

Multiple Authorship

Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands.

—Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

For a long time the social function of the exhibition was firmly fixed: the artist produced artworks, which were then either selected and exhibited by the curator of an exhibition, or rejected. The artist was considered an autonomous author. The curator of the exhibition, by contrast, was someone who mediated between the author and the public but was not an author himself. Thus the respective roles of artist and curator were clearly distinct: the artist was concerned with creation; the curator, with selection. The curator could only choose from the store of works that various artists had already produced. That meant that creation was considered primary, and selection, secondary. Accordingly, the inevitable conflict between artist and curator was seen and treated as a conflict between authorship and mediation, between individual and institution, between primary and secondary. That era, however, is now definitively over. The relationship between artist and curator has undergone a fundamental change. Although this change has not resolved the old conflicts, they have taken on a completely different form.

It is simple to state why this situation changed: art today is defined by an identity between creation and selection. At least since Duchamp, it has been the case that selecting an artwork is the same as creating an artwork. That, of course, does not mean that all art since then has become readymade art. It does mean, however, that the creative act has become the act of selection: since Duchamp, producing an object is no longer sufficient for its producer to be considered an artist. One must also select the object one has made oneself and declare it an artwork. Accordingly, since Duchamp there is no longer any difference between an object one produces oneself and one produced by someone else—both have to be selected in order to be considered artworks. Today an author is someone who selects, who authorizes. Since

Duchamp the author has become a curator. The artist is primarily the curator of himself, because he selects his own art. And he also selects others: other objects, other artists. At least since the 1960s artists have created installations in order to demonstrate their personal practices of selection. The installations, however, are nothing other than exhibitions curated by artists, in which objects made by others may be—and are—represented as well as objects made by the artist. Accordingly, however, curators are also freed of the duty to exhibit only those objects that are preselected by the artists. Curators today feel free to combine art objects selected and signed by artists with objects that are taken directly from “life.” In short, once the identity between creation and selection has been established, the roles of the artist and of the curator also become identical. A distinction between the (curated) exhibition and the (artistic) installation is still commonly made, but it is essentially obsolete.

The old question must therefore be asked anew: What is an artwork? The answer that present-day art practices offer to this question is straightforward: the artwork is an exhibited object. The object that is not exhibited is not an artwork but merely an object that has the potential to be exhibited as an artwork. Not by chance do we speak of art today as “contemporary art.” It is art that must currently be exhibited in order to be considered art at all. The elementary unit of art today is therefore no longer an artwork as object but an art space in which objects are exhibited: the space of an exhibition, of an installation. Present-day art is not the sum of particular things but the topology of particular places. The installation has thus established an extremely voracious form of art that assimilates all other traditional art forms: paintings, drawings, photographs, texts, objects, readymades, films, and recordings. All these art objects are arranged by an artist or curator in the space, according to an order that is purely private, individual, and subjective. Thus the artist or curator has a chance to demonstrate publicly his private, sovereign strategy of selection.

The installation is often denied the status of art because the question arises of what the medium of an installation is. This question arises because traditional art media are all defined according to the specific support of the medium: canvas, stone, or film. The medium of an installation is the space itself; and that means, among other things, that the installation is by no means “immaterial.” Quite the contrary: The installation is by all means material,

because it is spatial. The installation demonstrates the material of the civilization in which we live particularly well, since it *installs* everything that otherwise merely *circulates* in our civilization. Hence the installation demonstrates the civilizational hardware that otherwise remains unnoticed behind the surface of circulation in the media. And it also shows the artist's sovereignty at work: how this sovereignty defines and practices its strategies of selection. That is why the installation is not a representation of the relationships among things as regulated by economic and other social orders; quite the contrary, the installation offers an opportunity to use the explicit introduction of subjective orders and relations among things in order to call into question at least those orders that must be supposed to exist "out there" in reality.

We must take this opportunity to clear up a misunderstanding that has recently come up again and again in the relevant literature. It has been argued with some insistence that art has reached its end today; and that therefore a new field—visual studies—should take the place of art history. Visual studies is supposed to extend the field of pictorial analysis: rather than considering artistic images exclusively, it is supposed to address the purportedly larger, more open space of all existing images, and to transgress courageously the limits of the old concept of art. The courage to transgress old limits is certainly always impressive and welcome. In this case, however, what seems to be a transgression of limits turns out not to be an extension at all but rather a scaling down of the relevant spaces. As we have noted, art consists not of images but of all possible objects, including utilitarian objects, texts, and so on. And there are no distinct "artistic images"; rather, any image can be used in an artistic context. Turning art history into visual studies is thus not an extension of its field of study but a drastic reduction of it, since it restricts art to what can be considered an "image" in the traditional sense. By contrast, everything that can be presented in an installation space belongs to the realm of the visual arts. In that sense, an individual image is also an installation; it is simply an installation that has been reduced to a single image. The installation is thus not an alternative to the image but precisely the extension of the concept of the image that is lost if the traditional concept of the image is readopted. If we want to extend the concept of the image, it is precisely the installation that we need to discuss, since it defines the universal rules for space by which all images and nonimages must function as spatial objects. In more than one respect the transition to the installation as the guiding form

of contemporary art changes the definition of what we define as a work of art. The most significant and far-reaching change is to our understanding of authorship in art.

Increasingly today, we protest against the traditional cult of artistic subjectivity, against the figure of the author, and against the authorial signature. This rebellion usually sees itself as a revolt against the power structures of the system of art that find their visible expression in the figure of the sovereign author. Again and again, critics try to demonstrate that there is no such thing as artistic genius, and consequently that the authorial status of the artist in question cannot be derived from the supposed fact that he is a genius. Rather, the attribution of authorship is seen as a convention used by the institution of art, the art market, and art critics to build up stars strategically and so to profit from them commercially. The struggle against the figure of the author is thus understood as a struggle against an undemocratic system of arbitrary privileges and unfounded hierarchies that historically have represented base commercial interests. Naturally this rebellion against the figure of the author ends with the critics of authorship being declared famous authors, precisely because they have stripped the traditional figure of the author of its power. At first glance, we might see this as merely the well-known process of regicide, in which the king's murderer is made the new king. It is not so simple, however. Rather, this polemic reflects on real processes that take place in the art world but that have yet to be adequately analyzed.

The traditional, sovereign authorship of an individual artist has *de facto* disappeared; hence it really does not make much sense to rebel against such authorship. When confronted with an art exhibition, we are dealing with multiple authorship. And in fact every art exhibition exhibits something that was selected by one or more artists—from their own production and/or from the mass of readymades. These objects selected by the artists are then selected in turn by one or more curators, who thus also share authorial responsibility for the definitive selection. In addition, these curators are selected and financed by a commission, a foundation, or an institution; thus these commissions, foundations, and institutions also bear authorial and artistic responsibility for the end result. The selected objects are presented in a space selected for the purpose; the choice of such a space, which can lie inside or outside the spaces of an institution, often plays a crucial role in the result. The choice of the space thus also belongs to the artistic, creative process; the same is true of

the choice of the architecture of the space by the architect responsible and the choice of the architect by the committees responsible. One could extend at will this list of authorial, artistic decisions that, taken together, result in an exhibition taking one form or another.

If the choice, the selection, and the decision with respect to the exhibition of an object are thus to be acknowledged as acts of artistic creation, then every individual exhibition is the result of many such processes of decision, choice, and selection. From this circumstance result multiple, disparate, heterogeneous authorships that combine, overlap, and intersect, without it being possible to reduce them to an individual, sovereign authorship. This overlapping of multilayered, heterogeneous authorships is characteristic of any larger exhibition of recent years; and with time it becomes clearer and clearer. For example, at a recent Venice Biennale several curators were invited to present their own exhibitions within the framework of a larger exhibition. Thus the result was a hybrid form between a curated exhibition and an artistic installation: the invited curators appeared before the public as artists. But it is also frequently the case that individual artists integrate works by their colleagues in their own installations and thus they appear in public as curators. Consequently, authorial praxis as it functions in the context of art today is increasingly like that of film, music, and theater. The authorship of a film, theatrical production, or a concert is also a multiple one; it is divided among writers, composers, directors, actors, camera operators, conductors, and many other participants. And the producers should by no means be forgotten. The long list of participants that appears at the end of a film, as the viewers gradually begin to leave their seats and make their way to the exit, manifests the fate of authorship in our age, something the art system cannot escape.

Under this new regime of authorship the artist is no longer judged by the objects he has produced but by the exhibitions and projects in which he has participated. Getting to know an artist today means reading his curriculum vitae, not looking at his paintings. His authorship is presumed to be only a partial one. Accordingly, he is measured not by his products but by his participation in the important exhibitions, just as an actor is judged by which roles he has played in which productions and which films. Even when one visits an artist's studio to get to know his oeuvre, one is generally shown a CD-ROM documenting the exhibitions and events in which the artist

participated but also documenting the exhibitions, events, projects, and installations that were planned but never realized. This typical experience of a studio visit today demonstrates how the status of the artwork has changed with respect to the new determination of authorship. The unexhibited artwork has ceased to be an artwork; instead, it has become art documentation. These documentations refer either to an exhibition that did indeed take place or to a project for a future exhibition. And that is the crucial aspect: the artwork today does not manifest art; it merely promises art. Art is manifested only in the exhibition, as in fact the title *Manifesta* already states. As long as an object is not yet exhibited and as soon as it is no longer exhibited, it can no longer be considered an artwork. It is either a memory of past art or a promise of future art, but from either perspective it is simply art documentation.

The function of the museum is also modified thereby. Previously the museum functioned just as it does today, namely, as a public archive. But it was an archive of a special kind. The typical historical archive contains documents that refer exclusively to past events; it presumes the ephemerality, the mortality of the life it documents. And indeed the immortal does not need to be documented; only the mortal does. The assumption about the traditional museum, by contrast, was that it contained artworks that possess an eternal artistic value, that embodied art for all times equally, and that can fascinate and convince the present-day viewer as well. That is to say, they did not just document the past but could manifest and emanate art as such here and now. The traditional museum thus functioned as a paradoxical archive of eternal presence, of profane immortality; and in this it was quite distinct from other historical and cultural archives. The material supports of art—canvas, paper, and film—may be considered ephemeral, but art itself is eternally valid.

The museum today, by contrast, is increasingly similar to other archives, since the art documentation that the museum collects does not necessarily appear before the public as art. The permanent exhibition of the museum is no longer—or at least less frequently—presented as a stable, permanent exhibition. Instead, the museum is increasingly a place where temporary exhibitions are shown. The unity of collecting and exhibiting that defined the particular nature of the traditional museum has thus broken down. The museum collection today is seen as documentary raw material that the curator can use in combination with an exhibition program he has developed

to express his individual attitude, his individual strategy for dealing with art. Alongside the curator, however, the artist also has the opportunity to shape museum spaces in whole or in part according to his own personal taste. Under these conditions the museum is transformed into a depot, into an archive of artistic documentation that is no longer essentially different from any other form of documentation, and also into a public site for the execution of private artistic projects. As such a site the museum differs from any other site primarily in its design, in its architecture. It is no coincidence that in recent years attention has shifted from the museum collection to museum architecture.

Nevertheless, the museum today has not abandoned entirely its promise of profane immortality. The art documentation that is collected in museums and other art institutions can always be exhibited anew as art. This distinguishes the art projects collected in museums from the life projects documented in other archives: realizing art as art means exhibiting it. And the museum can do that. It is, admittedly, possible to present a life project anew in a reality outside the museum, but only if it itself ultimately concerns an artistic project. This kind of rediscovery of art documentation is, however, only possible because it continues the focus on multiple authorship. Old art documents are restored, transferred to other media, rearranged, installed, and presented in other spaces. Under such conditions it is meaningless to speak of an individual, intact authorship. The artwork as exhibited art documentation is kept alive because its multiple authorships continue to multiply and proliferate; and the site of this proliferation and multiplication of authorship is the present-day museum.

The transformation of the artwork into art documentation by means of its own archiving also enables art today to draw on, in an artistic context, the immense reservoir of documentation of other events and projects that our civilization has collected. And indeed the formulation and documentation of various projects is the main activity of modern man. Whatever one wishes to undertake in business, politics, or culture, the first thing that must be done is to formulate a corresponding project in order to present an application for the approval or financing of this project to one or more responsible authorities. If this project is rejected in its original form, it is modified so that it can still be accepted. If the project is rejected entirely, one has no choice but to propose a new project in its place. Consequently, every member of our society

is constantly occupied with drafting, discussing, and rejecting new projects. Assessments are written; budgets are precisely calculated; commissions are formed; committees are convened; and decisions are made. In the meanwhile, no small number of our contemporaries read nothing other than such project proposals, reports, and budgets. Most of these projects, however, are never realized. The fact that they seem unpromising, difficult to finance, or undesirable in general to one or more experts is sufficient for the whole work of formulating the project to have been in vain.

This work is by no means insubstantial; and the amount of work associated with it grows over time. The project documentation presented to the various committees, commissions, and authorities is designed with increasingly effectiveness and formulated in greater detail in order to impress potential assessors. As a result, the formulation of projects is developing into an autonomous art form whose significance for our society has yet to be adequately understood. Irrespective of whether it is realized or not, every project presents a unique vision of the future that is itself fascinating and instructive. Frequently, however, many of the project proposals that our civilization is constantly producing are lost or simply thrown away after they are rejected. This careless approach to the art form of the project formulation is quite regrettable, really, because it often prevents us from analyzing and understanding the hopes and visions of the future that are invested in these proposals, and these things can say more about our society than anything else. Because within the system of art the exhibition of a document is sufficient to give it life, the art archive is particularly well suited to being the archive of these sorts of projects that were realized at some time in the past or will be realized in the future, but above all to being the archive of utopian projects that can never be realized fully. These utopian projects that are doomed to failure in the current economic and political reality can be kept alive in art, in that the documentation of these projects constantly changes hands and authors.