

THE CURATORIAL TURN: FROM PRACTICE TO DISCOURSE

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Introductory context:

It was in the late 1960s that Seth Siegelaub used the term 'demystification' in order to establish the shift in exhibition production conditions, whereby curators were beginning to make visible the mediating component within the formation, production and dissemination of an exhibition.

I think in our generation we thought that we could demystify the role of the museum, the role of the collector, and the production of the artwork; for example, how the size of a gallery affects the production of art, etc. In that sense we tried to demystify the hidden structures of the art world. (O'Neill, P. and Siegelaub 2006)

During the 1960s the primary discourse around art-in-exhibition began to turn away from forms of critique of the artwork as autonomous object of study/critique towards a form of curatorial criticism, in which the space of exhibition was given critical precedence over that of the objects of art. Curatorial criticism differed from that of traditional western art criticism (i.e. linked to modernity) in that its discourse and subject matter went beyond discussion about artists and the object of art to include the subject of curating and the role played by the curator of exhibitions. The ascendancy of the curatorial gesture in the 1990s also began to establish curating as a potential nexus for discussion, critique and debate, where the evacuated role of the critic in parallel cultural discourse was usurped by the neo-critical space of curating. During this period, curators and artists have reacted to and engaged with this 'neo-criticality' by extending the parameters of the exhibition form to incorporate more discursive, conversational and geo-political discussion, centred within the ambit of the exhibition. The ascendancy of

this ‘curatorial gesture’ in the 1990s (as well as the professionalization of contemporary curating) began to establish curatorial practice as a potential space for critique. Now the neo-critical curator has usurped the evacuated place of the critic. As Liam Gillick pointed out:

My involvement in the critical space is a legacy of what happened when a semi-autonomous critical voice started to become weak, and one of the reasons that happened was that curating became a dynamic process. So people you might have met before, who in the past were critics were now curators. The brightest, smartest people get involved in this multiple activity of being mediator, producer, interface and neo-critic. It is arguable that the most important essays about art over the last ten years have not been in art magazines but they have been in catalogues and other material produced around galleries, art centres and exhibitions. (Gillick 2005: 74)

Accompanying this ‘turn towards curating’ was the emergence of curatorial anthologies. Beginning in the 1990s, most of these tended to come out of international meetings between curators, as part of curatorial summits, symposia, seminars and conferences, although some of them may have taken local curatorial practice as their starting point. Without exception, they placed an emphasis on individual practice, the first-person narrative and curator self-positioning – articulated through primary interviews, statements and exhibition representations – as they attempted to define and map out a relatively bare field of discourse.

Alongside this predominantly curator-led discourse, curatorial criticism responded with an assertion of the separateness of the artistic and curatorial gesture – when such divisions are no longer apparent in contemporary exhibition practice. I would argue that such a divisive attempt to detach the activity of curating from that of artistic production results in resistance to recognition of the interdependence of both practices within the field of cultural production. Moreover the mediation of hybrid cultural agents through the means of the public exhibition is overlooked.

The curatorial turn

‘Exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known.’
(Ferguson, Greenberg & Nairne 1996: 2)

Exhibitions (in whatever form they take) are always ideological; as hierarchical structures they produce particular and general forms of communication. Since the late 1980s, the group exhibition has become the primary site for curatorial experimentation and, as such, has generated a new discursive space around artistic practice. The group exhibition runs counter to the canonical model of the monographic presentation. By bringing a greater mix of people into an exhibition, it also created a space for defining multifarious ways of engaging with disparate interests, often within a more trans-cultural context. Group exhibitions are ideological texts which make private intentions public. In

particular, it is the temporary art exhibition that has become the principal medium in the distribution and reception of art; thus, being the principal agent in debate and criticism about any aspect of the visual arts.

Exhibitions (particularly group exhibitions, art fairs, temporary perennial shows and large-scale international art exhibitions) are the main means through which contemporary art is now mediated, experienced and historicized. Just as the number of large-scale, international exhibitions increased since the 1990s, so has the respectability of the phenomenon of curating been enhanced. Similarly, writing about exhibitions has further reinforced the merit of curatorial practice as a subject worthy of study. As a tactic: 'This may either be a compensatory device, a politicized attempt to consider works of art as interrelated rather than as individual entities, or a textual response to changes in the art world itself' (Ferguson, Greenberg & Nairne 1996).

The critical debate surrounding curatorial practice has not only intensified, but as Alex Farquharson has pointed out, even the recent appearance of the verb 'to curate', where once there was just a noun, indicates the growth and vitality of this discussion. He writes: 'new words, after all, especially ones as grammatically bastardised as the verb "to curate" (worse still the adjective "curatorial"), emerge from a linguistic community's persistent need to identify a point of discussion.' (Farquharson 2003)

Indicative of a shift in the primary role of curator is the changing perception of the curator as carer to a curator who has a more creative and active part to play within the production of art itself. This new verb, 'to curate...may also suggest a shift in the conception of what curators do, from a person who works at some remove from the processes of artistic production, to one actively "in the thick of it".' (Farquharson 2003) Ten years previously, when writing about cultural production, Pierre Bourdieu noted that the curator (*inter alia*) added cultural meaning and value to the making of art and artists:

The subject of the production of the artwork – of its value but also of its meaning – is not the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality, but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field. Among these are the producers of works, classified as artists...critics of all persuasions...collectors, middlemen, curators, etc.; in short, all those who have ties with art, who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it, and who confront each other in struggles where the imposition of not only a world view but also a vision of the art world is at stake, and who, through these struggles, participate in the production of the value of the artist and of art. (Bourdieu 1993: 261)

As cultural agents, curators and artists participate in the production of cultural value, exhibitions are intrinsic and vital parts of what Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer termed the 'cultural industries' associated with: entertainment; mass culture; the communications enterprise of mass reception; and as part of the consciousness industry (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 120–167). Exhibitions are, therefore,

contemporary forms of rhetoric, complex expressions of persuasion, whose strategies aim to produce a prescribed set of values and social relations for their audiences. As such exhibitions are subjective political tools, as well as being modern ritual settings, which uphold identities (artistic, national, sub-cultural, 'international', gender-or-race-specific, avant-garde, regional, global etc.); they are to be understood as institutional 'utterances' within a larger culture industry. (See Ferguson 1996: 178–9.)

Biennial culture and the culture of curation

One of the most evident developments in contemporary curatorial practice since the late 1980s has been occurring on an increasingly inter-national, trans-national and multi-national scale, where the 'local' and the 'global' are in constant dialogue. In *Contemporary* magazine's special issue on curating, published in 2005, Isabel Stevens produced a substantive list of 80 official Biennials/ Triennials throughout the globe to be held between 2006 and 2008. Terms such as 'biennial', 'biennale', or 'mega-exhibitions' no longer refer to those few exhibitions that occur perennially, every two years or so: they are now all encompassing idioms for large-scale international group exhibitions, which, for each local cultural context, are organized locally with connection to other national cultural networks (Stevens 2005). Biennials are temporary spaces of mediation, usually allocated to invited curators with support from a local socio-cultural network. They are interfaces between art and larger publics – publics which are at once local and global, resident and nomadic, non-specialist and art-worldly.

In what Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic call the 'biennial phenomenon' such 'large-scale international exhibitions' reflect the cultural diversity of global artistic practices and call into question the inertia of public art institutions that are unwilling or too slow to respond to such praxis (Filipovic & Vanderlinden 2005). Biennials have become a form of institution in themselves; their frequency has resulted in an index of comparability. In a rather prophetic essay, written in the early 1990s, Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne had already begun to question the fundamental idea of international survey exhibitions. Their collective essay ended with the paragraph:

However progressive the political or economic intentions behind them, international exhibitions still invite a presumption that the curators have access to an illusionary world view, and that spectators may follow in their wake. But a more specific and sustained engagement with communities and audiences, creating meanings beyond the spectacular and mere festivalising of such occasions, may produce a new genre of exhibition. It seems that in order to accommodate both artist's needs and audience demands, the new exhibition must have reciprocity and dialogue built into its structure. How successfully this is accomplished will determine international exhibition maps of the future. (Ferguson, Greenberg & Nairne 2005: 3)

As was predicted, these event-exhibitions have shaped new social, cultural and political relations in a more globalized world, where the traditional biennial model is maintained through discourse on cultural policy, national representation and internationalism, thereby enabling cultural travel, urban renovation and local tourism. Alternately, it is arguable that they have become polarizing spaces to legitimize certain forms of artistic and curatorial praxis within the global culture industry.

Very few *biennials* are of the scale of *Documenta*, *Johannesburg*, *Venice* or even *Istanbul*. Many tend to be improvisatory, localized and modest in their aims. Here I am interested in the general-specific homogeneity produced by the institution of the biennial, not the heterogeneity of the myriad of localized cultural statements. The populist perception of the activity of curating has changed in large part due to the spread of biennials in the 1990s, whereby new degrees of visibility and responsibility were placed upon the curator. Apart from the particular issues of scale, temporality and location, the activity of curation made manifest through such exhibitions is articulated as being identity-driven; therefore, an overtly politicized, discursively global and fundamentally auteured praxis prevails, in spite of the many variable forms they have taken on. The biennial form as a global exhibition model has driven much of the art world's global extension since 1989, when *Les Magiciens de la Terre* began the process. Biennials have become the vehicle through which much art is validated and acquires value on the international art circuit. Now such 'global exhibitions' often have as their main theme, 'globalization', whilst questioning the ideological underpinning of the exhibition itself as a product of that process.

Despite any curatorial self-reflexivity in recent large-scale exhibitions that may exist towards the global effects of 'biennialization', the periphery still has to follow the discourse of the centre. In the case of biennials, the periphery comes to the centre in search of legitimization and, by default, accepts the conditions of this legitimacy. Charles Esche suggests that the globalization of art within large-scale exhibitions has, through a process of standardization, absorbed the difference between centre and periphery. According to Esche, the 'centre first' model of global art, largely begun in 1989, still holds sway over much of the museum and biennial culture. It requires 'the key institutions of contemporary culture officially to sanction the "periphery" in order to subsume it into the canon of innovative visual art.' (Esche 2005: 105). Even though many of the artists in each exhibition may have developed their practice on the fringes of the recognized art world, 'their energy is validated and consumed by the centre and therefore the relationship between rim and hub remains in place. This is, of course, how globalisation generally operates – sometimes to the economic benefit of the patronised but rarely in the interests of maintaining their autonomy and sustainability.' (Esche 2005: 105).

The exhibition's ritual of maintaining a given set of power relations between art, display and reception is particularly true of, what John Miller called, the 'blockbuster exhibition', which tends to incorporate anachronistic elements whilst recuperating any

dissent from viewers as part of the totality of the overall event. In consequence, a 'cycle of raised expectations and quick disillusionment' is both predictable and over-determined. Miller argues that the 'mega-exhibition' is an ideological institution that reifies social relations between artworks and spectator. As the explicit purpose of these shows is to offer a comprehensive survey of artworks on a demographic basis, the terms of discourse are treated as pre-determined, rather than being 'transformed in the course of art production and therefore subject to contradiction and conflict.' (Miller 1996: 270)

According to Miller, a critique of these exhibitions on the basis of curatorial choices made within the established framework would be to ignore the ideologies underpinning the institutions that are responsible for them. He suggests that such institutions often treat and address audiences as a concrete social constituency, whereby artworks are relegated to mere 'raw material' within the 'total artwork' of the exhibition (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), thus privileging the curator's subjectivity, so that the outcome of the exhibition-form is naturalized as an organic inevitability within the organization's institutional framework producing an illusion of curatorial inspiration and genius (Miller 1996a: 272).

I would argue that during a period of transformation since 1989 the notion of exhibitions as authored subjectivities produced dominant discourses around 'mega-exhibitions'. Although more recent biennials have moved away from the single-author position towards more collective models, a globally configured exhibition market has persisted with a curator-centred discourse. Discussions, lecture programmes, conferences, publications and discursive events are also now a re-curent and integral part of such exhibitions, or in the case of some exhibitions, such as *Documenta X* and especially *Documenta 11*, discursive events formed the very foundation of the project. As Elena Filipovic suggested:

This striking expansion goes in tandem with curatorial discourses that increasingly distinguish the biennial or mega exhibition as larger than the mere presentation of artworks; they are understood as vehicles for the production of knowledge and intellectual debate. (Filipovic 2006: 66)

In many ways the expanding network of biennials has effectively embraced art and artists from the peripheries beyond a dominantly Western European and American internationalism, but as Jessica Bradley argued, they function as a more responsive and spectacular means of distribution:

[O]ne that can efficiently meet the accelerated rate of exchange and consumption parallel to the global flow of capital and information today...while curatorial aspirations are frequently concerned with addressing cultures in flux and eschew cultural nationalism, the motives for establishing these events may nevertheless reside in a desire to promote and validate local, culturally specific production within a global network. (Bradley 2003: 89)

It is the inter-relational attributes of both culture and location that are the most obviously marketable aspects of global tourism upon which they depend. Locality embodied in the promotion of tourist spots, local specialities, sites, culture and produce are actually the most reliable economic revenues for local communities. It has also been argued that during these times of 'culture as spectacle', artistic production is a catalyst for culture to be globalized, attracting financial investments as well as audiences. Ivo Mesquita also argues that during these times of 'culture as spectacle', artistic production acts as a catalyst for globalized culture, attracting financial investments and audiences. Biennials (and art fairs) are happening in more and more cities, which have adopted cultural tourism as a means of securing a place in the international arena of economy and culture, wherein artists, curators, critics, art dealers, patrons and sponsors nurture a clearly defined production system, through labour division, which produces hierarchical roles for the participants (Mesquita 2003: 63–68).

As an important agent within the global cultural industry, a new kind of international curator was identified by Ralph Rugoff as a 'jet-set *flâneur*' who appears to know no geographical boundaries, and for whom a type of global-internationalism is the central issue (Rugoff 1999). In particular, the role of the nomadic curator within large-scale exhibitions is to select and display "international" art through a visible framing device: a subjective (curatorial) system of mediation that has the notion of inclusivity as one of its central thematics. The rise of the global curator has less to do with embedded power structures within the art world and more to do with inherited cultural significance (and capital), where practice has long been prioritized over discourse within the culture industry as a whole, where practice is in turn dependent on being translated back into discourse in order to facilitate more equivalent practice, which enables the maintenance of the existing superstructure. As Benjamin Buchloh identified in 1989, there is an urgent need for articulating the curatorial position as part of art discourse, where practice as 'doing' or 'curating' necessitated a discourse as 'speaking' or 'writing', in order for the curator's function to be acknowledged as part of the institutional superstructure at the level of discourse:

The curator observes his/ her operation within the institutional apparatus of art: most prominently the procedure of abstraction and centralisation that seems to be an inescapable consequence of the work's entry into the superstructure apparatus, its transformation from practice to discourse. That almost seems to have become the curator's primary role: to function as an agent who offers exposure and potential prominence – in exchange for obtaining a moment of actual practice that is about to be transformed into myth/ superstructure. (Buchloh 1989)

This interest in discourse, as a supplement or substitute for practice, was highlighted in Dave Beech and Gavin Wade's speculative introduction to *Curating in the 21st Century*, 2000, in which they stated that 'even talking is doing something, especially if you are saying something worthwhile. Doing and saying, then are forms of acting on the world.' (Wade & Beech 2000: 9–10). So, it seems fair to characterize the discursive as an

ambivalent way of saying something *vis-à-vis* doing. This may seem a somewhat optimistic speculation, as Mick Wilson argues in his assessment of the productive powers of language, which have been part of the stock assumptions of a wide range of experimental art practices and attendant commentary (Wilson 2007). This tendency has been given further impetus by what he calls ‘the Foucauldian moment in art of the last two decades, and the ubiquitous appeal of the term “discourse” as a word to conjure and perform power’, to the point where ‘even talking is doing something’, with the value of the discursive as something located in its proxy for actual doing within discourses on curatorial practice (Wilson 2007: 202).

The ‘rise of the curator as creator’, as Bruce Altshuler (1994) labeled it, has also gathered momentum. The ever-increasing number of global biennials has provided what Julia Bryan-Wilson claims to be prestigious ‘launching pads for the curatorial star system’ in ‘the age of curatorial studies’, in which the ‘institutional basis of art is taken as a given, and the marketing and packaging of contemporary art has become a specialized focus of inquiry for thousands of students.’ (Bryan-Wilson 2003: 102–3). If the 1990s were all about a new professionalization during a period of globalization, they now seem to represent acceleration in the global art exhibition-making market followed by a settling down period. Only now can we begin to evaluate the processes of translation that accompanied these productions and recognize that curating as distinct moments of practice is significantly divergent from curatorial discourse.

Beatrice von Bismarck provided an example of this bifurcation between curatorial practice and discourse, so that professionalization and differentiation within the art world have turned curating into a hierarchically arranged job description, whereby “internationally networked service providers” offer their skills to a diverse exhibition market, when curating as practice is understood in discourse as something that is distinct from its understanding as a job title:

Of the tasks originally associated with the fixed institutional post, curating takes only that of presentation. With the aim of creating an audience for artistic and cultural materials and techniques, of making them visible, the exhibition becomes the key presentation medium. In contrast to the curator’s other duties, curating itself frees the curator from the invisibility of the job, giving him/her an otherwise uncommon degree of freedom [...] and a prestige not unlike that enjoyed by artists. (von Bismarck 2004: 99)

Within curatorial discourse, the figure of the curator operates at a level previously understood as being the domain of artistic practice, where in Foucauldian terms, such discourse is ‘the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualisable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements...’ (Foucault 2003: 30). Thus, curating-specific discourse engenders a requisite level of prestige, necessitated by the dynamics of contemporary curating. Practice alone does not produce and support such esteem, rather distinct

moments of practice translate into a hierarchical ‘common discourse’ of curating as it is understood through its discursive formations. While internationalism is now at the core of practice with the biennial industry, its accompanying curatorial discourse functions to maintain the superstructure of the art world on a much wider scale than ever before. Where the biennial curator is a well-travelled subject, the curators of exhibitions are already engaging in a complex network of global knowledge circuits that traverse and overlap the other: each ‘biennial’ is ‘in conversation’ with the next, providing yet another momentary place of exchange of curatorial discourse across exhibitions; each exhibition speaks with one another as well as to the world they claim to reflect.

Curator as meta/artist, artist as meta/curator

Since the late 1980s, the shift away from curating as an administrative, caring, mediating activity towards that of curating as a creative activity more akin to a form of artistic practice was indicated by Jonathan Watkins’ polemic on curating written for *Art Monthly* in 1987. Using Oscar Wilde’s idea that objects were transformed into art by the critic through writing, Watkins provocatively argued that curating was a form of artistic practice and that curated exhibitions were likened to Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Readymade Aided’ artworks, where the display or exhibition is aided by the curator’s ‘manipulation of the environment, the lighting, the labels, the placement of other works of art.’ (Watkins 1987: 27)

Watkins’ loose description of what role curators/artists/critics take on within an exhibition context may no longer be completely in synchrony with the development (over the last eighteen years) of curatorial practice beyond the parameters of gallery or museum exhibition displays. Yet Watkins’ belief that curating is a ‘necessary, if insufficient, medium through which the communication between art and its audience takes place’ (Watkins 1987) seems in tune with the way in which the cross-fading of individual positions within our cultural economy has aided the transformation of artistic practice. Its slight shift away from an author-centred cultural hierarchy towards a post-productive discourse, in which the function of curating has become another recognized part of the expanded field of art production.

Almost twenty years after Watkins’ polemic, the issues inherent to the “curator as artist” question remains one of the key debates within curatorial discourse: it is still being discussed within many contemporary art magazines such as *frieze* and *Art Monthly*. In 2005, writing for his monthly column in *frieze*, curator Robert Storr expresses his fears about the notion of the curator as an artist by refusing to call curating a medium since it ‘automatically conceded the point to those who will elevate curators to the status critics have achieved through the “auteurization” process.’ Storr also situates the origins of the idea of the curator as artist in Oscar Wilde’s 1890 essay ‘The Critic as Artist’ (where it is the eye of the beholder that produces the work of art) rather than in Barthes’ post-structuralist analysis of authorship. Storr’s conclusive response, ‘No I do not think that curators are artists. And if they insist, then they will ultimately be judged bad

curators as well as bad artists' ends up reiterating 'the artist/ curator divide and inadvertently returns the power of judgement to the critic.' (Storr 2005: 27).

Storr's rejection of the notion of curating as a form of artistic practice and his refusal to call curating a medium represents one of the ongoing tensions within critical debate surrounding curatorial discourse since the late 1980s. Yet, as John Miller has argued, the spectre of the curator as meta-artist began to haunt large-scale international exhibitions since Jan Höet's *Documenta 9* in 1991, when Höet put himself forward as a curatorial artist who used a diverse range of artworks as his raw material. For Miller, the momentum of artist-curator, or the artist as meta-curator, had already been building up from the work of artists linked to institutional critique, who had taken curatorial prerogatives and the works of other artists into their own practice, such as Group Material, Julie Ault, Louise Lawler, Fred Wilson, Judith Barry and others working in the US in the 1980s. Miller argues, however, that Höet's technique of 'confrontational hanging' was less about the exposure of 'non-reflexive assumptions about what makes up an exhibition and what that might mean' (Miller 2004b: 59) associated with these artist's curatorial interventions and more about 'the wilfully arbitrary juxtaposition of works, equates artistry with free exercise of subjectivity.' (Miller 2004b: 59).

The idea of the curator as some type of meta-artist became prominent in the 1990s, where, according to Sigrid Schade, 'curators [now] sell their curatorial concepts as the artistic product and sell themselves as the artists, so the curators "swallow up" the works of the artists, as it were. In such cases, the curators claim for themselves the status of genius traditional in art history.' (Schade 1999: 11) Dorothee Richter echoed this view when she stated:

Since the eighties, we can see another shift in the roles ascribed to artists and curators: It seems perhaps as if a shift in power in favour of the curator has taken place, especially since the role of the curator increasingly allows for more opportunity for creative activity. Thus, the curator seems to employ the artistic exhibits in part as the sign of one text, namely, his or her text. (Richter 1999: 16)

Richter suggests that the presentation of an exhibition is a now a form of curatorial self-presentation, a courting of a gaze where an exhibition's meaning is derived from the relationship among artistic positions. This, she argues, is represented by the co-dependent idea that the curator and artist now closely imitate each other's position (Richter, 1999: 16).

In 1972, the artist Daniel Buren wrote 'Exhibition of an Exhibition', where he claimed that: 'More and more, the subject of an exhibition tends not to be the display of artworks, but the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art.' (See Buren 2004: 26.) At the time, Buren was referring both specifically to the work of curator Harald Szeemann and his curation of *Documenta 5*, and to the emergence of the idea of exhibition organizer as author. Buren was suggesting that works were mere fragments

that make up one composite exhibition, and, although having not changed his position, he later updated his initial thoughts in 2004:

...[art works are] particular details in the service of the work in question, the exhibition of our organiser-author. At the same time – and this is where the problem has become pointed enough to create the crisis in which we find ourselves – the ‘fragments’ and other ‘details’ exhibited are, by definition and in most cases, completely and entirely foreign to the principal work in which they are participating, that is, the exhibition in question. (Buren 2004: 26)

Buren’s disdain for the tendency towards large-scale exhibitions to acquire the status of quasi-artwork where the work of the curator transforms the work of the artist into a useful ‘fragment’ in his or her own work of exhibition as art still prevails. Buren claimed that this can and has taken on many guises in the more recent past:

The organisers/ authors/ artists of large-scale exhibitions provide results we already know: Documenta transformed into a circus (Jan Höet) or even as a platform for the promotion of curators who profit from the occasion in order to publish their own thesis in the form of a catalogue essay (Catherine David) or as a tribune in favour of the developing politically-correct world (Okwui Enwezor) or other exhibitions by organiser-authors trying to provide new merchandise to the ever voracious Western market for art consumption, which, like all markets, must ceaselessly and rapidly renew itself in order not to succumb [...] (Buren 2004: 26).

But the great irony of Buren’s statement is that it is a published response to the question as to whether the *Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist* (2003) proposed by curator Jens Hoffmann as a part of his own curatorial project/exhibition/publication. By enabling Buren’s text and other artists, Hoffman’s intention was to pass to artists the critical and curatorial voice and to include them in the discussion around the effectiveness of an artist-led curatorial model, but Mark Peterson states, ‘...[it] ultimately uses a similar curatorial strategy as the one he is criticising, namely to invite artists to illustrate his thesis.’ (Peterson 2004: 80) Peterson goes on to argue that Hoffmann’s position only appears as one of self-reflexivity, as the curator attempts to involve artists in questioning, not only his own practice, but the various mechanisms and dynamics of his medium and his profession and how exhibitions gain form, yet ends up deflecting attention away from his own curatorial trap. This may in part be true, but Peterson’s position, not unfamiliar as a general viewpoint, again places the curator and artist in opposition to one another.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, it is precisely because of an absence of a single, universally accepted authority within contemporary culture that curators are becoming ‘scapegoats [...] because the curator is on the front line of a big battle for meaning under conditions of uncertainty.’ Bauman adds the term ‘scapegoat’ to a long list of ingredients for a curator’s role which he lists as animator, pusher, inspirer, brother,

community maker and someone who makes people work and things happen and someone who inspires artists with ideas, programmes and projects. He also adds that 'there would be an element of interpreting, of making sense of people, of making them understand, giving them some sort of alphabet for reading what they see, but cannot quite decide about.' (Bauman 1998: 31)

From the late 1980s, – a period of crisis – according to Bauman, who perceives art as being re-centered around what he calls 'the event of the exhibition' where the experience of art is generated primarily by short-lived temporal events and only secondly, if at all, by the ex-temporal value of the work of art itself. It is mostly the work of art exhibited in a widely publicized event that meets the standards set for the proper object of consumption, that stand the chance of maximizing the shock while avoiding the risk of boredom, which would strip it of its 'entertainment value'.

As well as their temporal and transient nature, large-scale international group exhibitions have tended to lend themselves towards thematic shows. It has been argued that such projects prevent artists from realizing their 'true potential' and even that this emphasis on the curatorial project has quite serious implications for the status and roles of art and artists. For example, Alex Farquharson questions exhibitions that foreground their own sign-structure, which pose the risk of using art and artists as constituent fibres or pieces of syntax subsumed by the identity of the whole curatorial endeavour. He argued that we are more likely to remember who curated *Utopia Station*, ongoing since 2003, than which artists took part, forgetting that Rirkrit Tiravanija (an artist) was one of the curators. For Farquharson, projects such as Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Do It* (1993 onwards, www.e-flux.com) and *Take me (I'm yours)* (Serpentine Gallery, London, 1995) or *A Little Bit of History Repeated* (Kunst-Werke Berlin, 2001), curated by Jens Hoffmann, result in the relegation of artists to deliverers of the curators' conceptual premise, while curatorial conceit acquires the status of quasi-artwork (Farquharson 2003). This more than common opinion seems to yearn after an upholding of the cultural value of the artist over curator within contemporary art exhibitions and has serious problems for the overall question of advocacy within the art world. As Gertrud Sandqvist has warned, the curated exhibition is not intended merely to reinforce the identity of the artist or of the curator. Instead of seeing curating as one of the rare, more intellectual, positions in the processes of art-circulation, there is a danger that curators may become mere agents for the artists and risk as a type of trademark. So, if the exhibition is a producer of meaning, then its purpose is different from the art market's, and possibly also from the artist's (Sandqvist 1999: 43–44). Finally, as Maria Lind has pointed out reverence towards the work of art has its own problematic: it is suspiciously close to resting upon ideas about art as detached from the rest of our existence; and it often conceals the concept of a curator as 'pure provider' who simply supports an artist without affecting the exhibition and its reception (Lind 1998).

The same old story of repressed histories: by way of concluding the beginning

Prior to the 1990s, few historical assessments or curatorial paradigms existed, let alone a discourse specific to contemporary curatorial practice. As an historical discourse, curating still has yet to be fully established as an academic field of enquiry. In *The Power of Display: A History of Installation at MoMA*, 1998, Mary Anne Staniszewski proposed that western art history had forgotten to take into account the functions performed by curating, exhibition design and spatially arranged exhibition forms. For Staniszewski, our relationship to this past is not only a question of what art is now seen to have been part of this history, but what kind of documentation and evidence of its display has survived. She writes: 'What is omitted from the past reveals as much about a culture as what is recorded as history and circulates as collective memory.' (Staniszewski 1998: xxi)

Visual effect, display and narrative are central to any curated exhibition. The exhibition remains the most privileged form for the presentation of art; thus, display may be understood as the core of exhibiting. Staniszewski suggests that the history of the exhibition is one of our most culturally 'repressed' narratives. The contextualization of space and its rhetoric have been overshadowed by the context of art in terms of epochs and artists' *oeuvre*, despite the fact that exhibition installations have had such a crucial significance for how meaning is created in art. One of the key factors in the production of artistic posterity is the dominance of the modernist 'white cube', which eliminated the context of architecture and space as well as of institutional conditions. According to Thomas McEvelley, the endurance of the power structures inherent to the white cube centres on that

[...] of undying beauty, of the masterpiece. But in fact it is a specific sensibility, with special limitations and conditions that is so glorified. By suggesting eternal ratification of a certain sensibility, the white cube suggests the eternal ratification of the claims of the caste or group sharing their sensibility. (McEvelley 1999: 9)

Hans Ulrich Obrist is one of numerous curators to have mirrored Staniszewski's assessment, by stating: 'seeing the importance of exhibition design provides an approach to art history that does acknowledge the vitality, historicity and the time and site bound character of all aspects of culture' (Obrist 2001a). He has claimed that this amnesia 'not only obscures our understanding of experimental exhibition history, it also affects innovative curatorial practice.' (Obrist 2001b) In many of the interviews I have conducted over the last few years, contemporary curators often refer to the amnesiac effect of missing literature, and what Brian O'Doherty called 'radical forgetfulness' towards innovative pre-white cube exhibition forms. So the institutionalization of 'the white cube' since the 1950s meant that 'presence before a work of art means that we absent ourselves in favour of the Eye and the Spectator.' (O'Doherty 1976) According to O'Doherty such a disembodied faculty meant that art was essentially seen as autonomous and experienced primarily by formal visual means.

Aside from the series of essays that made up *Inside the White Cube*, first published in *Artforum* in 1976, there had been very little subsequent examinations of display practices of the early twentieth century, less still the notion that contemporary art curation was affected by any lack of contextualizing history. The 1990s could be said to have begun the process of remembering, during a moment of emergency when curatorial programmes had little material to refer to by way of discourse specific to the curatorial field.

It was into this epistemic gap that contemporary curatorial discourse began to take shape in the 1990s, and a generation of curators emerged during what Michael Brenson called 'the curator's moment' (Brenson 1998). I would argue that the prioritization of all things contemporary within recent curatorial projects, alongside the concentration on an individualization of the curatorial gesture has created a particular strand of discourse that is hermetic at times. At the same time it is self-referential, curator-centred and, most evidently, in a constant state of flux: curatorial knowledge is now becoming a mode of discourse with unstable historical foundations.

From surveying the key debates within publications dedicated to contemporary curatorial practice, it is apparent that curatorial discourse is in the midst of its own production. Curating is 'becoming discourse' where curators are willing themselves to be the key subject and producer of this discourse. So far, for those unwilling to accept the provision made for the figure of the curator within the reconfigured cultural field of production, critical response has been maintained at the level of an over-simplified antagonism, where the practice(s) of artist and curator are separated out. If it is to continue, the gap between curatorial criticism and curator-led discourse will only widen further.

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