

I am very honoured to participate, once more, in this conference and to have the chance to present, again, on Igor Zabel's exhibition legacy.

Two years ago at *Exhibiting in Slovenia II*, during the Q&A after my presentation titled *The Curator's Rooms*, I have a vague memory of a question from Beti Žerovc, drawing a direct line between *Inexplicable Presence (Curator's Working Place)* (which was the focus of my talk) and *Individual Systems* (which will be the focus of this talk), as two exhibitions where Igor Zabel best achieved his own curatorial vision, these are my words. I do not remember how I answered, and it doesn't really matter. What matters is that I set myself up looking to prove Beti's hypothesis, and that in this looking what I found was a new context to better understand Zabel's curatorial career.

An individual and a system

Every other year (more or less), around the time when the International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, better known as the Venice Biennale, opens in Venice, that city is flooded with a particular type of people, [...] artists, curators, gallerists, museum directors, exhibition organizers, critics, collectors, and everyone else who would like to become a part of this world as well as a whole group of people who have some (more or less vague) connection with contemporary art.

Venice is not just an exhibition of contemporary artworks; it is also, especially, an exhibition, or presentation, of the art system itself, which, condensed into a few days in the limited space of its picturesque and theatrical venue, displays itself in its multilayered and contradictory nature, in its most unpalatable aspects and loftiest achievements. Here you can get a clear idea about the workings of the complex system we call the contemporary art world.

This is how Igor Zabel describes the Venice Biennale in his 2001 column, entitled "*The Soil From Which Art Grows*." An apt description, but unaware of the fact that just two years later, he would find himself at the very centre of it all.

Two years passed, and in 2003, Francesco Bonami, the Artistic Director of the 50th Venice Biennale titled *Dreams and Conflicts - The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, offers 'complete autonomy to ten curators to realize their visions' that would together comprise the central 'International Art Exhibition.' One of these curators was Igor Zabel with his exhibition *Individual Systems*.

In his catalogue essay, Bonami heavily leaned on the previous Biennale, curated by Harald Szeemann (*The Plateau of Mankind*), claiming difference. As Bonami insists, *Dreams and Conflicts* announced the end of "the golden age of the 'Grand Curator' – an age that Szeemann had opened in the late 1960s."

With the dismissal of the "Grand Curator", Bonami declares the importance to reimagine "[t]he 20th century of the "Grand Show" – such as the Biennale and Documenta – developed from the single perspective of the curator/author. When it ended, my generation was forced to conceive of a new exhibition structure and curatorial practice that could address the identity and future of the "Grand Show".

His generation, indeed, placed their hopes in a new curatorial model for large-scale events that sought ‘polyphony’ in which authority is, at best, divided and delegated among many voices. This invitational structure was not unique to Bonami’s Biennale.

Without going too far into a typology of curatorial ‘teams’ (exemplified best by Okwui Enwezor’s 2002 documenta 11) or endless curatorial delegation (here I am thinking of Giancarlo Politi’s first Tirana Biennale, in 2001, where Francesco Bonami was one of more than 35 invited curators), I would rather like to stay in Venice, and invoke Aperto ‘93.

The Aperto section of the Venice Biennale was introduced by Achille Bonito Oliva and Harald Szeemann in 1980 as the ‘open’ section for young, international artists. What would become the last iteration of the Aperto section, Aperto ‘93, took place during Bonito Oliva’s transnational fantasy for the 1993 Venice Biennale.

Organized by Helena Kontova, she invited her fellow Flash Art editors and contributors to curate distinct exhibitions within the Arsenale. This final iteration of the Aperto section, which was increasingly gathering more attention than both the central exhibition and the national pavilions, was nicknamed in 1993, *the better biennale*. One of these critic-turned-curators was Francesco Bonami, who recalls it as the start of his curatorial journey. A decade later, Bonami reproduced the same invitational structure, this time expanding it to the whole International Art Exhibition. Extending an invitation that he, himself, received a decade prior, creating a vast ‘exhibition of exhibitions’, a said future for the "Grand Show".

The critics were unanimous. They condemned the biennial as unbearably dense, packed with too many works. The critics renamed it “the Dictatorship of the Curator.” Bonami’s response was to explain the critics’ disapproval, claiming that they were, in fact, reacting to the loss of their own power as critics, as the role of the curator was rising to stardom.

In what, I think, we can only understand as a critical gesture, Piotr Uklanski’s contribution to the Biennale’s outdoor section, was a red banner on which the black silhouettes of the eleven curators were enumerated.

Compositionally, the curators are detached from one another, positioned in the individual autonomy granted to them by Bonami’s invitation. This image allows us to further the reading of the 2003 Biennale as a ‘biennial of curators’, so much so, that they are themselves becoming its subject, and with the biennial logo at the left end, just next to Zabel, the curators become the branded advertisement for the biennale, clearly in sight from the vaporetto, on your way in the floating city. Standing the proudest and tallest, Bonami’s silhouette reminds us that despite his wishes of horizontal authorial delegation, his posture grows bigger with each invited curator and their invited artists. He becomes the ‘curator of curators curating artists’, and if I may say, the ‘GrandER curator’.

Bonami’s reliance on curatorial invitation as his strategy marks the peak of an era of transformation of the curator’s position in contemporary art. This era consisted of the rise of the cult of the star curator which acquired an unprecedented mobility through the biennialization of the art world; fuelled by the unstoppable globalism of both the world economic system, as well as the art system. An art system which could no longer ignore what was outside the fortress of the Former West.

This is the same system in which Igor Zabel's recognition as an international curatorial figure was taking shape. After coordinating Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana, in the year 2000 (where I must note, Francesco Bonami was part of the team of four curators) Zabel was included within ICI's important curatorial survey publication: *Words of Wisdom : A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art* (2001). As well as two prestigious Phaidon publications : *Vitamin P : New Perspectives in Painting* (2002) and *Cream 3: Contemporary art in culture* (2003). This sequence of Zabel's international curatorial recognition culminated with Bonami inviting him to curate in Venice.

Zabel's response to this invitation was his exhibition: *Individual Systems*.

In the 2003 Venice Biennale catalogue, in Zabel's exhibition essay, we can read his intention for his section:

"the *Individual Systems* project is an attempt (fragmentary and uncertain as it surely is) to answer the dilemma about how is art still possible, how can a "clearcut decision" be achieved, and how can the concepts of artistic autonomy and modernity become a basis for it."

To quote Zabel again, in a transcript of a lecture, which was published in the book *READY2CHANGE* in 2005: "In brief, the theme of the exhibition was those artists who shaped specific systems and procedures through their work; artists who penetrated into the already existing social systems in their own indigenous and specific way and shaped up their own world within them."

Zabel's exhibition was noted by some critics as an exception within Bonami's Biennial. In Beti Žerovc's words (from the 2018 documentary, *The Curator's Room -Igor Zabel: How To Make Art Visible?*) "His *Individual Systems* exhibition was, within the whole Biennale, a very special, quiet, poetic space. Anyone could see that it had Igor's special touch all over."

The quietness of Zabel's exhibition meant that, in Charles Esche's words (from the same documentary), "somehow, this exhibition got lost within the cacophony of spectacle that was present in other curatorial suggestions. And this quietness of *Individual Systems* found it difficult to compete in the mess that is the Venice Biennale."

In 2008, Esche and Maria Hlavajova (who was also within the curatorial team of Manifesta 3, alongside Bonami) organised the exhibition *Once is Nothing* as a response to an invitation from the 1st Brussel Biennale. The two institutional curators took the opportunity to reflect on Zabel's *Individual Systems*.

To do so, they asked Josef Dabernig (who designed the original exhibition architecture and who also was one of the exhibiting artists in Zabel's project) to re-imagine and adapt the spatial architecture of *Individual Systems* to its new space in Brussel.

Without attempting the repetition of re-exhibiting the original artworks, the curators offered a free publication as a way to, imagine : *Individual Systems*; an attempt to bridge both time and space.

Once is Nothing asked : "Can exhibitions themselves serve as mnemonic models?"

And here, I am interested in interpreting *Once is nothing* as a grieving exhibition. In a Freudian sense, one's labour of grief involves removing their former libidinal investment from the loved object, with the hope of being able to form a new bond. *Once is Nothing* leaves out the artworks that Zabel loved so much. It knows that it can't bring back the original experience, and it does not even pretend to do so. What it does, is that it confronts us to a physical absence, a displaced exhibition architecture without its artworks, and our only tool, being a mnemonic publication. *Once is Nothing* offers us a space to project in, whether a pre-existing memory of Individual Systems or, even, to invent one of our own.

I must admit that I also left out the artworks (again) from my presentation. I rather wanted to better understand the curatorial landscape in which Zabel was moving through. I didn't even pretend to get close to the works. It was partly to prevent emulation and mainly, to allow myself to continue to project in Zabel, a curatorial model capable of interrogating the figure of the curator, its responsibility, and its authorship, at any given scale.

Returning to Beti's question from two years ago, I would like to answer: Thank you for your question, I'll think about it for two years...

But really, I think what links those two exhibitions, (outside of the fact that these were among the few exhibitions in which Zabel didn't carry the responsibility of representing the Moderna galerija; only carried the responsibility of his own personal obsessions); it was that those two exhibitions shared, in maybe its best form, his great desire to encounter the art itself, created on two different and almost contradictory scales, but both working with the hope of 'taking time to concentrate on nothing but the [art] work.'

To extend this answer and conclude, I would like to share an excerpt from an interview of Zabel, after curating what will be his last exhibition, the 2005 Slovene Pavilion in Venice :

[transcript of the video excerpt]

One question more, please uh... The biennale is one of the biggest artwork kermesse. Do you think that art is existing just because of this particular context ? Or it can obtain good results in other ways out of the usual spectacular ways ?

I think uh... I think of c...
that it... it... it... it is... like this that we have uh...
that art can exist in man... many different contexts
and sometimes even...
it can be more uh... energetic and more uh...
sincere and more powerful outside this sort of... big events.
I don't know... I don't think that uh...
uh... uh... I think that this sort of uh...
big... big sorts of events are important also...
for many reasons, but uh...
It's good to have all... all this context around
I... I... I think that yes... that it can of...
definitively exists and sometimes much...
in a much better way outside it.

Returning to the text with which I opened this lecture, “*The Soil From Which Art Grows*” a text preceding his experience within the Arsenale, I find a question, and an answer, that I believe would still be accurate, if asked again; after *Individual Systems*. And I quote Zabel:

“Sometimes, observing all the commotion and discord of the art world, which seems at times to hover somewhere in its own illusory reality, remote from ordinary real life, I ask myself if it makes any sense at all to be part of it.
And I always tell myself that it does. “

Thank you.

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