

An Expanded Eye



Jacqueline Burckhardt and Bice Curiger with forty-nine copies of *Parkett*, Zurich, 1997. Photo: Daniel Schmid. From Jacqueline Burckhardt, *La mia commedia dell'arte*. Courtesy Jacqueline Burckhardt and Edition Patrick Frey

Notes and reflections inspired by Dora Imhof's *Cis for Curator: Bice Curiger – A Life in Art* and Jacqueline Burckhardt's *La mia commedia dell'arte*

By Daniel Baumann

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Until around twenty-five years ago, the art world was preoccupied with finding an audience for contemporary art, selling it and defending it from attacks; there were different camps and

ideologies and an overarching agenda of expanding the idea of art and making convincing arguments for certain well-defined positions.

Around the turn of the millennium, the situation gradually but fundamentally changed. Arguments lost significance, replaced by prices, by the act of paying. Among the multifarious consequences of this shift was a transfer of power from the established tastemakers and gatekeepers—which is to say, critics, curators, museum people and artists—to gallerists, collectors and auction houses. A loss of significance often leads to self-examination, so it was no coincidence that an interest in the history of art began giving way to an interest in the history of exhibitions, a field where artists, curators, museums, historians and critics—not collectors, art fairs and auction houses—held sway. A key publication in this regard was Mary Anne Staniszewski's 1998 book *The Power of Display*, which my friends and I discussed enthusiastically. As the blurb has it, "Art historians, traditionally, have implicitly accepted the autonomy of the artwork and ignored what Mary Anne Staniszewski calls 'the power of display.' . . . Staniszewski treats installations as creations that manifest values, ideologies, politics and of course aesthetics." A year before, Catherine David's Documenta 10 had shown the way forward in this shift, cross-examining Documenta itself as a Western, male-dominated exhibition that fetishized the object and various forms of showing off. She opened the format of the exhibition to the world and to global ways of thinking, and she was heavily criticized for it. But her innovations set into motion the "political" biennial-type exhibition as we know it, establishing the parameters for every Documenta since, creating a genre that has now in turn itself begun to smack of academicism and mannerism.

A further form of self-examination and self-affirmation has recently taken place, with increasing frequency, via biographies and autobiographies of critics and curators. While the former concentrate on collections of writings, the latter tend to present the stations of curatorial curricula vitae more or less with the curator at the center. No publication took this farther—deservedly—than that devoted to the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann: the doorstopper devoted to the entirety of his career, weighing in at some ten pounds (4.5 kg), published posthumously in 2007: *Harald Szeemann – with by through because towards despite: Catalogue of All Exhibitions, 1957–2005*. I guess we can, with bated breath or a frustrated sigh, look forward to similarly comprehensive biographies of Kasper König, Rudi Fuchs, Jan Hoet, Manfred Schneckenburger, Pontus Hultén, Jean-Christophe Ammann, Okwui Enwezor et al. Some might already have made the shelves without my realizing it, but this year brought the biographies of both Bice Curiger (curator and cofounder of the art magazine *Parkett*) and Jacqueline Burckhardt (art conservator and likewise cofounder of *Parkett*). My first thought was, "Is this really necessary?"

But of course I wanted to get my hands on the books: *Cis for Curator: Bice Curiger – A Life in Art* by Dora Imhof (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König) and Jacqueline Burckhardt's *La mia commedia dell'arte* (Edition Patrick Frey).

Curiger was and is one of the most successful and influential women curators of her generation. Too few people understand, for instance, the importance of the new approach to writing about art that Curiger ventured into as a very young critic—a collection of these writings has yet to be published. More familiar is the story that, together with Burckhardt and Dieter von Graffenried, she invented a new type of art magazine (*Parkett*) and that, beginning in the mid-1970s, she experimented with, even established, the essay-exhibition as a new approach and format for showing art.

Parkett is to my mind Curiger's chef d'oeuvre. It was more than printed matter; it was an exhibition in paperback form that celebrated the printed volume as *kunsthalle*, museum, collection and gallery. It was accompanied by a program of editions that raised the bar for what a periodical could be. The magazine's celebrated run came to an end in 2017 after more than a hundred issues. It began in 1984; I was seventeen and I can still remember how I opened the thick, booklike first issue in my father's office and before reading anything else coming upon the dedication. I was incredibly surprised: It was not to Benjamin or Derrida, as was then de rigueur, but to the legendary Swiss cyclist Hugo Koblet, who won the Tour de France in 1951 and died tragically at the age of thirty-nine, in 1964. This was a statement I understood; it spoke to me and chimed with my attitude toward life at the time, shaped by a boundless interest in sports and music, art and kitsch, fashion, taste, everything. Hierarchies no longer meant anything; everything was suddenly possible and important; everything was up for renegotiation. As the German journalist and cultural critic Dierich Diederichsen put it in his 1985 book *Sexbeat*: "1982 was a thoroughly good year. The project of setting up a new



Klaudia Schifferle, *Bice die Kunstkritikerin* (Bice the Art Critic), 1980. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ProLitteris, Zurich. From Dora Imhof, *Cis for Curator: Bice Curiger – A Life in Art*. Courtesy Klaudia Schifferle and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König

kind of pop music by historicizing and relativizing all elements of music showed most stunning results in the form of [English pop band] ABC and others. Nobody believed any more in authentic expression. All elements were referential, alluding to the history of pop culture, nothing was innocent anymore, everything so extremely self-aware, intellectual, campy—and nonetheless beautiful and enthralling.” This is what *Parkett* stood for (Diederichsen was for a while a regular contributor), and for the first time ever it was possible to read thoughtful, well-argued writing about a new generation of artists in nonacademic German. *Parkett* made contemporary art meaningful, accessible and sexy. Many people have forgotten that, well into the 1990s, it was difficult to find essays or catalogues about contemporary artists. With oodles of enthusiasm, *Parkett* filled this important gap and more. Soon, the magazine was credited for its sharp radar for up-and-coming artists. It established itself as a highly regarded—if at the same time jealously mistrusted—trendsetter, meaning that curators, gallerists and collectors turned to it for orientation and those whose names appeared within its pages began to count as established figures or even future greats.

A decisive role was played by the “*Parkett* collaborations.” The idea was that each issue would be created in dialogue with an artist, who would work on the magazine together with its staff. This proximity to artists was the constant, the motor and the mark of quality of Curiger’s

work, and to this day the attitude informs every exchange with her. Although *Parkett* had a big influence on the Euro-American art world, by the early 2000s it had gradually lost its clout, which happens eventually even to great magazines and which was, as is often the case, a result of changing realities on the ground. First, it was by then no longer an exception for even younger artists to have catalogues and substantial bodies of writing devoted to their work. Second, the rise of the internet meant information was suddenly available quickly, globally and at no cost. Third, the art world was becoming global while *Parkett* retained its primary interest in the dialogue between Western Europe and the United States. Or, as Burckhardt tells her interlocutor Juri Steiner in *La mia commedia dell’arte*: “In retrospect the art world at the time was extremely Western in its mentality, and, as you say, the earth was still flat for us. . . . In a world that has become round, we would need to know a great many more languages and cultural and political contexts in order to sufficiently understand—let alone have an informed opinion about—the art of other cultures.”

Nothing arises out of thin air, and *Parkett* was no exception. It had its roots in Curiger’s training as a journalist, ethnographer, art historian, activist and curator. As *C is for Curator* makes clear, she had already put her feelers out far and wide as a very young woman—for example, in an early visit to New York. She wrote for magazines and newspapers in a nonacademic, slightly tongue-in-cheek proto-pop language,

View of “*Zeichen und Wunder*” (Signs and Wonders), Kunsthaus Zurich, 1995. From left: Fischli/Weiss, *The Question Pot*, 1984; Niko Pirosmiani, *Stag, The Actress Margarita*, and *Giraffe* (all n.d.); Lily van der Stokker, *Dear Mummy*, 1995. Photo: Mancia/Bodmer – FBM studio. Courtesy Franziska & Bruno Mancia



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and co-organized the legendary, scene-defining exhibitions “*Frauen sehen Frauen*” (Women See Women)—put together in 1975 by a feminist collective to which Curiger belonged—and “*Saus und Braus*” (“Living It Up,” approximately) in 1980. She was also part of the dancers’ collectives *Frauen-Jet-Gruppe* (Women Jet Group) and *Frauenrakete* (Women Rocket), which brought to the stage various combinations of amateurism, feminism, desire, critique, dance, performance art and parody. This unabashed mishmash of seemingly contradictory positions and visions was part of Zurich’s self-reinvention at the time. It was provocative and productive, broke down barriers and was bolstered by the stylish sense of humor that continues to run through all of Curiger’s work. She did not act alone in this but was part of a bigger scene that included Burckhardt and artists such as Peter Fischli, Dieter Meier, Sigmar Polke, Klaudia Schifferle and David Weiss, as well as future gallerist Susan Wyss and fashion designer Sissi Zöbeli.

The two exhibitions that launched Curiger’s curatorial trajectory already espoused her essayistic approach, which was still fairly novel, and a nimble-footedness that was antithetical to the sluggishness and conservatism of Switzerland at the time. In contrast to the thematic exhibition, which is constrained by a clearly defined frame (geography, chronology), the essay-exhibition can develop much more freely. Szeemann was the pioneering forerunner in the development of the form, giving the genre its first canonical show in 1969 with “*Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*” at the Kunsthalle Bern—an exhibition whose title could stand for each and every essay-exhibition. The advantage of the format was and is at least twofold: It allows contemporary art—art which cannot yet be seen with historical distance—to be situated in a framework of reception without overly constraining how it is to be read. This preserves the autonomy of the work while still evincing a curatorial hand. In addition, the hope—a generational one—was that the new approach would break the power of obsolete and canonized narratives by countering them with subjectivity and self-empowerment. During the 1990s, Curiger achieved mastery of this dynamic as curator-at-large of the Kunsthaus Zürich. I and my fellow young curators made pilgrimages to her exhibitions and discussed them, critically of course, afterward. These shows included the 1994 group show with Sophie Calle, Sylvie Fleury, Raymond Pettibon and others titled “*Endstation Sehnsucht*” (A Streetcar Named Desire); “*Birth of the Cool*,” a survey of American painting from Georgia O’Keeffe to Christopher Wool (1997); “*Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer*” (Free View Onto the Mediterranean, 1998), which focused on young Swiss artists; and “*The Expanded Eye*,” a panoramic show in 2006 whose English subtitle was “*Stalking the Unseen*.” For me personally, the exhibition “*Zeichen und Wunder*” (Signs and Wonders, 1995) stands out. It was the first time I had ever encountered the work of the Georgian artist Niko Pirosmiani, and Curiger’s accomplishment in bringing this then completely unknown, incredibly interesting painter to Europe can hardly be overstated.



The entrance to the Städtische Kunstskammer zum Strauhof in Zurich in 1980, with a poster designed by Peter Fischli and Klaudia Schifferle for the exhibition “*Saus und Braus*” (“Living It Up,” approximately) and an installation of wooden logs by Hannes R. Bossert. From *C is for Curator: Bice Curiger – A Life in Art*, by Dora Imhof. Courtesy Bice Curiger and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König

The essay-exhibition today belongs to the fixed repertoire of curatorial work, almost without exception. It populates museums, galleries, biennials, project spaces and, in recent years, even auction houses, and there seems to be no idea or cloud of associations too abstruse to be honored by an exhibition. That this is so points to the limitations of the format, namely its latent arbitrariness and how easily its manifestations can slide into irrelevance, but above all the fact that a hundred thousand associations don’t write history anew. In love with our sudden inspirations, we neglected—despite a slew of great ideas and subversive perspectives—to construct engaging new narratives that transcend individual, subjective experience. One reason was our blindness to many truly important subjects, a myopia that doesn’t feel great in retrospect. The intensity with which race, gender, class and climate have, in the past few years, become major themes in the art world was, in hindsight, wholly to be expected, and it was such vital subjects as these that surfaced too rarely among the essay-exhibitions. A new generation is demanding that history be rewritten; that rewriting is already happening. I suppose it had to be this way: We did not become who our parents warned us about. Instead, we became the Establishment.

Translated by Alexander Scrimgeour