

In 2006, in Rome, a museum opened to promote 21st century art, MAXXI, designed by the architect Zaha Hadid. The museum will also include a museum for architecture that will be finished in 2010. It is a contradiction in terms to build a museum for the future, for art that does not yet exist. Therefore, in April, 2009 the curator Stefano Chiodi organised a conference concerning the functions of the museum. The Russian theorist Boris Groys was one of the key speakers. He emphasised the important role of museums beyond collecting and exhibiting a collection. It is also a place, a room where the visitor in a different way can meet the artworks IRL, which is something completely different from the web's virtual, flat reality. It is also a room where one can, as in a library, make unexpected discoveries. The museum is for Groys a necessary framework that through its stability can constitute a platform for change.

# “Being democratic and universal, you are always under the accusation of being elitist...”

Interview with Boris Groys<sup>1</sup>

Andreas Gedin

Andreas Gedin: In your essay *The Retechnization of Art* you wrote about the importance of documentation (photography, video, books, web sites) in contemporary art.<sup>2</sup> That it sometimes becomes more important than the actual event. What do you think that we should do with this kind of material in the context of the museum? Is it to be regarded as art?

Boris Groys: They are art pieces and not art pieces at the same time. Documentation can on one hand be a representation of something, of art taking place outside of the museum. And the only way to keep it, to get access to it and evaluate it is through documentation. On the other hand it can be art in it's own right. I would like to compare this situation with the romantic paintings from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The real experience of romanticism was to walk in the Swiss mountains, to be endangered and maybe even, accidentally, die. But what came out of it were paintings, and these paintings were at the time seen as a kind of documentation of a difficult journey. But for us, today, the documentation is maybe more important than the original experience.

1. Boris Groys (b. 1947), is Professor of Aesthetics, Art History, and Media Theory at the Center for Art and Media Technology in Karlsruhe, Germany. He is one of the most important contemporary art theorists.
2. Parkett, # 72, 2004

AG: If so, the documentation is more of a kept memory, than something in a planned art collection of an institution. They are not artefacts.

BG: Well, if they are presented in a museum, they are included in a certain area of comparison with all possible things in a museum. They are compared with works by Poussin, by Leonardo and so on. What happens is that when documentation is included in the collection of a museum it becomes art works. Even if an artist says that a documentation “is only documentation, you shouldn’t take it seriously”, de facto they are art works and we relate to them as art works.

AG: When art institutions like museums in this way create art, the idea of what art could be is changing all the time, and that must also go for the idea of the artist, the curator and all others involved in this machinery.

BG: No, I don’t think so. If everything is changing the change disappears. We don’t feel that something changes if everything is in change. We have to have some kind of framework, which remains stable and gives us some possibility to measure change. If everything changes it is the same. It is like in the supermarket: It is always the same because it is always different objects in it. The museum is also like a supermarket, but a supermarket that keep the previous commodities. So we can really see how this kind of supermarket changes over time. If you for instance talk about documentation, take for example Walid Raad, the Lebanese artist also working under the concept of The Atlas Group. He said that his documentation – The Atlas Group Archive – was the result of his research in Lebanon. But it was of course fictive. It was pseudo documents, but the public received them as real documents, being fictional art works. So at the moment, when documentations enter the museum, they start to play with the situation. And this is possible because the museum as an institution has not changed! So I don’t think that the museum should change, but be a place of change.

AG: You have pointed the problem of self-reflection in the context of the museum, that you cannot experience yourself in the present, like in a mirror. But this must also mean that the understanding of the museum changes all of the time, and hence the museum is in flux?

BG: Understanding changes all of the time. But it is only interesting if it is put on the wall. The problem is that art is about visibility, that it is visible or maybe will be visible. And you can understand art in this or that way, but it does not affect it. It is still there. And then you die, but the art is still there. So there are some things that remain.

AG: In your article *The Politics of Installations* you define the position of the artist as being a free one, and the position of the curator in the institution as not being free in the sense of representing the institution and the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> It is surprising that you so directly speak of the artist as being free.

BG: I think that it is a perfectly normal thing to say. Under specific conditions you are free. I do not speak about concepts of freedom like those of Heidegger or Schelling. But talking in terms of the supermarket again: under the specific conditions of the supermarket you are free to buy this or that. There are certain

2. e-flux journal, #2, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal>

kinds of areas of freedom, and there are certain kinds of conventions that allow you to use it. So, there is a certain freedom given to the artist that is not given to the curator. Inside the system, under the specific conditions of the system, there are different criteria's of freedom, and hence different conditions of freedom for the artist and the curator. That is what I am trying to say.

AG: You could still say that in some respects the positions of the curator and the artist sometimes coincide. Someone said earlier that everyone is a curator today.

BG: I said that!

AG: But if that is the case, the curator and the artist could be the same.

BG: Of course. But it is only in the moment when it is clear who is the artist and who is the curator, that you can shift positions. To mix something or to shift something you first of all have to differentiate it. If everything is the same, you cannot mix it.

AG: Couldn't you think about these changes in positions as in the game musical chairs?

BG: Yes, that is the way the whole contemporary art system functions. There are certain roles like, the critic, the collector, the curator, the intellectual and so on. And people actually changes theses roles all of the time. We don't have a system with pure artists, pure curators etc. Everybody moves

AG: Still from a sociological point of view, or regarding the power plays in the art system, everyone does not accept these shifts of positions. Both concerning decisions and access to things like economy, exhibition spaces etc. But also concerning the right to speak about the art.

BG: These problems concerns democracy and universality. The contemporary art world wants to be universal and democratic. This means that it is a minority! Because we are not living in a democracy or in universality. We are living in a system of national states and of economical inequality. So, the art world is a playground for the concept of equality and the concept of democracy.

AG: Do you think that this playground is elitistic?

BG: No, no. It is in fact more democratic! But we are living in a very strange society were to be more democratic and more universal you become an elitist. This happens because people are more accustomed to a non-democratic society than a democratic one. The majority do not think in a democratic or universalistic way. So, being democratic and universal you are always under the accusation of being elitistic.

AG: Your use the concept of "playground" when you talk about the art world, makes really sense. The reference to the theatre seems even more appropriate than the museum, for instance.

BG: Yes, it is a stage. It is a certain stage where we have the ability not only to listen to people or to communicate, but also to see their bodies, their gestures, their clothing ... We can relate to what we see, not only to ideas.

AG: In the situation you describe – the playground – the magic is of course that things brought on to the stage becomes art. But if it is a curator who brings in a ready-made, it does not have to become art! Even though it can still function as parts of an exhibition as a whole. This is more difficult for the artist because in this case the ready-made becomes a piece of art.

BG: I was working with Volksbühne where for example all of the actors were in closed spaces, not visible on the stage.<sup>3</sup> But their actions were filmed and projected in real time. So at that moment the stage in itself becomes the main actor, and the actors becomes requisite. This means that this stage can be used and played with in very different ways. When it comes to documentation in the arts, you can also use the documentation as art. But you can also use art as documentation. Under certain periods, for example, you can use certain political ideas and documents in this way.

AG: Does this mean that you can show ideas?

BG: No, you cannot show immaterial things like ideas. But you can show texts. When I made an exhibition on the Moscow Conceptualists at Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt I showed a lot of texts.<sup>4</sup> Conceptual art has shown us that there are no ideas just as ideas. They have to be put in a certain medium like being written down or recorded, and when that is done ideas becomes objects and can be shown and also sold. They become objects of art and also commodities ...

AG: ... and the market is the dominating principle of the art world.

BG: No, I don't think so. It is not a fact. If you are inside the system you can see very clearly that art is on its way to go from the market, for example represented by a group of collectors, to a mass market.

AG: But what about the sponsors of the museums and the biennials?

BG: But that is something completely different. You have a massive political support in these cases, and the sponsorship is also political. We have a new event culture, which is much more like a propaganda culture, much more politically and ideologically motivated. People talk about Sotheby's and Christie's but it is actually a very small and irrelevant part of the art world. For a curator of a biennial is someone like Damien Hirst not interesting. We have some kind of small art market that functions like the market of antiquities for a small sector of the society. And more and more of the contemporary arts is becoming a part of the mass culture industry. That is something completely different.

AG: Don't you think that contemporary art sometimes, with all these long video films in a way are trying to resist the event based mass culture by being demanding?

3. Boris Groys: *Stalin. Das ist der Frieden*. Ein Gespräch mit Carl Hegemann. [http://www.volksbuehne.berlin.de/theorie/produktionstexte/der\\_meister\\_und\\_margarita/stalin/](http://www.volksbuehne.berlin.de/theorie/produktionstexte/der_meister_und_margarita/stalin/)

4. *Total Enlightenment. Moscow Conceptual Art 1960–1990*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 21 June – 14 September 2008.

BG: It is important to see that this development of a mass culture has two stages. First stage was art made *for* the masses, as Guy Debord described in *The Society of the Spectacle*. The second stage is production of art *by* the masses. And this is what happens now: everybody is making photographs, videos, private exhibitions ... and hundred of millions of people participate in Youtube, Second Life etc. And these virtual places are exhibition spaces, and this means that everybody produces but no one looks. This is an overproduction with a vanishing spectatorship. So, we don't have a spectacle but a strange intimate space. We are like in a system of transition, like in the Digestive Tract. We are digested but we don't see and we are not seen. It is a very interesting experience. Without a beginning and without an end.

AG: And to where do you think we, and the arts, are heading?

BG: I think that the function of the art milieu is to not produce art, but to look at it. Because everybody produces, but nobody looks. A small group of spectators ...

AG: ... experts?

BG: No, just spectators.

AG: Do you regard it as an act of resistance?

BG: I think so. It is a kind of resistance of not being involved in a production. What Guy Debord announced is actually what is resistance today. Not to produce and not to expose and in exceptional cases look at what other people have done. To have a reserve of attention and to be attentive. To concentrate.

AG: It sounds like 19<sup>th</sup> century, maybe like a salon?

BG: A salon without the salon. The salon is your own attitude. I think this started already with an artist like Andy Warhol who preferred to look at things than to make them. Looking attentively. He made art just to survive. Today there is a lack of attention and concentration.

AG: Are you referring this attention to Heidegger?

BG: Well, I think it relates to every kind of philosophy from Plato to Derrida. After that the classic philosophy stops. It has of course to do with presence, because philosophy is based on memory. The ability to concentrate and to be attentive is related to the ability to memorize. And the contemporary public has not the ability to memorize. Instead they are googling. It is actually a substitute of memory. So, philosophy has to change and react to this new kind of technology of memorization. Not only to it as an archive but also to it as a process. Google is not just a new archive but also a completely new way to deal with this archive. When you – by googling – ask for something, for example a notion, this notion comes back to you. A new experience is absolutely excluded. You only get back what you asked for. It is a very strange condition, very untypical. Mostly when you ask for something you get something completely

different back. But googling is a perfect reflection of your own questioning. You never get anything beyond what you asked for.

AG: Do you refer to the experience in a classic library, when you find something by accident?

BG: Yes, when you just wander through a library. If you for example are looking for information on suicide in a library, you will probably also end up with a lot of information on other things. But if you google on suicide you will only get information on suicide. Another difference between books and Google is that if you write about a book you also evaluate it. But Google does not do that, it is just interested in that something is mentioned, not in what way something has been said, if it is right or wrong, if it is interesting etc. There is no differentiation. With Google you never go further, you always remain where you already were. It is a very interesting experience.

AG: In one way this is very democratic. Quantity rules over quality. Like the market.

BG: Yes, it is a huge equalizer. But I try not to be critical about it, just to be fascinated.

*Rome, April 4, 2009*