

Propositions on curating, or how much curating is involved in social change

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Richter, D. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9830-9764>
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PROPOSITIONS ON CURATING

or How Much Curating Is Involved in Social Change

by
Dorothee
RICHTER

Dorothee Richter is a professor in Contemporary Curating, has been head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating (MAS/CAS) since 2005, at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). She also co-founded with Susanne Clausen the "Research Platform for Curating, Practice-Based Doctoral Programme" a collaboration of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and the Department of Fine Arts, University of Reading, now the "PhD in practice in curating". From 1999 to the end of 2003, Richter was artistic director of the Künstlerhaus Bremen, where she curated a discursive programme based on feminist issues, urban situations, power relation issues, and institutional critique. She has worked as a curator ever since. Some of her curatorial projects: New Social Sculptures at Kunstmuseum Thun, (2012) Speculative Curating, Performative Interventions, Migros Museum, Zürich (2016/17).

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“Curating and Social Change” was a workshop we organised at Connecting Space Hong Kong, in which the speakers from Hong Kong sketched their contemporary situation, the slowly diminishing public spaces, the changes in the political systems, and the visible and not so visible censorship. The speakers explained to us a variety of artistic and curatorial interventions that were initiated during the Umbrella Movement in 2014, when a big movement for more democratic rights started. A deeply-felt urgency has been driving these actions; the speakers from Hong Kong unfolded for us the actions and artistic practices they have used in the past few years. For this workshop, we were able to provide a meeting space, a discussion space, and because of the special situation of Connecting Spaces Hong Kong – Zurich being part of a Swiss university and situated in Hong Kong, we were also able to provide a safe space.

Beside these dedicated goals of a specific curatorial question, I would like to argue that curating as such is part of social change in the field of cultural practices, and that there are power struggles in interpretive dominance, which I will outline in the following essay, as well as position both our and our programmes’¹ practice in contemporary art and thinking.

ISSUES OF POWER

The power struggle started with the instituting of the new figure of the curator with documenta 5, as was argued by Beatrice von Bismarck.² The figure mimicked, on an iconographic level, the position of god, a king, and a genius, and is therefore deeply involved in instituting male white dominance in the 1970s, as I have showed elsewhere.³ The crowd around the curator could be identified as the artist community of the 1960s, who empowered themselves and questioned the gatekeeper function of museums and galleries through overcoming ways of distribution, production, and reception through the creation of their own channels of presenting art: in the streets, in concert halls, through newsletters, producing in communities, and upending any

1 The Postgraduate Programme in Curating, CAS/ MAS, Zurich University of the Arts, and the PhD in Practice in Curating programme, a cooperation with the University of Reading in this field, see www.curating.org. 2 Beatrice von Bismarck, “‘The Master of the Works’: Daniel Buren’s Contribution to documenta 5, Kassel 1972,” in Nanne Buurman, Dorothee Richter (eds.), “documenta: Curating the History of the Present,” *OnCurating* Issue 33 (2017), pp. 54-60. See www.on-curating.org. 3 Dorothee Richter, “Artists and Curators as Authors - Competitors, Collaborators, or Team-workers?,” in Michael Birchall (ed.), “On Artistic and Curatorial Authorship,” *OnCurating* Issue 19 (2013), <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/artists-and-curators-as-authors-competitors-collaborators-or-team-workers.html#.WSvttY7c3EE>, accessed 28 May 2017.

genre boundary. This movement and their revolts are still present in the iconic image of Szeemann, but also subdued.

In 2010, Anton Vidokle, one of the three initiators of e-flux and e-flux Journal, lamented the increasing amount of “art without artists,” and pointed out the problems associated with the curatorial position as such. Within that context, he made specific critical reference to the “Curating Degree Zero Archive,” launched by Barnaby Drabble and myself. Curating Degree Zero Archive was a travelling archive that, in cooperation with various institutions, academies, and exhibition spaces, was shown in eighteen cities, and further expanded with our cooperation partners at each venue. A fundamental aspect of our concept was and is to take the archive as an occasion for discourse: at each venue there were discussions about what is meant by a critical curatorial perspective, how the relationship between the artist and the curator can be conceived, what is meant by curatorial training, etc. At the moment, we are also working on a new digital platform, which will provide a variety of interviews relating to curating. Connecting Space supported us with the possibility to interview in Hong Kong Pauline J. Yao, Christina Li, Aric Chen, Qinyi Lim, Freya Chou, Cosmin Costinas, Yung Ma, Hammad Nasar, and Lars Nittve.

Anton Vidokle is sceptical about the archival tendency in curating: “Yet another example of such a tendency is the ‘Curating Degree Zero Archive,’ a traveling exhibition of ‘curatorial research’ designed as a kind of artistic installation. Conceived by curators, the exhibition circulates through a network of public art institutions largely run by curators. The issue is not whether curators should have archives or open them to others, or to what degree this is interesting or not; rather, the question concerns whether the people in charge of administering exhibitions of art should be using the spaces and funding available for art to exhibit their own reading lists, references, and sources as a kind of artwork.”⁴ Vidokle’s text is pervaded by the longing for the traditional artist subject. In a lengthy critical response, Sabeth Buchmann observes that the criticism voiced by Vidokle in his essay with the “alarmist” title “Art without Artists?” — to

⁴ Anton Vidokle, “Art without Artists,” in *e-flux Journal*, No. 16 (2010). <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-artists/>, accessed 6 January 2016.

the effect that curators claim “the status of artists and critics in inadmissible manner” — “... was not new”.⁵ The interesting thing is that, between the e-flux mailing list, an exhibition space with which he occasionally cooperates, a web journal, and several archives, Vidokle himself pursues a blend of artistic and curatorial fields of action, if from the artist’s perspective. Incidentally, he carries out these activities within an economic context, which has its own problematics, as one might suspect.

Sabeth Buchmann likewise makes reference to the 1960s and 1970s, but she describes the examination and dissolution of distinct professional fields by Lucy Lippard as a feminist position, who increasingly rejected her role as an art critic in order to design new conceptual models of presentation. Institutional critique and the transcendence of genre/media and professional boundaries were aspects of the meanwhile historical reorganization of the art field. To quote Sabeth Buchmann again: “What is astonishing, against this background, about Vidokle’s statement is his claiming of a standpoint supposedly outside the system and oblivious to this historical context.”⁶ Different movements and experiments such as Fluxus and Concept Art triggered the dissolution of previously existing classifications. What does this mean for our model of materiality and imagination? What does it mean? How is meaning or ideology produced? Seen in a positive way, curating provides still new ways of constructing meaning, which also means, as a questionable task, a cultural tool for creating affect and attention.

But what happened exactly? Why is curating on the one hand rejected as a competitor to artistic practice and why, on the other hand, is there this enormous wave of a desire to call oneself “a Curator”? And why have an overwhelming variety of different study programmes on “Curating” or “Curatorial Studies” or “Spatial and Curatorial Programmes” been instituted — sometimes even several of these at one single university? What is behind this longing for this notion/title? And could there be a position of shared interest between artist and curators, a being with that insists on specific contents?

⁵ Sabeth Buchmann, “Curating with/in the System,” in Dorothee Richter, Barnaby Drabble (eds.), “Curating Degree Zero Archive: Curatorial Research,” *OnCurating* Issue 26 (October 2015), <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-26-reader/curating-within-the-system.html#.WSvsFY7c3EE>, accessed 28 May 2017.
⁶ Sabeth Buchmann, “Curating with/in the System.”

WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES CURATING SO DIFFERENT, SO APPEALING?

The suspicion that curating might in some way be related to post-Fordist working methods was already voiced by Olga Fernandez at a symposium we held with the Fridericianum in Kassel, which was organised by Rein Wolfs and myself.⁷ In her contribution, Fernandez correctly argued that curating is representative of precisely that change in the world of work that can be described as post-Fordist working methods and so-called immaterial work: a new form of the generation and organization of knowledge — albeit without a more equitable distribution of the added value.

According to various authors, curating is a veritable paradigm of intellectual, immaterial work, but also of the organization of social relationships, and the initiation of social cooperation. Could this also emphasize collaborations between artists and curators in which the specific categories and roles would begin to merge? The well-connected travelling curator, however, must be understood as a “figure of longing”: these new forms of knowledge production evidently imply the promise of being able to produce meaning in a new way in our chaotic, crisis-ridden world. The curator appears to have attained an authorial stance; in the digitally-networked world, he or she succeeds in adopting a speaker’s position. In my opinion, however, it is no more than an ideal-typical illusion of a curator that leads to these attributions.

On the one hand, they factor out the real, material post-Fordist working conditions, and on the other hand they imagine an impact beyond the boundaries of the art field — a political impact difficult to be realized in a straightforward way. Maurizio Lazzarato outlines the downside of immaterial work: “Precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility, and hierarchy are the most obvious characteristics of metropolitan immaterial labor. Behind the label of the independent ‘self-employed’ worker, what we actually find is an intellectual proletarian, but who is recognized as such only by the employers who exploit him or her. It is worth noting that in this kind of working existence it becomes

⁷ Olga Fernandez, “Just what is it that makes ‘Curating’ so different, so appealing?,” in Dorothee Richter and Rein Wolfs (eds.), *INSTITUTION AS MEDIUM. CURATING AS INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE?*, *OnCurating*, No. 8 (2011), p. 40, http://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateiverwaltung/old%20Issues/ONCURATING_Issue8.pdf, accessed 6 January 2016.

increasingly difficult to distinguish leisure time from work time. In a sense, life becomes inseparable from work.”⁸ All of these characteristics become uncannily familiar when one thinks about contemporary freelance curatorial work.

CURATING AS CARE FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The topic of curating as care has been taken up by different authors, for example, Elke Krasny in her not yet published PhD on Susan Lacy’s project of networked international dinner parties, “The International Dinner Party. A Curatorial Model, Re-Mapping Affinities, Transnational and Feminist Practices.” Curating as care in this context is an outspoken feminist concept of networking women in the arts.⁹ Curating understood in this way positions the task of curating consciously as a possibility to produce platforms of shared interests, so to speak. This “being with,” this space of negotiation and shared interests beyond genre boundaries and specific roles in the art field, was what Connecting Spaces aimed at. “Being with” understood in a sense that Jean-Luc Nancy proposed would always mean questioning any form of institutionalised community.¹⁰

On the other hand, it is Nanne Buurman’s merit to draw attention to the fact that the notion of “curating as a labor of love” and “curating as networking” also problematically colludes with the neoliberal deployment of traditional concepts of femininity in post-Fordist societies and their regimes of immaterial and affective labour.¹¹ She attributes the performance of this shift in curatorial work, for example, to Carolyn Christoph Barkargiev’s stagings through the catalogue Logbook accompanying dOCUMENTA (13).¹²

I agree with Buurman’s analysis that this is affirmed as a performative cultural utterance to position immaterial and affective labour as naturalized. Biopolitical means that, in Foucault’s usage, this technique of power does not deal with single subjects in the way that Althusser’s concept of interpellation was formulated, but that this cultural utterance would furthermore influence major arts of societies. Immaterial and

⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 133-47. ⁹ Elke Krasny, *The International Dinner Party. A Curatorial Model, Re-Mapping Affinities, Transnational and Feminist Practices*, unpublished PhD, University of Reading, 2014. ¹⁰ See also *OnCurating* No. 7, “Being-with: Community Ontological and Political Perspectives,” Elke Bippus, Joerg Huber, Dorothee Richter (eds.); here the notion of “Being with” is discussed, http://www.on-curating.org/issue-7.html#.WXc_X47c02w, accessed 25 July 2017. ¹¹ Nanne Buurman, “Angels in the White Cube” and “CCB With...”. See also Buurman “Vom Gefängniswärter zur Heilerin. Kuratorische Autorschaften in vergeschlechtlichten Ökonomien,” *Kritische Berichte*, No. 4 (December 2016), pp. 109-116. ¹² Nanne Buurman, “CCB With... Displaying Curatorial Relationality in dOCUMENTA (13) The Logbook,” in Nanne Buurman, Dorothee Richter (eds.), “documenta: Curating the History of the Present,” *OnCurating* No. 33 (2017), pp. 69-85.

affective labour are no longer marginal, but can be seen as installed firmly, not only in creative industries but all over in worldwide financial business and on all levels of management tasks in companies, as Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt, as well as Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, have pointed out in their discussions on immaterial labour.

What the different theoretical approaches have in common is that they want to explore how power is reorganised in global capitalism, in which the state apparatuses have lost their central role. Here, one has to think about the enormously powerful state apparatus of Mainland China, which is already intensively influencing cultural policies in Hong Kong. One might argue in line with this thought that the ideological apparatuses have gained immense terrain in influencing people, which makes this area also subject to suspicion for any superpower. So any production of images is crucial these days, a circumstance of which we should be more aware. Thus, some ways of curating and some representations of curating can be seen as affirming neoliberal working conditions.

NOTIONS OF CURATING

Taking up my argument from there, it became clear that curating is not an existing practice as such; it is, as are the arts generally, a contested field in which all sorts of performances, or speech acts, are produced. Speech acts that create meaning function as hegemonic or anti-hegemonic machines, to put it roughly. For us, Curating Degree Zero Archive offered, through the tour, the invited panels, and the experimental presentations, first and foremost the possibility to discuss all of this, the power positions, the speech acts, the creation of meaning, with whom and how to collaborate. Likewise, the curatorial workshop at Connecting Space in Hong Kong, with the input of local artists and curators Yang Yeung, Kacey Wong, Michael Leung, Bo Zheng, Clara Cheung, and Wen Yau, made shared knowledge production possible, discussing different forms of activist/artistic utterings in a society in which the public space is difficult to maintain. With the digital platform “Curating explored with a camera,” we hope

to make these kind of discussions and fights on contested spaces even more visible.

In the following, I will sharpen our approach to curating:

1. In our programmes, we understand curating, or the curatorial, not as a philosophical concept, but as a practice that is deeply involved in politics of display, politics of site, politics of transfer and translation, and regimes of visibility. It is based on a concept of critical research that takes as its starting point the investigation of what is often the overly simplistic understanding of the curator as a new agent in the fields of art and culture. The programme understands the curatorial as a multi-authored approach to the production of meaning, which is intrinsically linked to transformations of contemporary societies, the reorganization of labour, cultural policies, politics of inclusion/exclusion, and issues posed by points of intersection.

The problematic of the notion of “the curatorial” is a nobilitation of this complex production, and therefore it is in danger of becoming nebulous. Also, the idea of insisting on just another way of authorship has its problems; curating can become a driving force exactly in the moment, when it leaves the pattern of single authorship and becomes a project of shared interests. This was also the approach of Connecting Space Hong Kong, in which the process of working together became crucial.

2. Curating exists at the interface between the spatial, the theoretical, and the visual. Curating produces meaning in the manner analysed in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* for complex sign systems. This meaning is produced in a specific historical moment in relation to the arts, to a political situation, to a cultural context, to a social situation.

3. Curating produces subjects in the sense that each instance of curating consists of a media conglomerate representing an invocation. Subjects can be overpowered by intense and emotional environments, or be positioned in an overview

situation; above all, they can be entertained. It is not easy to attain true participation; this is only possible when both the content and the form are taken into careful consideration, whether by an artist or by curators.

4. Curating is a discursive formation as sketched by Michel Foucault; it produces inclusions and exclusions, it rules over right or wrong (“good” art or “bad” art), it produces constellations such as discourse societies and institutions, as well as material conditions (production, budgets, etc.). In this sense, curating is knowledge production and truth production (if this is conceived of as historically produced, with very specific effects). From the structural perspective, curating, as a product of Western cultural art production, comprises racist, sexist, and sociological — i.e. class-oriented — exclusion mechanisms. To curate means to be aware of this and to also be aware that culture is produced continuously. “What people call transculture is culture as it happens. Culture alive is its own counter-example. Transculturation is not something special and different. It is a moment in a taxonomy of the normality of what is called culture. To assign oneself the special task of cultural translation or plotting cultural translation has therefore to be put within a political context.”¹³ Along this line of argument, Connecting Spaces understands transculturality not so much as a dialogue between “Asia” and “Europe,” as the implied understanding of “culture” tends to either stay abstract or have an identitarian effect. But cultures (in the plural) are understood as constantly migrating, in flux, and leading to hybridizations on a societal and on a personal level, not limited to geographical fixity or civic identity, but also including disciplinary provenance, gender or social backgrounds, and the power structures involved.

5. Curating takes place with artworks (which themselves often already represent complex situations), but also without: the act of curating a panel discussion, an archive, a social situation, a website, etc. is an act of meaning production through the selection and combination of cultural artefacts

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “More Thoughts on Cultural Translation,” *eipcp* (2008), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0608/spivak/en>, accessed 8 March 2016.

in space and time. In relation to art, curating is a subordinate system (within the framework provided by the art system, an institution, a city, a nation, a tourism strategy, etc.). This is emphasized by Magda Tyzlik-Carver: “So what is a curatorial system? Firstly, we need to identify various elements that are part of this system. Curating is one of them, but also online platforms, networked tools, software, and a public as users/producers/immaterial labourers. However, the notion of a curatorial system also recognises the interactivity among all the elements, the relations generated and forms of production mobilised within the system.”¹⁴


6. Curating means to negotiate. To have access to a space of representation always also means to work in a contested space. Envy ensues, various groups and players strive to exert influence. Every curator has to work in a sphere of intersecting and contradictory demands and limitations. To be aware of this, and to test the limits, is what Felix Ensslin means when he examines curating within the context of the hysteria discourse¹⁵ and the university discourse. Therefore Connecting Spaces itself has to deal with the tensions between the affirmation of the institution that is its commissioner and an institutional critique as well as between different forms of knowledge and its practices. It may act as a space that opens up the opportunity to leave the university for some time — and to come back to it with new questions and desires.

7. Curating is not to be reduced to a form of administration, as is implied by various study and further training programmes. These courses provide their participants with a number of organisation and management tools, for example, knowledge of loan contracts, condition reports, insurance, transport, cooperation with business enterprises, etc. While it is true that this can all be part of curatorial work, art handling as such is just one organisational part of curating.

8. Like everything in the art field, curating is always and unavoidably linked with the art market. There is no such thing as “outside the discourse” or “outside the market.” For

¹⁴ See Magda Tyzlik-Carver, “Interfacing the Commons. Curatorial System as a Form of Production on the Edge”, <http://www.kurator.org/media/uploads/publications/essays/public-interfaces/tyzlik-carver.pdf>, accessed 6 January 2017. ¹⁵ Felix Ensslin, “The Subject of Curating - Notes on the Path towards a Cultural Clinic of the Present,” in Dorothee Richter, Barnaby Drabble (eds.), “Curating Degree Zero Archive: Curatorial Research,” *OnCurating* No. 26 (2015), http://www.on-curating.org/issue-26-reader/the-subject-of-curating-notes-on-the-path-towards-a-cultural-clinic-of-the-present.html#.WXjoyY7_QiM, accessed 25 July 2017.

curators and artists alike, what is crucial is the decision as to how one positions oneself within and in relation to the discourse/market.

9. As with any cultural utterance, curating is only able to interfere in an instance of social change as an active player, if this meaning producing activity will cooperate with other social urgencies and demands. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau have called this forming a chain of equivalence. Therefore, we are back again at the “Curating and Social Change” workshop. Curating can offer a space of representation, a space of discussion, a meeting space, a space for reflection, a space to learn from one another. Art, curating, and political action are not the same, but culture is a space in which to create consent or dissent relative to political systems. Therefore, our programmes have been developed in the context of cultural analysis, theories of power, and theories of communities based on feminist, queer, postcolonial, ecological, post-Marxist, and other political and emancipatory positions. Many of these positions emerge out of political struggles or social movements. We see curatorial knowledge production as a space for the negotiation of social, political, cultural and economic conflicts. Therefore we understand curating as agency from which new constellations emerge. 

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BOOK DESIGN

ART DIRECTION

Michele Salati
www.michelesalati.it

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Córdova Canillas
www.cordovacanillas.com

PHOTOGRAPHIC INSERTS

Robert Bartholot
www.bartholot.net

INFO-GRAPHIC

Doron Goldfarb

PRINTING

Agpograf

PROOFREADING

Brandon Farnsworth
Matthew Hanson
Nuria Krämer
Patrick Müller

TRANSCRIPTION

Brandon Farnsworth
Matthew Hanson

TRANSLATION

Adam Bresnahan
Brandon Farnsworth
Ophelia Huang
Mark Kyburz
Steven Lindberg

ZURICH UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

Toni-Areal
Pfingstweidstrasse 96
8005 Zurich, Switzerland

CONNECTING SPACE HONG KONG

G/F, Wah Kin Mansion,
18-20 Fort Street
North Point, Hong Kong