Sheffield Hallam University

A colony provides a safe haven

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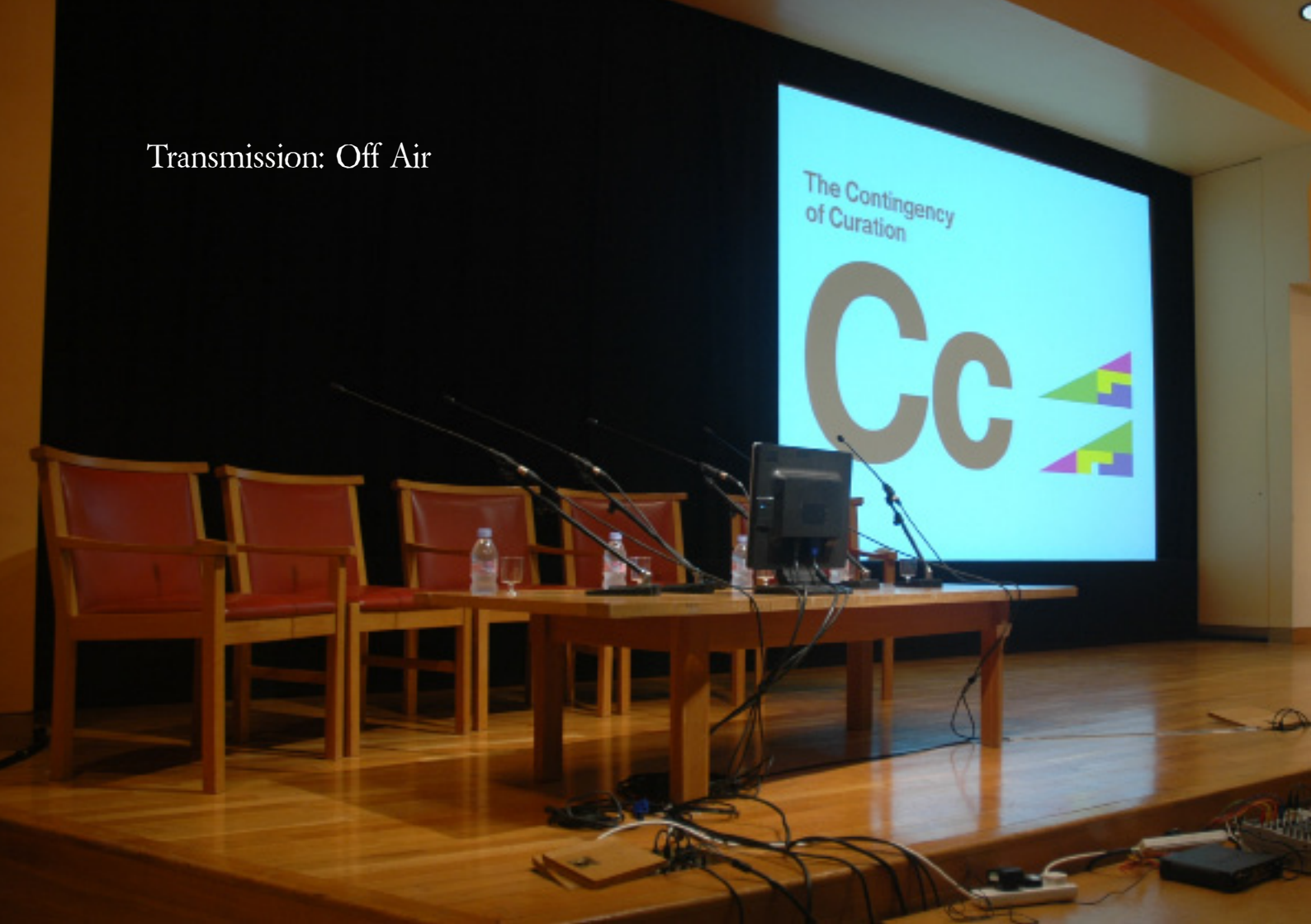


Transmission: Off Air

Jaspar Joseph-Lester, Amanda Beech & Matthew Poole

The Contingency of Curation

Jaspar Joseph-Lester, Amanda Beech & Matthew Poole

Introduction

The Contingency of Curation is a project led by three groups of postgraduate curating students from Chelsea College of Art, the University of Essex and Sheffield Hallam University. Over the course of the project we explored three primary figures of the curator; 'the autonomous curator and the institution'; 'collaboration and authorship'; and the curator as 'the agent of social change'. The discussion began with a seminar at Chelsea College of Art in late 2009. A further seminar at Site Gallery, Sheffield in February 2010 saw the themes emerge and develop. A 'discursive rehearsal' was held at Wimbledon Space in March 2010 where the final themes of the project were refined and the proposed guest speakers finalised. This then formed the framework for a conference at Tate Britain that took place on Friday 21 May 2010.

Speaking in a range of presentation formats, the conference moved across the terrains of art production, urban planning, art criticism, and art's reception, addressing the notion of the curator and the curatorial in its now, most pluralised form. This diversity of perspectives and formats provided the basis for each of the three panels to consider our assertion that despite the diversity of processes that make up the curatorial, its explicit presence in artistic culture, and its power to organize the reception and distribution of art, curation nevertheless continues to struggle to transform the conditions in which it operates.

Jaspar Joseph-Lester, Amanda Beech & Matthew Poole

In this interim publication, we develop our findings from one of the three conference panels. Students from each of the three universities are currently working together to produce the next stage of the publication – that takes up the themes from each of the three panels to develop questions raised by the conference as a whole. The final version of *The Contingency of Curation* publication will be available in early September.

This publication focuses on responses and interventions from Daniela Cascella and Lucia Farinati (Sound Threshold), Simon Hollington and Kypros Kyprianou, and Neil Webb and Ron Wright. This group of artists and curators were invited to respond to the theme of the panel, *Mediation as Production – Collaboration, Authorship and Contingency*, with a range of media and presentational formats. Here we considered how the blurring of the separation between the roles of 'curator' and 'artist', emphasised by an increase in collaborative practice and the artist increasingly taking on the tasks of the curator, raises important questions about the notion of authorship and highlights that curation is no longer a central column of power in the art world. Students from the group contributed to the event by projecting live subtitling of the panel discussion and distributing cards with a number for the audience to text questions to the panel. The images and texts that follow extend, what developed into a highly mediated, multi-authored event, to again ask if these expanded curatorial practices challenge received notions of creative agency.

Jaspar Joseph-Lester, Amanda Beech & Matthew Poole

History

Since 2008 Amanda Beech, Course Director MA Critical Writing Curatorial Practice, Chelsea College of Art and Design, Jaspar Joseph-Lester, MA and Mart Fine Art (Curating), Sheffield Hallam University, and Matthew Poole, Programme Director, Centre for Curatorial Studies, University of Essex have brought MA curating students together to produce a yearly project with interim events and a final 'outcome' - this has involved exhibition making, talks, and the publication *Project Biennale*, launched at the Venice Biennale 2009 with a review and press conference exhibition held at SIA Gallery Sheffield, June 10-11th 2009 (www.projectbiennale.tk).

This cross-institutional partnership seeks to enhance learning through practice, discussion and collaboration. In bringing together three universities (SHU, UAL, UoE) the aim of the project is to allow students to be made aware of current academic research models and methodologies, to become familiar with how those activities can be manifest in professional practice in the public domain and how these practices can develop and enhance new modes of inquiry to the discipline of curatorial/fine art practice. By working towards a conference and publication - through a series of meetings, one night events, e-mail and weblog discussion and seminars – *The Contingency of Curation* seeks to demonstrate the value of learning and teaching collaboration and student-led projects to enhance approaches to both pedagogy and research.

nd what's going on around us. I think this is a very us

Neil Webb & Ron Wright

dscape, and our position was instead of going to mus

What kind of experience have you all had in terms of how people react to the term curator versus artists? There are ideological attachments to these titles. How do you all understand these in your practice, and how do you use them to your advantage, if you do at all?

Some artists will see curators as holding the power as they will be the ones that ultimately chose whether they want to show their work. Some artists are suspicious of curators and consider that artists are the ones with the work and the ideas.

On the other side of the coin when I have curated projects I have found myself strangely popular, so read into that what you will.

These are quite general sweeping remarks, in my experience I would suggest that artists want their work shown so will initially court curators, others prefer to observe in the shade. The artist/curator relationship can be very fruitful. Like all things you need to do your research. Some artists will be of interest to some curators and vice versa.

Neil Webb & Ron Wright

What problems do you find with collaborative practice compared to your individual practices?

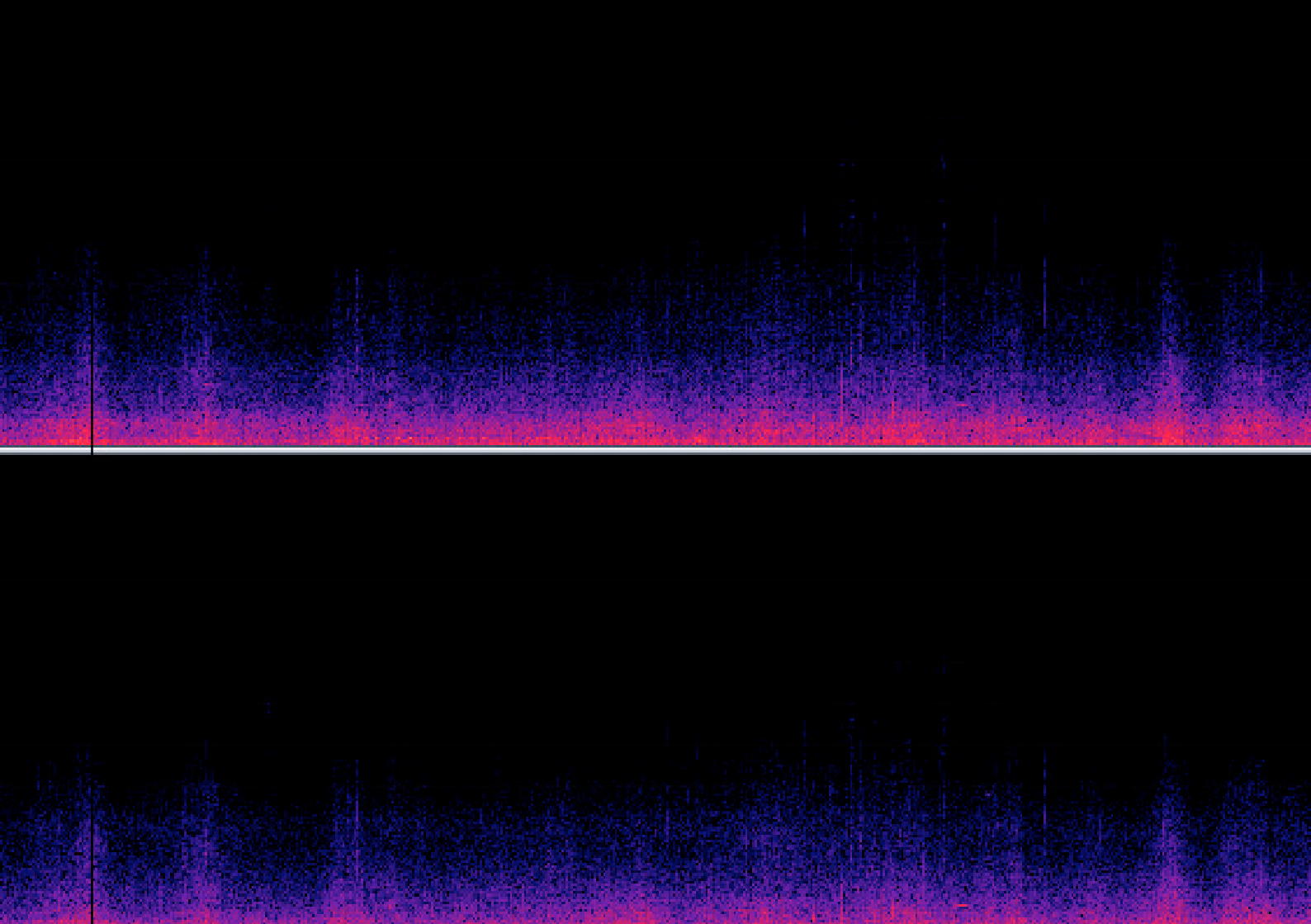
I don't believe there should be too much of a problem if you enter a collaboration with an open mind and the sense of the word 'collaboration' is maintained in the partnership. There is a lot to be gained in a fruitful collaboration, exchange of ideas, methods and ideology.

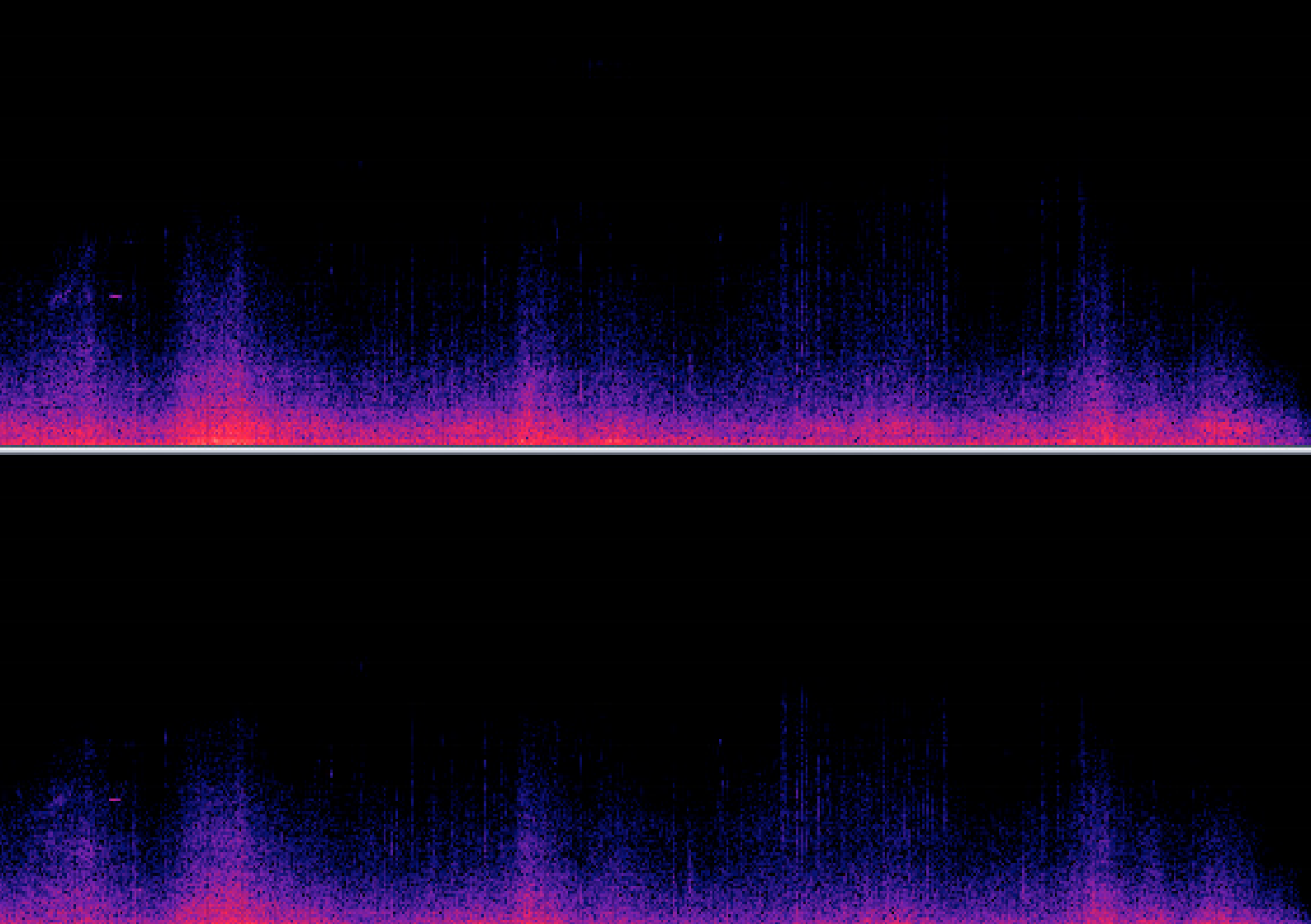
The only problems generally arise when an initial collaboration is tabled but then changes direction towards the facilitation and execution of someone else's work. In this instance, which I have experienced, the project is no longer a collaboration and is being overseen ultimately by a single person. This is not an ideal situation and brings up questions of whether you want to be credited for a piece of work or ultimately if you simply accept it as a paid job?

Do you prefer to curate yourself or be curated?

My first motivation is always to make a piece of work so I would rather be curated than curate in the first instance. Luckily I have nearly always had existing work selected by a curator or been given a free hand to create a new piece.

Neil Webb & Ron Wright





Sound Threshold

Daniela Cascella & Lucia Farinati

Richard Birkett

Could I pick up on something you said in your presentation? You described the fact - of sound threshold developing as a practise. In some way being through necessity, through some kind of need to readdress how sound is curated, how sound is presented.

Daniela Cascella

It was not just that. It was a need to address a specific landscape where we both found ourselves producing the work, because it was going to take place there, and there were a number of issues raised by the fact that there were going to be art projects made by people who were not that familiar with the landscape, and our position was instead of going to museums - you know, to engage with museums and arts, we decided to look at the landscape by means of ecology and go and engage in a dialogue with the centre of people who have been studying that territory for over ten years.

Lucia Farinati

We saw that this centre was like a very small centre, so we find out it was a very incredible community of 20 people. The first panel's idea of working in between autonomy and engagement in the community is like a big community. What is a community? It's a subject. It's a question. So I do feel in this project we will engage with the people that do the research by the environment, and it was a kind of style between the artist and the musician and the scientist. So this kind of idea in our research was in place. But yes, in relation to the manifesto, there was also addressing the topography of the area. Many claim that it was about the ecology, there was no real engagement with that specific topic.

This interview has been taken from the transcript from the *'Contingency of Curation'* conference

Richard Birkett

So in a sense, that kind of need to shift beyond the conditions that were set up by manifesto and create different kind of relationships was, I suppose, it's about moving beyond the constraints of that kind of situation but also positing a different kind of model of research and the one that was entrenched in what manifesto is and how it works.

Daniela Cascella

Yes, there was fluidity brought about by the decision of using sound and the fact that could allow us to play in a concert and CD format and not just in a display.

Lucia Farinati

That I think is a point... I think the interest for - our interest with sound is really - is really focusing on the idea of listening, which is another way in which you relate with the audience. So sound - the element of time and space, and the question for us is actually to - a thing of space, so it was not as much about curating sound. It's quite interesting people invited us as a sound curator. What a sound curator is I don't know.

Richard Birkett

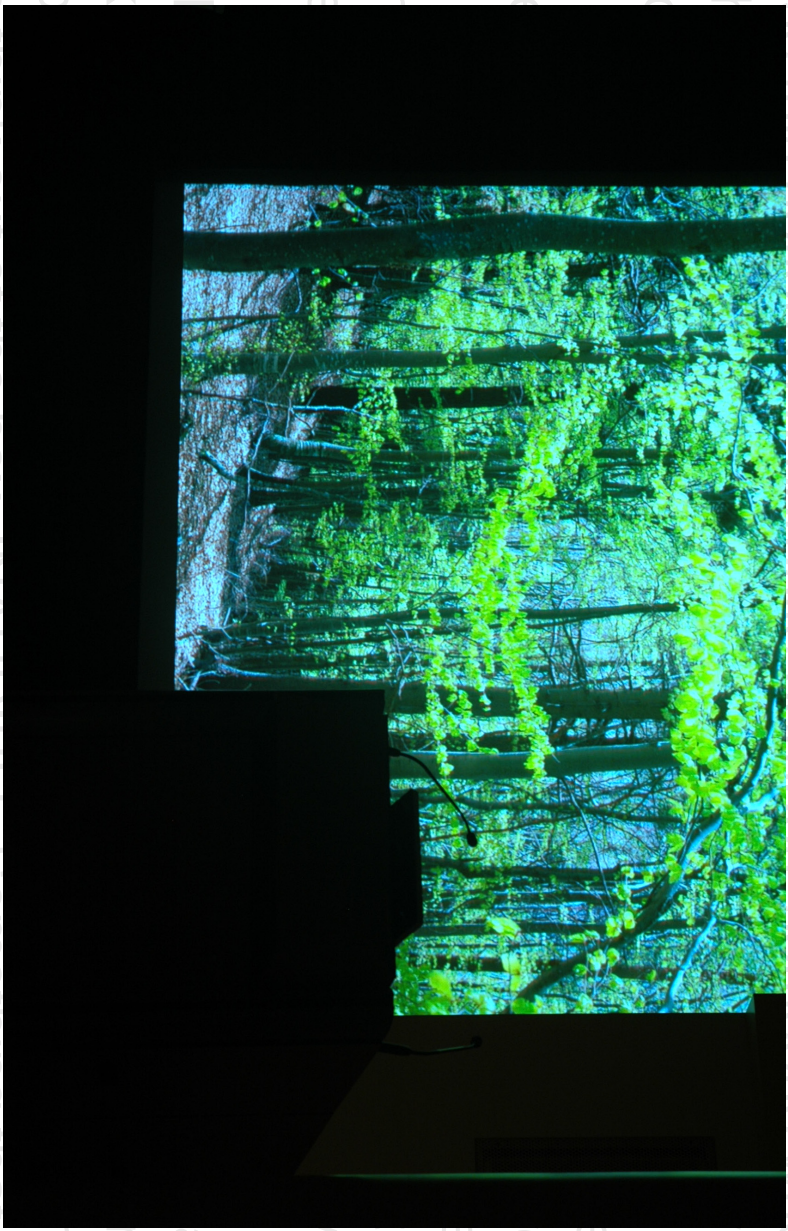
But perhaps that's kind of interesting, again, in a sense that sound curator being a slightly unstable term because we don't really know what it is. Yet it offers potential perhaps that isn't - the notion of curating within the field of sound has an un- kind of is untraversed, if you like, is something that needs to be formulated as it's happening rather than already being in place. It's not that kind of coagulation, as I said earlier, of ways of doing things.

Lucia Farinati

Well, again, it's interesting because it's an in-between territory. When you have, you know, an in-between territory, it's where the experimentation can happen, so it's more like a fixation with sound because it's sound but only because it's in between territory.

This interview has been taken from the transcript from the *'Contingency of Curation'* conference

Sound Threshold
Daniela Cascella & Lucia Farinati



Simon Hollington & Kypros Kyprianou

What kind of experience have you all had in terms of how people react to the term curator versus artists? There are ideological attachments to these titles. How do you all understand these in your practice, and how do you use them to your advantage, if you do at all?

Simon:

The thing about titles, jobs etc, where I grew up (working class, North London) people you'd meet never asked what you did, it was considered a little un-seemly, and a little rude. When you met someone there would be banter until personal information was offered or slipped out. This could take weeks.

It was only after I left home and went to art school that I entered the middle class culture of giving you the third degree on the first meeting.
Maybe this is why I don't really attach an ideological tag to being an artist. I don't particularly like the term.

In an article, someone once referred to Kyp and me as 'Conceptual artists' -I wrote back and said something like I'm not sure that we were, and that 'Half the time I think I'm just a song and dance man'. The writer (Mr. Sawyer) acutely replied 'So what are you the other half the time?. Well at the moment I'm a painter and decorator. In a couple of months I'll go back to teaching, and during that time there will be days in which Kyp and I will sit at my kitchen table talking about our next project.

What problems do you find with collaborative practice compared to your individual practices?

Kyp:

Some practical things include the fact that Simon's not good on stepladders. Simon, you've missed a bit over there haven't you?

Simon:

No I have not missed a bit. The clients want it 'rustic'.

Despite giving half my fee to Kyp, I don't have any problems with collaborative practice, I'm amazed more people don't try it.

One reviewer did refer to us once as 'Sooty and Sweep'. I don't know which one is which - but there is something in there about a nonsense language. We can spend years working out a project, and with that comes an inate understanding of the idea - also backed up shared slang and cultural references that we forget that people may not get. And so when you explain them to people they are often bemused. It's like we have developed a Hollington and Kyprianou argot, and we forget that sometimes - and it's not the argot of the art world.

Do you prefer to curate yourself or be curated?

Kyp:

When a curator gets in touch and asks if we'd like to do a paid residency at a once top secret military establishment then I prefer to be curated. Actually, the exhibition that came out of the residency that the curator invited us to do involved us curating long forgotten objects from an archive run by volunteer curators, so a bit complicated to split down into an either/or answer.

Simon:

Well, we are curated in the sense that someone gives us some money, and a space and we make something suitable. Recently, the only group shows we have been in are film screenings/tours, and I don't see that as the same as object/space type work. A full reason why would take too long to say - but luckily we have worked with some very good curators who just allow us to what we do with little interference. And sometimes they even bring us a cup of tea when installing, which is nice. It's a bit like being a painter and decorator.

If you believe in mediation as production and its immediate corollary production as mediation, do you therefore follow Deleuze's view that all being is mediation and that there is a material panpsychism? Is this a problematic challenge to human agency in the processes of change, transformation and self determination, or should we be more fatalistic?

Kyp:

Is there free will in matter? You've missed a bit haven't you?

Simon:

No.

Simon Hollington & Kypros Kyprianou

Could you please reflect upon your experiences of being involved in the mediating process of creating what we called a 'multi-authored event', and expand a little upon how you feel or felt about the absence of a clear authored position.

Kyp:

We weren't at the third session of the symposium, but a man came out earlier than everyone else, happy to have authored his own exit.

Simon:

I think many things are multi- authored, more than we imagine. A riot is a great example (was it Emma Goldman that said 'Society gets all the criminals it deserves'?) - as well as more prosaic events like a trip to the shops.
So I applaud all of your attempts at replicating this. However, it was at Tate Britain (I won't mention BP) to the usual crowd, and conforming to our known language/concept structures that made it feel like it was authored by a mechanism bigger than the sum of its parts.

I was in a consultation meeting a couple of weeks ago about a regeneration project. The organisers thought it would be good to have the meeting at the local pub in the middle of the regeneration area. That's fine, but they (for practical and ideological reasons) booked the upstairs private hire room, and so us usual suspects turn up and talk, argue and posit personal agendas while the locals who will be the most affected by the art/regeneration axis of evil were downstairs having a beer and watching the football on the television.

Of course the local population will be consulted in due course, but it felt very same as, same as.I'm not sure where I'm going with this, other than than maybe the answer to the Deleuze question is wrong. The answer is not no, but yes. Or somewhere in between.

Richard Birkett

In the synopsis for this part of today's conference, the last hour or so has been described as a 'multi-authored curatorial event'. This strikes me as a very charged description – immediately it raises interesting questions; what is a curatorial event? What is it that has happened in the last hour that makes it a curatorial event, whereas what surrounds it is conference?

There is something interesting here about the provision of this structure by the initiators of the session, and the brief they have provided to the speakers to move beyond the parameters of conventional academic presentations. It feeds back into the idea of mediation as production, and really feeds back into our interest in a role that sits between those of artist and curator. It begs the question also, within a contemporary expanded cultural field, what necessity is there to define and fix those roles?

Now, I wanted to really consider this position – that perhaps could be described as one of in-betweenness – and the elasticity it has afforded us during this session. Perhaps what we have been asked to do over the last hour is to forget the need to qualify whether we're experiencing an artwork, some form of documentation of an artwork, some form of performance, some form of curatorial position or method, or some form of academic position.

Before opening up into a discussion with the participants I wanted to relate this sense of in-betweenness to a text that I have found quite helpful and that has opened up a few ideas for me recently. The text is by sociologist John Law, and is titled After Method: Mess in Social Science Research. It focuses on social science as a discipline, but more broadly what is interesting to take away from this text – through my rather crude understanding of it – is the disarmingly simple notion of appreciating that every time we look at 'reality', just by the process of looking and considering things, we're actually constructing those realities, rather than them just being 'out there'. The supposed certainties that we use, our established methods of practice, should be considered as unstable and in formation, rather than fixed points from which to distantly observe.

Richard Birkett

John Law takes the very interesting example of a laboratory, in which scientists may use with great confidence a certain piece of apparatus to enable them to run tests and achieve answers through repeated testing; but obviously there is an extent to which that apparatus itself is constructed around a series of 'answers', a series of points, a kind of coagulation of conclusions over a period of time. His idea is to flip that on its head somewhat, and to ask at what point those realities are being formed through the methods we undertake.

With this in mind it's interesting to consider that when looking at an expanded field of artistic practise, the supposed certainties that we operate under, that we operate through – our established methods of practise, whether they be curatorial or artistic – should somehow be considered unstable rather than fixed points.

I think this is very useful in relation to a notion of mediation as practise and a need to blur the positions of artist and curator, and to even blur positions beyond those disciplines towards other disciplines. In the words of John Law, there is a challenge, perhaps, that "we will need to think hard about our relations with whatever it is we know, and ask how far the process of knowing it also brings it into being". This notion is suggestive of assuming an unfixed position, of being continually reconstituted by the input of other people, by the instability of relations that intersect within both the production and reception of art.

The potential that is outlined here suggests the avoidance of the closure that might be associated with a singular position, a singular perspective on the world. So that's one way perhaps to open up into this discussion a bit more; when it comes down to these two binaries, these two positions of artist and curator, does a sense of a tertiary, mediative position suggest that the roles of artist and curator don't offer enough scope? That in the fixedness associated with these positions we're lacking something?

The Contingency of Curation