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A History of Curating—Past and Present

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REFERENCES

David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*, Londres: Pluto Press, 2015

Jens Hoffmann, *Theater of Exhibitions*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015

Dieter Lesage, *Art, Research and Politics: Essays in Curatorial Criticism (1999-2014)*, Bruxelles : (SIC), 2014, (Livre VI)

Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, Colchester: Penguin Books, 2014

Réalités du commissariat d'exposition, Paris : Beaux-arts de Paris les éditions : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2015. Sous la dir. de Damien Airault avec la collaboration d'Estelle Nabeyrat

- 1 Given all the new publications dealing with things curatorial, even though these certainly do not exhaustively represent the current discourse in all its heterogeneity, we get the impression that the curator's role displays a history which, until the 1990s, was dominated by a successive line of pioneering figures.¹Over these past 25 years, the historiographical situation has changed. This change is not due solely to the appearance of female curators, but also and above all to the quantitative explosion of the sector about which everybody is agreed, and which has given rise to a change that has not necessarily been for the better. We can thus observe that the term curator is being increasingly watered down (Jens Hoffmann, p. 19), that the knowhow behind exhibitions is neglected (idem, p. 20), and that, last of all, a sort of "curationism" has come into being which has not merely contaminated the art system (David Balzer). Previously, it was the pioneers who set the tone and pointed to the direction: individuals (male) with powerful personalities, who, despite all their knowledge, followed their hunches, and who, by turning their backs on traditions, had prepared the way for their successors. Hans Ulrich Obrist contrasts the heroic dimension with the human, personal dimension, because, as

he also shows in his autobiographical narrative *Ways of Curating*, the personal encounter and, in particular, the conversation, are “the lifeblood of any curator’s metabolism” (Hans Ulrich Obrist, p. 69).

- 2 It seems less interesting to wonder if these representations of the history of curating are true or false, than to observe the qualities which recur in these narratives about the (ideal) curator. As an historical figure, this latter thus acts perfectly as a backdrop which, in addition, can no longer be contrasted with the attributions given to it by present-day protagonists. The descriptions of the “pioneering” type of curator emphasize his erudite character, his style, his charismatic tastes, his self assertion, and his daring. These descriptions thus suggest the distinction between profession and vocation, underpinned by the fact that what was involved was self-taught people, well before today’s curators who benefit from specialized professional training. As autodidacts, they could—or rather should—draw their strength from within themselves, removed from the beaten track. By following the logic of this narrative, the sum of these qualities represents the basis for developing and realizing visions, which promotes—or has promoted—this small group of personalities to the rank of mentors of tomorrow’s curators (see Hans Ulrich Obrist on the “Mentors”, p. 96 ff). If the majority of today’s professional curators, men and women alike, can only refer to catalogues and transcribed interviews (those of Obrist in particular), an exclusive minority can still lay claim to these personal exchanges about the mode of dialogues with their mentors, a mode that has come to its natural end with the disappearance of pioneering curators. This model of the “mentor-pioneer” contrasts with the current situation of an anonymous mass training, due to countless specialized academic careers, courses, and professional projects. This constructed narration, based on contrast, seems, above all, to stem from a function of distinction which would definitely be best analysed with the help of a sociological approach. However, the roles and figures thus created do not borrow just the traditional representations of the discoverer, pioneer, and researcher (usually male), but also correspond to the image conveyed in the media of the star curator (who may nowadays also be a woman).
- 3 As for the question of anonymity versus stardom, it can be noted that, despite the ever growing number of ambitious people involved, these do not shrink from referring to other protagonists in the curatorial arena on a first name basis. So in his latest work, his *Essays in Curatorial Criticism (1999-2014)*, Dieter Lesage talks about himself as “the other Dieter” (p. 293), which means knowing that he is indirectly referring to his colleague Dieter Roelstrate. If this interplay between private and public, and initiated and excluded (Dieter Lesage, p. 292 ff) calls to mind the New York art scene, as described by Andy Warhol in his diary (*The Andy Warhol Diaries*), though without having the same radicalness, this juggling illustrates, above all in combination with the pioneer’s narrative, the focus on the charismatic personality of the curator who, as an emphatic author of exhibitions and biennials, also constructs his reputation.
- 4 David Balzer, in his turn, launches into a not very substantial critique of curatorial praxis, ² for the most part monitoring this phenomenon, but without reflecting it with any remove.³ All this is understandable in relation to the continual need for narratives involving heroes and stars, and to the efforts made to accumulate a symbolic capital. But even with this back drop, the call made by the curator Jens Hoffmann to introduce order through the curator’s authority can be irritating: “The role of curators should be about bringing order into this chaos [of the concepts of humanity and culture] through the creation of culture” (Jens Hoffmann, p. 84). The vehemence of this sentence, based on a

rhetorical extrapolation, is possibly due to the very format of the text which takes an interest in a mere three pages in a question as complex as “the current need to hold exhibitions”. One notes, above all, to what extent people are still spreading the word about the figure of an *auteur*-curator with an almost boundless radius of action. This particular notion does not only clash with the “death of the *auteur*”, announced a long time ago, but it also conflicts, above all, with the ubiquitous forms of discourse about collaboration, cooperation and the group (*collectivité*) in all areas of cultural production and their practices.

- 5 The texts which the protagonists in this field devote to curatorial issues (the praxis and role of the curator, the exhibition medium) turn out to be illuminating, above all, with regard to the attributions made in this regard, whose complexity augments if one tries to analyze them as self-referential forms of discourse. The writings of Obrist, Hoffmann and Lesage are of real interest when one tries to understand how it is possible, in the end of the day, to talk about curatorial praxis using the yardstick of past shows and fleeting institutional practices, because, after all, what is involved here is at times abstract phenomena which are foreign to readers. As such, these writings can be compared to the efforts evident at the conference organized for the 60th anniversary of *documenta*, which brought together artistic directors from the last four events.⁴ This invisibility of curatorial work is probably also one of the reasons why people, anecdotes, biographies and autobiographical narratives have such an important place. The publications mentioned here by four male cultural producers are, in this respect, representative of a certain type of narrative which attributes the curator with the qualities of a discoverer and a cosmopolitan scholar, while at the same time thus comparing him with the figure of the artist, likewise idealized as a hero: “Making art has always entailed taking risks, challenging expectations and established practices, and doing away with the old” (Jens Hoffmann, p. 7).
- 6 We have still barely made mention of the curatorial praxis *per se*, by emphasizing the (self)representation of the curator, broadly tallying with the image of the star curator, conveyed by the media for an interested public. From this angle, these new publications devoted to the curatorial issue are still focussing on art and ways of exhibition making. People expect this activity to deliver “a discursive argument” (Jens Hoffmann, p. 11): “a carefully formulated argument presented through the meticulous selection and methodical installation of artworks [...]” (Jens Hoffmann, p.19). At the same time, it is the personal dimension, typified above, which plays a central role, as an obviously subjective perspective: “subjectivity has become dominant in our epistemology” (Jens Hoffmann, p.29). After all, the exhibition must take into account the impossibility of forging unambiguous meanings: “[...] intentionally open to various forms of interpretation [...]” (Jens Hoffmann, p.31). With regard to these claims, there thus comes into being a tension between understandable argumentation and the emphatic expression of a subjectivity, calling to mind Harald Szeemann’s “Individual Mythology”⁵. This latter goes hand in glove with the open nature of possible interpretations, calling on the huge field of knowledge production, the assertion of which, in relation to artistic and curatorial practices, has now become the rule, but one that is rarely given concrete form. Getting back to the historical example of the private cabinets of curiosities (*Wunderkammer*) of the Renaissance, at the root of the public national museums of the 18th century, Hans Ulrich Obrist writes: “Collection-making [...] is a method of producing knowledge” (p. 39). Yet he does not explain how putting collections together plays a part in the production of

knowledge. To put it more precisely, what is missing is a description which would help us to understand how (collected) objects are transformed into knowledge, and how objects are knowledge bearers: “mysterious and strange objects” are simply likened to “collections of all forms of knowledge” (Hans Ulrich Obrist, p. 40). Obrist is not the only person with this problem. His declarations, like Hoffmann’s, tend rather to reveal, in a symptomatic way, the obvious need to construct a more grounded theoretical discourse. Up until now, however, any epistemology of the curatorial field is virtually non-existent.⁶

- 7 What then might a specifically curatorial form of knowledge production consist in? How would it differ from other forms of knowledge production (for example in exact sciences and human sciences), and how might the discourse about “art research” be useful for these lines of thinking? To this end, the constitution of constellations represents the methodological nucleus of curatorial praxis. Unlike the most precise analysis possible of a distinct object, what is involved is choosing a certain number of objects and spatially relating them, in such a way that certain qualities appear in this context of a specific constellation, qualities which can be regrouped and attributed to a certain questioning. From this angle, it is thus possible to propose that it is a matter of knowledge generated by relations. We can find this kind of approach for analyzing knowledge production and the production of meaning from the aesthetic-cum-spatial angle of the aspect of the theory of the essay (*Essayismus*). At the end of the 1950s, by adopting a decidedly critical viewpoint *vis-à-vis* the sciences, Theodor W. Adorno wondered to what degree the “essay form” might permit a productive line of thinking, with the help of aesthetic methods—a line of thinking “methodical in its absence of method”—, by explicitly including artefacts as objects of possible studies. Essayists and curators thus develop a thesis, a discursive argument, which can be proven or in any event discussed, starting from a constellation. If the abstract description of this method describes it rather as an approach to the human sciences than as a curatorial praxis, this approach particularly typifies exhibitions devised by Anselm Franke, *Animism* (2012) and *The Whole Earth* (with Diedrich Diedrichsen, 2013), which incorporated art works and objects, films, and the like, hailing from other domains, while at the same directly using the term: essay.⁷
- 8 It is also worth bearing in mind that the essayist, faithful to his scholarly method, which is also associative and non-scientific, for it is “without method”, also corresponds to the role of pioneer in Adorno’s *auteur* conception. If it were possible to analyze the exhibition medium with the help of the essay theory, from the angle of the constellative and relational production of knowledge, curatorial praxis would have to alter its approaches. In this respect, it behoves us to mention, last of all, the slim tome *Réalités du commissariat d’exposition*, which, unlike the other publications discussed here, does not follow any subjective and narrative perspective, but a more broadly sociological one, to grasp the conditions attaching to curating, and, in particular, the situation, role and function of freelance exhibition curators in the present-day art field. Based on interviews with female French curators, the introductory chapter “Types et degrés de la réalité curatoriale—Une approche sociologique” (p. 13-33) draws a complex overview which raises issues of gender, economics, different forms of knowledge, and so on, to do with the realities of the trade and the role of the curator, male or female. The ensuing chapters deal thematically, in a most rewarding way, with many relevant aspects of the curatorial praxis, intermingling criticality, education/mediation, functions of curatorial concepts etc. Looking at this selection of new publications about the curatorial praxis, we thus note, *inter alia*, the complexity which hallmarks the relation between the different forms

of discourse, and the phenomena and issues they deal with. The narratives devoted to the pioneer figure and the more sociological approaches show to what extent the discourses themselves produce the phenomena which they claim they want *merely* to analyze. So it would in fact seem to be enough to talk in terms of “curatorial realities”.

NOTES

1. Obrist, Hans Ulrich. *Ways of Curating*, Colchester: Penguin Books, 2014, p. 60: "These are some of the pioneers I have come across, fragments from the past that have become a toolbox for me." What follows are short descriptions of the achievements by Harry Graf Kessler, Alexander Dorner, Hugo von Tschudi, Willem Sandberg, Walter Hopps, René d'Harnoncourt, Pontus Hultén. In other parts of his essay collection Hans Ulrich Obrist describes Harald Szeemann and Kasper König as belonging to the small group of historically relevant, pioneering curators. As it illustrates the way how the curatorial canon is (re-) produced by its current protagonists, let us quote Jens Hoffmann on Obrist here: "Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who began his career in the mid-1990s, single-handedly revolutionized curating. He certainly owed much of his creative impulses to the more unorthodox curators working in the 1970s and 1980s (Harald Szeemann, Johannes Cladders, Walter Hopps, Lucy Lippard, Jan Hoet, Kasper König, and Pontus Hultén, to mention a few)..." (Hoffmann, Jens. *Theater of Exhibitions*, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2015, p. 22)
2. Balzer notes (like others before him) that the terms “curator” and “curate” are used in all sorts of domains which have nothing in common with art and the exhibition of art. He nevertheless sabotages his own criticism, whose content, over and above this observation, remains in any event blurred, when he, in his turn, uses these terms, for example when he describes the fact of Net surfing as an “everyday curatorial activity” (Balzer, David. *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*, London: Pluto Press, 2015, p. 129).
3. Cf. “Prologue: Who is HUO?”, which refers to the insider name of Hans Ulrich Obrist. (Balzer, David. *Op. cit.*, p. 7 ff.)
4. Symposium "60 Years of *documenta*", Kassel, 17-18 July 2015, organized by Dorothea von Hantelmann.
5. A term coined by Harald Szeemann in the context of *documenta* 5, cf. Harald Szeemann, *Individuelle Mythologien*, Berlin: Merve, 1985.
6. This lacuna also applies to publications hailing from the doctoral programme ("Curatorial / Knowledge" <http://ck.kein.org>) at Goldsmiths College in London, even if a title like *The Curatorial - A Philosophy of Curating* (edited by Jean-Paul Martinon, London, 2013) suggests otherwise.
7. One observes in this respect that the publications brought together here, are, like many others, tacitly devoted solely to the notion of art, to artworks and to their presentation, whereas the curatorial issue in itself does not include this restriction.