

Curating Between the Lines

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REFERENCES

Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, New York : Independent Curators International, 2012, (Perspectives in Curating)

Cultures of the Curatorial, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2012. Sous la dir. de Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski

Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2012. Sous la dir. de Maria Lind

- 1 On this day in May 2013, a search on amazon.com for publications on “curating” yields 292 results. While this number is quite literally miniscule to the curatorial field’s much more established older siblings (“art history” returns 403,584 results and “art criticism” returns 97, 507 results), this search indicates two remarkable developments. First of all, the great majority of these books have been published since 2010, a remarkable influx in such a short period of time. Second, they contain almost entirely the same content.
- 2 By claiming that these many publications share much of their content, I do not mean to discount the hard work many of my colleagues have put into the growing literature on and around curating in recent years. Only a few years ago curators were lamenting the lack of timely or pertinent literature on their field. Curatorial students and working curators alike could only turn to a few publications. The first books on curating and exhibition making arrived in the 1990s: *Die Kunst der Ausstellung* (ed. Bernd Klüser, Katharina Hegewisch, 1991), *Thinking about Exhibitions* (Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, 1996), *The Power of Display* (Mary Anne Staniszewski, 1998), and *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (ed. Emma Barker, 1999). This literature was supplemented in the first decade of this millennium by a second wave of publications, including: *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (ed. Paula Marincola, 2007), *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (eds. Steven Rand and Heather Kouris, 2007), *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions*

That Made Art History (Bruce Altshuler, 2008), and *A Brief History of Curating* (ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2008). From there, the floodgates of curatorial literature have opened and I for one hope that we as curators are not now drowning in our own inflated words and ideas at this important juncture in the field.

- 3 Of course, here I must also disclose my personal investment in the boom of literature around curating. In 2010, I founded *The Exhibitionist*, a journal for curators, by curators, focused solely on the practice and theory of exhibition making; we are releasing our eighth issue this summer. I am also in the process of publishing *Show Time*, a book on exhibition history since 1990, forthcoming from Thames & Hudson this year. I also was the editor of *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, published by Mousse, also this year, and have contributed essays to a number of other curatorial publications. All this is to say that my interest and criticality towards this relative explosion in publications on curating is self-reflexive, and my critique is one that I hope may prove productive. My interest here is to understand the general nature of this second, and by far largest, wave of publications on curating in order to consider how the field can move forward by strengthening and diversifying our efforts in the future.
- 4 I have selected three recent publications from the last year to examine from the dozens available: *Cultures of the Curatorial* (ed. Beatrice von Bismark, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski, 2012) and *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art* (ed. Maria Lind, 2012), incidentally both published by Sternberg Press, and *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (Terry Smith, 2012), published by Independent Curators International (ICI). I selected these publications as case studies because for me they are some of the most representative as well as the most cohesive and structured books on the subject in the last year. What is also perhaps important to mention is that all three books come out of conferences: *Cultures of the Curatorial* from a conference at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst / Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig in January 2010; *Performing the Curatorial* at the Valand School of Fine Arts, University of Gothenburg, Sweden in November 2010; and *Thinking Contemporary Curating* at The Now Museum conference, a collaboration between ICI, The Graduate Center CUNY, and the New Museum in New York in March 2011. The fact that these publications come out of conferences is important in that it implies these books consist of position papers, discussions, and ongoing debates amongst a fairly small network of colleagues. This is in contrast to earlier publications such as *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* in which texts were either reproduced or individuals were commissioned to write specifically on a topic, knowing that their texts would be published as they started to research, rather than revising a presentation after the fact.
- 5 In these books, topics and case studies as well as terms and languages are shared and disseminated several times over, endowing them with gravitas through their exposure on the printed page.¹ A few meta concerns or themes emerge amongst almost all these books: the curator-as-artist or the curator-as-author (what I have written about in other articles the emergence of an auteur theory of curating); the biennial boom and the notion of the globetrotting independent curator (making art global); and curating beyond exhibition making into other mechanisms for making art visible to a public (what I have also termed the paracuratorial). Words such as “constellation,” “contemporary,” “discourse” and above all, “the curatorial” are used with great aplomb in these publications, though often with vague or conflicting meanings. An engagement with exploring the growth of creative curating in recent decades is expressed (some books cite

“the past twenty or so years” some “thirty to forty”), but for the most part what is happening in the here and now is given priority to more distant histories on the subject.

- 6 As mentioned earlier, *Cultures of the Curatorial* and *Performing the Curatorial* come from the same publisher in the same year and the editors of both books make a contribution to each other’s publications. *Cultures of the Curatorial* is the more ambitious and substantial of the two, including twenty-two essays by a range of artists, curators, historians and theorists divided into four parts: conditions, disciplines and cultures, rules and positions, and institutions. As the title suggests, many of the essays in the book attempt to take the temperature of the curatorial field today by providing different methods of analysis and several practical case studies. Some highlights in *Cultures of the Curatorial* include Dorothea von Hantleemann’s article which argues that the curator has achieved exalted status in recent years because of contemporary society’s obsession with selection in a culture of affluence; Anton Vidokle’s polemical “Art Without Artists?” which laments what Vidokle perceives as a de-valuing of the role of the artist as the visibility of the curator rises; and Tirdad Zolghadr’s recollection of his experiences curating the highly contested United Arab Emirates Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. *Cultures of the Curatorial* is a useful and substantial read as a loose amalgamation of texts, but one from which it is difficult to assess the greater impact of the sum of its parts.
- 7 *Performing the Curatorial*, while more modest and focused in its output, suffers from the same problem of ambiguity as *Cultures of the Curatorial*. The book is a product of a conference that brought together thinkers in various fields, but mostly art, to examine the emerging area of “heritage studies,” as Johan Oberg claims in the foreword to the book. In that sense, “performing” signifies a performing of one’s identity, history or culture vis-à-vis Judith’s Butler’s notion of performativity rather than performance as related to art. What follows is a series of diverse and well-written texts by Doug Ashford, Boris Buden and Clémentine Deliss, among others, that do indeed describe performativity in certain ways—the performativity of the artist, the curator, the audience, even the performativity of the object and the exhibition space. What is less clear, however, is what exactly performing the curatorial may represent in either practical or theoretical terms.
- 8 What is the curatorial, exactly? Lind makes it clear that “the curatorial” is not analogous to “curating,” the latter of which she considers the “technical modality” of the work of the curator. The curatorial, on the other hand, appears to be a methodological impetus, a way of thinking about one’s practice that can center on art but also exist beyond it. The product of this methodology may take the form of an exhibition along with any number of other products. It seems the only rule of “the curatorial” is that it impels the curator into the position of a mediator. Lind defines “the curatorial” most succinctly when she claims that it is “a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth, that strives to create friction and push new ideas.”² While this definition is provisionally useful, it can also be applied to any number of thoughts or things, ultimately forming a nebulous and ill-defined usage of “the curatorial” as an anything goes approach to curating that can lead as easily to the curating of art, history and ideas as it does to the curating of menus, shoes, and automobiles.
- 9 Terry Smith’s *Thinking Contemporary Curating* is not flawed by the problems of nebulous language on the part of its author. On the contrary, Smith offers a lucid and cogent schema for understanding the landscape of what he calls contemporary curatorial thinking. By taking as his starting point the unique thinking, which drives curators (as

opposed to the thinking that drives art historians or art critics), Smith lays out what he considers the hallmarks of contemporary curatorial thinking in five chapters. These chapters roughly overlap with the ones in *Cultures of the Curatorial* and *Performing the Curatorial*, along with many other publications. The rise of the auteur curator is addressed along with the growth of biennials and the development of curatorial activities that run parallel to exhibition making. What Smith does differently, however, is explore several areas that many books leave unaddressed, including the innovative curatorial treatment of major collections and historical objects; the collector as curator à la Ydessa Hendeles; the development of a history of curating through both publications and exhibitions themselves; and perhaps most importantly, a clear and insightful analysis of what it means to be a curator working in the contemporary moment—taking into account many different times and histories in relation to a curated experience. *Thinking Contemporary Curating* also originated in a conference, and has the same flexible and almost impromptu feeling behind it as the other publications; it is clear that this book, unlike some of Smith's many others, was not years in the making. His schema is certainly not comprehensive, and as an art historian he has both the privilege and the deficit of looking at contemporary developments in curating from an outsider's angle. Is it discouraging to the working curator that perhaps the most clear and insightful analysis of the field today has been written by someone who is not a curator at all but an art historian?

- 10 I have read, reviewed, contributed, written and edited many publications on curating in recent years. While I am clearly invested and obviously enjoy the kind of conversation this growth in the field has engendered, I often wonder if sometimes we are all missing the point. Curating itself is an ill-defined category, and one that continues to expand and take on other meanings. Why then add another layer to this nebulousness by parsing out “the curatorial” from curating itself? Why do we, as relatively small group of colleagues who more or less all know each other, publish dozens of books with many of the same authors to argue over the fine points of what we call what when and in what context? Are we furthering the field or insulating ourselves from outside opinions and perspectives through a web of critical language? Perhaps one reason for the influx of such publications is exactly what these writers discuss in the pages of these various books. In today's experience economy, the individual who selects is placed in a privileged position through his or her ability and knack for imparting knowledge to an audience. The responsibility of the curator, in my opinion, is to make these selections and the ideas behind them accessible to individuals beyond the confines of who we may be familiar and comfortable with. Curatorial publications need to start taking a bigger view, incorporating more perspectives from those working outside the fields of contemporary art, and dropping the jargon that can make some shy away from our work.

NOTES

1. Beatrice von Bismark and Maria Lind contributed to each other's publications, and presumably attended each other's conferences. Lind also presented at The Now Museum conference, the genesis of Terry Smith's *Thinking Contemporary Curating*.
2. Maria Lind. "Performing the Curatorial: An Introduction." *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*. Ed. Maria Lind. New York: Sternberg Press (2012): 20.