

## **The new art of being amateur: Distance as participation**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the recent surge and interest in what may be described as ‘amateur’ art, relating it to other amateur practices in different fields. These works would not fit into a narrative of relational aesthetics; rather, they appear closer to a *Ranciorean* act of archive excavation into forms of expression that fall outside professional realms. The text interrogates how they stand in relation to the flow of ‘official’ culture by an exploration of the themes of participation and equality. The amateur works at a professional level yet could be even more effective in terms of productivity and innovation, not by appropriating the professional space but precisely by distancing his or her work from it. This key notion of a ‘distance’ is discussed with reference to Boris Groys’ writings about the equality of images under their factual inequality, in order to establish how amateur practices confirm the territorial differences between different spheres of production yet could engage and potentially disrupt the hierarchy of values that sustain those spheres.

### **Keywords**

amateurism

equality

distance

Groys

‘Exhibition #1’ of The Museum of Everything – the first of a series of events and expanding projects – opened near Regent’s Park Road in London in October 2009, as one of the off-sites events related to ‘Frieze’ Art Fair; as the press put it, it promised to provide all the fun, without the fair. Crowned by *Time Out London* as the Best Event of that year, the display of this collection dedicated to the work of untrained individuals, socially marginalized and physiologically fragile artists was almost hidden from the fashionable streets of Primrose Hill, installed in the rooms of a rambling and atmospheric former dairy that had been used later as a recording studio. Visitors not familiar with the area had enormous trouble finding the place since it cannot be seen from the street and does not have a clear address; the confusion was aggravated by the fact the exhibition was meant to last up until Christmas, then was extended and re-extended, then was officially closed and yet, the museum could still be visited. Even weeks after the actual closure of the event it was possible to find people wandering around Bridge Approach in front of Chalk Farm tube station, asking locals about the exact place or opening times of The Museum of Everything, as if they were dealing with an almost metaphysical enquiry.

As it appears in The Museum of Everything’s website, the three exhibitions or events and the publications that have been loosely based around this collection aim to showcase and celebrate the creativity of those working outside the realm of professional art making, and also to ‘reconsider the role of the museum, what we preserve and what we leave out, unveiling the cracks plaguing the dominant art historical narrative’ (The Museum of Everything, 2010). Evidently this reconsideration of the museum’s function has been central to contemporary art for

almost a century; additionally, a substantial dimension of what we now call Museum Studies has been devoted to unveil the institutional politics of cultural preservation and transmission; and in the broader context of cultural theory, sociology, anthropology and political economy, the discussion of the creation and the destruction of value – tightly linked to that of the decisions about what we preserve and what we leave out of history – has enjoyed undisputed centrality. However, the critical aspect of this article is to discuss how this renewed interest in amateur art – an interest that has adopted different forms during the last few decades and that in its current fashion could be illustrated with a number of varied examples, like The Museum of Everything amongst many others – could also be bounded with the debate about amateur practices more generally and forms of self-organization and self-production, all of which create a particular frame to address issues of participation and equality within cultural production.

### **Horizontality and production**

Some of the artists exhibiting at that original exhibition of The Museum of Everything – arguably the one that expresses more directly the aim of showcasing the extraordinariness and creativity of those working outside the circuit of professional art making – are familiar names: Nek Chand, the road inspector that secretly made over 2000 human figures from cement and found materials, which can now be visited in a public park in India; the reclusive Chicago hospital porter Henry Darger, who spent his time creating hundreds of narrative paintings, including huge panoramic collages, to illustrate his epic written fantasy about seven childhood sisters called the Vivian

Girls (Darger is now one of the most highly prized amateurs but his work was only discovered, piled high in his rented room, after his death in 1973). Most of the art shown in 'Exhibition #1' was never intended for any form of public viewing or display and was rather private. Indeed, all the incredible positive and supportive press reviews of this first event kept referring to the same boundary articulation – using word games such as these 'outsiders' are the truly 'insiders' – and to the fact that this kind of work supposedly offers an intensity, dedication and originality that professional art is not able to have. 'Exhibition #4', held during September 2011 at Selfridges department store in Central London but announced much earlier, maintained the same proposition of privacy and marginality: 'Hidden from view around our world, humble pockets of creativity bustle, dynamic studios where self-taught artists discover, form and make' (The Museum of Everything, 2010).

All the exhibitions organized by The Museum of Everything – including the current fifth one, at the Garage Center for Contemporary Arts in Moscow, which features known and recently discovered self-taught Russian artists – continue to use the same unpolished, almost childish aesthetic that has now become its trademark: clumsy cardboard signs with hand written words to advertise their events, appealing non-professional environments that totally distance themselves from the cultured, cool yet, over-designed setting of the contemporary art gallery. This aesthetic contributes to position The Museum of Everything within the wider discussion of participation, audiences, self-reliance and, more broadly, who is the real or utopian receiver of art, who can reclaim art for his or herself, what is the territory of art and to what extent this is an autonomy space. For 'Exhibition #2', for instance, held at Tate

Modern during May 2010, The Museum asked in its website for ‘the unintentional, unseen, un-exhibited and unknown artists of Greater Britain to bring their work for us to display in the greatest museum in the land’ (The Museum of Everything, 2010). A Board of Trustees chose 200 works (including, for instance, the artwork of a call-centre worker, or a vast cloth charting the medical history of its amateur author) that were displayed to the public and documented in one of the substantial catalogues that the institution produces with each exhibition. This particular catalogue plays with a format that is now very familiar to contemporary art, media and advertisement, the kind of apparent unmediated display of people’s experiences or, in this case, artworks that play with the illusion of immediacy. Similar to Gillian Wearing’s well-known project ‘Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say’ – for which she approached people on the streets of London, asking them to write something down and then photographing the people displaying what they wrote on a sign – for this catalogue each amateur artist is pictured holding his or her art piece, while a small caption tells the viewer or reader who was the author, his or her age and a very small statement about the work, usually enlightened by everyday experiences and circumstances rather than by theoretical references or art historical links.

Some time after this show, ‘Exhibition #3’ proved to be the most popular of all the previous events, attracting over 50,000 visitors and receiving great attention and positive reviews from the press. This time The Museum of Everything reinvented itself by teaming up with British pop artist Sir Peter Blake and, particularly, with his appealing collection of self-taught art, found objects and anonymous artefacts. Styled

up as a variety show or circus-inspired event, the display maintained its popular and folk art approach even though it has been notoriously professionalized in terms of marketing strategies and staff; the entrance continued to be free but donations were welcomed and indeed encouraged. One of the main attractions of this exhibition was the work of Walter Potter, a Victorian taxidermist noted for his anthropomorphic dioramas featuring stuffed animals mimicking human life, which he displayed at his museum in Bramber, Sussex (his collection was moved around and finally dispersed in 2003).

The amateur theme continued, and so did the emphasis on the raw talent of these artists who circulate in the margins of regular art circuits. Yet Potter, for instance, did own a museum to display his work; a number of the artists that form part of James Brett's (The Museum of Everything founder) collection have exhibited in places as established as the MoMA or the Irish Museum of Modern Art (indeed a few of them do very well in the art market); and some of the contributors to the different phases of The Museum of Everything are easily recognizable insiders such as the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, the artist Paul Chan or the Whitechapel Gallery Director Iwona Blazwick. But, as happens with the discourse attached to outsider art – theorized by Jean Duffubet himself in France and Roger Cardinal in England (who indeed coined the term 'outsider art' in 1972) – The Museum of Everything emphasizes a gap, a distance that, yet fictional, separates itself from 'regular' art, even if this distance is only a figure of thought or a rhetoric tool.

It is this emphasis on the problem of distance that I find quite timely – even though it might not be part of The Museum of Everything or other amateur endeavors

agenda. I find it timely now, particularly when discussions related to participation in art have shifted from the realm of interaction and relational aesthetics to a debate about spectatorship that, if we follow Jacques Rancière's argument in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) is constructed around a distance wrongly conceived as the separation between acting and observing, doing and looking; in this vein, a society of artists is that in which there is not any difference between those who know and those who don't know, or a society of 'translators' (Rancière uses this term) in which some do and others transform that doing by receiving it with intelligence – a quality of everyone and not the privilege of few – and humanity. It is also timely now that other disciplines such as sociology and political economy have turned their attention towards amateur practices, signaling a new moment in which the amateur works at a professional level yet is even more effective in terms of productivity and innovation, not by appropriating the professional space for him or herself but precisely by distancing his or her work from it. Distance is, precisely, what I would like to bring to the discussion of the practices of the amateur as another dimension within the wider discussion of social aesthetics, participation and the autonomous (or not) realm of art.

### **The art club**

Utopias of a tactile resistance and a poetic dimension of the everyday are usually attached to the presentation of the work of amateur or self-taught artists. The show 'Enthusiasm' (held in various locations around Europe with different exhibition strategies), for instance, featuring a selection of films produced under the roof of Poland's amateur film movement from the 1950s to the mid 1980s when even leisure

was organized through numerous factory-sponsored clubs (and indeed both the equipment and the space was provided through the workplace), presented itself as the embodiment of the intimate experiences of Polish workers, the stories forgotten or never told in official Socialist records. Neil Cummings and Maritza Lewandowska, the artists in charge of the research and the set up of the different exhibitions, describe in their website and on-line archive Chance Projects (dedicated to their many different endeavors) that these are not 'standard "amateur" films of family landmarks such as births, weddings and holidays, but they are a real aspiration to cinema' (Cummings and Lewandowska, 1995–2008). In between them, it is possible to find animations, political satires, abstract films, documentaries on families, villages, cities or factory life, comedies and historical dramas.

The authors express that they wanted to construct a social, material and conceptual context in which the films could be situated, such as, for instance, the reconstruction of a fictional film club, which was their first exhibition strategy presented in London at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2006. They narrate how the clubs they encountered during their research trips were usually stuffed with framed photographs, printed film stills, posters, certificates, medals, prizes and trophies from film festivals, cupboards stacked with unwanted film reels and video cassettes, redundant projectors, old cameras and recording equipment, film editing desks and chemicals, homemade developing tanks and film dryers, tea and coffee making equipment, a fridge, a coat-stand, odd chairs, salvaged furniture, junk and even rubbish. Cummings and Lewandowska did a selection and grouped the films in three themes rather than genres: Love, Longing and Labour, which worked as the subtitle of



the London exhibition. As they describe these choices, they did not want to conform to the standard projection of films in galleries onto a wall; they wanted to complement the film-makers' own cinematic aspirations, they say, pointing to the lively viewing experiences of the film clubs as opposed to the cold and disengaged screenings of most commercial and institutional spaces.

'Enthusiasm' differs enormously from one exhibition space and strategy to another one; the one set up in Warsaw, for instance, seemed to have been able to engage more critically in wider discussions about the relation between the amateur film-makers, the state and the factory, than the one in London, and was accompanied by events including the participation of some of the film-makers themselves (in fact the slight change of the title tells a lot about the change of emphasis: the Polish exhibition was entitled 'Enthusiasts', the London one used the noun 'Enthusiasm'). That the Polish film clubs managed to provide a space for the workers to gain control over the means of production remains a contested statement; yet it is interesting to note how this project proposes something that The Museum of Everything avoids in its presentation: it positions amateur work, explicitly, in relation to something, in this case, the factory. As Tom Roberts notes in one of the reviews of the London exhibition:

... amateur work, however 'personal' in its pursuit of curiosity, always exists in a relation – of aspiration, antagonism, or both – to the structures that govern the conferrance of legitimacy on practices: the school, the workplace, informal systems of judgment, the art institution, the state. (2005)

It is, therefore, the manifestation of (again) a distance, a separation but also an engagement with this distant relationship what makes something to be amateur (even though most of the times the opposite is said: if we follow the tradition of Duffubet's outsider art, for instance, we will find the claim that amateur artists are those cut off or disengaged from tradition, stressing the fact that they work in total isolation rather than in relation to any kind of sphere or professional body).

From a slightly different perspective, there has been a fresh and growing interest in amateurism as form of cultural production closely tied to innovation and to a creative use of technology; indeed the availability of technologies for the wider audience of art has been one of the key aspects of the development of amateur practices. In the catalogue of the exhibition 'Amateurs' (2008), for instance, John Roberts links this discussion to the issue of the audience and so conceives amateurs as members of the public who, even lacking the official recognition of their skills, are able to 'produce culture on their own name (2008:16):

The contemporary use and adaptation of the amateur, therefore, are derived from two related sources in this respect: the incorporation into art, from the 1920s, of the 'under professionalized' technologies of photography and film, and the transformation (after the Russian Revolution) of the amateur into the 'non-artist artists' – the amateur as non-professional *coparticipant* with the professional. In this light, we might say that the amateur-as-producer or 'non-artists artist' – as ego ideal and fantasy figure – is one of the determining and recurring forces in art after the avant-garde irruptions of the 1920s and 1930s.

With the dispersal, retardation, and, later, re-inscription of the original avant-gardes in European and American art, the amateur became sometimes an implicit and sometimes an explicit point of identification with the post-revolutionary moment of the amateur-as-producer's democratic incorporation into culture. (Roberts 2008: 18)

The more contemporary realm of amateurs (or at least the attention directed towards them, since amateur practices have existed as a distinctive 'Other' for as long as the professionals have been around) goes way beyond the art world and they seem to be more active than ever as co-participants in the production of culture. They play a determinant and structuring role, for instance, in Antoine Hennion's sociology of taste, in which amateurs have reflective capacities alien to the certified rigors of the professionals; in his view, amateurs actively participate in the production of that which she or he likes by constantly 'performing' and testing their taste through a series of technical, social and aesthetic experimentations, and therefore corrode other frameworks that explore the nuances of taste (notoriously Bourdieu's concept of *distinctions*, the primary target of Hennion's critique). In contemporary discussions, the amateur also dismantles the distinction between work and leisure (which is, indeed, a very important proposition of 'Enthusiasm'), and also sets up a new distribution of organizational models that does not conform to hierarchical models of production. Provisionally, this might be called a horizontal model of production: amateurs work at a professional standard yet they are set apart, at a distance. A further

exploration of this horizontal position would allow a discussion of the proposition of equality that, in a very concealed and contingent state, might reside in the participative yet fictional efforts of projects such as The Museum of Everything.

### **Equality and aesthetics**

Projects such as 'Enthusiasm' rapidly reminds us of another aspect of Rancière's writings, that of the patient excavator of workers archives, even though in the philosopher's case, that excavation takes the form of a documenting and recounting of the voice of early nineteenth-century factory labourers (in other words, it is still more attached to an act of mediation or storytelling that it is also present in 'Enthusiasm' but with a less visible presence; we could say that Rancière 'translates and interprets', whereas 'Enthusiasm' and The Museum of Everything 'show', even though this apparent immediacy only works through the fictional space of the imaginary art club or museum). As Rancière does in *The Nights of Labour* (1989), 'Enthusiasm' overturns some assumptions regarding workers lives by exposing their night thoughts, fantasies, desires and longings, their *ocio* (a category that in itself is reclaimed from the bourgeoisie) and its (supposedly) emancipatory aspects, both the potential and the real possibility of living another life and dismantling the separation between those who did manual labour and those dedicated to intellectual work or, indeed, the time of the night and the time of production. Alongside the project's proposition that these film clubs worked following an inverted logic of work and leisure – in terms of the workers being productive only when working in their hobbies, even though their free time was also regulated by the State (but reclaimed for

themselves would be the authors' argument), it also portrays a profound level of self-awareness in the form of a reflection, criticism or celebration of the conditions in which these films were made – alluding to the technology being used, the collaborative nature of the processes of acting, scripting, directing and editing, the spaces created for viewing and sharing the films – with an audience in mind (with would be an important difference with outsider art and its assumption that the creators work with no awareness whatsoever of the viewer or indeed the outside – or inside – world).

A slightly more distant reference could be found in the work of the artist Jeremy Deller, who, indeed, has created a significant body of work based on folk art following the similar logic or, more accurately, the fiction of all inclusiveness that lies at the heart of The Museum of Everything, particularly in his project 'The Uses of Literacy'. Again, Deller makes use of a text dedicated to the study of leisure spaces within the working class – Richard Hoggarth's book entitled precisely *The Uses of Literacy*(1957), one of the founding narratives of the traditional canon of British Cultural Studies – in order to tear apart the assumed opposition between two polar forces: the fan and the band, the spectator and the creator. Unlike Hoggarth, who was actively involved in the adults' education movement in England and thought that the literacy hardly fought for was being wasted in the hands of an Americanized mass culture and music, Deller explores the lively aspects of the fan aesthetics by curating an exhibition dedicated to artworks produced by hardcore fans of the Welsh band Manic Street Preachers – an ensemble of poems, photos, customized book covers and

other ephemera that form part of teenager bedroom culture. The music of the group is never mentioned or played.

It would be possible to place this type of work within the framework of *postproduction*, the term coined by the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud (2000) to describe how art – in his view – has become a space for social experiments in which artists do not create from raw materials but ask what possible relations they can still generate with the world from the ones that already exist (and in fact Neil Cummins and Marysia Lewandowska did a version of ‘Enthusiasm’ for ‘Manifesta 7’ in 2008 entitled, precisely ‘Postproduction’). In this argument – efficiently contested by authors such as Claire Bishop (2004) – the main feature of artworks is not their quality as finished products, but their capacity to function as links and encounters, through which meaning is created collectively. But to limit Deller’s work to the narrative of appropriation – which provides the matrix of Bourriaud’s concept of *postproduction* – would miss its proposition regarding a ‘principle of equality’, which is also present in projects such as ‘Enthusiasm’ and enables an engaged dialogue between amateur practices and other social spheres. Given that Bourriaud’s privileged model to refer to the art world is the flea market – as a space where dissimilar things come together, waiting to be invested with a new value or given a new use, it might be argued that the author’s framework also proposes the equality of artefacts (artistic or not), yet there is a big distance between his logic of equivalence, which is based on reference and therefore cancels difference, and a conception of equality, which incorporates difference through the manifestation of a gap.

The discussion of this ‘principle of equality’ is key to understand the renewed importance of amateur practices in the current context, and why they are so crucial to address contemporary debates about participation and social aesthetics (it also explains the link that I have been trying to make between these amateur works and the writings of Jacques Rancière). I would attempt to discuss it further by referring to a slightly different formulation of the same principle, which, indeed, would bring us back to the realm of the museum (of Everything or of a different kind).

### **Disruptive innovation**

In his essays ‘The Logic of Equality’ and ‘The logic of equal aesthetic rights’, The Russian art historian Boris Groys (2006, 2008) describes how the functioning of the art system is based on rules of inclusion and exclusion (again, the inside/outside polarity) reflecting not autonomous aesthetic values but rather social conventions and larger power structures. Groys’ argues that this lack of any immanent or purely aesthetic value is precisely what guarantees the autonomy of art. In other words, this autonomy of art depends in the abolition of any hierarchy of taste and the determination of equal aesthetic rights for all artworks; every value judgment is therefore an intrusion into this equality by external factors or powers. Groys would say that this is the precondition of any aesthetic, social or political engagement with art; this very separation – taking the form of an intrusion inside the regime of equality – is needed to unfold processes of engagement:

Only under the presupposition of the equality of all visual forms and media on the aesthetic level is it possible to resist the factual inequality between the images – as imposed from the outside, and reflecting cultural, social, political or economical inequalities. (2008: 14)

In the author's view, good art is art that affirms the equality of all images 'under the conditions of their factual inequality' (Groys 2008: 15) and, furthermore, the art world is the very 'socially codified manifestation of the fundamental equality between all visual forms, objects and media' (Groys 2008: 13); rules of exclusion and inclusion within this arena only mirror larger power structures being played within society at large. Because The Museum of Everything is fictionally based on this distinction between inside and outside, and because amateur practices in general confirm these territorial differences, their affirmation of the equality of images under their factual inequality, would entail not the negation or indifference towards a canon or tradition but rather a critique of the given hierarchy of values that sustain that tradition, a process of both distancing itself and an instance of recognition.

Only under this assumption of the fundamental aesthetic equality of all artworks can every value judgement, every exclusion or inclusion, be potentially recognized as a result of a heteronomous intrusion into the autonomous sphere of art – as the effect of pressure exercised by external forces and powers. And it is this recognition that opens up the possibility of resistance in the name of art's autonomy, that is, in the equality of all art forms and media (Groys 2008: 14).



Groy's theoretical framework works very similarly to the one he uses when discussing the museum, which may be useful for thinking about something like The Museum of Everything (and at the end Jame Brett's, its founder, chose to call a museum rather than a simply a collection, and all the different events are framed within this museum umbrella even when they are very distant from it, like the works presented for the second exhibition). Arguing against the tradition of museum and library condemnation, and against the idea that we need to incorporate real 'life' to the 'dead' space of the museum (an ideal that has permeated some discussion regarding social aesthetics), Groys states that the museum is not secondary to reality but rather works as an agent that introduces a difference in order to determine what is the real and so being able to engage with it; it is the producer of art as such. We do not need the museum normative role anymore and the call to transgress its boundaries have become so commonplace that we might not even need to affirm them over and over again. But we might still need a wall, even fictional – this distancing that I have been talking about – to recognize the intrusions in the so called equality of images (and indeed, in Groys' argument the fact that the provision of equal images is endless is that which guarantees the possibility of generating new structures of power, new hierarchies of signs).

The production of the new is merely a result of the shifting of the boundaries between collected items and non-collected items, the profane objects outside the collection, which is primarily a physical, material operation: some objects are brought into the museum system and land, let us say, in the garbage. Such shifting produces again and again the effect of newness, openness, infinity,

using signifiers that make art objects look different from those of the musealized past and identical with mere things and popular cultural images circulating in the space outside the museum (Groys 2008: 34).

This argument about newness is particularly pertinent if we pay attention to the role of wider amateur practices, since the production of the new is, quite literally, increasingly occurring in the realm of amateurism (amateurs have invented Linux and the game *Sims*, to name just two of the endless examples of the very productive and innovative outcome of their practices; other areas of amateur innovation include astronomy, gardening, acting and playing sport with virtually the same demands and standards as professionals do). According to the professional amateurs or ‘Pro-Am’ research document prepared by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller (2004) of the Thinktank ‘Demos’, the twenty-first century is being actively shaped by their practices, creating new models of production that are essentially adaptive and low cost. Amateurs are disruptive innovators, the study claims, they create innovation by given new uses to things and, in doing so, they engage with democratic values now that the more traditional political spheres have lost some of their currency; they are, so to speak, consumers who produce (again, a very Bourriaud type of argument anyway).

It is not clear how these Pro-Am activities would posit themselves in a parallel sphere, different from standard practices; if anything, they seem to contribute and reproduce the larger power structures and hierarchical positions embraced by their professional relatives, even more so now that they seem to exist in direct dialogue and

exchange with their non amateurs peers. Their problematic position might reside in the fact that they are ceasing to exist as a distance, as if this cancellation was, paradoxically, that which undermines their potential for participation and engagement. In the same way, and coming back to Groys' argument, if the museum (of Everything or other) is the place to find a form of horizontal equality of objects, images and media, equally in between them but non-equal to what lies outside, it would have to remain separated by wider rules of inclusion and exclusion. The same could be argued in relation to amateur art: in order to assert the equality of works, or, indeed, the equality of intelligences if we borrow Rancière's argument in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991), which he then retraces in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009): it is necessary to engage with tradition rather than to ignore it (as is usually implied in discussions of this 'raw' art, non-attentive to history and professional strategies), but to actively position itself as being amateur in relation to something else. The Museum of Everything is not able, in my view, to provide an alternative viewing experience or to generate an independent circuit for art to circulate. Yet, that failure and the somehow naïve discourses attached to it actualize this notion of distant viewing and bring it to the surface – a distance or separation between the museum and art produced outside the museum, between the adoring fan and the band that he or she is devoted to, between a conformist idea of participation and more meaningful instances of contemplation and engagement.

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