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Left to right: panellists Vasif Kortun, Marina Sorbello, Cloe Piccoli, Gloria Moure and Mark Gisbourne at the Festival dell'arte Contemporanea, Faenza, Italy, 2008 PHOTO MICHELE GRAGLIA

by ELDON GARNET

In Faenza, a picturesque medieval town in Italy's scenic Tuscany region, a group of international curators and critics gathered last spring to examine "present-day art and the directions in which it is developing." The question of the training of curators ran as a central thread throughout many of the festival's presentations and discussions. Present for the three-day event was an eccentric gathering of curatorial heavyweights, including Carlos Basualdo, a member of the curatorial team for Documenta 11 in 2002, Iwona Blazwick from Whitechapel in London, Vasif Kortun from Platform Garanti in Istanbul and two Italian superstars, Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva.

The preoccupation with curatorial education segued into a more fundamental question: what is the curator today? It was obvious from the outset that the process of training curators within the framework of art's present moment represents as significant a problem as any other facing the art world. The dialogue that emerged about the role and practice of the curator swiftly created a division between those panellists—often curators or directors of publicly funded institutions—who continue to straightforwardly pursue programs based on presenting artists and their works and those who no longer have faith in the current global curatorial model.

How does one train to be a curator in an art world in which the notion of the curator as a romantic figure who sits



CURATOR



SHOW TIME

The world's
most glamorous
vocational
schools

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Joseph Beuys (centre) at
the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf
ca. 1970 PHOTO IOTHAR WOLLEN

studies programs from the more traditional discipline of art history and the attendant interest in the art market, art fairs, biennials and mega-exhibitions in these programs is pivotal. As art has fundamentally expanded, we have seen a parallel proliferation of art schools and graduate-level curatorial-studies programs. For example, the Ontario College of Art and Design, in Toronto, where I teach, has this year initiated a master's program in curatorial studies.

The recent growth of curatorial programs is one of several trends that clearly signal the market's progressive encroachment upon the academy. At the Faenza conference, Pamela M. Lee, a former student of the Whitney School and Harvard now teaching at Stanford University, asserted that curatorial programs now seem the logical point of entry into the art world for aspiring professionals. They are "the world's most glamorous vocational schools," providing students with requisite practical know-how. With the curator now assuming celebrity status in the art

back, thinks and puts together an exhibition has been replaced by the curator as manager, fundraiser, labourer and rock star? At the present moment there is general agreement among critical thinkers that the art world, in its overabundance, in its successful proliferation, is imploding. Art has become so inclusive that boundaries have been eradicated. In the early 1980s it was revolutionary to conflate fashion, architecture, film, music and literature as art productions, but now it is common; boundaries are as free-floating as the production and creation of art. When was it that the curator became the artist and, by extension, the celebrity? Was Guy Debord the pioneer or was it Jérôme Sans taking up the guitar? Curators, like artists, are now free to cross-dress in any cultural garb they can imagine, layering their activities across disciplines. So what does it mean to train curators when curating itself is in a state of metamorphosing into art?

There is a pressing need to assess and critically evaluate recent shifts and developments in curatorial practice, particularly to investigate curatorial-studies programs and their connection to the current excitement about curation. The break-off of curatorial-

world, newly minted curatorial schools, Lee suspects, are, at least in the United States, "but a cash cow to older and more established programs in art history." But at what cost? American graduate schools are hugely expensive and offer little in the way of financial assistance. The well-established Bard College, for example, charges first-year curatorial-studies students more than \$30,000 in tuition each year.

These programs market themselves as professionally oriented, able to provide successful students entry into the professional curatorial world—but often to the student's disappointment. Opportunities upon graduation are rare due to the relatively small size of the art-museum universe. Contemporary-art museums are not numerous, and starting curatorial salaries are usually low and advancement slow. Given the limited possibility of employment in the field, Lee cannot help but wonder at the purpose of curatorial-studies programs—except as a "cash cow" for the educational institution.

Expressing a more optimistic position was T. J. Demos, from London. For Demos, the proliferation of university-level curatorial-studies programs is less a problem than an accepted way of life. Trained at Columbia University in New York, Demos is currently

teaching art history and directing graduate students at the University of London's University College. He has experienced the expansion first-hand, witnessing in the last few years an "absolute explosion" in curatorial-studies programs in London. He has also found a parallel splintering of the art discourse, with graduate-level curatorial programs now developing on their own intellectual terms, distinct from what was once the exclusive domain of art history.

Aware that the art academy is well established as a place of vocational training and art-market production in both Europe and North America and that it has functioned very successfully in this way for two decades, Demos is interested in a more critical approach. He is engaged in a rethinking of the academy as a space of critical discourse, characterized by more "experimental practices," a place where the "invention of new kinds of institutions" is taking place. While a managerial ethos has seemingly taken over the art academy, there has been a parallel rise in alternative, experimental art programs. These new "institutions" are often modelled on Joseph Beuys's work with the Free International University. Initiatives such as Charles Esche's protoacademy, the 16Beaver group in New York, the International Academy of Art Palestine, in Ramallah, and Manifesta 6's (failed) attempt to develop an academy in Cyprus represent a return to previous models of the radical art academy. These are usually non-tuition-based, non-hierarchical and absolutely inclusive, characterized by an atmosphere of collaboration and an overturning of the teacher-student hierarchy. The hope is to move away from the managerial model of art education and toward "the development of an arts academy that is truly about the exploration of knowledge in its most inclusive and process-based form."

As fascinating and utopian as the notion of a free academy open to all might be, the pragmatic reality is that the art academy, as part of the institution of the university, is an industry at the service of the art market. This was clearly stated in Faenza by Jennie Hirsh, the moderator of the panel on art and curatorial schools: "Creativity and the visibility of the arts have progressively become fundraising tools, a way to make concrete the university's interest in the humanities." Many curators feel, Hirsh attests, that given the reality of museum practice, they would be better served by an M.A. in economics than an M.A. in art history. Co-operative, self-directed, non-market-based and artist-driven experimental institutions will continue to provide theoretical opposition, but do not represent a realistic threat to knowledge capitalism, which, according to governmental logic, is predicated on profit as opposed to societal transformation.

The most cynical, and most refreshing, response I heard to the curatorial and education crisis under discussion at the conference came from the curator Vasif Kortun, who founded and for many

years directed one of Turkey's first contemporary-art institutions, Platform Garanti in Istanbul. His institution, supported by more-than-adequate private funding, has been so successful in presenting contemporary-art programming to large, excited audiences that he has now become bored. After curating many major exhibitions, including international biennials, Kortun has now—possibly sarcastically, possibly truthfully—declared that he is transforming Platform Garanti, turning it into an institution for research and an archive. The new institution will have exhibitions, "but not in the way one is used to—less pure, and never without a reason, a question, something that itches and worries one"—but focus on the history of past activities and a cross-disciplinary research facility. It is an experimental, utopian plan that, ironically, could serve as a model for an advanced curatorial school, one where training is based on teaching people who is who. ■

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