

In Suspension – Some (Final) Remarks on the Concept of Model

Alfredo Cramerotti's Lecture at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

3 November 2012

Text by (in no particular order) Lauren Mele, Tirdad Zolghadr, Cathy Haynes, Alfredo Cramerotti, Fredric Jameson, Kari Conte, Clifford Geertz, Cristiana Tejo.ⁱ

Proxemics is the study of distances. The term was introduced by anthropologist Edward Hall in the 1960s, and was picked up by notoriously distanced, elusive artists such as Liam Gillick only recently. The proxemics Wikipedia page can explain subtleties distinguishing “critical distance” from “flight distance”, “personal distance” from “social distance” and so on.

Distance, that is, as a thing in itself. Not wafty and aristocratic, like a curatorial statement, but very tangible, like an easyjet boarding pass, with which I will fly home tomorrow.

Let's step outside the institution for a moment. What is the reciprocal relationship between an artist, a curator, an audience, and a place?

There is expectation from the art world for artists and curators, and for audiences to some extent, to be itinerant, to move from place to place in order to grasp the global span of contemporary art practice, and contemporary culture, and to make the most of it. Some others though, have started to foresee that more and more artists and curators will have significant and long-term investment and commitment in a particular place, wherever it may be, producing sets of relationships between the local and the global.

We are talking here of distances between geographies, aesthetics, disciplines, practitioners, educations, websites, institutions, and more. Proxemics over proximities.

As artists work (more and more) in situation-based contexts, curators perhaps will (work and work) for a long time in the same place, and will engage with local dynamics on intimate levels. It will generate substantial potential for cultural production. In a way, artists and curators will become institutions in the proper sense – a set of relations between people, space and function.

So, let's re-enter the institution then, and consider myself as such. I am an institution (no pun intended).

Life as an institution is projected towards the future – not who I am now, but who I will become. It is a question about how I choose to think of myself as artist, curator and audience while producing, engaging with or using an exhibition, or a cultural programme. Today is therefore an ongoing effect to be shaped, a model to be refined hour by hour.

I get closer to grasp me (as an institution) when I take myself as a possibility among others. Not when I represent who I am, but when I construct a model for it, and declare it. Only when I engage with the possibility of something can I try to change what is important (for me, as institution). If I, as interested public, accept the opportunity to 'develop' this or that topic in time, as part of my own story, I activate a sort of witness process, and I become my own audience.

So the mysterious pleasures of proxemics (the study of distances, spatial and temporal) are important to the arts as a constitutive modus operandi, including myself both as producer and as respondent. The technique is nothing unusual to critics, who very often dogmatically keep a distance to practitioners they're writing about, in the very hope of evacuating intention from the critical equation. The staggering problems that arise when the writer, the writing and the bewritten disregard the rules of proxemics have all been thoroughly theorized in the field of literature, but the topic remains a mess in the charisma-driven field of the arts, including me as an institution. It's yet to be accepted that the producers are somewhat beside the point when it comes to their work.

Similarly, the notion of cultural representation and its relevance in regional and international context, is in a constant state of flux and it is continuously under scrutiny and examination. To state the obvious, every individual sees the world differently from a specific location, and the aesthetic makeup of man-made or man-assigned models can change vastly from culture to culture, and from location to location. One person or community may view 'something' as representative and truthful of something else in a specific context, whereas the rest of the world may have a different association entirely about the same 'something'.

One of the points of issue with research and participation in the cultural field is that often you physically cannot see with the naked eye what the model of work is representing and it is there purely to constitute knowledge of what the 'thing' is. This is where Regionalism has the luxurious avenue of subjectivity and specificity at its disposal, which somehow Internationalism (or a model standing for it) is not permitted flexibly. We cannot have a specific International, but we happily deal with a specific Regional.

As knowledge becomes ever more specialised, and public and private life becomes more commercialised and internationalised, art – what we are doing here – will increasingly take on the role of the trespasser, luring itself into other fields, markets and discourses in ways that re-introduce regionalist difference, that crack open their normalizing effects, and show another life (or another way of doing things) is possible. That's a bit of aspiration perhaps, but as institution I constitute myself as I go ahead and it's essential to keep a horizon to glance.

I consider culture (in this case, art) being like a map; functioning both as a *model of* – describing phenomena, processes and events – and a *model for*, providing the instructions to build my reality. In other words, I create a system of references for interpreting what I do. The artists here, and curators, and institutions, construct a world in order to question the way it is constructed, or a model of reality in order to ask the viewer what is being modelled.

Maybe artists and curators and institutions from hegemonic countries have to learn from their counterparts in developing countries how to work, to think and to act in an international context of crisis, precariousness and instability, not least financially; a common state of things in many regional contexts, and indeed a familiar situation for some of us here. Adaptability becomes mandatory. And it usually runs from the Regional to the International.

This is me as institution talking. To have a model for something in the Regional context means to act as a catalyst for understanding that specificity; and in the International context, as a catalyst for knowledge to transfer to somewhere else, possibly adapted. Adaptation is a crucial concept. In accordance with this stance, accuracy is integral for Regional model to be productive and relevant. However, often a Regional model is created on the premise that what they are 'standing for' is not so visible to the naked eye of the external viewer, so Regionalistic liberties are, inevitably, taken.

To put this proposition in the context of this symposium, I look at something outside art, and apply to the very idea of Critical Regionalism of the title the argument of ‘ex-aptation’, as opposed to ‘ad-aptation’. A bit of background: studying the biological design of the living species, scientists Elizabeth Vrba and Stephen J Gould coined the term *ex-aptation* to indicate those characters that appeared for a specific reason in the evolutionary process, but developed further to become a broad and universalized element of survival. I quote:

An ex-aptation is, basically, a character evolved for a purpose other than that for which it is currently used. A trait, evolved to serve one particular function, ultimately serves another one. Bird feathers are a common example: initially evolved for temperature regulation, they were later adapted for flight, which became the main feature of birds.

In parallel, the Regionalist trait first developed to expand its relevance on the context that generates it, since the tools at its disposal from the Internationalist approach were no longer enough; that trait could now ex-apt and shape the subsequent view of the (art) and cultural world globally, by returning full circle to Regional contexts and specific ways of working. It is in a roundabout way, if you want. It could provoke a state, or perhaps more a process, of ‘sustained curiosity’, and in turn change me, as inhabitant of the Regional, let alone as institution, through an attempt to comprehend what I am (internationally) curious about and therefore unaware of.

In fact, to think about a model in a ‘secure’ way by means of structured Internationalism, is to reduce the (Regional) unknown to the expected, and therefore take away the possibility of learning.

Over to us.

Thanks.

¹ Alfredo Cramerotti is responsible for editing them together, so look no further. If you have any question, you can contact him directly and he will be happy to answer.