their public. In this sense, the paracuratorial would also ideally be a switching point and interface for the initiation of communicative processes.

Translated from the German by Timothy Cornell

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