

Never apologize, never explain. The growing fear in contemporary art practices

Francesco Bonami. Curator of Venice Biennale 2003. Manilow Senior Curator at Large at the Contemporary Art Museum of Chicago



Starting with the foreword of uses and abuses of critics, as I've been in all fields I kind of know exactly how does it feel. I've been an artist, I've been an art critic, I am still sometimes an art critic, and I'm a curator. I know what does it mean to be a bad artist, I was a bad artist, I know what does it mean to be a bad art critic, a was a bad art critic and I know what does it mean to be a bad curator because people tell me sometimes that I'm a very bad curator. I experienced the abuses of art critics when I did the Venice Biennale in 2003. I wasn't surprised. I don't know if you've ever seen that film by Sam Peckinpah, *Wild Bunch*, a masterpiece. At the end of the film there is this scene that lasts, at least, half an hour, where there's only shooting, with any kind of weapons.

There are people shooting to each other, killing each other with these machine guns, guns, anything... And that is basically what happened with my Biennial in terms of press and critics. By the moment it opened, I was surrounded by art critics with machine guns and they started shooting and it lasted, I think, until the end. It was interesting because, for the first time, I realized that there was a complete separation between people who go to see shows and us, art critics, a complete difference between these two worlds.

People, in real world, don't care so much about what art critics say about an exhibition. Only we care. Because our jobs depend in a way of that. In reality, the normal person, the passer-by that goes into an exhibition, is not really affected if the critic likes it or not. Actually, if he hates it, people go to see the show to see why does he hate it and if he likes it a lot, they also go to see why does he like it. So, the power of the art critic in, maybe, the last ten years has diminished in terms of impact on the real world. Before, there was this filter, the art critic and the curator's roles were overlapped, they were almost the same, like Clement Greenberg and those people. So there was this filter between the production of art and the real world, were people who could understand could be the tool to explain art works. Today there is a different goal for museums to reach over people, so we don't lean on the museums, we don't lean anymore on the word of the art critic.

When I did the Venice Biennale it was interesting because, (and it sounds very arrogant on my behalf) even now that they really understood what I did, they keep analyzing the biennial as one exhibition, they keep criticizing it as one single thing, instead of eleven exhibitions, really autonomous exhibitions, where each curator did what he really wanted to do in his own section and I didn't interfere in the selection of artists or the display of art works. All critics said that the biennial was the most horrible biennial ever produced on the face of the earth. And then, as they went into the biennial and they said that some show was a very nice show, *Utopia Station* was a very nice show, Carlos Bozardo's was a very nice show, Hou Hanru's was a very nice show..., but the biennial was disgusting. These two things were not going together, they were seeing one thing and then analyzing its parts. It's like saying that a person is really ugly but has a beautiful face, fantastic legs, beautiful eyes, astounding hair... but it's still an ugly person. It doesn't make any sense. But it was really a psychological thing; people were overwhelmed by the structure that was imposed in the biennial. It was not anymore one thing, but different things. So, they really refused to understand it was a different kind of exhibition. I don't think that biennials of that size, like Venice biennial, are really an exhibition, they are the container of different things. If you try to transform it into an exhibition, I think you'll fail miserably.

So, those were the abuses of art critics. The abuses were, in fact, that they refused to understand it. A lot of colleagues were particularly upset by the subtitle "The dictatorship of the viewer", they felt deprived of their role. The

fact that the viewer could be in charge of his own experience was something extremely disturbing for some art critics. In certain cases, they even compared me to Hitler (I don't know why), but they had this kind of anger towards this title. The problem was that, while normal people experienced it in a normal way, the people in the biennial were very upset by the press, and they realized, at that point, (and it brings me to the title in the program) that we live in a society of consensus. We work, not to achieve consensus, but to build and create things that are precooked in consensus. We live in fear, and I see it as a disturbing attitude, particularly with younger colleagues of mine, who proceed in their practice, in their work and I think in their careers, with this constant fear to do the wrong thing. And the more they fear to do the wrong thing, I think the more they do it, in the sense they don't do anything new. The more they want to be in sync with the tastes and the consensus of the system, which is the system of the art world mostly, the more they get out of sync. The more they try to get the right artist, the more they get the wrong artist, in the sense that the artist is already boiled. And today's artists are boiled very soon, very fast, because the pressure to produce the right work of art, the right exhibition is very strong. There is not more sense of art laboratory, of risk taking, everybody is behaving like Tate Modern or Guggenheim or MoMA, in the US but also in Europe, most of them start with fear, they don't start as an experiment. Museums forgot that in 1929, a Museum of Modern Art, was an absolute challenge. Alfred Barr invented something that didn't exist. Now, we don't invent anything any longer, we try to reproduce something that already exists, with the same method, the same structure, we don't try something new. I'm not criticizing it, it's understandable, the pressure is immense. When you do an exhibition, and this happens too in Italy but particularly in Europe, if you don't have already ten or fifteen articles appearing in newspapers and magazines before the exhibition, the people who gave you the money get extremely nervous. So the idea is to go always in the same direction. And if the fact of wanting to be popular is partially understandable on the side of politicians and administrators, it is not understandable to me for younger curators that work today. But I hear very often when I talk to them, because they have better ideas than mine and I try to steal them, they ask me "What do you think about a show with such and such artist? Where will this artist be in ten years?". To me, it's an absurd question because you already block yourself into the future, you transform the future into the past, if you take what will happen in ten years, you're already in the past.

You cannot live like that. You live in fear, but more and more often people are really concerned about that. They don't look what they have in front of their eyes, but they try to imagine what they will have in front of them in a period of time. And they don't fear to make a mistake now, they fear that in ten year's time, someone will say, "Look at him, he was an idiot ten years ago", which of course is an extreme, I'm taking it to an extreme example, but is a little bit what happens. The fear is affecting everything. In museums there is a "name's dropping syndrome". Museums want to have the "blockbuster", they don't understand that a blockbuster with a famous name is a disastrous event for a museum. To give an example, I was looking at the attendance to the Museum in Chicago in the last year, two years ago...one museum had a two per cent more, another had a five per cent more...and then I looked at the Mexican Museum in Chicago, which had a drop of 35% in the attendance and I was curious to know what happened there. So, I looked at it and in fact, it didn't have any drop, the attendance was the same than two years before but, in between, they had a Frida Kahlo show that raised the attendance to a 35%. From that moment on, the comparison was not made with the average attendance in ten years, but with that year's Frida Kahlo's show. So it will take years before the museum recovers this 35%, if he does, and all these years will be seen as a failure, as a disaster. So museums always want to have a blockbuster, which costs a lot of money, and they don't understand that it's rarely recovered by the income that those shows produce, and also that they unbalance completely the life of a museum. Only few can hit a certain amount of people, like the Tate Modern, the Guggenheim, the MoMA... but all the other museums live in the balance of the ecosystem of museums. But people live in fear and they are pressed to do something like a blockbuster appeal, they want to see the line outside the museum. And if they don't see it, they are very sad. And this fear is also attacking collectors.

Twenty years ago, collectors were those people who wanted to buy something before somebody else did, at a cheaper price than anybody else, make an investment and be smarter. Now there is a seems that collectors like to be stupid, that they really enjoy being idiots. Take, for instance, a photograph of Andreas Gursky, I think is an edition of five, costed 250 dollars each when they were first put on the market. After two months, people bought them and put them on an auction where were bought for 500.000 dollars. So, you think, that's it, it won't happen anymore. But one or two years later, another picture, the same, not exactly the same but another edition, gets into the market: 900.000 dollars. And, if you talk to these people, they are very proud to be the one who paid the most for an Andreas Gursky. They are really excited to be the record. And this kind of cases make me think that, either I'm wrong or, and I think I probably am, or the values of stupidity and intelligence are completely mixed up and it's impossible to define who is intelligent and who is not. All this is due to fear. Collectors fear to go for the wrong thing, buy the wrong artist, not to be in the line of what will be important in ten years. An if this system keeps feeding it, and that's the reason why galleries and art market is really "booming" (which is good, I don't want to be misunderstood, because it's sustaining it, I'm not against art market), the most interesting phenomenon is that auctions are exploding, as tools of speculation. The speculative attitude of people has increased and auctions proliferate because these people, as I said, don't want to

buy this pair of glasses at ten dollars, they feel safer if they pay a thousand dollars. There is a value added to this pair of glasses that make them feel safe.

So, I realized that there's a lot of insecurity and I think that, particularly contemporary art, cannot develop with insecurity. And I think that's why there is an explosion of small figurative art, it is fulfilling insecurity. And if this phenomenon is not reversed, I think we are in a very regressive conservative mood where things could be very dangerous, very autodestructive. Of course, there would be shows and everything, but they would be less and less interesting. That's why I (and again it may sound arrogant) but I was very proud of the biennial I put together because it was a self destructive event, but in a positive way, self destructing according to this kind of parameters, about fear. But, maybe irrationally, I didn't have any fear, never experienced any sense of fear. I remember the president of the biennial called me two days after the show was opened. He was very supportive to me until the day before the biennial opened, but the he started reading the article and he said "If, apart from this, we don't have attendance, you're finished, your career is destroyed". And even then, maybe again unconsciously, irrationally, I didn't have any fear, I knew he was saying something totally absurd, not only because I think, as I said all the time, that careers in art world are always written in pencil (nobody knows who is the eraser, but there exists an eraser somewhere and at one point everyone is going to be erased from the list, very few people will survive and be written in ink) so I wasn't scared by the statement of the president of the biennial, but I realized he was in total fear, that he believed totally in the power of words and not the power of facts. But because I was convinced of what I did, I didn't feel any pressure. Don't misunderstand me, I wasn't happy that people was trashing the biennial, I would have liked them to talk well about it but I wasn't intimidated by it.

People misunderstood the power of words. Words are opinions. It's very rare that an opinion about a work of art is scientifically proved. But today it seems that art curators, collectors and museum directors are looking desperately for the scientific proof of what they are doing is right and not wrong. And art is not a scientific practice, thanks God. It would be horrible if we knew exactly how to build an exhibition, how to create a work of art. Art is a game ball, a challenge, an experience. As the director of Macba said in the interview you had today in the newspaper, very nicely, art is playing, is not a game, it doesn't have rules like a game but it's like playing. It means you're inventing different rules all the time. In Latin "jugar" has the same meaning, but in English "game" and "play", as he explained in the interview, I'm quoting him, are two different things. Art doesn't have rules and that's why art is interesting. The history of art is a fiction. There is a private history of art, the one each of us build inside our head and our spirit, the encounter that we do. We can go to El Prado, to the Venice Biennale and then we build an unlinear history of art. If we would follow the fictional history of art, before you get to the contemporary art, you're dead, as you have to start from the cave paintings, then go to Egypt and Mesopotamia... it takes a lot of years before you get to the Pompidou. Fortunately, you can do whatever you want, because art is playing, it is not a game, it doesn't have any rules. To see young curators and critics go by the book and follow so much the rules, obsessed by the coverage on the press, is sad and disturbing. When you are young, you have to be hungry, curious, irrational. But if you're young are you're already rational, already on a diet, not open to take risks and to make mistakes, I think it's a sad situation. It brings me to the last show I co-curated last week in Turin, a new triennial that the city of Turin invented, they wanted to do a triennial, everyone wants to do it...(of course, there is this question, ¿why all these triennials?). But as I always said, triennials are like the atomic bomb, the United States say, "Oh, you cannot do the atomic bomb", well, "Why not?". There is no reason why someone cannot create the atomic bomb, as there is no reason why someone could not create a biennial, there's no copyright, and they are tools to experience art, as well as triennials. The question about triennials is that it isn't made by the people of the city where the triennial is happening, it is created by the art system. Us, creating curators, we feel overwhelmed by the number of biennials, we cannot go to see them all, we don't have the money to, so we would like that no one did biennials anymore. But, well, it's a preposterous desire.

Well, I went off the track. We curated this triennial in Torino, as the city wanted it, together with the three museums the Fondazione Sandretto, where I'm the artistic director, the Castello di Rivoli and the GAM, the Galleria de Arte Moderna in Turin, and we also used all these spaces. I'll talk about this show because the title was the *Pantagruel Syndrome*. And *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is this famous book that nobody has really read (like a lot of famous books nobody reads, but we know them). It is a book by François Rabelais, a French writer of the end of 15th century, beginning of 16th century. The two characters, Gargantua and Pantagruel, have this kind of enormous appetite. In our society, art world has an enormous appetite. Biennials are pantagruelic, my biennial was in fact a really huge pantagruelic enterprise. We called the show *Pantagruel Syndrome* and there are only 75 artists, with two one-person show, with mid-career artists, because we thought that maybe we should impose some kind of diets to these kind of exhibitions, in a society that is constantly overwhelmed by images, things, objects, consumes, information, news...Also because Rabelais was bridging Middle Age and Renaissance, he was bridging the collective society of Middle Ages with the individualistic society of Renaissance. And today, I think we live a combination of new Middle Age and a collapsing Renaissance, or the negative part of it. We live everything collectively, we are obsessed by the press, we're totally

manipulated by television. In Italy, if you don't participate in a TV program, you don't exist. Society is divided into people who watch television, who don't exist, and people who are in television, there's nothing in between. So, we live this collective nightmare and, at the same time, are very individualistic, very obsessed with our person, our body, our identity, we change our identity, we are totally self-referential all the time. So we are this combination of Middle Age and Renaissance and that's why Rabelais was chosen. And this same combination brings back to the growing fear: we want to have our identity but we also have this insane desire that our identity is accepted and shared by the collective world. We don't seem to have an inner world any longer, and the inner world is the one made of doubts, mistakes, risk, dreams, conflicts...Outside, dreams disappeared, conflicts survived, mistakes are considered huge crimes and people don't take risks any longer, or only very few do. So, I don't have a recipe (besides reducing the number of exhibitions) to face this fear, because when I talk to my younger colleagues, they look at me as if I was stupid, they don't listen, they really don't listen, don't want to take a chance, only want the right thing, they want to do the right show. They calculate everything and want to transform the curatorial practice into a scientific practice. A don't have a recipe to change this trend. I think that, if it doesn't change by itself, we are going to see more and more a very boring contemporary art world, very boring exhibitions, museums that basically mirror each other in their collections, having the same thing, and we will know if we are in a German or an American museum depending of the smell of the museum café. Architecture is also unifying, so everybody wants to have their own Frank Gehry or their own Richard Meyers. If we think that the project of the Centre Pompidou was given to two young architects as Renzo Piano and Richard Rodgers, is amazing, and it was only thirty years ago, not so long ago. They took the chance to give the commission of the museum to young people. And today is an icon. Nowadays, that's not longer possible. People go already to a famous architect, they don't want to take a change or have a look at anything, they want a name, the market value, the museum has to be signed, which is contradicting the power of innovation. I think that's the situation today. I'll finish here and if you have any question, we could talk about it because, I understand I wasn't adding a thesis or an antithesis, or a synthesis of what I'm saying, and I don't have any answer to my own questions. But because that's the state of my mind and I think it allows me, in spite of my white hair and my fifty years of age, to be curious and hungry, with doubts. I don't say I don't have any fear, but fear is under control and not related to my profession. I think the only suggestion that I can give to people who will work in this field, and again, I'll borrow from the owner of Macintosh computers, Steve Jobs, is the suggestion "Stay curious and stay hungry". Thank you.

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