

What Is It Like to Be a Bat?

Tags:

#Thomas Nagel

#philosophy of mind

#curating

#genius

The question from the title is itself the title of a philosophical paper that was published in 1974. In it, Thomas Nagel postulates the radically subjective nature of human experience. Questioning the possibility of reductionist, physicalist accounts on human consciousness, Nagel stresses the unique, untranslatable, and eventually uncommunicative nature of our experience of the outer world. No matter how detailed and objective account of a person's experience science may present, there is always a surplus, a feature of the experience which exists solely in the mind of a person experiencing it.

What about arts, performing arts in particular? Is there an analogous situation as well? Can we, in any meaningful way, speak of analogies between evidence-based natural sciences and the highly interpretative art field? I believe we can, to some degree at least. Although Nagel stirred quite a controversy within the philosophy of mind, still strongly dividing opposing camps after almost 50 years, his thesis sounds rather uncontroversial in the contemporary critical discourse on art. We - artists, critics, theoreticians – proudly exhibit our uniqueness, the impossibility of final and decisive interpretation of our work. Yet, we tend to preserve the sovereignty over that interpretative surplus only to ourselves. In our everyday exchange with the world, we are the main curators, we are the holders of the truth (of the artwork), or at least coordinators and managers of the ways toward it. We accept criticism, we appreciate dissensus, but at the end of the day we withhold the right to the correct interpretation of our experience.

Is curating just reclaiming this authoritative stand? Countless articles in curatorial magazines and journals offer multiple perspectives on curatorial "trade", and (probably) none advocates the position just expressed. How so? Is it because such a position is utterly meaningless or too heavy a burden to admit that we still cling to the authorial figure of a genius author/curator?

Compost sources

Orientation and disorientation, by Una Bauer

Sub/Dom Dynamics of Art (&) Criticism, by Ana Fazekaš

Curatorial (as critical and performative) institution, by Biljana Tanurovska- Kjulavkovski

Outer sources

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Nagel, Thomas (1974). "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?". *The Philosophical Review*. 83 (4): 435–450

Kunst, Bojana (2015). *Artist at Work*. Winchester, Washington: Zero Books.

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