

Critical on the Inside

Produced at Point Éphémère, Paris in June 2007 as part of a workshop with the Curating Degree Zero Archive

Everything is political. All art is political. Even art about flowers. And the familiar white box, which feigns purity, is just as loaded as anything else.

As a means of cultural production, curating is in a privileged position of power and influence. This power can be used to maintain a status quo, or to challenge it. The trick, however, is to be able to challenge that power structure without relinquishing power yourself. So how can we sustain criticality and dissent without being estranged or put in a position of direct opposition? How can curatorial practice resist maintaining hegemony without being marginalized?

This conundrum is one acutely relevant to a younger generation who, having witnessed our parents' sweet but fairly futile attempts at grassroots activism, must learn to operate from inside the structure, rather than from outside it. How does one curate within the system but resist being swallowed up by it? The solution to what I call 'critical curating from the inside' is a contradiction in terms since it asks the curator to straddle a dichotomy – to be antagonistic to the politics that govern our lives, while being complicit with them.

Such a contradictory methodology can best be illustrated by examples rather than spelled out in words. One simple example: An exhibition wanting to illustrate the traumas of war, might manifest as a show about "hot young artists from the Middle East." A feminist curator, rather than making a show on women's art, might organize a project on something completely unrelated, but put female artists on par with male ones.

To be effective in the mainstream, such shows must appeal to large audiences. They should retain a bit of mystery, and promise enlightenment and fun – a bit like the fortune teller game on the back of this page. Sneaking this text in with the game is a gesture towards just such a strategy of infiltration.

-Chen Tamir