

## Ong Keng Sen – curating potentialities

In getting to know Ong Keng Sen and his approach to curating during SHOW ME THE WORLD in Munich, the thing that stuck to my mind the most were his thoughts on the interferences of art and usefulness. Not only did he challenge putting art to an use that might be commercial or government-friendly, he also called the use of art as an instrument for the production of politically relevant products into question. Doing Ong Keng Sen's thoughts justice here is quite complex, as the process he talks about when explaining this concept of *curating nothing* (in reference to Jean Luc Nancy's concept of "Nothing") is a quite political and subversive one. But – and this is the main point – not political by the means of letting politics colonize the arts. Not by trying to generate *products* that are to be put to a political use but by the means of the process itself as subversive act.

To expound this while relating to his own working experience, Ong Keng Sen stated a difference between two kinds of curation. *Informal curating*, represented by his FLYING CIRCUS PROJECT on the one side, *formal curating* represented by his work as director of the SINGAPORE FESTIVAL OF ARTS (SIFA) on the other. Existing since 1996 the FLYING CIRCUS PROJECT is a multi-disciplinary long term research project that brings artists together without the main goal of producing concrete results. As Ong Keng Sen later on explained in his working group, the context of this project allows subversive practices as *wasting money* and *deconstructing value* by for example spending Singaporean funds in Myanmar without generating any products, any *use*. These practices of curating potentiality rather than products are, according to Ong Keng Sen a lot harder to establish in the context of *formal curating*, meaning the context of the SIFA that he has been curating for the second time in 2015. In his work for this festival Ong Keng Sen had and has to face the pressure of curating for an audience as well as for the government, of creating use and products. While elaborating on strategies of curatorial resistance against the arts colonization by productivity, Ong Keng Sen pointed out three main goals of curation: *Curating nothing*, *remaining enchanted* (in reference to Jane Bennett's concept of The Enchantment of Modern Life) and *curating potentiality* and latent power (rather than products).

Subsequently in his working group at the symposium we had the chance to further discuss the responsibilities of the curator and the question of how to prepare oneself for these responsibilities. Here Ong Keng Sen emphasized the importance of the transparency of curatorial decisions and the difficulty of neither acting as a figure of authority nor creating dependency when you are still the one "coming with the money" and deciding how it is spent. The central question remained: How can the curator escape neoliberal strategies of efficiency and evaluation? In relation to this we dug deeper into a concept that Ong Keng Sen had only mentioned briefly at the end of his talk: The curator as body and the *embodiment of curation*. In using this term Ong Keng Sen wanted to address that the curator as a body should not remain safe and invisible putting others to the "frontline" but rather make her-/himself visible and vulnerable. Rather than denying the individuality of curatorial decisions and referring to a neoliberal framework of seemingly objective evaluation, she/he should be aware of and transparent with the fact that he is inhibited by all the things she/he has seen and experienced. Rather than pushing this fact away one should embrace these embodied references and in relating to them make curation much more than a series of clever ideas. While at the same time constantly questioning oneself, seeing the own curatorial body as problematic and – most important – not colonizing the artist for the sake of the own curatorial vision.

Taken as a whole, Ong Keng Sen's talk as much as the discussion in the working group sensitized me for the many ways in which the arts can be – and often are – colonized: By a neoliberal greed for utility and market-value, by a political claim for relevance, by the audiences wishes of being entertained or educated, by curators seeking to fulfill their visions. So, if there is something like *postcolonial curation* it would be defined by a constant process of avoiding these pitfalls and temptations of colonizing the arts, of perpetually reminding oneself not to generate products – to whatever use they might be – but to instead *curate potentialities*.

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