



Roger Buerger

(Berlín, 1962) is an independent curator and a Professor at the University of Lüneburg, Germany. In 2004 not only was he named artistic director of Documenta 12, slated to take place in Kassel in 2007, but the MACBA presented his project *How do we want to be governed?* as well as the film series *Harun Farocki: to think in images* in which he was a major collaborator.

Q. *How do we want to be governed?* is part of a series of exhibitions you are presenting in different spaces and different cities under the general title *Die Regierung* [The Government]. Can you explain the logic of this series? Why do you consider the issue of governmentality relevant in the context of artistic practices?

A: It is important to remark that the exhibition is not about governmentality. I'm through with that. I treated governmentality, the relationship between technologies of the self and neoliberalism, in an exhibition in 2000. At that point the issue was important to me. However, there's a general weakness in that discourse. Foucault started to study what he called programmed subjectivities, for example, those that are implied by management manuals. But there's a huge difference between those programmed subjectivities and actual subjectivities. For me it was important to get rid of the subject, so to speak, and of the notion of individual agency, as I am under the impression that there's a lot of nonsense; the same we deal with when discussing art and politics.

All those terms are highly over-determined and therefore void of any substance. They should be put into brackets for a while. We have to arrive at a notion of power relations that goes beyond the relationships between individuals, collectives and institutions; beyond Bush and Berlusconi. Those people are, in my view, symptoms of a crisis rather than agents. That's why approaches à la Michael Moore are dead wrong. The current exhibition, conceived together with Ruth Noack, is about the Foucauldian notion of "government". He is giving the term the broad meaning it had in pre-modern times: the guidance of people. But this guidance is not enacted directly, like in the beating of children. To govern means to exercise power in an indirect, mediated way – to act in order to determine or circumscribe the actions of others. So, it's actions upon other actions.

The logic behind the exhibitions is not that of a series but rather that of sequence.

For me it was important to bring together the subject of the exhibition, actions upon other actions, and its form, which means getting rid of the usual exhibition format to create a continuity through the sequence where you could represent

what's really going on with those actions upon other actions. The idea was to have an exhibition that transforms itself like a film in three dimensions, and to explore the actual potential of artworks in that process. For example, the supermarket sequence in Godard's *Tout va bien* can be related to the privileged exhibition site, to display, but also to the Fordist factory space. That depends on how it is used in the exhibition context. The idea of the sequence came up from the desire to focus on things from different angles and to explore the same artworks in different contexts and on different levels.

In terms of artistic practices, actions upon other actions risks remaining too abstract, so we brought "government" down to three topics: 1) the conflict between modernism as a universal paradigm or projection and local forms of modernity, 2) neoliberal immanence which reflects governmentality but is mainly about the individual being "liberated" from the big state apparatus such as the welfare state or state socialism, and 3) the idea of the state of exception which has, according to Walter Benjamin, become the rule. Here, the project Ex-Argentina, an exhibition organized by Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann after the crisis that hit Argentina in December 2001, is probably the most telling example. Those three areas are of course related.

Modernism is very important for a lot of artists. They cannot help but come back to it for a variety of reasons. The fragility or precariousness of the individual can be traced in new performance or dance work. Here I am thinking, for example, of Maja Bajevic. I'm interested in the transformation of the notion of the individual between the 50s and 60s and now. In the 50s there was a heroic figure, think of Pollock, and in the 60s there was this self-conscious embodiment of public space, at least in Western performance work. Now the idea of an absolute fragility has replaced this either heroic or ignorant imaginary. Of course, there are many more things going on in terms of artistic practices but I think those three topics are relevant, especially for a middle-class European audience.

Q. How do you deal with the local-global dialectic in this series?

A: Government is a truly universal subject. Everyone has something to say about it. But government also means different things. The universal and abstract dimension only makes sense if it's developed specifically. In Lüneburg, for example, we were dealing with the transformation of the European system of higher education, the so-called Bologna-process, and its repercussions for the students. In Barcelona we are dealing with alternative forms of organisation developed by social movements both historically and today. In Rotterdam the idea is to come back to the Dutch tradition in which there is an intrinsic link between the collection, the individual, and nationhood, and so on. It is, however, important to keep the universal paradigm in mind. For example, when we deal with the

fate of the textile industry in Poblenu, we are also dealing with textile production and manufacturing in other areas of the world. It makes sense to relate those struggles.

Q: The project in Barcelona involves a different dimension of the curatorial practice, in the sense that the authority and expertise of the curator is mediated by dialogue with local groups and social movements. This is a kind of negotiated and socialized curatorship. Do you think it is necessary to redefine curatorial methods? And would this redefinition involve a self-critical process in which more transparency and more participation are to be gained?

A: I always work like that. In Lüneburg I work with my students. I also work with my partner, Ruth Noack. I don't like working alone, as it is boring. I also work closely with the artists. For me this is the only way to work, despite all the conflicts and struggles this kind of process entails. The exhibition improves that way. And also my own position becomes clearer since I have to reinvent myself on a day-to-day basis. Curatorship is a highly mediated practice. I don't know if it's necessary to redefine the discipline, though it's clear to me that travelling around the world in order to select artists for exhibitions is meaningless. We desperately need a discussion both on curatorial practice and on methodologies of exhibitions, a *discours sur la methode*. Transparency is not the point. I'm sceptical of that notion which falls under a neoliberal category. Transparency means that you keep other people at bay but inform them about what you are doing. My method needs a lot of improvisation, which is the method, but it's never going to be transparent.

I am more in favor of participation than transparency. It's a matter of texture. If you're working with people like the ones we're working with in Barcelona, the texture becomes more complex. This is a formal argument. The exhibition improves because it incites people to relate themselves to it. The most enigmatic parts are brought down. So I think participatory processes are more interesting and rich, while in formal terms the result is more balanced and beautiful. People have the possibility to define their own presence in the process.

Q: The issue of relationality is quite central in the project here. How do you define aesthetic relationality? How does it affect curatorial methods?

A: My notion of relationality is highly influenced by the work of Leo Bersani, especially by his book *Caravaggio's Secrets*. Bersani conceives of forms of subjectivity that operate outside of the sacrosanct notions of selfhood. He tries to come to terms with people's extraordinary willingness to kill in order to preserve their identity. Contrary to what the term relationality implies for many people in the art world, it has nothing to do with a communitarian aesthetic à la Tiravanija. It is a formal category

that refers to the capacity of the subject to find its own image in the world.

Q. During the process of the Barcelona project you have been nominated as director of the upcoming Documenta 12. To what extent will the exhibit in Barcelona be related to that program? What have you learned from Barcelona? To what extent will the experience here serve as a model for further work, particularly Documenta 12?

A: I don't know yet what Documenta 12 will look like, but it is clear that I won't change my methods for Documenta's sake. There are a few expectations from this kind of big format exhibition that need to be destroyed. There is, for example, no need to have 250 artists in order to be representative. What counts for me is aesthetic quality, and I will argue my criteria. Maybe we are going to have an exhibition of about fifty artists and relate their work in a significant and coherent way. It is a bit premature to talk about it now.

Q: The origin of *How do we want to be governed?* at the MACBA comes from the need to develop a kind of historical articulation beyond the one presented in the exhibition *Art and Utopia*. *Art and Utopia* is, as curator Jean-François Chevrier has clearly remarked in public, is rooted in a traditional liberal bourgeois ideological framework, of which the museum is of course one of its major institutions. The discussion about the subject is central to *L'action restreinte* and Chevrier posed questions such as: "who is speaking?". The implied subject in this exhibition is the modern European liberal bourgeois individual of which the curator himself seems the most paradigmatic incarnation. This is the subject that Immanuel Wallerstein declares finished after '68 by saying that we are already in a post-liberal era. Chevrier publicly declares the need to defend the modern liberal subject in the context of the increasing post-modern banalisation of art and culture. There may be an antagonism between *L'action restreinte* and *How do we want to be governed?* in the ways in which they were curated: on the one hand you have the liberal intellectual working individually as an expert art historian, and on the other we have these collaborations with artists and groups in an attempt to construct another kind of exhibition in terms of public space. Do you agree with this antagonism between the two exhibitions and the two methods involved? Do you see *How do we want to be governed?* as a critique of *L'action restreinte*? When you say that the need to investigate alternative exhibition and curatorial methods comes from formal needs that can be understood according to the liberal modernist tradition and thus the opposition, I would suggest differently. If you don't agree with this antagonism between the two, and thus see also *How do we*

***want to be governed?* as a continuation of the liberal paradigm, then why working differently?**

A: We probably need to do several things at the same time. We need good historical exhibitions. But there are some things *L'action restreinte* is not telling me. Think of Alexandra Exter's work. You have some examples of in the show. But at some point she decided to give up art, at least in the classical sense of the production of artworks. She started to manufacture things for workers, creating textiles and so on. That's not in the show. How do you represent such a move by an artist? She is not giving up art, but has transformed aesthetic practice. Her action was not exactly restrained.

You can see similar moves in the ExArgentina-project. These moves, I would argue, partake of art's autonomy. They wouldn't make much sense beyond an aesthetic perspective. I'd say that *How do we want to be governed?* starts at that point; that threshold, where it's not necessary to say no to conventional modes of artistic production, which you also have in ExArgentina, but where you have to notice art's trespasses of institutional and ontological boundaries. I'm interested in what happens beyond this threshold, in that which cannot be contained, so to speak. That's why I'm interested in the local utopias such as Poblenuou. Those utopias were never realised, but were terminated like the Commune de Paris and the collectives during the Spanish Republic. We are historically responsible for those political experiments, though we feel closed off from them. But, how can we have access to something that never truly materialised? -- Art is quite good in providing us with a cartography of potential historical developments, and this exhibition is about that question. I'd not say this is antagonistic to *L'action restreinte*. I would argue that some things are different from historical exhibitions, but I don't see antagonism. It's rather an extension of certain argument. What you have in *L'action restreinte* is one side of the research of the boundary between art and life, the material part, but the artists were also negotiating something else. This show is about that something else.

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