FROM MUSEUM CURATOR TO EXHIBITION AUTEUR
Inventing a singular position

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This article, touching on the sociology of art and the sociology of professions, is concerned with the conditions and modes involved in the transformation of the role of the curator — in France, in the first instance. While various morphological factors contribute to the crisis in the profession, expansion, increased authority and a change in the nature of exhibitions combine to offer curators, or at the very least several among them, the possibility of attaining the status of auteur. The hypothesis of an evolving schema, which introduces particularly the idea of deprofessionalization as a form of transition, is then reinforced by evoking a development comparable to the one we have observed in the cinema. Finally, the analysis of an important exhibition will permit us to illustrate the pertinence of the schema
and to propose several possible evolutionary scenarios.

The profession of curator is currently in the throes of a crisis which is attributable to a number of factors, morphological especially: a crisis of expansion in the wake of increases in the number of posts (made possible by the swelling of public funds dedicated to culture and made necessary by the intensification of ‘cultural’ practices, in terms of the consumption of artistic products); a crisis, by correlation, brought about by the widening of recruitment criteria and the opening up of entry routes into the profession (since the creation of a competition accessible to anyone with a university degree, in addition to the traditional recruitment by the Ecole du Louvre and, recently, to any Ecole du patrimoine graduate) as well as the multiplication and diversification of the institutions concerned (of the 1,200 museums in France, 34 are national, the remainder being either ‘classified’ or simply ‘controlled’, public or private, fine arts, the sciences, technical, ecmuseums, etc.); a crisis, finally, in the division of labour with an increasing specialization of tasks allocated to the various categories of curators.

In recent years we have witnessed several halting attempts towards homogenizing and priviliging the profession: the organization of meetings and public events, claims of a financial (salary increases) and statutory (harmonizing the pay and conditions in relation to the different categories of curators) order. Here can be found the characteristic elements of the process of professionalization which can briefly be described along the following lines: the creation and autonomization, under the ancien régime, of the function of the care and conservation of artwork – initially conducted by the painters themselves – in the framework of the royal collections; the institutionalization and increase in the number of positions accompanying the founding of museums during the Revolution; the formalization and uniformity of recruitment and criteria of competence with the creation of the Ecole du Louvre in 1882 and, consequently, the bestowing of the title of curator on members of ‘the corps of curatorship of the museums of France’ (recruited by competition, they number slightly over 200 at the present time); ethical regulations governing professional competence, formalized by a deontological code; self-control throughout the various associations (Association générale des conservateurs des collections publiques de France, created in 1922) or institutions such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM, created in 1946, or its subgroup CIMAM, Conseil international des musées d’art moderne).

At first glance, the activity of the curator can be defined according to both Parsons’ criteria of a profession (access regulations, objectivized co-opting mechanisms, a professional code of ethics, a relatively autonomous control of the field) and Weber’s, that of a highly bureaucratized occupation subject to the rules that govern the functioning of the state (a predictable career pattern, promotion
according to seniority). But, as we shall see, this profession is also reliant on the artistic realm which confers certain characteristic traits upon it.

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS AND DEPERSONALIZATION OF THE POST

The curator’s task is not only the safeguarding, analysis and presentation of a cultural heritage; it includes enriching it, principally through the acquisition of contemporary works — a function which confers upon the curator a role in the art market by the selection of objects and names and similarly calls upon him or her to resist the times or fashion. By so doing, the curator engages, initiates — and, at times, squanders — credit: both the curator’s professional credit and the institution’s moral credit, in addition to the financial credit of the state. By the same token, the curator runs the risk of incurring discredit; formerly, this discredit was linked to traditional custodial work (a good example would be the keeper of the collections of the ancien régime who, it is said, hanged himself after not being able to find a miniature) but which today is primarily concerned with purchasing. There are, in effect, several ways a curator can err: for example, by not buying enough (an error by default) or by acquiring too much (an error of excess, which would appear to be a particular menace to current representatives of the profession, collectively traumatized by historical errors committed by their predecessors under the Third Republic, notably those involved in the Caillebotte legacy affair). Thus error constitutes a risk to the curator’s craft, whether it consists of an error concerning the authenticity of a work (the purchase of a fraudulent copy) or its value in terms of the judgement of posterity (the purchase of works of inflated value and especially the non-acquisition of works of proven value; this risk is heightened when one deals with contemporary collections). In contrast to private collectors, whose personal tastes can confer a sort of ‘mark’ on their collections, curators, responsible to the wider community, will see their competence measured by the equivalence of their selections to the hierarchy of works and artists as established in the history of art. The curator is thus in opposition to Parsons’ professional, whose competence rests upon objectifiable scientific knowledge, as well as, if not more so, Weber’s functionary, whose task it is to follow judiciously defined procedures.

Thus the curator is confronted with the paradoxical injunction — when faced with the task of enriching the heritage with contemporary works as yet uncertified by art history — of investing in selections that are at once reflective of the curator’s own tastes (an extremely personal quality) and of collective values, certified by relatively formal procedures (the advice of peers, sales commissions, financial controls). So everything is conducted as though the inherent risk and discomfiture of such an
occupation would be likely to reinforce the tendency towards the erasure of the person in the past; this attitude is the only one capable of minimizing the risk of error which, as we have seen, is deeply inscribed in this profession, devoted as it is to highly unstable and strongly held artistic values.

This erasure of the person occupying a position that is part of a public-service institution becomes even more necessary in the case of curators because of the inherent risk of error in the profession; this would appear to be even more evident because the position places its occupant in a relationship with artists – an extremely individual lot – at least in terms of the works which the curator is charged with acquiring, protecting, circulating and, generally speaking, exposing to public scrutiny either materially (hanging, framing, lighting) or symbolically (attributive research, documentation, analysis, cataloguing). Traces of this form of abnegation, devotion on the part of the individual curator to the binary cause of art and public service, can be found at various levels: institutionally, in accordance with the long-standing tradition of avoiding ‘conflicts of interest’ imparted to all civil servants and in addition to the lofty level of self-imposed and deontological controls and constraints (the interdicts against participation in the art markets, by family members too, against compiling a personal collection concurrently with that of the museum and against acquiring expertise beyond that which is required by the job, etc.); psychologically, in accordance with the voluntary assumption of those traits deemed appropriate for a curator – reserve, modesty, discretion; and financially, due to the relatively low earnings (salaries are, considering the high level of education and training required for curators, the lowest among the entire public service). The last characteristic is, in part, due to the high proportion of women curators (120 women to 103 men in the ‘corps’), the legacy of a time when those who held the posts, recruited from the financially and culturally privileged sector of society, could well afford to perform their tasks on a benevolent basis. But it should be acknowledged more generally that the dual sacrifice of wealth and fame that is required of the curator’s profession is compensated by its prestige and the personal gratification derived from frequent contact with the privileged objects and lauded individuals that are works of art and artists.6

NEW FUNCTIONS, NEW POSITIONS

The current crisis in the profession, then, tends to call the established order into question, including this erasure of the person. Any crisis carries with it new perspectives that cannot be realized except along the individual trajectories of those who seize an opportunity of accelerating certain evolutions; they also contribute to defining new positions in the constitution of the future space of the professional
realm in question. Among these perspectives, we found the emergence of an authorial position through the expedient of the exhibition particularly interesting to analyse in that it introduces, in the midst of the realm of personal abnegation that is the museum, a criterion of singularization, bestowed with a legitimacy where it would ordinarily be disparaged as an indication of 'deprofessionalization'.

We shall see that it is possible to envisage this phenomenon from a positive rather than a negative point of view in the emergence in this realm of an original manner, validated from within and without, of conducting curatorship through the function of curator of exhibitions. Access, even if it remains rare and in large part indirect, to the position of exhibition auteur conjures a figure imported from other disciplines. This figure is as irreducible to the notion of a post (it is not the institution that defines the ‘author’ – and as it happens the latter is so defined in opposition to the former) as is to that of function (to the extent that the mere accomplishment of a task does not make an author, rather it is the singularity of an author’s production that does so).7

It would seem that it is through the redistribution and redefinition of the functions traditionally given to the curator that new positions tend to emerge. In effect, among the four crucial tasks which define the job (safeguarding the heritage, enriching collections, research and display), the only one which would allow a certain personalization – in the dual sense of the singularity of the accomplished task and any increase in stature it derives – is presentation to the public. And it is precisely this one which traditionally occupied the lowest level in the hierarchy of functions. Thus museum staff are readily suspected – if not accused outright – of working only for their peers, of ignoring the aesthetics of display, of neglecting the comfort of visitors, of not concerning themselves with pedagogy and of setting out unreadable captions, etc.8 The indignant denials of those accused demonstrate that it is no longer legitimately possible to affect a manifest disdain for the function of public presentation, regardless of the effective quality of the work accomplished in this regard. There is every indication that a new legitimacy is conferred upon contact with the uninitiated or, at the very least, non-professionals through the intermediary of ‘hanging’ (and the physical ‘hanging’ can coincide with the mental ‘hanging’ of visitors).

This transformation would appear to be linked to a change in the equilibrium between the two constituent facets of the task of presentation. These are the permanent display of collections on the one hand and the temporary mounting of exhibitions on the other. If the former has barely evolved – and with good reason – except by formal choices which are not always perceptible to the lay person (lighting, wall colour, juxtapositions),9 the phenomenon of temporary exhibitions has continually increased in scale for nearly a generation: in the number of organized
events, in public attendance, as well as in the quality of the work accomplished and remunerations accorded the function of exhibition curator.

Several factors contributed to the development of this function. The first was an increase in the number of exhibitions, ranging from displays of the permanent collection—in museums as well as in galleries—to temporary exhibitions of a portion of the collection rounded out by works on loan from outside sources and extending to an exhibition's complete autonomy in terms of a collection (as is currently the case with the national galleries of the Grand Palais). Another factor was the diversification of disciplines falling under the aegis of exhibition activity—artistic and scientific (fine-arts and natural-history museums), as well as technical and industrial—event without including the commercial art fairs and salon exhibitions.

A final factor is the growing specialization of exhibitions being made by cultural institutions: most often monographic (of a single artist), but also historical (covering a period), geographic (from a region or country) and thematic/encyclopaedic (grouping various categories of works—visual arts, architecture, literature, music, etc.—around a subject). This last type, typically illustrated by the large multidisciplinary exhibitions at the Centre Georges Pompidou, is particularly relevant here in that it reinforces the role and specificity of the function of curators in relation to the position of the curator. No longer content with the traditional role of a curator in charge of an exhibition—selecting, obtaining and installing the works of art—the curator must now also perform an enlarged administrative role, determining a conceptual framework, selecting specialized collaborators from various disciplines, directing work crews, consulting with an architect, assuming a formal position in terms of presentation, organizing the publishing of an encyclopaedic catalogue, etc.

Multidisciplinary exhibitions are only the most visible point of a process which also affects more traditional, monographic exhibitions as well. A curator working in a French museum, having staged, at an interval of twenty years, two exhibitions devoted to the same painter, testifies to an ‘extraordinary mutation’ and a ‘revolution in artistic approach’.

When organizing the first exhibition (Bonnard at the Orangerie, 1966), all he had to do was select the works (with little scientific concern and excluding any demonstrative impulse), write to the collectors in order to obtain the loans and hang the works (with an equally limited museological concern). His staff had to make do with a typewriter and a bulletin board, and he was content with an installation which combined chronology with aesthetics, and with a slim black-and-white catalogue with a standard foreword by an anonymous official. Twenty years later for an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou of the same painter and organized by the same curator, the catalogue had grown into an immense monograph (inaccessible to a private publisher), evidence of a deepening scientific
determination to demonstrate a specific objective (in this case Bonnard’s modernity). This time the curator had a large staff under his command primarily for the physical installation which attracted far more attention than the first time, with a particular accent on visualization, on sensitizing the public (including a not very informed public) to what the work cannot reveal on its own. In other words, we are at a far remove from Picasso’s dictum that his works should be hung ‘off the back of a truck’.13

FROM CURATOR TO CREATOR

A rapid and spectacular evolution such as this (in less than a generation) cannot but have repercussions on curatorial practice and not solely in the sense, mentioned earlier, of stressing public presentation over other functions traditionally legitimized by a peer group. In fact, the exhibition offers an autonomous area, a margin of personal manoeuvring in comparison to other aspects of the profession; the curator can permit him or herself things that would be impossible in a museum, and the staging of an exhibition is a ‘privilege’, a ‘delight’. The exhibition curator’s function authorizes a measure of fame which eludes other colleagues to the extent that an exhibition assumes the guise of cultural event whose positions and merits are publicly discussed by a cultivated audience. Furthermore, specialized critics are increasingly attentive to the scenographic aspects; no longer content with discussing the exhibition’s subject, they tend to stress the exhibition as an object in and of itself, more frequently citing the ‘author’. In other words, the press deals with the exhibition not so much as a transparent medium produced by an institution but as the work of an individual with a particular name; among other symptoms of this evolution, we would like to cite examples of articles or editorials devoted exclusively to the staging of exhibitions,14 the creation, in 1987, of the Grand Prix national de la muséographie by the Ministry of Culture and the award, in the same year, of the Vasari Prize for the publication of an art catalogue.15

This autonomization of function, no longer subject only to the judgement of peers, is a relative indication of a double expansion of referential horizons: at the same time both geographical, by the internationalization of large cultural and touristic events which certain exhibitions have become for a well-informed public,16 and social, due to a shifting of the stakes towards a larger cultural field.17 Such an expansion is also accompanied by the possibility, hitherto out of the question at the institutional level, of taking on this position without actually being a curator. Academics, philosophers, critics, public-relations consultants, artistic directors and theatre and film directors now have the opportunity – as well as the desire – to act as exhibition curators. Such a development inevitably exacts an upheaval, in relation to
content (let us cite the exhibition Les Immédiaturn, organized in 1985 by the
philosopher Jean-François Lyotard – see above, chapter 8), to staging (notably the
exhibitions of scenographers Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud at the Centre culturel
du Marais, l’Ecole des Beaux-arts or the Bibliothèque nationale), and sometimes the
regulations governing the loan or security of works.

Such an upheaval of standards never fails to provoke reactions, often very
negative ones, from curators (for example, the degree of unanimity in the reaction
against the Guillauds was remarkable); reservations concerning thematic and
multidisciplinary exhibitions, denunciations of ‘abuse of power’, of ‘a lack of
humility’ in relation to the works, of ‘spectacularization’ or of the liberties taken
with historical truth on the part of ‘distinguished amateurs’ bearing undeserved
titles.

This results in what can appear to be a form of ‘deprofessionalization’ of the
exhibition curator’s function, contrary to the process of professionalization observed
originally in the position of museum curator. This deprofessionalization is marked
specifically by deregulation in access to the job, a deinstitutionalization of the criteria
of competence (its not being necessary to hold a specific diploma or position), an
expansion in the social milieux or, to be more precise, in the intellectual fields of
endeavour concerned, an individualization of product where a ‘signature’ becomes
much more apparent and a redefinition of competence in terms of singularization
(originality) rather than the implementation of collectively recognized rules.

However, the position of exhibition ‘creator’, regarded with suspicion as long as it
is evaluated according to the traditional criteria of museological professionalism
(collectively regulated, autonomized and desingularized, if not bureaucratized), is, at
the same time, susceptible to a valorization produced by other criteria proper to the
larger field of intellectual and artistic producers. Therefore, it is in the name of the
privilege accorded invention and creation – of the singularity of the individual
creator of an artwork and his or her capacity for innovation when faced with the
solidified traditions in the institutions – that the original work, the combination of
works and documents which constitutes an exhibition, can be judged. In other
words, in extremis, it is as auteur that an exhibition curator will eventually be
regarded. This is certainly an extreme position, but it is the passage to this extreme
which is of interest to us here.

A COMPARATIVE TERM: THE AUTEUR IN THE CINEMA

As any position in the world of the arts, that of the auteur is not defined by
institutional or legal properties, as is the case for a specific post; neither is it defined
by functional properties (accomplishing this or that task). Rather, it is defined by a
certain ‘symbolic’ property, the recognition that an individual holds this particular quality. One can imagine the futility of attempting a positive definition of what an auteur is or should be under these conditions; the best we can do is to isolate historical or individual factors which are more or less favourable to such a qualification. For this reason, a description of the process of accession to the position of auteur in the context of a professional function – such as we propose to conduct concerning exhibition curators – must proceed, to a greater degree than in the rest of the social sciences, in our opinion, from a methodical comparison to analogous processes in other fields; this would allow for the disengagement of the types of social construction surrounding the notion of author or artist, accordingly.

The cinema would seem to be particularly suited for such a comparison since, on the one hand, the notion of auteur has developed with a particular profile and, on the other, the economic characteristics of film production have several points in common with those governing the production of exhibitions. In both cases we are, in effect, dealing with what could be called an economy of temporary cultural products for mass distribution. We are also dealing with a prototypical economy, one geared to the fabrication of a sole object, susceptible to reproduction (cinema) and relocation (exhibition) but not to serial production, since even if a certain experience can be accumulated and reused from one product to the next, there exists no true standardization of budgets, personnel or materials. Both cases require the conjunction of a team working under a director whose identity can (and this above all is what interests us here) undergo major variations: producer, scriptwriter, director, in-house curator, specialized guest curator, creator or architect. . . .

These general characteristics aside, more concrete analogies exist between the economy of the cinema and that of the exhibition. Budgets have attained a comparable level and, in terms of quantity and quality, equivalent amounts (for example: 8.5 million francs for a large exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1986 – which represents the average cost of producing a quality French film). Attendance is generally similar (the 450,000 paying visitors to the aforementioned exhibition would represent a good box-office draw for a quality film) and the price of admission is, more or less, the same for a film or an exhibition.

Scheduling, in terms of organization, represents a similar time frame, one quite elongated at the outset; the initial idea often preceding production by several years, the production anticipating fabrication by a number of months which, in turn, may be completed weeks before public presentation; the duration of the type of presentation cited above rarely exceeds three months and is seldom less than one month for a first run (film) or for the first showing (exhibition). In each case equally, the general public follows on from the initiated public (private screenings,
vernissages) and the press (savage attacks or praise, a simple recitation of content or an in-depth production evaluation); obscure operations invariably follow on, such as the transport of works or of copies and the storage or striking of sets.

In addition, the personnel or credits (mentioned at the beginning of the catalogue, in much the same way as names and duties of technicians appear on the screen) include an equivalent number of collaborators, of the order of fifty or so people (not including subcontractors, technicians and those on the commercial side of the venture). To dwell further on the similarities, one need only invoke the analogous conditions experienced on a film set and an exhibition site: similar mysterious displacements, alternating frenetic activity and stasis, an indeterminate number of people performing more or less identifiable tasks, a manifestly rigid hierarchy which is oblivious to outsiders, the same atmospheric mixture of urgency and relaxation, vigilance and release, complicity and mutual supervision. And, above all, the same solidly entrenched boundary dividing ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ which protects the area of the set or site from everyone but the initiated; areas where, once past the intense selection process at the outset, director, technician, star and intern work closely in what appears to be a democracy.

It is understood that there remain uncontestable differences between a film and an exhibition. In the latter, the primary material is not people (the actors) but works of art — albeit both are obtained at great cost and heavily insured. Furthermore, the exhibition as a temporary product cannot survive beyond its presentation in the way a film can if the copy is not destroyed after the first screening as was long the case (from this point of view, the exhibition is closer to live performance). Finally, the exhibition is not inscribed in the economy of the traditional marketplace where exchanges are strictly financial but in a public economy where persons are, for the most part, salaried by the state (for temporary collaborators’ fees are directly charged to the exhibition budget) and where the works are quite often the collective property of the state, administered by a public establishment, or the private property of a collector.

One must therefore obtain (and not purchase) authorizations for loans rather than rent services. The monies used are not the economic capital of an enterprise but the prestige capital of a public establishment, as also is the value of the personal relations developed by the curator during time devoted to negotiations: phone calls, meetings, lunches, vernissages. . . . Thus, the primary material of an exhibition — the works of art — is the object of a relatively informal system of long-term exchanges, concluded not according to contractual agreements but through dealings between individuals which combine diplomacy, professionalism and friendship in a politic of mutual acknowledgement where reputation presides over caution and profit.

We are familiar with the notion of the auteur in the cinema — a product of French
criticism since the fifties – to promote and elevate the director’s role to a level comparable, in a creative sense, to that enjoyed by a painter, writer or composer. This investment in the director’s role by critics associated with the ‘New Wave’ gave what had been a matter of ‘competency’ an explanation of such concreteness and breadth that, a generation later, the pretension to auteur status is a common feature on the film scene, at least in France. This validation of the director followed closely the gradual emergence of the role through the thirties, when, with the invention of ‘talkies’, the editor (hitherto a primordial figure among technicians) no longer had the same latitude, given the constraints of sound, to construct a film according to his whim from the stockpile of infinitely manipulable silent scenes. With the advent of sound, mastery over continuity became a primal element during filming and the director, who had previously simply directed actors (not very differently from a theatre director), was transmuted into a master of the realm – in a context in which rising costs, due to a marked increase in material expenditure, heightened the importance of control over production.

However, in the Hollywood studio system (including independent companies which, from our perspective, are not much different), recognition of the director’s role continues to encroach upon that of the producer, who has had massive responsibilities: both in pre-production (choice of subject, screenwriters, stars, technicians, shooting conditions, etc.) and post-production (editing, distribution, advertising, etc.). The director did not even impose his or her views on the set. In fact, it is only at the moment when the producer, while retaining financial control over operations, delegates his functions to the director that the latter, in control of subject and scenario, actors and sets, camera movement and the actors’ movements, and editing, can be considered as a fully fledged auteur. This is a status only attained in certain segments of French cinema and only rarely in television where the producer is the true creator who organizes the broadcast; the role of director hinges upon his or her technical aptitude, as was the case during the Hollywood studio era.

A CASE STUDY: THE VIENNA EXHIBITION AT THE BEAUBOURG

We would now like to apply the process of constructing the notion of auteur to a specific exhibition, organized at the Centre Pompidou in 1986 under the title Vienne, naissance d’un siècle. This exhibition seemed to us, by its intrinsic qualities as well as its singular audience, to represent a key moment in the evolution of the curatorial profession towards a relatively more singularized position, achieved through the function of curator or, better still, the ‘creator’ of exhibitions. If in fact the curator in this case only achieved more or less marginal recognition as auteur, and if his work
was not acknowledged as a personal contribution, other than by a very narrow circle, it is nevertheless here that the premises for such a recognition are to be found. These testify perhaps to an evolution in the status of this activity in the field of practices of cultural consumption and in the field of intellectual and artistic production.25

We have said that recognition of the responsibilities of the curator, for the exhibition and for the catalogue, was strictly limited to peer-group professionals and the specialized press. However, the general non-professional public would consider the curator's role, from many standpoints, to be comparable to that of a film director preceding the Second World War when, as a general rule, the general public did not go to see a film by a particular director but rather flocked to films by a particular star or, in some cases, a certain producer ("the latest Selznick"). So the curator's name does not carry the same advertising weight: when asked "Who organized the exhibition?", no one interviewed at the Beaubourg for our study knew the answer (except for one of his former students). The public goes to see a subject (it could be Vienna or, for that matter, Anna Karenina) or certain stars (Klimts are reproduced as often as Greta Garbo's face was in her day) and is aware that an exhibition is a Centre Pompidou (the latterday Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) production — something on which to hang one's hopes or, eventually, disappointments.

From an organizational standpoint, this exhibition was a group effort — among various departments of the Centre Pompidou — to a much greater degree than would traditionally be the case with monographic exhibitions and more closely resembling the structure of a film production: a total of fifty or so individuals (without counting those responsible for an initial exhibition on the same subject, staged in Vienna, and certain elements of which were retained by the exhibition in Paris — and not taking into account the subcontractors, fabrication workshops and catalogue production), of whom half were on the Centre Pompidou payroll. Thus, the multiplicity of collaborations (an architect, three consultants on the history of ideas, a half-dozen adjunct curators specialized in various domains: architecture, applied arts, music, photography) has the paradoxical property of diluting responsibilities overall while rendering the authority (in every sense of the term) of the overseer — in this instance the exhibition's general curator, the curator of the Musée national d’art moderne — all the more necessary and visible. He explicitly assumed this authority:

We were greatly reproached for this; in the other exhibitions the curators directed their respective domains and were to a certain extent free to show what they wanted, whereas in this case we basically required collaborators to adhere strictly to a number of principles to such an extent that, when the time came for installing, we definitively suppressed anything we didn’t want. In any case, we continued to organize things in a direction which seemed to us, effectively, authoritarian.24
This position of ‘authority’ within the institution is parallel to a ‘singularity’ which does not exist solely to fulfil the curator’s functions (especially in presuming basic decisions as if they were personal choices) – it also follows its own characteristic itinerary. In fact, innovation here follows the same passage through the museum world as it does in other realms, beginning with the relative marginality of innovation in terms of the milieu to which it belongs. We are here referring to a lower social origin than is generally the case among curators, a relatively atypical scholastic trajectory (university as opposed to the École du Louvre), assertive aesthetic and intellectual choices, through to the considerable slant of a parallel activity as art critic operating under an alias. This duality between curator and critic, bureaucrat and writer, with the erudite competence and stance of an essayist, also exists in the curator’s status with regards to this exhibition, over which he had total control: by imposing his signature on the catalogue (first innovation); using his art-critic alias (second innovation) and not his real name which he nevertheless used to ‘author’ the exhibition as exhibition curator; and, by way of retribution, signing on as author of the catalogue text (a third innovation, which was accorded him in keeping with contractual obligations). In the way that he acted in the various aspects of the exhibition (concept and production, the catalogue and press releases) as curator and critic, and gave all his energy to it, so a film ‘auteur’ employs any resource (literary culture, professional relationships, technical competence and access to various media) to give a project the maximum opportunity to be perceived as it is, and ever shall be, as his work.

But beyond any personal considerations, access to the position of auteur depends upon other conditions. For our purposes, we shall set apart three to show that they punctuate the evolution of film criticism. The first is the highlighting of a thematic, in other words a unit of personal preoccupations invested in the content of a work, and seen in various works. The second involves a stylistic appraisal of a given work, or better still, from one work to the next. The third characteristic of this accession to auteur status resides in a register of the public’s reception of the work (from the specialized critical audience to the wider public), partly conceivable in its ‘opacity’ as a work which is whole and the object of a specific judgement – and not in the ‘transparency’ of a medium which is intended simply to transmit a figure (painting), a story (cinema) or a theme (exhibition).25

In relation to the first point, the thematic, several examples can be found with the exhibition in question: in critical appraisals, in the statements of the curator, whose personal theme (or, to echo André Bazin’s terms, ‘moral vision’ and ‘spiritual tendencies’)26 crystallizes around notions of ambivalence and dissonance. There is an inherent ambivalence in the title selected for the catalogue (L’Apocalypse joyeuse – joyous apocalypse – an expression borrowed from Hermann Broch) and repeated in
the exhibition title; ambivalence in the opposition between modernity and the avant-garde (the theme of the catalogue introduction), between the local and the universal, between hatred and fascination. Dissonance is repeatedly invoked as a common thread, a principle developed as much in the interpretation of ideas as in the choice of colours or music.\footnote{27}

As for the second point, the stylistic aspect of the exhibition, it is effectively to be found in the curator's remarks and in the conscious choices regarding the installation, whether in relation to the architecture of the space (a circular trajectory reminiscent of the Viennese 'Ring'), the play of mirrors or the colours of the dividing walls to which he devoted extensive attention. Perhaps, more generally, the curator adopted a formal stance consisting of privileging \textit{visibility}. In other words, he emphasized the sensitive correspondences between the works and the objects on display -- over their \textit{readability} or the systematic explanation of historical elements underlying the choice of presentation. The tension between two stylistic options became manifest in the opposition between two people: the curator, museologically formed, and the specialist historian, who as a consultant brought other considerations of an academic kind to the equation -- hence the 'dialogue of the deaf' between 'an academic who doesn't know how to visualize' and 'museographers who have grown accustomed to manipulating objects but not necessarily concepts'. The museographer, in this instance the overall curator, tended to privilege the 'subconscious' over 'the meaning'; form, material, the image over the text; 'shock' or 'astonishment' over the 'reading'; 'visual sensation' over 'linguistic explanation'; the 'work of art' over the 'document'; 'seeing' over 'understanding'; in short, 'pure visibility', which operates in 'immediacy', rather than 'explanation', which requires duration.

One can also address the genuine stylistic choices in relation to the installation of the exhibition -- choices eventually buttressed by explicit references to other artistic realms such as theatre (as examples: 'dramatization' or 'tragedy'), opera (the small exhibition journal designed like a 'libretto'), film (the exhibition circuit constructed like a 'film set'). Such an exhibition, to the degree that its aim is not merely to display the works but to demonstrate a certain interpretation of works and ideas (an interpretation necessarily constructed and thus, in a certain way, signed), has a tendency to nudge the 'creator' from his or her anonymity. At the same time such an exhibition has to admit to being defined as an attempt to construct ideas out of matter.

\textbf{In this context, two possible approaches are offered to the visitor: either consumption of the ideas (by abstracting those 'things' which constitute the installation, the arrangement of documentation, the materials and colours of decorative elements or, more directly, the selection of works), or consumption of}
those same items by appreciating, above all, the quality of the exhibition as such and remaining disinterested, except perhaps secondarily, in the 'ideas' which are the object of the exhibition. In the first case, the installation would tend to remain 'transparent' to the eyes of the consumer of ideas, indifferent as he or she is to the support which makes them visible. In the second case, the exhibition will interpose the 'opacity' of the work of mediation between the object and the visitor. As is the case with works of art, it is understood that the second approach is likely to be disseminated among those who, whether it be the result of professional specialization (critics, for example) or due to their cultural habits, have a sufficiently developed aesthetic perception to see the 'form' as well as, if not better than, the 'background'. As for the rest – those 'consumers of ideas' – the exhibition will above all be seen as a signifying system (in part largely the case) as opposed to pure spectacle. In semiotic terms, the works and their installation would be the signifier, ideas and interpretations the signified, the exhibition's object (turn-of-the-century Vienna) the referent. From this perspective, the exhibited works will achieve their justification, either in their artistic values and the enjoyment that they give rise to, or in their symbolic or metaphorical value.

FROM THE PARTICULAR CASE TO THE PARTICULARIZATION OF STATUS

Much as the perception of exhibitions can be refracted, according to various contexts and publics, in different more or less favourable directions in what we might call an aestheticization of museum visitation, so too can the status of curator follow various evolutionary routes in the wide universe of possibilities which the current situation offers. In fact, we have seen that traditionally, when the exhibition was merely a secondary function of museums – which were principally devoted to the conservation of works and content periodically to mount a selection of their holdings – the particular role of the exhibition curator was confused with that of the general curator, requiring little in the way of qualification. However, with the development and specialization of exhibitions and the increasing tendency to stage a 'theme' with attendant historical and cultural resonances instead of simply exhibiting a collection, it has become necessary to impose a more specialized and in-depth application of the three main competencies: conception, management of works and presentation (script, acting and direction).

One can foresee two types of evolution. On the one hand, in the absence of professionals fluent in all three skills, we might see a clear-cut differentiation between functions under the supervision of an overseer (for example, the 'creator' or architect to whom the establishment would temporarily delegate the organizational
responsibility, or the curator who would hire a ‘screenwriter’ and a ‘director’ while reserving for himself the traditional role of producer – retaining, of course, responsibility for choosing, and negotiating with, ‘stars’). Or we might see the complete opposite – as is most often the case with the cinéma d’auteur – the forming of a specialized elite of exhibition professionals, auteurs whose services would be temporarily on loan in much the same way that a director will form an alliance with this or that producer for a film which will be perceived, by critics and at least part of the general public, as being the director’s film and not the producer’s. If we may draw a comparison, the first case would represent the ‘American’ model (a relatively formal division of labour within an association managing various ‘professional’ bodies). The second, however, incorporates more of a ‘French’ model: the concentration of functions within one individual who remains relatively singular and autonomous in relation to the institution – in other words, the auteur.

The case we have just explored would seem to incline towards the second option. However, as we have stated, this constitutes one particular case from which it would be foolhardy to make generalized predictions. It is nevertheless its very particularity which makes it of interest: in effect, the exceptional or marginal nature of the phenomenon here analysed – the ongoing constitution of an authorial position within a relatively bureaucratized profession – does not signal a systemic aberration or a dysfunction or even an exception that proves the rule. It represents much more. It is symptomatic of an evolution which conforms to a process antithetical to ordinarily privileged, sociological notions of what constitutes ‘professionalism’: an evolution from a professional position which is institutionally and collectively defined in terms of its post (for our purposes, the curator) to the progressive autonomization of function (the exhibition curator), itself capable of authorizing a more independent and personalized position which is that of the auteur.

Finally, the fact that the former case is analysed in a very individualized way does not detract from the validity of the demonstration (in the way that one could object to a narrowly statistical sociological concept). One can consider that the sociology of professions should also include the notion of individual creators of status, people capable, in periods of crisis or of redefinition of the professional landscape, of creating and incarnating new positions, generalized and formalized from the outside. More precisely, we can discern three possible examples in the relations between individual and professional identity. In the first, individual characteristics precede identity (which was the case with certain artists at the beginning of the Renaissance); in the second, it is precisely from among the ‘individual creators of status’ that a new identity is constructed, crystallizing around eponymous figures (Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo among Renaissance artists, Van Gogh as the figure of the accursed artist, Orson Welles or Godard as film auteurs). Finally,
the third case is one where a collective identity, however constituted, acknowledged
and, at times, even institutionalized, precedes the individuals, condemned as they are
either to construct their personal identities in terms of the collective one (often in
reference to the heroic individuals they incarnate), or to deconstruct it with a novel
identity strategy (as Duchamp did for example).

It seems to us that it is from this perspective that ‘individual creators of status’ in
the various domains (whether they be art or medicine, politics or religion) should be
studied and compared; the sociology of professions would do well to integrate these
singular objects which it ordinarily tends to neglect. In any event one would then be
able to generalize the particular case of museum curators that we have analysed here.

Translated from the French by Robert McGee.

NOTES

This article was drawn from a study by N. Heinich and M. Pollak, conducted for the
Centre Georges Pompidou in co-operation with the association ADRESSE: Vienne à Paris:
portrait d’une exposition, Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou – BPI, 1988. It was
published as ‘Du conservateur de musée à l’auteur d’expositions: l’invention d’une

1 See Des chiffres pour le patrimoine, Paris, La Documentation Française, 1981;
Pratiques culturelles des Français, Paris, Dalloz, 1983; as well as J. Chatelain,
Administration et gestion des musées, Paris, La Documentation Française, 1987.

2 Notably: colloquia at the Centre Georges Pompidou (June 1987, March 1988, April
1988); Salon de la muséologie (Nov. 1987); Salon international des musées et des
expositions (Jan. 1988); public debate at the Musée d’Orsay (Jan. 1988). This essay
draws from facts gathered at these events.

3 For a critical bibliography on the notion of professionalization, see J. Heilbronn, ‘La
professionnalisation comme concept sociologique et comme stratégie des sociologues’,
Historiens et sociologues aujourd’hui, Journées de la Société française de sociologie,
June 1984.

4 See T. Parsons, ‘Professions’, in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 12
(1988); M. Weber, Économie et Société, 1, Paris, Plon, 1971. See also, for an application
to artistic professions, R. Moulin, ‘De l’artisan au professionnel: l’artiste’, Sociologie du


6 ‘No other profession of an intellectual nature has, to this degree, its ambition
determined by the institution to which it belongs… Curatorial quality is identified with
the collection the curator manages and studies, for the hierarchy of the position mirrors
that of the objects; its connoisseurship and professional value depends upon those
pieces he or she handles or has claim to’, notes D. Poulot adroitly in ‘Les mutations de la
Sociologie de l’art, under the direction of R. Moulin (minutes from the Marsailles


9 For more on this subject, see numbers 17–18 of Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne, devoted to ‘l’œuvre et son accrochage’.

10 See Des chiffres pour la culture, Paris, La Documentation Française, 1980.

11 We would like to cite, as it concerns private galleries, the words of Kahnweiler at the turn of the century: ‘We do not longer do exhibitions, I am content to mount paintings’. Mes galeries et mes peintres, Paris, Gallimard-Idées, 1982, p. 59.

12 Gérard Régnier’s intervention at the colloquium on exhibitions organized by the Centre Pompidou, June 1987.


14 See Baux-Arts Magazine, June 1987. A reading of the cultural pages of Le Monde and Libération, two dailies which devote the most space to exhibitions (as shown by a study conducted by the press service of the Musée national d’art moderne), reveals that both offer numerous examples of this heightened taking into account of the curator’s role.


16 For example, the charter tours organized especially for visiting the exhibitions Vienne and Europalia in Brussels, Kassel’s documenta or the Venice Biennale. These major events are increasingly showcased and reviewed in the principal European dailies.

17 D. Poulot refers to the possibility of ‘mapping out a literary career which would be more or less detached from the institution by metamorphosing a catalogue piece into an intellectual essay, thereby acquiring personal renown at the universities and, thus, the cultivated public’: ‘Les mutations de la sociabilité’, p. 107.

18 For a description of this process in the magical properties, see M. Mauss, Sociologie et anthropologie, Paris, PUF, 1950.


20 To our knowledge, there are no studies specifically relating to the economy of the exhibition. For the social role and perception of exhibitions, see J. Davallon, Cliquemurer pour ainsi dire tout l’univers: la mise en exposition, Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou–CCI, 1988; Les Inmatériaux, Paris, Expo-Media, 1986; Hana Gottesdiener, Évaluer l’exposition, Paris, La Documentation française, 1987; L’objet expose le lieu, Paris, Expo-Media, 1988; Utilisation et évaluation de l’exposition, actes


22 See N. Heinich, ‘Peintres et cinéastes’, minutes from the Peinture et cinéma colloquium, Quimper, March 1987.


24 This quotation, and those which follow, are taken from interviews conducted with the exhibition curator as part of the study we have cited. The ‘we’ in the passage refers to himself and his direct collaborator, an art historian not affiliated to the Centre Pompidou. However, at other moments during the discourse, the use of personal pronouns gives expression to the fundamental ambivalence between the collective responsibility and individual leadership, team collectivity and authorial singularity: the prevalent form is ‘one’, ambiguous and impersonal, designating both visitors and conceptuallists; locutions referring to a kind of objectivity of selections are equally impersonal (‘it was evident’, ‘what was needed’, ‘it was important’, ‘it was indispensable’, ‘the idea was to’, etc.), imparting characteristics inherent to the object itself which are beyond any individual decision. But we also found more personal forms; for example ‘we’ is used (rarely) in an effort to evince the Parisian specificity of the exhibition in terms of its Viennese counterpart; and, more frequently, ‘I’ is used both to justify personal positions or general ideas and to establish a differentiation from other players (architects, peers, critics).


27 As an example, we would like to cite the following remarks by the curator concerning music:

There is another problem which underscores the use of music in an exhibition: music is used in an attempt either to reinforce or underline the climate (as was the case in Vienna where in each room you had Mahler or Schoenberg or Strauss waltzes); however, in that particular instance, I believe the end result was the opposite of the one intended — in other words, there was a redundancy of music in relation to the work, to the exhibited objects, such that the redundancy in a sense effaced the sought-after effect — instead of underlining, it erased. So if one wishes to introduce a musical element into an exhibition which is, to repeat, essentially a phenomenon of a visual order, the music must not intervene by underscoring but must provide a dissonance with the visual material. Wherefrom derives the idea of playing a Strauss waltz throughout the exhibition — the well-known, celebrated and cliched Blue Danube — thus conforming to the idea the general public has of Viennese culture, the Vienna of tourist brochures and postcards. This impression persists until the discovery, at the very end of the
exhibition, that it is a music... which is, in a sense, founded on a latent, concealed violence which literally explodes in our faces with the sight of male choirs, veiled by the apparent femininity of the culture and masked from the start, since 1880, the beginning of the exhibition—a menace which became brutally incarnate in 1938. Thus the music, at this point in time, plays a dissonant role, considerably reinforcing the visual material to the extent that it gives it an explosive charge instead of neutralizing it which would have been the case had the assonant card been played. But here the card was clearly dissonant. And there are other dissonant phenomena in the exhibition.