

FORMS OF PRACTICE: CURATING IN THE ACADEMY

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I've been worrying that we talk about curating too much. We never used to talk about curating like this. We just got on with it. Actually, we hardly even had a name for it. But as it takes shape as an academic subject, the level of self-consciousness that this produces provokes a form of rhetorical, even ironic, curating. It's our fault. At best we are at a moment that coins the new languages of curating. At worst the academy becomes home to curating about curating. Curating as subject, but with no subject to curate. Surely the practice of curating offers more possibilities than that. Curating as research. Curating in the lab.

But it's still early days for curating. And even more so for curating as an academic subject. The growth of curating programs around the world seems to reflect demand from potential students, if not necessarily from the institutions that might later employ them. According to this trajectory, one nightmare scenario is that there might soon be as many curators as artists—a sort of concierge service for art, every artist having their own curator in tow. And then there are the specializations, where curating is invoked to serve every type of micro-medium.

What accounts for this interest? There's a cynical suggestion that it's a desire to participate in the art world. It does sound glamorous, but there are easier ways to crash the parties. I want to argue for something else: that there is an emerging discipline of curating that relocates its legacies, as it gradually frees itself from the constraints of the institution and comes to occupy a unique place in the academy. It needs to be sited there if only to define very often what it is not. The discourse of curating is not about methodologies of display or histories of the museum, but about an expanded field of practice. I want to argue against the trend for curatorial specializations in favor of curating as a more inclusive mediating practice.

There is a paradox to this, given that curating, I would argue, must be understood in terms of practice rather than as a supplementary activity

tacked onto the end of art history. It is not art history, nor is it museology. Rather, it functions in a variety of ways to produce a language of its own that goes beyond another styling of critical theory. It is responsive, of course, in its relationship to art and to artists, but it may also be proactive in the ways in which it seeks to establish spaces and contexts of operation for works and people.

The adherence to practice is an ideological position. Immediately this flags up the difficulties of teaching curating *as a subject*. It's not a subject at all, but rather a framework or critical mechanism to enable self-criticality, and to expand a field of vision. It's tempting even to propose curating as a *genre*. Curating not so much as critique or commentary, but as a formal manifestation of practice. Genre, here, is a definable space or language within or against which one might work continuously. To propose curating as a genre would suggest that it is a practice that is not exclusively responsive or secondary to the styles of art with which it collaborates.

Curating as a taught subject is not even 20 years old. The program I inherited eight years ago at Goldsmiths, for example, had been run along a social science model, for no apparent reason, as far as I could determine, other than to apply some formal rigor to this relatively new discipline. All the more strange, as it was positioned in the fine art department rather than under the umbrella of art history. The art school has been comfortably embedded in the British University since the 1950s, with all the implications that come with the notion of supporting artistic practice as an academic, assessable subject.

Analyzing the specifications of the curatorial program we inherited at Goldsmiths, my colleagues and I understood that it had been framed within the university institution to invoke systems of knowledge that were subject-specific. It's hard to excavate what exactly the motivations for this were, but they were perhaps related to an inherent institutional nervousness at the prospect of this new discipline.

Curating programs framed themselves in the early days through a tripartite model of artist-curator-audience. But much of what was taught relied heavily upon museological technicalities, social engagement, and a small measure of connoisseurship thrown in. A training in a portfolio of predetermined skills, rather than in a more complex development of an individuated practice. No negotiation of *position*, of where the curator might be in spaces in which art circulates and comes to be seen.

It seems to me that the moment for curating programs has really occurred in the last decade, exactly when permission for curating as a practice has become fully part of the discourse of the broader art world. And the moment when curating came into its own, no longer obliged to defend

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This is not as radical as it sounds. And it is certainly not bad news. It means that the moment you recognize curating as a practice, another type of contextualization comes to take the place of the canon, opening it up beyond one singular history or methodology. And because of the openness of the practice it is not a question of curriculum.

There's a blank space to be filled, and indeed a space to be forced open, where the curator is accountable to a multitude of influences. In this way curating cannot be taught, because it should anticipate being out of its depth. Curating doesn't tick boxes, but flows over the margins. Practice is an unsteady condition that thrives on the spaces its experimentation opens up. Certainly there is an articulacy that can be developed around practice. Context, if you will. But it is not prescriptive. If context is almost the sum of what one might be able to teach, by the same token, curating as a taught subject should recognize that it cannot hope to cover all the ground. It must be subject to constant change and displacement. (And never rely upon the same reading list from one year to the next.)

There's a function for the curator that needs to be defined beyond footnoting what has gone before. The model that emerges must be one of subjectivity, where the curator produces an alternative set of histories that work backward to locate themselves.

By the same token, with hindsight, as we attempted to rethink how curating might be taught, we might well have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. In our revisions, we chose not to prioritize technical skill sets in favor of learning those practicalities on the job. We do not teach a history of display from the *Wunderkammer* to *When Attitudes . . .* for fear of an overindebtedness to art history. Instead we conduct seminars according to the practices of the students. We shouldn't do more than structure the space in which their projects are tested among their peers. No thematics, except perhaps the understated anticipation of barely visible memes, or an unstable zeitgeist. No theory as a starting point, except in the service of a project under discussion.

And yet, almost reluctantly, we found ourselves reintroducing histories into the discourse. But this time the perspective was different. For example, at Goldsmiths we have developed a curatorial histories course inside the program that is entirely driven by the students. They select the exhibitions that are to be brought to the seminar for discussion. They rewrite the history of these precedents. What we continue to learn from this is just how curating is used for dramatically different agendas, and continues to be read differently, depending on one's perspective. This sound like a banal truism, given the uncontested internationalism of contemporary art, when there is no continent

or region without its own biennial or art fair. Because we are all subscribed to e-flux, the new curating reveals not so much a distinction of content, but a dramatic difference of purpose. We never anticipated that our students would wish to use curating as a language that changes so dramatically depending on the context.

If the ethics of curating are to be based on the obligations that emerge with practice, then how is it possible to negotiate the curated object if, by definition, it is absent from the site of the discourse? Art schools have long taught around a produced object, in the studio, where, for the most part, the object is fabricated. The critique takes place with a materialized work, or at least the work in progress. There's something to see, to walk around. But that's not always a possibility within the practice of curating. The acts of curating are so often deferred. The processes of production may be drawn out, and might occur much later in the day, or, of course, elsewhere.

But there must be a way to carry forward the encounter of the studio critique into the obligations of curating. It's an intense encounter, and always an ethical one. Facing up to the work of art and finding a language for it. I would wish to argue that there is a possibility of a curatorial critique that retains this ethical obligation, even with the physical absence of the works of art under discussion. Practice, or research, occurs elsewhere. In this way the academy is not necessarily the site of that research, but a location that gathers these findings into an open discourse.

In the name of curating, even the objects sometimes get in the way. We became commitment-phobic in this flight from the museum, adeptly avoiding any obligation at all to the materiality of the collection. Indeed, the triumph for the independent curator was the ability to be detached from an obligation to a collection as such.

The curator was no longer at home. Uprooted, the curator could operate in a variety of registers and locations in a practice of curatorial temporality, rather than any consolidation of history. And this was a battle worth fighting. It signals the moment when curating begins. But we lost the *touch*; we hardly handled anything. And sometimes you do need a home to go home to.

Returning to the collection, we've renegotiated it through a couple of surprising, unanticipated routes. If today's generation of curators inherits a legacy of dematerialized, process- and discourse-driven curating, the physical absence that is produced in the wake of such strategies becomes a site of mourning and loss. Something was left behind.

At the same time, the past decade has seen the growth of independent collections, far beyond the control and rigor of any museum. Independent, willful, without constraint, these collections reflect an increased interest in and hunger for contemporary art as economic and intellectual capital.

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Highly visualized outputs, generating speed through consumption. And no one has begun to think their way through them in any critical way, except as symptoms of a market. But their curatorial legacy will prove much more interesting.

The object returns, however subversive the form. Indeed, the more subversive the better. The contemporary collection has become infinitely accommodating; there is nothing it could not bring under its auspices. It moves quickly, rashly, and does not fret with buyer's remorse. But it can only do this without overindebtedness to a past. What is collected is a manifestation of existential desire. It does not have to tell the whole story. It simply tells its own, here, now. Outside of history.

In such a climate the contemporary curator has to negotiate this surplus and is obliged to reengage with the idea of collection building. These collections become the sites where new conjunctions might be formed, temporarily, that collapse museums' histories in favor of an ethics of subjectivity. The collection must be irresponsible, must refuse to retread the territory of the museum, and the curator now faces a unique opportunity to engage with this.

Another side of this practice of curating would be to propose the notion of the non-curator, perhaps in a way similar to how Brian Eno used to speak of himself as a non-musician. But if curating resists becoming a subject, then why try to test its limits in academia? My sense is that we have learned a great deal through the curating programs about where curating might operate. Curating beyond the exhibition, a new generation of curators want to curate wherever gaps occur in their world experience. A sort of daily practice of curating. If the academic context runs the risk of producing a potentially unhealthy degree of self-consciousness in curatorial practice, so too it needs a degree of self-awareness to seek out corners of interpretation that critical discourse alone cannot reach.

A non-curating, or minor curating, then, that resists the monumental in favor of a temporary critique. Curating as problem solving, sketching out the territory.

Often invisible, its effect is incremental and highly localized. It is not restricted to proposing specialist expertise, but rather offers a tailored response to where you find yourself, here, now. While fully conversant with the language of the biennial or the museum or the catalogue raisonné, this is a curating of temporality, always in motion, barely observable, but embedded within the practices of art making. Again, an ethics of curating.

A longtime collaborator of Harald Szeemann once told me that Szeemann never included a work in an exhibition that he had not traveled to see in the flesh. The curator today might express disappointment if something did not yield immediate results in a Google image search. There's some

legitimacy to the young curators' strategy, as much as we very much frown upon it in class. After all, Aby Warburg's dislocation of art history brilliantly anticipated the equivalence and simultaneity of the Google search. But I suspect that Szeemann, if he was alive today, would still prefer to conduct his research the long way round.

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