

From Para to Post: The Rise and Fall of Curatorial Reason.

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In the field of curatorial studies, issues around the future of the discipline, in terms of various ways of practicing, are, not surprisingly, quite central, and thus also the question of how we can talk about any *post*-curatorial turn. But it is so in two ways, or, if you will, caught up between two modes of production. Two modes that always shift between being complementary and conflictual: the idea of research in an *academic* sense, and the idea of practice in a *professional* sense. On the one hand, then, the curatorial is examined and executed as an academic form, and on the other, curating is seen as a practice within galleries, museums, biennales and other forms of exhibition-making. And more often than not, these streams are seen as separate, particularly in terms of research methods and aims: on the one hand, there is an apparent meta-level of curating, sometimes called the curatorial, with its aspects of theorizing, historicizing and politicizing the practice, and on the other the hands-on, *realpolitik* of exhibition-making, and its concerns with installation, funding and publicness.

However, I would argue, that we are currently witnessing a double movement of contraction and extraction, and it is precisely in response to this paradoxical situation that we find the post-curatorial turn. Which is to say, that practitioners of curating more often than not see themselves in opposition to studies, to a certain form of research culture, and thus distancing themselves from the curatorial, while, at the same time, a number of practitioners, and indeed arts organizations, try to see themselves as research based, as following certain trajectories, and even as being places for enacted research. However, it needs to be stated, that this is a false dichotomy. Rather, we are dealing with different concepts of the curatorial, and questions of what constitutes research and public engagement, as most public institutions today need to be not only spectacular,

and think of audiences and constituencies in quantitative ways, they also need to be research based, and educational, thinking of their audiences and constituencies in qualitative ways.

Initially, the term 'the curatorial' was merely an adjective, that related to matters and styles of curating (including curating in the expanded field, such as formats that did away with the exhibition itself), but has, in the last decade curiously taken on the status of a noun, indicating a notion that not only relates to curating, but is also separate from it. In a sense, it is an expansion and abstraction of the practices of curating. In a recent anthology entitled *The Curatorial*, no less, but with a telling subtitle *A Philosophy of Curating*, Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff, makes a case for the curatorial as separate from curating:

If 'curating' is a gamut of professional practices that had to do with setting up exhibitions and other modes of display, then 'the curatorial' operates at a very different level: it explores all that takes place on the stage set-up, both intentionally and unintentionally, by the curator and views it as an event of knowledge. So to drive home a distinction between 'curating' and 'the curatorial' means to emphasize a shift from the staging of the event to the actual event itself: its enactment, dramatization and performance.¹

The use of the curatorial is here, then, an analytical tool and a philosophical proposition, and by indication, a separate form of knowledge production that may actually not involve the curating of exhibitions, but rather the process of producing knowledge and making curatorial constellations that can be drawn from the historical forms and practices of curating. The seeds of the post-curatorial can thus be found in the short history of the curatorial, as a continuation, and possibly, realization, of some of its basic tenets. But 'post' is not the only prefix that has been attached to the curatorial: The curator and curating theorist Paul O'Neill thus expanded on the debates around the curatorial, with his definition of the *paracuratorial*, and its relationship to the curatorial as a *constellation* of ideas and objects. The term constellation, drawn from the Frankfurt School, indicates the curatorial as a specific method of gathering and presenting knowledge; taken literally a constellation is, of course, not a complete picture, but rather a combination that allows one to draw a picture, and make proposals based upon this picture. It is world-making through a world view. The paracuratorial, on the other hand, is a set of adjacent and

auxiliary procedures and practices around and outside the form of the exhibition as such. It indicates ways of setting ideas into other curatorial forms besides exhibition-making; be that screenings, talks, performances, discussions, publications and other discursive events. But rather than seeing this as a separate entity, as a kind of public programming that is tied to, and that temporally occurs after the curatorial processes leading to the exhibition, O'Neill asks us to consider these activities as curating in their own right, and not just as a supplement to the exhibition, but also as an alternative to it. Furthermore, he claims, such ideas are in direct opposition to a widespread conservative impulse within the field of curating:

[...] a regression to the artwork first model of curation: curating as selecting from an already-sanctioned art market; the disappearance of curatorial self-reflexivity; curatorial labor restricted to object-oriented exhibitions; curating reduced to working within institutions; establishing a canon or selecting from within a canon; curating associated with, or working within, a private collection or museum context as the only way forward.²

The paracuratorial is, then, a critical response to the marketization of contemporary art, and rejection of spectacle, bigness, and the artworld credo of 'the show must go on' regardless. It is, in this sense, both the anti-biennale and the anti-art fair. O'Neill instead lists a number of practices, individual as institutional, [that](#) promote paracuratorial formats as primary rather than secondary, and as integrated rather than separated, in the form of research-led programming and curating. Today we can easily add more to O'Neill's list, both in numerical and geo-political terms, but also in terms of scope, with such activities found in both artist-run and project spaces, on one end of the scale, and with big museums on the other. It will be beyond the scope of this text to list these initiatives in any comprehensive way, but it is important to remark how research-based notions of programming and working are to be seen in many alternative spaces in the so-called centers of the artworld, and how, in particular, ways of working that are locally sedimented can be found across the global south, and what such projects share is exactly an ambivalent relationship to Western hegemony and its established protocols of working, exhibiting and producing knowledge and value, and knowledge as value. We could, [paraphrasing Paul O'Neill](#), call this 'the *postcuratorial paradox*', as well as, in

other ways, describe this along the lines of Tara McDowell's notion of a 'post-occupational condition', where not only curating and the paracuratorial is blurred, but also the roles, and division of labor implied, by such categories as artist and curator, thinker and programmer, director and assistant, master and student, and so on, are both willfully and intuitively obscured, if not even abandoned:

[...] if there is a shift in contemporary art away from identifying with specific occupations such as artist, curator, educator, or art historian, then it matters, and we should interrogate this shift. Why is it occurring, what new worker has it created, and what reskilling does it ask of this labourer? How does this post-occupational condition reflect or problematise broader social and economic conditions of labour across an unevenly globalised art world?³

There are two major points to be drawn from this line of questioning; [first in terms of](#) how the post-curatorial has to do with the undoing of occupational roles, and certain divisions of labor, but also; and here we are dealing with underlying economic and structural changes rather than curatorial moves and countermoves, that have as much to do with deskilling as reskilling of cultural workers across the sector. Which is to say, that the post-occupational and thus postcuratorial is not only an attempt at undoing hierarchies and curatorial authority from below, from within the practices of curating, but also brought about by the structural transformation of work, and indeed working conditions, within the art world as well as within societies at large under globalization. It is, in a word, *precarization*. Indeed, in the artworld, there has never been any right to work, neither for artists or curators, and you are to consider yourself blessed to find work, particularly paid work. Precarious working conditions [have](#) always been integral to the artworld and cultural production, particularly in how you enter, and as often, exit, this profession, and if creativity and virtuosity can be claimed to be contemporary art's contribution to the world economy and ways of working, of informing the labor force, then, this must be seen in tandem with its other great contribution, namely the precarity, exploitation and deregulation that comes with project work, and its reorganization of labor conditions, contracts and wages...

At the same time, [and this is second point to be drawn from McDowell's invocation of the post-occupational, the very](#) disappearance of occupations proper – quite literally: the loss of employment – also testifies to a heightened sense of crisis in the artworld, due to the structural transformations not just brought about by decades of relentless neoliberal deregulation, but also by what appears to be its current demise. As the rise of the populist right all across the former west, epitomized by the election of Donald Trump in the US, has shown, neoliberalism has been largely rejected in favor of what the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban has infamously dubbed 'illiberal democracy', which not only rejects neoliberal orthodoxies of globalism, but also the ideas of governing through consensus and the center, and thus is a blanket dismissal of the cultural expressions of centrist politics, which is precisely the curatorial consensus of mega museums, glossy art fairs and repetitious international biennales. In many ways, this system of presentation and circulation is what characterized contemporary art as a system, if not as particular practices, and these are driven by a particular curatorial reason that closely mirrors the political reason of what Tariq Ali has characterized as the extreme center.⁴ It is no wonder, then, that many practitioners have rejected this very model, in favor of locally sedimented and engaged practices, as well a focus on long term research and sustainability (both economically and environmentally), that can be understood as postcuratorial in the sense of being a critique of the prevalent curatorial reason and its inherent centrist politics. However, with the current collapse of the empty center, both economically and politically, the question is how this structural, political and aesthetic crisis of the contemporary art system will be answered from within the system itself, from within curating? If both the political and the economic support structure for this system is eroding, how will curatorial reason and consensus become post-curatorial?

Moreover, so far we have mostly discussed the post-curatorial as a curatorial strategy (or even a paracuratorial one), but we perhaps can also conceive of it as tactical device? If the global system of curatorial reason that is large scale exhibitions, such as biennales with their accent on circulating proper names of the appointed curators rather than selected artists, can be viewed as strategical,

perhaps a tactical approach, focused on facts and movements on the ground is what can counter our lofty promises of aesthetics as inherently democratic, and culture as soft diplomacy? This would seem particularly pertinent, as global politics are shifting towards regionalism and protectionism, and by and large replacing soft diplomacy with brute force, and, in terms of cultural politics, national affirmation and celebration. In this way, the post-curatorial not only distances itself from big scale curating, and focuses on sustainability and durability instead, but may also be said to distance itself from the dominant rhetoric of curating, both in terms of the language *of* the exhibition (its syntax and grammar, its formats and displays) and the language used *about* the exhibition (its reflections, or meta-language, as well as its promotional writings, such as curatorial statements, press releases and reviews). And the last part is important, as it allows us to conceive of the post-curatorial as not only after curating, as a deconstruction and renegotiation of its basic tenets, but also as anti-curatorial: not reconfiguration, but rejection, and not only of spectacle and marketization, but of its propensity for shop talk, of curatorial talk value, and indeed curatorial theory as 'empty' talk, as mere window dressing, and instead insisting on situated and, crucially, embodied knowledge. It is a way of also taking the curatorial itself, in the sense described above, as a form of expansion and theoretization, to task. Taking ideas to task is done, though, not through argument and counter-argument, or analysis-synthesis, but through performance and actualization, and testing out curatorial discourse's claims, ideas and propositions on the ground, within the social relations of the exhibition space and educational facility, including the biennale, themselves. Here, the critical theories of the curatorial are actually not only discussing and identifying problems, but part of the problem, when it becomes merely talk value, enabling curatorial reason to continue rather than be perplexed, paused, and possibly postponed.

Ideas must thus not only be enacted, but embodied, which always accepts a lessening of curatorial authorship and authority. Such post-curatorial approaches take place [against](#) a dual background of lack and loss, however. Lack, in terms of identifying what is lacking in the curatorial, understood [not only](#) as

practice, [by also as a specific theory](#) (or even as [a form of practicing theory](#)). [And this is a lack that is countered by critique, surely, but perhaps also by posing a demand, if only](#) implicitly, through [alternative, post-curatorial ways of working, demanding that another artworld is made possible](#). It can thus be described as a shift from curating to instituting, but as instituting differently, as Cornelius Castoriadis would have formulated it.

But this lack, originary or otherwise, is not just a moment of institutional critique, and a turn to instituting – it is also so on the basis of a loss: the loss of occupations, infrastructure and actual public institutions. When thinking and doing post-curatorially, it [is](#) not only a matter of will and choice, but also of necessity, as institutions are disappearing, delegitimized, defunded, and destroyed. Instead, the task now is to not only institute otherwise, but to insist on instituting, as if it were still possible, as Athena Athanasiou has suggested.

And [while](#) we may have no choice, it will certainly require *will*, not only mindfulness, but perhaps rather willfulness, to quote, as a way of conclusion, Sara Ahmed:

But we will need, we still need, to proceed with caution. Willfulness is not a ground upon which we tread. When willfulness becomes a ground, translating a wrong into a right or even into righteousness (to be righteous is to be morally upright), then arms can become rods, coming up only to straighten things out. After all, when arms come up, they disturb the ground. Can we learn not to eliminate the signs of disturbance? Disturbance can be creative, not as what we aim for, nor as what grounds our action, but the effect of action: disturbance as what is created by the very effort of reaching, of reaching up, of reaching out, of reaching for something that is not present, something that appears only as a shimmer, a horizon of possibility.⁵

Notes.

1. Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff, 'Preface' in: Martinon (Ed.), *The Curatorial – A Philosophy of Curating*, Bloomsbury: London, 2013, p. ix.
2. Paul O'Neill, 'The Curatorial Constellation and the Paracuratorial Paradox', *The Exhibitionist # 6*, 2012, pp. 55-60.
3. Tara McDowell, 'The Post-Occupational Condition', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, p. 24.
4. Tariq Ali, *The Extreme Center: A Warning*, Verso: London, 2015.
5. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2014.