

The Curator's Rooms

Between May 20th and 31st of 1997, Igor Zabel, writer, theorist, and curator at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, organized *Inexplicable Presence* (Curator's Working Place), a 10-day exhibition hosted within a basement room of the Moderna galerija. In this intimate experiment, Zabel prompted the artists with a short anecdote and a photograph as the curatorial point of departure for their own contributions.

The small room was used as both the curator's temporary office and exhibition space; a space where Zabel tried a different way of exhibiting and encountering the visitors within "the peripheral, ephemeral, accidental, and arbitrary", and imagines "the possibility of low-budget projects", while interrogating his own role as a curator.

In a text from the English compendium of Zabel's art writing, titled *Exhibition Strategies in the 1990s : A Few Examples from Slovenia*, he writes that *Inexplicable Presence* was a way to "make concrete" some of his reflections about the figure of the curator in contemporary art. He makes a sharp critique of the common understanding of the "the curator as the selector, author of the exhibition, interpreter and co-creator of an exhibition's context." Instead, Zabel insists that the "curator's role is probably becoming more 'dialogical'. A 'dialogic' relationship signifies that though the curator does not create the works nor defines them (although he or she can have a practical influence on them), he or she can decisively determine the viewpoint from which we observe them, emphasize a particular aspect and so on."

The original video documentation of *Inexplicable Presence* has become an object of fantasy for me. In this intimate, mute portrait, the video scans each artwork from the exhibition. Handheld, the camcorder's autofocus catches the reflections from the framed works and wanders around the small room. As one of the few visual archives of this project, the almost silent walkthrough is mesmerizing, only scored by the ambient soundscape of the room's open window. The amateur-feeling document, with its fleeting focus, in-camera effects, and fragmented cuts, accounts more for an intimate experience of the works than a comprehensive or classical overview of the exhibition.

Since viewing the video, I immediately assumed that it was Igor Zabel himself that was holding the camera. I inferred that he was filming in a manner only interpretable as accounting for a familiar knowledge of the artwork, a preexisting relationship with the artists. As a document of an exhibition, produced by the curator of said exhibition, his silence felt transgressive, inviting the viewers, inside a deeply personal space. This intimate gaze seduced me, and my curatorial imagination.

It is only much later that I was made aware of my own projection on this archive. In a video call conversation with Urška Jurman, at the Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory, she mentioned that it is, most likely, not Zabel who shot the video. It would have been, most likely, the same person that was in charge of filming the other exhibitions at the Moderna galerija. I have to admit that this possibility of Zabel not authoring these moving images, was a vulnerable situation. Yet, imagining Zabel behind the lens, recognizing his silhouette in the reflections of a framed work, was already part of my interpretation of the intimacy of the exhibition, and I could not un-see him behind this archive.

In 2020, the Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory published the posthumous catalogue for *Inexplicable Presence*, after the discovery of the self-designed layout for the planned book. In the forward, Zabel writes, “I sent to several artists a photograph of a certain place in Ljubljana and a text explaining why I’d chosen this place. The letter also included a description of the project and a personal note explaining to the artist why I had decided to ask him/her to participate in the project. I asked to produce a small work as a response to the picture and the text.” Zabel was interested in contemplating “the possibility of a project which would be based on an extremely private and peripheral starting point and which could nevertheless develop in a dialogical sense.”

All the artists he invited were of ‘personal importance.’ Reflecting on his central position in the project, he writes, “With this I do not believe that I am appropriating the artist’s role; all I want to do is to pose a certain question and problem, and at the same time try not to hide the condition of my own position.”

This last part is what, to me, sets apart this curatorial experiment. It is through this desire of not hiding his own condition that we can appreciate the action of displacing his office from the second floor to the basement of the museum.

Zabel furthers this gesture of intimacy by physically working in the exhibition, transforming his office work hours into the publicly accessible viewing time. He stated: “I will be present in the room, doing my usual work and perhaps playing some of my favourite music. Of course, I will be ready to talk to any interested visitors.” This mediation component is an important aspect of the specificity of *Inexplicable Presence*. Usually, the task of meeting directly the public is not part of the institutional curator’s job. This desire to get closer and more intimate, both with the works and the visitors, makes this experiment a very fertile ground for dialogues and conversations.

In the 2018 documentary *The Curator’s Room; Igor Zabel: How to Make Art Visible?*, which presented a focus on *Inexplicable Presence*, as a very ‘characteristic’ and ‘personal’ project for Zabel, Beti Žerovc states that by moving his office, Zabel situated himself in the ‘belly of the institution’. This framing might refer to the potential of working within the institution in order to rethink its own norms. It calls for interrogating the structure of the museum from the inside.

Zabel writes in the catalogue : “As a curator, I find myself more and more attracted by the peripheral, ephemeral, accidental and arbitrary.” He continues: “The whole project, including the publication, will be very inexpensive. I believe, however, that a deliberate use of the possibilities of such a project may produce special qualities which cannot be offered by larger and more expansive projects.”

To understand what possibilities Zabel may have been seeking with this inexpensive, small-scale project, we must look at the context that surrounded the 1997 exhibition.

The exhibition took place during European Cultural Month, which was an immense cultural endeavor. Spanning all art forms, the city of Ljubljana hosted the European Commission event with a subversive promise of European belonging, just a few years after Slovenia’s national independence. One important thing to note is that it attracted an immense cultural tourism, most likely from the former west.

As one of the main events of the EMK, the Moderna galerija hosted Epicenter Ljubljana, an exhibition curated by Harald Szeemann. From April 8th to May 31st, 1997, this large, international exhibition filled the majority of the exhibition halls of the museum.

Igor Španjol commented, in the 2018 documentary, that Szeemann's exhibition was 'very showy,' featuring renowned artists and some of the biggest art installations ever exhibited in Ljubljana. To quote Španjol: "Igor felt that these kinds of efforts might need a counterbalance."

To think more deeply about what Španjol suggests, the 'counterbalance' of Zabel's project to Szeemann's, we can look to the notable difference of scale between the two. Scale of the artworks, scale of the exhibition rooms, scale of the curatorial postures. That same year in 1997, Szeemann had also produced the 4th Biennale of Lyon, as well a portion of the Kwangju Biennale.

This triad of large-scale events is notably discussed by Szeemann in an interview conducted by Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli and Franklin Sirmans. Entitled "Curator as Author : From Ljubljana to Lyon to Kwangju", the conversation was published in the Flash Art International in the summer of 1997. Performing his flamboyant character with convoluted insights into his exhibition-making process, Szeemann makes two declarations that stand out:

He states that the invitation he received from Zdenka Badovinac to curate the exhibition Epicenter Ljubljana was similar to a *carte blanche* which led to, and I quote him: "a new freedom in curating."

He furthers this point in his catalogue essay. While describing the exhibition of the eight artists who, "actually have little in common," he states that "It is precisely here that this exhibition has an opportunity: it is an epicenter, that is, a new type of group exhibition, trans-age, trans-erotic, trans-energetic." In the interview, he also adds, "trans-everything".

The second outstanding declaration, and concluding response of the interview, comes after a question from Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli. She asks, "After all these years how do you feel about curating?" Szeemann answers: "I am not a curator, I am an author."

This refusal of the curatorial role is very telling. It seems like the 'freedom' that Szeemann is working from, projects his position beyond the curator to a more omnipotent author. Surpassing the condition of a role he is still, nevertheless, benefiting from, Szeemann declares his sovereignty. Here lies the difference in scale between the synchronous pair of exhibitions. If Epicenter Ljubljana remains a space of freedom for Szeemann to surpass his own title, it is far from the self-reflexive position, intimacy, and accountability that Zabel is looking for in The curator's working place.

As a response to Harald Szeemann's refusal of claiming the position of the curator, I would like to pair another quote from Igor Zabel's text, *Exhibition Strategies in the 1990s*: "The emphatically personal or even arbitrary nature of the work often characteristic of the contemporary curator is actually the deconstruction of the position of power and selection. (Speaking about "deconstruction," I am not trying to say that curators can eliminate their role as the instance of power in the institutional system of the world of art, but rather that they reveal this role clearly and no longer present it as something "objective" or "natural.")

To conclude my presentation, I would like to respond to a passage of Igor Zabel's writing concerning the experiment that was the Inexplicable Presence exhibition: "I see only one danger," he writes, "Sometimes, people are more interested in the "unconventional" way of presentation than in the works themselves. Actually, such an approach is exactly the opposite of what I wanted to achieve."

I must admit, that I have done just that, leaving the works aside to focus on the structure of his project. But I also must disagree, since it is exactly Zabel's "unconventional" approach that gives me the model to carry forward my own peripheral and low budget projects, and to continue interrogate the figure of the curator.

Thank you.

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