

Ben Portis

Self-Triangulation: Public Positions Guided by Personal Dialectics

One of the things also about pulling up towards the end is that this... the stimulus of the experience of others certainly inflecting my own thinking about this skeletal statement that I brought, and I think I can recognize in it some things that I was not aware of at the time I prepared it, or even two days ago, and you may have already perceived it for what it is, which is, in certain ways, kind of a statement from solitude, and I think that's one of the things that is a condition of working in a larger institution which not everyone can appreciate except for those of us who are in them—that the operations of a contemporary art curator can be very isolated within a complex structure and not so... It's not part of a kind of a dialogue or a collegiality that would be maybe more fluid in realms that are grounded by the authority of history and internationalism, and I guess another thing is that what I've set up is probably what I would regard as a kind of survival chart, not in a desperate way, but in a kind of condition where a very enduring institution nonetheless has a great deal of inherent tectonic instability.

You know, the ground shifts a lot. A couple of times a week. Things are very different, and they occur almost beyond anyone's control. They're certainly happening at the Art Gallery of Ontario with a great deal of frequency now, because there's a project that we are in the midst of in several ways, and at the outset in others, which is a *force majeure*, and so one of the things that I find that I'm calibrating a lot—and yet it's a good thing to be keeping in mind at all times—is a sense of time and anticipation, and knowing that the delivery of a project, of an investment, is going to occur in circumstances that are very different than are those which you can observe at present, or even determine from the past, and you need to be able to hold on to something, so... This is not specific to any kind of project, because I guess the one thing that may be different for me is that I will be engaged in many projects at once—easily six to eight things going on at once—that all require a level of concentration and separation, and I think that that was partly what I was getting at on the first day when I mentioned the disappearing curator. I wouldn't say

disappearing, but a kind of... a distinction between the recessive position and the assertive position, that it's... sometimes, being orally assertive, you can start to tangle up distinct objectives in yourself somehow, and sometimes to be able to pull yourself away makes the differences in your tasks and objectives clearer.

So I think another thing about this statement which I submitted that you would probably recognize... everybody who I showed this to before, their first comment was how laced with contradiction it is. And I think that that's just... I don't know, for me it's healthy. It's a way of moving around things and always acknowledging the difference and the layers of interpretation that any artist or artwork or subject is going to acquire, not only in its own history, but perhaps in the nine months to two years that might typically be dedicated in a curator's work in advance of something being seen by the public. And so what I've tried to chart out in a rudimentary way is the ways that the objective position and the subjective position can mesh and be productive, and one of the reasons I wanted you to have the list in front of you is because, in these parallel lists that I've proposed, there are headings that might easily fall on either side, so part of the question that I would still be considering is why they're there, why I've classified something as being perhaps more suitably subjective or objective, and that is perhaps where I think it belongs in terms of a kind of a usefulness, that it's better placed there because on the other side it can be counterproductive or confusing.

So I'll go through the list a little bit and probably hopscotch about.

Choice is, I guess, for me, paramount. It's why I chose to become a curator, not to control conditions but to retain a stake in creativity, and for me, that's... so when I say, choice, freedom to make one's own judgements and decisions, that is a very difficult thing to attain, because there are so many concerns and needs and constraints that are placed before us, and maybe to go to the objective counter of that, the ability to face down hidden agendas... what I mean is that it's important to do that at the outset, to... not to eliminate them, but to acknowledge them, to acknowledge them to others where they may be affected, and particularly to an artist that you may be working with, that you need to establish an air of trust in order to make a project successful, and I would say that a successful project is one

where everybody grows through it, not only the curator but the artist, the artwork, the organization, its understanding of what it can do and how it might do it, and then ultimately the visitors who will experience the artwork, kind of the launch of a project into the public sphere.

Certain subjective considerations are interrelated, and those I would say: personal suitability, number two, number four, learning something new (am I expanding and challenging myself?), and six would be interpretation for self. And I'm not actually sure why I extricated them, but it's... I think that they're all placed in this larger consideration of working in time that, so, the personal suitability is just something I can do well, is... doesn't need to be based on something that you know you can do already, but is this something that is reasonable to get to in a period of time that you are allowed or need to establish early? If it's something that's going to take two years to realize, then you better make sure that you have that amount of time to devote to it, and that you have the necessary support within your organization to dedicate over that period.

And then in counter to this subjective heading—taking stock, matching projects to the organization and its resources. And again, this is not something that needs to be an established condition, that matching a project is, can also be: is this something that's going to take us someplace that we need to go? Is this going to raise the right questions and involve the right people? I think other aspects of time are... It's very important in terms of points number seven and eight under subjectivity: immediacy, so trusting decisions that seem to arise quickly, or I guess trusting gut instinct and yet knowing that that quickness needs to be sustained over a long period of time, so what is the artist or the art about? If it's about something that can be perceived quickly, how is it going to hold my attention for a year? I don't want to be bored with something by the time it's ready to go.

And then, following that, building on enthusiasm, I think it's just very, very important to feel very good and positive and encouraging at the outset, because there are going to be all sorts of unforeseen challenges, and it needs to have the impetus of a kind of faith, and you need to be able to convey that to your colleagues and other supporters, and to the artists involved at all times, that this is something that's

going to work out well.

Going back a little bit—this is a kind of messy way of thinking through something on the spot—but interpretation for self, and I counterpointed that to interpretation for visitors. So the way that you may need to enter the subject, go someplace that is new, may not be the same path that you're going to set up for a visitor to make the encounter later on, and so... and sometimes it's important to even kind of disguise the effort that you've made, and just hold that as private knowledge, because the explanation or the rationale—the interpretation that you impart later—probably needs to be incomplete anyways. A thorough justification is often a barrier for somebody else's own engagement with an artistic experience; essentially, if it was important enough for me to work at, then I would hope that part of my support for an artist is that somebody else has to work a little bit to get there too.

And so: relationship to artists. And I think I covered that a little bit already, in terms of pulling back, but just... this doesn't seem so obvious that it needs to be stated, but it's quite apparent that it's disregarded very often, from what I see, that sometimes the artist's purposes are waylaid or misconstrued, and that obviously a great deal of the work is to enter into an engagement with the artist that is not going to be overly determined by your desire to resolve it and package it for a space or a context or a pattern of presentation that you've developed as a personal style.

Maybe I'll close off with the final points of being wrong and being right, and I don't mean that they are... being wrong is not something that... it's not a comfortable position, but I think it's obviously, in some ways, kind of the... nine is the necessary allowance of one, that you need to feel that the choice that was made freely could have been incorrect, or a bad decision. Or that it was not necessarily entirely bad, but a misestimation of what might possibly have happened. And I'm realizing that there's actually a number of things that I should get to on the objective side, that I spoke about briefly last night with Jan Allen, who pointed out that there was a kind of a bright side and a cloudy side to these lists.

And... a lot of the toeing the line fell under objectivity, but I didn't quite see it that way, that... I think particularly in terms of a group, under objective numbers

three, four, and eight, that have certain interrelationships, and I think it's about the mindfulness of any kind of concentration, any sort of delving towards one set of ideas or activity, that it's always important to step back and see things in the context of what others have done, in the context of those directions that you chose not to go to, or that this very choice might seem to indicate a preference over, and then in point eight, constructive denial and defence—I don't mean a denial of what you're about, but a kind of... a denial against, of those things that are going to suck you dry, I guess. The explanations that can wait till later, and the explanations of the choices that you've made.

And I listed being right under objectivity, because I just think that that's where it belongs, and I think that the lonely righteousness is not a very productive accomplishment for a curator.

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