

The art of curating

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Plea for a concerned curatorship

About curatorship and artistry within the contemporary performing arts

Within the domain of the visual arts many books and articles concerned with ‘curatorship’ have been published. Curators and theorists like Hans Ulrich Obrist¹, Carolee Thea², Jens Hoffmann³, Elena Filipovic⁴ contribute actively to the creation of a canon of curating⁵. In the performing arts, however, the discourse around this topic is rather limited. *Frackija*, a magazine for performance art, raised awareness of this subject a couple of years ago in an edition titled *Curating Performance Art*⁶. Every now and then, individual texts appear, but a thorough reflection on the subject seems to be lacking. Nonetheless, it remains important to question this position of the curator, certainly in the performing arts where the notion is slowly erasing other terms. The programmer, the artistic director, the manager, the producer - all these terms are united and replaced by one that reflects our time: the curator.

Harald Szeemann, a Swiss curator and acclaimed pioneer of the profession, organised an important edition of Documenta (a large exhibition organized every 5 years in Kassel, Germany) in 1972. This edition exemplified the growing tension between curators and artists. French conceptual artist Daniel Buren, who was invited to present a work, was very critical of the way Szeemann directed the exhibition. Buren wrote a now classic plea against the incorporation of artists’ work into the curator's grand concept, titled *Exhibition of an*

¹ OBRIST, U.H. (2014). *Ways of curating*. London: Allan Lane.

² THEA, C. (2009). *On curating: interviews with ten international curators*. New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.

³ HOFFMANN, J. (red.) (2013). *Ten fundamental questions of curating*. Milan: Mousse Publishing.

⁴ FILIPOVIC, E. (red.) (2013/2014). *The artist as curator*. Milan: Mousse Publishing.

⁵ MISIANO, V. (red.) (2010/2011). The canon of curating. *Manifesta Journal: journal of contemporary curatorship*. No. 11.

⁶ MALZACHAR, F., TUPAJIC, T., ZANKI, P. (red.) (2011). Curating performance arts. *Frackija*, No. 55.

*exhibition?*⁷ In 2004, almost 30 years later, he re-addressed this argument in a text with the prominent title *Where are the artists?*⁸

Boris Groys, art theorist, philosopher and curator, wrote a short text in 2006 titled *Multiple Authorship*. In this text, Groys describes how curatorship and artistry begin to merge around the rise of 'installation art'. Installation art emerged in the 1960s, and usually consists of large, spatial artworks using various media (video, sound, internet) and different disciplines (performance, architecture, video work). In creating an installation, the artist will often select objects made by other artists or specialists (scientists, journalists, citizens) to be presented alongside works produced by the artist him or herself. Groys writes that "*The artist is primarily the curator of himself, because he selects himself. And he also selects others: other objects, other artists.*"⁹

The relation between artists and curators has been a terrain of constant tension ever since the sixties - a tension between the long history of the arts, and curatorship, whose history is yet to be written. Artists find themselves increasingly confronted with curators who use (and sometimes intervene in) the artistic work to put forward their own ideas. This tension arises out of a shift in power positions between the figures of the artist and the curator and a loss of 'autonomy' on the part of the artists. The curator is not solely an innocent mediator between artists and the public, but can also instrumentalise the artists' work in demonstrating her or his own curatorial concept.

In this text, I will investigate the meaning and function of the curator: first in general and then more specifically in relation to the performing arts. My aim is not to abolish the distinction between curators and artists, as Groys' is, but rather to propose a narrower definition of the term 'curator'. This revised definition will aim to allow both the artist and curator to strengthen one another's position, rather than to consider one another as simply a means to an end.

⁷ BUREN, D. (1972). *Exhibition of an exhibition*, http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/d_buren_printable.html

⁸ HOFFMANN, J. (ed.) (2004). *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist: Where are the artists?* Frankfurt: Revolver.

⁹ GROYS, B. (2008). *Art Power: Multiple Authorship*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Curatorship

Establishing a definition of contemporary curatorship is not a simple exercise. Many curators seem to consciously keep their interpretation vague in order to allow for a wide range of professional possibilities. Florian Malzecher, a freelance dramaturge and curator, wrote a text on curatorship titled “*About a job with an unclear profile, aim and future.*”¹⁰ Many curators would say their job is flexible and indefinable.

From the sixties onwards, the term ‘curator’ has shifted in meaning and become increasingly fashionable. There was a turning-point wherein the museum was no longer solely regarded as a place to conserve important objects, but increasingly thought of as a place where one could actively, and on project-to-project basis, present works of art. Walter Hopps, Pontus Hultén and Harald Szeemann were pioneers of a canon of curating within the visual arts. However, the reinterpretation of the term curator was already changing before the emergence of these figures. It did not appear from nothing, but rather has its roots in the avant-garde movements of the beginning of the 20th century, who introduced a radical new approach to presenting and creating art.

The practice of the independent curator became more prevalent in the 1980s. Independent curators did not necessarily hold fixed positions within institutions, but started to be hired on the basis of individual projects. The curator became an increasingly more flexible and nomadic labour force, mirroring a trend that is also recognisable amongst artists. This evolution came in the wake of increasing globalisation, with new markets being opened and mobility becoming easier and cheaper.

The curator thus becomes a multidisciplinary subject. According to Harald Szeemann, the modern curator is at once “*an administrator, an amateur, an author of introductions, a librarian, a manager and book-keeper, a conservator, a financier and a diplomat*”¹¹. Whereas in the past, a curator had a clear job profile (conserving works of art), he or she now needs to be multi-talented. By acting in this way, the curator becomes characteristic of our current post-Fordist economy, where a broad gamut of qualities is a requirement of the profession.

¹⁰ MALZACHAR, F. (2011). Cause and result: About a job with an unclear profile. *Frackija*. No. 55. (p. 10-19).

¹¹ OBRIST, U.H. (2013). *A brief history of curating*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier.

Defined in this way, the curator differs little from the artist. The artist too is expected to master different functions at the same time (manager, writer, philosopher, craftsman). However, defining the curator and artist solely on the basis of the functions they are asked to fulfil (and thus erasing the differences between these two fields) entails a rather formal approach. It might be more interesting to seek for a more philosophical interpretation of the curators' role.

In order to further define the notion of the curator, it might be interesting to look at this position in relation to performing arts. It was only in the eighties and nineties that the figure of the curator entered the field of performing arts. In fact, one might claim that the curator's presence wasn't a radical new addition to the scene. Some pioneering curators who were active in the visual arts claim to have been inspired by practices within the performing arts. The multidisciplinary approach and the way festivals were showing a diverse body of work provoked much enthusiasm within the visual arts scene. This multidisciplinary aspect is something that characterizes curating to a large extent.

A curated project always brings together different domains of knowledge, different disciplines and different artistic works. These works contrast, elevate, and are in dialogue with one another. It is the specific relationship between different works of art, or between works of art and other domains (e.g. scientific research, activist practice etc.) that sets up a framework in which dialogue may arise. It is ultimately within this dialogue that the activity of curating is grasped. It is here that critical thinking emerges, which should always be the goal of curating. To bring different works in relation to one another and to create a readable dialogue is what distinguishes a curator from a programmer, a conservator, a producer and even from an artist. The programmer is often not bound to an artistic concept or a clear substantive line, but rather to political demands and directions that influence the selection of a (seasonal) program. The conservator has to make sure objects are preserved in the best possible condition. The producer is primarily busy with the economy of the project. The artist involved in installation art first and foremost selects work to fit his or her own artistic purposes. The curator assembles a program, a festival or an exhibition, on the basis of works of art made by specific artists which he or she wants to bring into a dialogue to generate a broader, public discussion. Too often, curating is reduced to the composition of a program or a festival on the basis of a certain theme. Frie Leysen, a festival organizer, recently formulated it in an interview as

follows: “Curators develop a concept and subsequently seek artists to fill that concept or illustrate it.”¹²

This vision of curatorship is a common but unequivocal approach to curating. The thematic curating of a festival or program appears too often and only strengthens the tension between artists and curators. My goal is to develop a different approach to curatorship; an approach in which these two positions are not in constant tension, but rather complement one another as much as is possible. Let’s call it a ‘concerned curatorship’.

A concerned curatorship

Curating comes from the Latin word *curare*, meaning 'to take care of'. A curator is therefore someone who takes care of something or someone.

Some artists immediately reject the figure of the curator on the basis of the word's etymology because it entails a hierarchy. ‘Artists can take care of themselves. They don’t need anyone else to do it for them’ is one habitual critique. The artist, however, always finds him or herself tangled in a web with other actors (curators, critics, distributors, etc.) The claim of emancipation is a false one, and often merely rhetoric. One should understand that curating is not solely motivated by a care for the artists, but comes primarily from a care for the potential conversation. Isn’t it precisely here that a good curator distinguishes him or herself from a lesser one? Isn’t it in the care for a dialogue that engagement and concern comes into being towards the artist(s)? Isn’t it through this dialogue that both the curator and the artists develop their ideas?

Good curating comes down to developing the optimal conditions for an artist to show his or her work. Such ideal conditions are both practical (technical, logistic, financial, promotional) and contextual (a collaboration arising out of artistic dialogue). The concerned curator creates the concept in collaboration with the artists. The final presentation thus becomes the result of the sympathetic (or opposed) visions of both actors. Where such an approach is absent, the curator can only use artists and their artworks for his or her own end. Indeed the curator becomes a ‘dictator’, as Boris Groys would put it.¹³

¹² BELLINCK, T. (2014). Dat kleine streepje tussen woorden. *E-tcetera*, 32 (138). (p. 11).

¹³ GROYS, B. (2014). *Art beyond spectatorschip*.

<http://www.bozar.be/dbfiles/webfile/201405/webfile121342.pdf>

Concerned curatorship begins with a long dialogue between curator and artist. This dialogue can eventually lead to a common project in which these two different positions are temporarily dissolved. The affinities and the common goals take over from the differences. The project is not only the result of the genius of the artists, nor that of the curator. Instead, it is a collective work. When the work is finally made public, each actor involved resumes their official role in order to defend the work with his or her different means and within different networks.

It is in intense collaborations that the future of the performing arts lays. In the eighties, new institutions were initiated (e.g. in Belgium - Kaaaitheater, Nieuwpoorttheater, de Monty, Buda) or old institutions were given a new breath (Vooruit, KVS, Beursschouwburg). These initiatives were further professionalised with the unintended (and unfortunate) consequence that the focus on the artistic work and the support for artists increasingly suffered from decreased attention. The institutions have become businesses to run, with workers to pay and continuously lowering subsidiary support. As a result, artistic work is given less importance as the institution's focus shifts to other fronts. On a practical level, there is an increased attention given to the maintenance, restoration and conservation of buildings. On a financial level, the biggest part of the budget is spent on costs to run an organization and not on the artistic work itself. On the architectural level, there is an increased focus on the bar as the centre for meetings and exchanges, and not to the theatre or the art space itself. On the level of content, there are many side activities with spaces being rented out to commercial events that are often disconnected from artistic concerns.

Today, we are increasingly in need for new possibilities to present artistic work. It feels as if there is a lack of spaces to present and circulate art, particularly as the list of emerging artists gets longer every year. In reality, however, there is plenty of space. Belgium (and Europe) is full of stages for performing arts! Therefore, it might be more precise to say that there is a shortage of diversity in the way work is presented. The established institutes are 'full' and often have diplomatic or political obligations to reprogram certain companies every year (even those that have lost relevancy). On the other hand, there is an increasing group of artists who operate the margins. They are often united under one common (container) term 'young makers'. Their age varies from 14 to 99. They are the precarious artists, those who do not belong to, or have, a structure.

Freek Vielen, a 29 year old theatre maker, articulates it strikingly in his ‘State of the youth’ (Theatrefestival 2014, Antwerp): “(...) for example: Oscar van Woensel was 31 when he did the State of the Union, not of the Youth, but the one of the Union, Wayn Traub was 32, just like Sidi Larbi, therefore, for a few seconds I considered whether I was supposed to be happy with this ‘young makers’ label considering I’m 29 years old. Whether the State of the Youth isn’t just a shabby paper boat, because for years now the pool has simply been too full and it will flood with my presence.”

Whether the swimming pool is ‘too full’ now is questionable. Maybe that applies to the structures that were built in the eighties. What we need now are new forms of institutions, or ways of supporting and presenting artists. Therefore, an alliance with the growing group of independent curators might hold an answer...

Within the visual arts there is a strong tradition of freelance curators and artists who, on a small scale and with their own hands, set up new initiatives and claim new spaces. Maybe the time has come for performing artists, who operate in the margins, to no longer wait until they are picked up by established institutions or festivals (the “dinosaurs”, as Frie Leysen eloquently puts it¹⁴). Maybe it’s time to make bonds with curators in the margins and set up new, experimental initiatives.

Ann Olaerts asked the following, relevant questions in her State of the Union (Theaterfestival 2014, Antwerp): “Can we, relying on the artistic wealth of the past 20 years, give a place to the process of death and birth in our own history? And profoundly adjust the current system that has its roots in the eighties? More thinking and starting from the artistic projects themselves, and less from the structures.”¹⁵

The political curatorship and artistry

A plea for a more concerned curatorship and thus a more intense collaboration with the artists is at the same time a plea for the politicisation of both functions. This process of politicisation

¹⁴ BELLINCK, T. (2014). Dat kleine streepje tussen woorden. *E-tcetera*, 32 (138). (p. 11).

¹⁵ OLAERTS, A. (2014). *State of the union: Passie, vakmanschap, beziëld leiderschap en een open blik*. http://vti.be/sites/default/files/state_of_the_union_TF_14.pdf

already takes place when closer alliances are made between curators and artists, and when they claim new spaces and different forms of attention.

Anneleen Kenis, a researcher connected to the university of Leuven, wrote a text in 2010 with the remarkable title *Beyond individual behavioural change: a plea for repoliticizing environmental action*.¹⁶ With few changes, this could easily be the title for a part of this text as well. Instead of abiding the position of the individual artist networking for their own visibility, the way out could be to reach hands to those who have skills and are eager to challenge existing modes of presenting, producing, communicating, etc.

In the magazine ‘Oikos’, Dirk Holemans writes that our society is in need of the political, not politics. “*We are in need of projects that are directed towards the future and that strive for more ecological durability and social justice, hereby they shouldn’t block themselves by what today is considered as advantageous.*”¹⁷

A similar need imposes itself on the arts sector. In the theory of ‘transition’, the innovation is a result of small-scale experimental projects (= niche) that slowly transform the existing, established structures/institutions (= the regime).

We don’t necessarily have to buy new buildings (like in the eighties). We are not in need of any more new buildings that get stuck in the rigidity of an official institution. What we need is a multiplication of the temporal, or returning collaborations between artists and curators, in order to develop a wide variety of presentation practices. This variety will not be reached by fixing new physical spaces, but by starting from scratch, every time again, and acting from the idea that there is not only one ‘best’ way.

It is here that curatorship and artistry come together and contribute to the creation of *the political*. *The political* differentiates itself from *politics* in the sense that *politics* has to do with the everyday - the managing of society on the basis of previously decided policy plans and taking care of the balance between all societal actors; and *the political* is the space where citizens can participate on an egalitarian basis in a deeper and broader ideological debate. In

¹⁶ KENIS, A. (2010). *Voorbij individuele gedragsverandering: een pleidooi voor een herpolitiseren van milieuactie*. <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikels/2010/04/07/voorbij-individuele-gedragsverandering-een-pleidooi-voor-een-herpolitiseren-van>

¹⁷ HOLEMANS, D. (2014). Over depolitiseren en herpolitiseren. *Oikos*, 69.

politics one searches for consensus, where in *the political* there is also place for unsolvable conflicts and visions that could never come together. It is a space for contestation, an indispensable place for democracy.

'The political' takes shape when a problem or conflict occurs. Specific to this text, it takes shape when artists and independent curators make alliances and contest the existing regime by setting up new initiatives outside of this regime. A transition towards a more diverse and fairer arts sector will never happen while we continue to work individually in the margins. Only by working together (in different constellations) and by departing from the necessity to make and present an artistic work (not because one feels the pressure to be visible all the time) can a regime be designed differently. As a consequence, "*More thinking for the artistic projects and less from the institutions*" would become not merely a hollow slogan, but a statement built on solid ground.

Performing artist Jan Ritsema wrote in an edition of *Frackija* about curating in the performing arts:

conclusion

art is lost

and

so are the curators but

le roi est mort vive le roi

so

*let's go, both, hand in hand artists and programmers for a fresh beginning a renaissance of art that does not look like anything anymore*¹⁸

A transformation of the arts sector can potentially happen if 'independent' curators and artists mutually start to operate in the margins and develop an alternative approach to presentation, production, communication, etc. Only by working together are we able to break our paralysis towards the ruling regime. Maybe the art of curating is revealed only then, when the curators and the artists start to take care of one another.

¹⁸ RITSEMA, J. (2011). About programmers and curators. *Frackija*. No. 55. (p. 7).