

Curation in the Slovenian Performing Arts

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The contribution aims to examine the issues surrounding curation in the field of performing arts in Slovenia. The central point of interest will be curation of contemporary performing arts festivals that are based on a concept or a selected theme and characterised by transdisciplinary, transnational, transcultural and transinstitutional hybridisation of artistic procedures, production strategies and modes of addressing the audience in a globalised world. How did the professional profile of a performing arts curator develop and what is their identity? What is their role in relation to the artistic director and festival selector and how was this role understood in Slovenia? These are the key questions that will guide us through this discussion.

1. CURATOR: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

In the field of the performing arts, the profile of a curator took shape in the 1980s and early 1990s; however, it was not considered exhaustively until thirty years later. One of the early, if not the earliest, overviews of curation in the performing arts was made in 2010 by the Croatian performing arts journal *Frakcija*, in the thematic issue entitled *Curating Performing Arts*, which was published in English (and edited by guest editors Florian Malzacher, Tea Tupajić and Petra Zanki). The editors were apparently well aware of the importance of their decision and of the place a historical overview and theoretical consideration of curation in the performing arts have internationally. Later, in 2014, a special thematic issue of the American scientific journal *Theater* entitled *Performance Curators* was published (edited by Tom Sellar).¹

The professional profile of a curator emerged in the field of independent theatre, in new or newly defined theatre institutions, festivals and art centres, where the use of interdisciplinary approaches to performance led to new aesthetics, alongside new forms of production that paved the way for new working structures and hierarchies within ensembles, collectives and groups (Malzacher, 2010, 11). Florian Malzacher, who explored curation in the European performing arts, sees Belgium and the Netherlands as the centres of these ideas, from where they spilled over into the neighbouring countries. Tom Sellar, who examined the so-called curatorial turn in the North American context, also connects the emergence of curators in the field of performing arts with the emergence of art centres where various in-between, we could say hybrid, forms of performance were being developed, and notes that curators found inspiration in interdisciplinary experiments, multimedia projects and activism of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Malzacher, the foundations of performing arts curation were largely laid by the mid-1990s, followed by a period of continuity as well as of differentiation, reflection, development and re-questioning of new formats in the form of laboratories and residencies, summer academies, thematic festivals and emerging artists platforms (Malzacher, 2010, 11). In the past twenty years, a group of progressive independent performing arts curators emerged on the international scene, who initiated platforms for new models of collaboration and presentation. These are associated with “selected venues and connected with urbanist, participatory

1 The thematic issues of the journals *Frakcija* and *Theater* are the main sources that trace the evolution of the profession of curator in the performing arts. I have also written about this in the article “Curation as Mediation Between Art and Knowledge Production” (Orel, 2017).

and relational performances” that take place “both inside and outside of festivals or institutional contexts” (Sellar, 2014a, 23) and call to be placed within a curatorial frame. Tom Sellar notes that the performing arts followed the developments in the world of art, with the turn coming about in the 1990s, when global art biennials like documenta and the Venice Biennial waged on a new class of nomadic, internationally oriented curators who advocated expansions of exhibition practices and for enlarging perspectives to include non-Western art (*ibid.*).

2. FESTIVALISATION OF THE PERFORMING ARTS

In Slovenia curation in the field of the performing arts was closely connected with the emergence of international festivals of contemporary (performing) arts in the mid-1990s. In the first years after Slovenia gained independence, the ties with the former common Yugoslav space were temporarily severed (in institutional theatres, but not in the fields of alternative, independent theatre and popular culture) and the space for Slovenian theatre practitioners’ activities narrowed considerably (Sušec Michieli, 2008, 41). In the years following 1991, the only opportunity for artists, theatres and producers, who were used to touring, exchanging experiences and meeting fellow makers at festivals in Yugoslavia (at the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF),² the International Theatre Festival MESS in Sarajevo, Sterijino pozorje in Novi Sad, the Summer Festival in Dubrovnik and the Summer Festival in Ohrid, if we mention only the most important ones), to present their work was at traditional theatre festivals, namely the Week of Slovenian Drama and Maribor Theatre Festival. This gap was filled in 1993 by the festival Ex Ponto, which was founded in Ljubljana to enable expatriated artists to continue creating work in exile and to re-activate the connections in the arts and culture with the once common Yugoslav space. Initially conceived as a social movement, Ex Ponto (1993–2015) gradually evolved into an international performing arts festival and expanded its activities primarily into Eastern European countries. Not long after, other international festivals were launched: the festival of contemporary performing arts Exodos in Ljubljana, focused especially on establishing connections with the Western production centres and networks (1995–2017); Culture Week, also a festival of contemporary performing arts (referred to also

2 Katarina Pejović provides an overview and analysis of guest appearances of Slovenian performances, theatres and groups at the BITEF festival in her article *Prepleteni tokovi: slovensko gledališče in festival Bitef 1967–2016* [Intertwined Currents: Slovenian theatre and Bitef festival 1967–2016] (2017).

as MKT – Multicultural Week, which took place in Maribor from 1995 to 1998); the contemporary arts festival City of Women (1996), focusing on women's creativity in various fields of art and from different parts of the world, including from distant countries usually perceived as exotic, and which has over the years considerably strengthened the segment of performing arts in its programme; the contemporary performing arts festival Young Lions (1997), which initially showcased the most promising but not yet established young artists and groups at the beginning of their careers, and later moved away from the original concept and started to also bring to Ljubljana well-known names from the field of the contemporary performing arts. Ljubljana offered also the festival of young independent artists Break 21 (launched in 1997 and re-conceptualised in 2002 as a festival of urban, technologically supported artistic practices and renamed Break 2.2)³ and The Beauty of Extreme, which showcased some of the most radical examples of body art (in 1997 and 1999). These festivals added considerably to the vibrancy of theatre life in the 1990s. They had in common advocating interdisciplinary approaches to performance and a tendency to explore new directions and trends in the field. They were also very tightly connected with so-called independent theatre production, and contributed substantially to the consolidation of hybrid performance practices, as well as acting as a social corrective of existing socio-political circumstances.

Festivalisation in the performing arts gained momentum and continued after the turn of the millennium. New international festivals were launched, among them the festival of performance, contemporary dance and theatre Performa (2000) in Maribor, the theatre festival Kluže Ambient (2001), contemporary dance festival Fronta (2006) in Murska Sobota, festival of radical bodies Spider (organised in Ljubljana in 2011 following the first edition that was held in Athens in 2010), CoFestival (2012) in Ljubljana, which was formed through the joining of three contemporary dance festivals: PLESkavica Festival, the European project Modul-dance and Ukrep – Festival of Dance Perspectives. Moreover, institutional theatres, too, started organising festivals in order to showcase their production and present performances representative of the theatre to the interested domestic audience and (invited) guests from abroad. All the mentioned international festivals build their programmes around a concept, around a selected theme, which they open up through various theatrical and interdisciplinary events and other

3 With every new edition, this multimedia festival changed the last number in its name (Break 2.3, Break 2.4). It was last mentioned in the Slovenian Theatre Yearbook in the 2001/2002 season, when it was referred to as Break 2.2, probably because it changed its concept and crossed over to the field of visual art.

artworks, thus creating a space for discussion with the wider public through a range of different discussion formats. Their programming is designed to integrate the festival into the local environment and appeal to the local and the international audience in the most direct way possible, whilst creating platforms for new modes of production, representation and reception, as well as reflection. One of the key tasks of curators is undoubtedly establishing creative connections between artworks and their audience. In doing so, they also create “a very specific public space, well equipped to be a place for political reflection of society by aesthetic means” (von Hartz, 2010, 111). The programming at concept-based festivals was conceived as an original work, regardless of what the festival’s programmers were called (project author, artistic director, selector or curator).

3. THE QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY

An overview of the designations for the leading functions at the mentioned festivals not only gives us an insight into their organisational structure, but also suggests certain dilemmas with the terminology. The difficulty of naming is, on the one hand, a symptom of the changes accompanying the definitions of interdisciplinary approaches and artworks at the intersection of different fields of art, while on the other, it is a result of a lack of reflection of these changes in the field of the performing arts.⁴

The term curator was borrowed from the field of visual arts without much reflection, which has been the object of much polemics. It began to be used in the performing arts to designate programme makers who would in theatre institutions be described using the traditional designations: artistic director, *intendant*, dramaturge, manager, producer (Malzacher, 2010, 11). The terms *theatre curator* and *performance curator* are more common in the USA than in Europe. In Slovenia, the term “curator” can be detected after 2000, especially at the City of Women (first in 2004) and Exodos (after 2011). It is interesting that in both cases the use of the term was initially limited to guests from abroad, and was only later expanded to include contributors from Slovenia. The artistic leadership of the City of Women festival consisted of two segments: the

4 As noted by Florian Malzacher, the difficulties with the terminology can be inferred from the simple fact that so-called independent theatre itself is still not suitably named: “Experimental theatre? Free theatre? All are biased and misleading. Time-based art? Live art? At least these are attempts at defining the genre within different borders. Devised theatre, that is, a theatre that must evolve again and again from scratch? New Theatre – after all these years? Postdramatic theatre? At least one successful, marketable keyword” (Malzacher, 2010, 11–12).

first included (women) selectors,⁵ the second comprised guest curators, as specified in the programme notes.⁶

In 2007, the term “selector” was replaced first by “programme director” and later with “artistic director”. Like the City of Women festival, Exodos first used the term “curator” to describe the work of a programme maker coming from abroad, namely the world-renowned artist Jan Fabre, who was invited to curate the festival in 2011. With this edition, the festival also redefined its concept and has since then become a biennial event, entrusted to a curator from abroad (in 2013, to the acclaimed British artist and member of Forced Entertainment Tim Etchells; in 2015, to the Belgian curator Jan Goossens; in 2017, to Tang Fu Kuen). Other festivals practically never use the designation “curator”. In Slovenia, several terms are commonly used to describe the programme makers of the festivals centred around a selected concept, the most frequently used being artistic director, selector, programme designer, curator.⁷ The decision on which term to use depends on the nature of the work and the role an individual performs within the festival team, but also on one’s understanding of individual designations. As far as these synonyms are concerned – all of which designate authorship of the festival programme – it is worth pointing out the specificity of the term selector.

In the performing arts, the term selector is associated with the terminology used at retrospective national festivals, such as the Maribor Theatre Festival, Week of Slovenian Drama, Gibanica – Biennial of Slovenian Contemporary Dance Art and Biennial of Puppetry Artists of Slovenia. These festivals design their programmes based on selecting the best performances created in Slovenia in the period considered.

- 5 That’s correct, the festival was run by women, except at the very beginning, when it was led by Koen Van Daele (for six consecutive years, from 1996 to 2001).
- 6 The 2004 City of Women festival was conceived by “selectors and programme coordinators Sabina Potočki and Bettina Knaup” and “guest curators Katy Beepweel, Laurence Rassel, Karen Wong”. The programme was prepared in the same way in the following years – by a selector and a programme coordinator in cooperation with guest curators. By the following year, in 2005, the group of guest curators included also Slovenian authors, Igor Prassel and Miha Zadnikar, besides Culture2Culture and Virginia Villaplana.
- 7 The Ex Ponto programme was conceived by the “festival’s director” Damir Domitrović Kos, also called “author and head of the project”, in close collaboration with “assistant project head” Ksenija Gorjak and “coordinator” Ruža Mlač. In the 1990s the Exodos Festival was led by the “festival director” Miran Šušteršič, in collaboration with the “artistic board”, sometimes referred to as “artistic direction” (which included Tomaž Toporišič, Irena Štaudohar, Simon Kardum, Boris Pintar). The City of Women festival was conceived and initially run by the “artistic director and head of the project” Uršula Cetinski, who was joined in the festival’s second edition by the “selector and coordinator of the programme” Koen Van Daele. The Young Lions festival was initiated and run by Nevenka Koprivšek (up until 2020) – as “festival director”, “artistic director” and “programme designer”, in cooperation with “programme designers” (Irena Štaudohar, Mojca Jug etc.). The Performa festival has collective “artistic and programme direction”, CoFestival is run by the “artistic board”, and the Spider festival by the “artistic director”.

This is the criterion that has to be met for a performance to be included in the programme, with selected performances competing for the title of the best performance as well as for achievements in other areas (dramaturgy, stage and costume design, acting, etc.). The awards also come with monetary benefits.⁸ The audience gets an overview of the quality of the theatrical production, whereas the artists are given an opportunity for (self)reflection. At the same time, national theatre festivals act as venues for the exchange of performances, collaborations, experiences and information and seek to provide a bridge between the national environment in which they operate and the international space they aim to integrate into. At national festivals, the selector chooses performances for the competition programme, aiming to highlight the best performances as well as to contribute to the processes of researching, evaluating and historicising performing arts. While the curator too, of course, selects performances and other kinds of events with regard to their quality, this is nevertheless not the only criterion for including them in the programme. Their work is essentially focused on designing a programme according to the selected concept, theme, problematic, on weaving a whole from the already created artistic and other works as well as establishing connections between artists and groups from different fields so that they may create new artistic works at the festival, perhaps invent new aesthetics, strategies of presenting and modes of addressing the visitors and thus reach out to new audiences. Curators often tend to constitute spaces for new modes of creating, thinking and acting and seek ways to expand them into the public sphere. While selectors of national theatre festivals in Slovenia in principle do not deal with the questions and financial conditions of the (post)production of selected performances (this is done by the festival's organisers), the work of a curator requires a symbiosis between the concept and the production of the festival from the outset. Or, as Goran Sergej Pristaš put it:

“Management wrapped up in programming, programming wrapped up in dramaturgy, dramaturgy wrapped up in theory, theory wrapped up in performance, performance wrapped up in education, education wrapped up in dissemination, dissemination wrapped up in management” (Pristaš, 2010, 31).

8 Award recipients working in institutional theatres progress to a higher pay grade. Award recipients working outside of institutions, so-called freelancers, do not enjoy the same benefit. Among all theatre festivals, it is the national festivals that probably most clearly evince that they are “economic corporations” (as Blaž Lukan has noted, 2004, 35) that regulate the market and determine the price of creations, performances and ultimately artists through a mechanism of rewarding.

When designing festival programmes structured around a concept, mutual questioning, establishing connections and making sense of the mentioned areas are of crucial importance for the festival's successful positioning in the wider social space.

Concept-based festivals only rarely call the authors of their programmes selectors. Understandably so, as their work differs substantially from that of a selector at national festivals. The terms programme maker and artistic director (which is also the most common one) are certainly better suited to describe them. At a certain time, the term curator sounded trendy, because it was associated with ground-breaking authorial visions of makers of a new type of festivals, their progressive ideas, autonomous attitude and understanding of the festival as an original artistic work. Nevertheless, the question arises whether it makes sense to adopt the term curator in the performing arts, given that they have their own tradition of managing theatre institutions and established names for their leaders. This realisation has apparently prompted the selective use of the trendy sounding term curator in Slovenia.

4. CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: CURATOR AS DIRECTOR IN POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

An in-depth theoretical examination of the artistic management of festivals—be they national or concept-based—has not yet been conducted in Slovenian theatre studies. That being said, the festivals and the work of their artistic directors were reflected on in the daily press and media (on the news, in reviews of performances and specific festival's editions), in professional journals (*Maska*, *Dialogi*, *Literatura*), and in scientific journals (*Amfiteater*). An opportunity to offer overviews of festivals' events is also provided for in the foreword to the Slovenian Theatre Yearbook, which annually presents critical evaluations of the past season. These commentaries, however, focus more on the theatrical production offered than on the festival as an "economic corporation" and an "artwork", to again refer to the author of the article *Uvod v razumevanje festivalov* [An Introduction to Understanding Festivals] Blaž Lukan (2004, 35 and 38).

A reflection on curating was offered by Eda Čufer in her lecture entitled *Occupation Dramaturge, Curator, Editor* (10 December 2008), held at the SCCA-Ljubljana Centre for Contemporary Arts in the frame of the Laboratory of Curatorial Practices 2008/09. The manuscript of the lecture has not been preserved and it was also not recorded. Petja Grafenauer wrote in her report that "the lecture attempted to articulate

the similarities and differences in the professional practices of dramaturge and curator, leaving the question of editor aside. /.../ It made very clear the difference in how curatorial and dramaturgical practices were conceptualised and how they functioned before and after 1989” (Grafenauer, Eda Čufer). The lecture was presented in the frame of a series of lectures on curatorial and institutional practices, as part of the educational programme School of Art – School for Curatorial Practices and Critical Writing, which is aimed at reflecting, analysing and evaluating curatorial practices in the field of contemporary visual art and organised annually by the SCCA since 1997.⁹

Among the numerous conceptual definitions of the curator’s identity (which in the theory of the visual and performing arts is discussed in relation to dramaturgy, translation, choreography, producing, etc.), there is one that is of particular interest for the present contribution—Betí Žerovc compares curating visual art exhibitions with the field of theatre: she compares the exhibition with the performance and the curator with the theatre director, which is attested to by the article’s title: *The Exhibition as Artwork, the Curator as Artist: A Comparison with Theatre* (Žerovc, 2010).¹⁰

Žerovc starts from the premise that “the curated group exhibition, and especially the thematic exhibition, can be very similar to the theatre performance as a composite stage-managed event in which the mediation of certain ideas, narratives, experiences, or messages is carried out through careful dramaturgical guidance of the viewer’s attention” (Žerovc, 2015, 204). What she is referring to here is not traditional theatre, as she points out, but postdramatic theatre. According to Hans-Thies Lehmann’s definition, postdramatic theatre refers to theatre “after” drama, or better, “beyond” drama, i.e. beyond the traditional understanding of drama and the hierarchy of sign systems in theatre. It is a theatre that is essentially marked by two principles: 1. retreat of signification (Lehmann’s term, 2003, 101), i.e. moving away from representation, which is replaced by the tendency to present and be present, 2. de-hierarchisation of theatrical means (Lehmann, 2003, 105). The basic principles of de-hierarchisation are, in his view, a side-by-side ordering of theatrical elements or parataxis, simultaneity of signs, play with the density of signs, aesthetics of the overabundance of signs, musicalisation, visual dramaturgy, rhetoric of physicality, irruption of the real,

9 The school’s programme in the period from 1997 to 2012 is presented in detail in the compendium *Dilemmas of Curatorial Practices* (156–164).

10 The article by Betí Žerovc was re-published in her book *Umetnost kuratorjev: Vloga kuratorjev v sodobni umetnosti* (2010) [*The Art of Curating: The Role of Curators in Contemporary Art*] and in *When Attitudes Become the Norm: The Contemporary Curator and Institutional Art* (2015).

event/situation, where theatre becomes a “social situation” (Lehmann, 2033, 105–126). As Beti Žerovc has noted, these procedures bear similarities with the curatorial procedures of the exhibition-making process, as nowadays dramaturgy, theatricality and multimediality are introduced into the field with a fanfare (2015, 204) in order to address the audiences as directly as possible. She has also observed a specific phenomenon in Slovenia: theatre directors often act not only as curators of exhibitions but also stage exhibitions as performances. Fine examples of this specificity are Janez Janša, Mare Bulc, Barbara Novakovič and Bojan Jablanovec, who have all crossed over to the medium of exhibition because of different reasons and creative interests. Even though their works are quite diverse (Janez Janša: *Life [in Progress]*, 2009; Mare Bulc: *Study for the Last Egoistic Performance*, 2006; Barbara Novakovič: *Muzeum*; Bojan Jablanovec: *Via Nova Muzeum*, 2009), we can recognise in them a new performance genre, let’s call it performance-exhibition. This new genre fits readily into the various hybrid forms of performance emerging from the in-between spaces among different media and fields, their common trait being liminality. This is characteristic of numerous artworks that are essentially defined by interdisciplinarity and intermediality. Explorations of liminality have brought forth different hybrid genres (for example lecture-performance) and performance-exhibition is certainly one of them.

On the other hand, curators of visual art exhibitions, too, evince a deep interest in performative forms of exhibiting, which include visitors as an integral part of the events with the aim of offering them a unique experience. They borrow from the performing arts the tools for directing the audience’s attention and the strategies for shaping community and audience. According to curator Matthias Lilienthal, visual arts curators are interested in theatre not as an art genre but as a medium of communication that has at its disposal the tools for effective address of the audience (Sellar, 2014a, 79). Innovative connections between artworks and the audience are thus a priority of both curators of visual art exhibitions and artistic directors of performing arts festivals.

5. CONCLUSION

The professional profile of a curator in the field of the performing arts took shape in Slovenia in the mid-1990s, when different platforms of international, concept-based festivals of contemporary performing arts (the first were *Ex Ponto*, *Exodos*, *City of Women*, *Young Lions*) started developing alongside traditional national theatre festivals (Maribor

Theatre Festival and Week of Slovenian Drama). The very term curator has been borrowed from the field of the visual arts. Even though the use of the term was appropriated from the visual arts without much reflection and was a source of inexhaustible polemic, the term has stuck in the international arena (the terms used are *theatre curator* and *performance curator*). In Slovenia too, this trendy-sounding term for progressive artistic directors of festivals, whose work is decisively marked by transdisciplinary, transnational, transcultural and transinstitutional hybridisation of artistic procedures, production strategies and new audience development tools in a globalised world, highlighted the ground-breaking, autonomous and artistic work of festival makers who aimed beyond the tradition of drama theatre, into the landscape of postdramatic theatre.

An overview has shown a rather selective use of the term curator in the Slovenian performing arts. Rather than using the term “curator”, festival programme makers preferred using terms from the performing arts: the most frequently used were artistic director and programme designer. The prevalence of theatrical terminology points to the festival programme makers’ knowledge of the history of performing arts, awareness of the specificity of their institutions and appreciation of the expertise-based use of Slovenian terminology. The intertwining of creative procedures from the fields of the visual and performing arts has occasioned a specific performance genre, the so-called performance-exhibition. It was developed by theatre directors (Janez Janša/ Emil Hrvatin, Mare Bulc, Barbara Novakovič, Bojan Jablanovec), who adopted the role of the exhibition curator and created performances as exhibitions.

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