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Curatorial Cultures – Considering Dynamic Curatorial Practice

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“Exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known.” [1]

Joan Gibbons, in her introductory narrative to the curatorial section of *Hothaus Papers*, reveals how the etymology of the word curate (as in ‘curate’ as a noun) goes back to the Latin word for care, ‘cura’, and through the religious art of the middle ages evolved into ‘curatus’, in reference to the care of the soul. [2] This is a particularly evocative description of the actions of the contemporary curator, as one that cares for our cultural products and their critical significance. Contemporary curators are summarised with a range of descriptive words such as caretaker, facilitator, mediator, catalyst, context provider, collaborator and negotiator. These have come to rise through the continuing prominence of the curator within exhibitions. A more public understanding of the term curator is only just beginning to shift away from the traditional role associated with museums and galleries.

The practice of curating is live and temporal. It has shifted dramatically from its anonymous backstage origin within dusty museums to a role at the forefront of modern art, and is responsible for conjuring both a synergy and a dynamic that operates across a multitude of levels. Curation is a rapidly growing practice and discourse that is fundamentally shifting the ways in which we view and receive art. Mari-Carmen Ramirez states that; “by contrast, the centrality accorded to contemporary art curators in the new system is evident in the multiplicity of extra-artistic roles and the diversity of performative arenas that have come to define our current practices.” [3]

O’Neill, in Rugg and Sedgewick [4], discusses the ascendancy of curatorial criticism since the 1960s, describing the critical shift away from the objects of art, to a critique of the space of exhibition. More relevantly, he references the ascendancy of the curatorial gesture in the 1990s and how this ‘began to establish curating as a potential nexus for discussion, critique and debate’. The rise of the curator can therefore be tracked through critical requirement. The role has adapted according to paradigm shifts, movements, cultural perspectives, and through the requirements of the work it chooses to curate.

Traditionally the curatorial role was to collect, archive and preserve works of art, and was seen as separate from its variable display. [5] Ramirez situates the curator as an

internationally recognised expert of the artworld establishment, I quote: “in this elite context, curators have traditionally functioned as arbiters of taste and quality. The authority of this arbiter role derived from an absolute - ultimately ideological - set of criteria grounded in the restrictive parameters of the canon on western Modernism/Post Modernism.”

The focus of the curatorial role has evolved from being that of a “behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter to a centralised position on a broader stage, with a creative, political and active part to play in the production, mediation and dissemination of art itself.” [7] The practice of collection within museums and galleries still remains the same, with a continual need for the assimilation of art collections and their preservation and display. This “time storage” as Hans Ulrich Obrist [8] labels it, is still massively important in cataloguing and preserving works. A perfect example is media art, where the necessity to archive digital and often ephemeral works is completely reliant on the survival of particular software and hardware. Therefore, to preserve the work, the associative technology must also be collected and conserved by the museum or gallery. The practice of archiving contemporary artworks has broadened relatively with the expansion of practices, and the responsibility of ensuring the future presentation of many works is thus massively reliant on the preservation of increasingly obsolete technical platforms.

There are several suggestions as to why the curatorial role has risen to the forefront of modern exhibitions, such as the increasing number of group shows from the 1980s onwards, the rise of Biennials and Art Fairs, and the general growth, complexity, diversification and collaborative nature of art practices. [9] There are more requirements for a mediator to collate, contextualise, translate and broker to a public the works shown in an exhibition. Thus contemporary curatorial practice has become much more holistic, dealing with the whole of the process as opposed to an element. Today’s curators are about authorship and agency, rather than the “reproductive processes of institutional power structures.” [10]

Curatorial practices have come to embody one of the most dynamic forms of cultural agency available today. The challenges represented by this role and its ability to affect a series of interdependent areas inaccessible through other, more restricted, modes of cultural practices requires a fluid and multidimensional approach [11] In the shift from the curator as master planner, Obrist [12] articulates how exhibitions have shifted from a historical approach of order and stability, to a place of flux and instability: the unpredictable. [13] In thinking about the curator’s role at the helm of such uncertainty, it becomes much clearer how the position has evolved and its contemporary requirements shaped.

The position in which the contemporary curator sits is one of emergence and flux. ‘Curator’ is a term in the constant state of ‘becoming’ writes O’Neill [14], ‘as long as “curating in practice” is continuously willing a flexible “common discourse” into being’. It can therefore be said that

curating is no longer about being somebody else, e.g. curator as negotiator or facilitator, it is about being a 'curator' as understood in discourse. In addressing what the role of the curator is, it is very much dependent, as previously stated, on the translation of practice into discourse. Even with the limited corresponding literature on curation, there exists a huge gap even within the documentation of fairly contemporary curatorial projects.

The actions of curating mean different things to different curators, who again work in different contexts and situations, locations and sites. [15] It is very much a cultural commentation role, experimental and discursive, necessarily responsive to socio-political and artistic shifts in a fluid culture. Our evolving curatorial dialogue seeks to embody movement and continuation in its descriptive qualities, and make visible and transparent the links and networks between meanings. For me curating is about the creation of new contexts through the bringing together of artworks, artists, private intentions, space etc, but also responding to the contexts of the artworks **that I seek to curate, and opening** up a discourse.

Personally, I consider that there is no curatorial evolution in the top-down chronological curation of museum culture; they do not bring anything to the table that is not already formulated. This is not to say that such events don't contribute to a broader artistic discourse through the collision of multiple artistic meanings, but in terms of curatorial practice such approaches reflect a person working at some remove from the processes of artistic production, instead of one actively in the thick of it. [16]

The curator will always be viewed as sort of contextualiser, whether in regard to artworks or the site of exhibition itself. Previously perceived as "experts on art's mediation by the sites of its display", the area of curatorial expertise sits markedly between the "private sphere of the production of art, on the one hand, and the public sphere of consumption, on the other." [17] Curation is always situated within a dynamic and is dependent on what has gone before to reveal originality in thinking. However, the notion of an expert sets the curator on a pedestal, setting their word apart from the multitude of voices, as opposed to embedding it within the many that together form a dialogue rather than a dictatorship.

The term Contextualiser infers a live and temporal practice rather than a static one. I have discussed previously the fluidity of the curatorial role in general, but now I want look at the ephemerality and performativity of the role in actuality. Ignoring for a moment all of the other aspects of curating, I want to focus for a minute specifically on the spatial aspect of display. A primary focus of the curatorial role is the public consumption of artworks and their associated contexts. The curator, in bringing a selection of works together either by a solo artist or in a group format, situates the practices within a dynamic. Yet this dynamic is not brought to life without an audience's engagement with the exhibition.

The 'window of liveness', from when an exhibition opens to when it closes its doors at the end of the day, reflects the performative aspect of the curatorial role. Irrelevant to whether the curator is absent or present in the space over this period of time, it is in this interval where the practice of curation is revealed. The collision of the production, mediation and dissemination of artworks becomes a performative gesture, making manifest the actual active 'practise' of curation. It can therefore be argued that curation is also very much concerned with contextualising sites of reception or live situations. The curator sets up a framework within which social engagement and exchange occur, experience is influenced, and new relational contexts emerge. Yet this aspect of an exhibition is often overlooked and its social value not considered.

The curatorial role is ever evolving in its relationship with site and place. With exhibition spaces no longer restricted to the traditional confines of a gallery, curation is about establishing and contextualising a site of exchange, referring to a space where artwork, site and audience converge. The 'exhibition space' exists where these conditions are met, and with Media Practices in particular focuses on the process of this convergence itself. This coming together of social, spatial and critical contexts generates a political space that exists within a wider cultural sphere. I prefer to use the term 'exhibition space' to represent the location where the artwork occurs, and to distinguish it from an institutional gallery space.

There have come to be more 'off-site' (non-gallery based) projects in recent years as exhibitions shift away from the white cube's signified emptiness [18] and critically acknowledge the role of site as part of the exhibition's context. I quote Brian O'Doherty [19] here, in order to contextualise Nick Kaye's description above, in his description of an ideal gallery, extracted from his book, *Inside the White Cube*. 'The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art". The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values'.

Site-specificity has long existed as an artistic genre, explored by artists such as Lacy, Smithson, Wodiczko and Acconci, with broad roots in Installation, Situationist, Land and Conceptual practices. Kaye, as previously cited, defines site-specific practices as those which, 'in one way or another, articulate exchanges between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined'. Although the basis of such exchanges has historically been grounded within the socio-political contexts of the site itself, contemporary site-specific works are concerned with developing a 'spatial-cultural discourse', described by Kwon [20] as combining ideas about art, architecture, urban design and theories of the city, social space and public space.

This merging of two critical directions; the white cube space of the object and the site-specific context of spatial works, has seen a new dialogue regarding the aesthetics of the relationship between artwork, place and audience develop. Exhibition spaces now exist 'off the map', and in the world, citing real life as their critical horizon and conceptualising the relationships and processes that occur within this context. (See fig.1).

There is no one set example of how media art practices function within a confined space; each performs differently, exerting different pressures on the conditional aspects that both determine and limit their relational capacities. Most works that function well in such spaces are often produced or commissioned to work within such parameters, and therefore are perhaps more site-specific in the traditional sense as they are intrinsically embedded within the site of production. However, such locations differ from their traditional predecessors in that the curatorial process also takes into account the relationship between site and artwork, and therefore is much more reliant on the audience to acknowledge and legitimise the connections made between the two. Out of the 'gallery's function as a place for viewing' [21] the audience can step outside of their predefined role as a viewing public and become authors or collaborators, abandoning any fixed ideas about what an audience should be. Hutchinson [22] states that "the unifying idea of the public can be a negation of the particularities and differences between and within people," suggesting that there is no 'authentic' public or audience.

This raw space provides a blank canvas for both the curator and artist that can be worked with accordingly to capture the characteristic of what the exhibition seeks overall to explore. Away from the agendas set by gallery spaces and the critical expectations of gallery audiences, alternative spaces reveal a space of potential, a space where anything can happen. This is very much a live space working with the conditions of subjectivity and presence, and dependent on an engagement across all elements. It is in this 'conditional' space that socially engaged and media practices projects sit, where contexts are formed and experience is lived. As an example, Allan Kaprow's Happenings are critically positioned by the artist, realised by the audience, influenced by the site, and politicised by the multiple perspectives and opinions of the participants. This condition of immediacy where a conflux of ideas, perspectives, conditions and experience meet mimics in Kaprow's eyes the grit and texture of everyday life.

Such conditions of immediacy are also opened up through interactive media works and emphasised or furthered by the opportunities afforded by the chosen exhibition site. As suggested, alternative exhibition spaces remove the audience's 'authenticity', permitting them to function in a more natural role. These circumstances allow a public authoring of the exhibition itself, with the public's interaction with artwork and site both contextualising and realising the exhibition as a space of engagement. (See fig.2).

In his article *The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse*, O'Neill [23] writes that "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." I consider how Luhmann's writings on art as a social system, and in particular his articulation of a reflective practice, could be applied to curatorial practice. I suggest that this would compare the action of 'exhibition making' or curatorial practice as being the equivalent of making an artwork. Luhmann understands art as an autopoietic system that is self-referential and recursive. [24] I view curation as a similar thing. Curation enables the space of exhibition to open up new possibilities for dialogue and exchange, with these new perspectives feeding back into the way in which the exhibition is perceived and reflected upon. The 'artwork' or 'practice' of the curator is the exhibition and all of its associated processes, thus again coming back to Luhmann's notion of practice as not being solely concerned with agency but rather the work's understanding of itself and how this reveals possibility for an exhibition to raise questions about itself and its environment. [25]

This becomes relevant when thinking about the broader social, cultural and political remit of curation and its practice. In its responsibility for the collaborative creation of context - that includes the artist/s; the artwork; the concept of the work and its representation; the facilitation of an exhibition's content; orienting the body of work [26], and finally the space of engagement with an audience - curatorial practice is very much the actions of a bricoleur. In reflecting the messiness and complexity of everyday contexts and building a knowledge formulated by experiences and relationships, the curator is a responsive practitioner; a collaborator in art's social relations.

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