

WHEN TRAVESTY BECOMES FORM

A review of:

'Issues in curating Contemporary Art and Performance'

Edited by Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick

Intellect Books, 2007

Taking issue with curating -whether curator-bashing or curator-praising- seems a very popular pastime in all art and culture related fields and one particularly instigated across the innumerable debates, symposia, exhibitions, courses, press articles, informal events and publications, all of which forms the context for 'Issues in curating contemporary art and performance' and its offerings as contributing material.

And across the breadth of its content, the defining character emerging from Rugg and Sedgwick's collection of texts, is that nobody more than curators is keen to take issue with their own profession, making self-reflexivity a creed and the dilemma of how to articulate critical intervention within institutions a matter of endless discursive folds, and in the process legitimising and reinscribing the necessity, potential and authority of both curator and institution within cultural production.

Creative insertions, travesties, posturing, relationality and role-playing rather than overt confrontation being one of the orthodoxies of contemporary critical art practice, it became obvious that the role of the infiltrator in the network had to insistently assume a prominence at all level in the production and dissemination of cultural products.

Bridging the gap between nascent tactics and overarching strategies, the curator/artist or artist/curator is the footloose omnipresent agent of creation and dissemination of knowledge that acts as a go-between, stretching across previously unestablished axes or exploiting existing ones all in the name of a progressive redistribution of governance within hierarchies and quasi-subversive counter-hegemonic positioning.

But when ambiguity is the norm and travesty becomes form, the declared radical defiance of endless poker playing leaves little room for any antagonism or concrete refashioning of relationships across the systems in which we operate. This become particularly insidious when such degrees of creativity and mobility, -previously the tools of those forced to conceal their aims to avoid repression-, is internalised to the point that institutions become so strategically creative that make everyone else look plain and stupid.

Positioning as marketing and homogenisation of strategies at all levels ultimately flattens the territory and leaves unchanged power relations as JJ Charlesworth points out: *'if critical approaches of curating today draw on the legacies of the past...recurrent expressions of reflexive speculation about the nature of curating, the artwork and the institution by those who constitute it become ritual observances, not radical contestation'*¹

So, whilst we await the assault of the emancipatory creative urge of the slide librarian to rise above its limited powers of indexing and subvert the institution from within by turning all the images of major works of the modernist period upside down and cause a scandal, we are ipso facto deeply involved in the continuous rise, metamorphosis and expansion of the role of the curator, since as Paul O'Neill tells us that 'the separateness of the artistic and curatorial gesture (is) no longer apparent in contemporary exhibition practice'².

And clearly he is right. Witness the practice of Maurizio Cattelan as an example, who repeatedly sent his alter ego Massimiliano Gioni in his place at interviews, delivering stock responses lifted from various texts, then curated an inexistent Caribbean Biennale as holiday opportunity for his friends, then as co-curator of the 2006 Berlin Biennale opened up a mock-franchising of the Gagolian Gallery, and finally he is now resident/squatter of the Tate Modern with his Wrong Gallery.

Then again, the radicalism of such highly developed forms of mimesis, iconoclasm and parody, might ultimately stand in doing better and to a more spectacular effect what actually already happens everywhere else around us.

If we briefly depart from the specific shores of cultural practice, with energy suppliers being also telecommunication providers, tyre manufacturers as real estate players or estate agents as independent property evaluators, can anyone tell who is doing who anymore?

The two-way traffic between the disappearance of previously essential middleman and the appearance of new ones, and the ensuing exchanges of roles between suppliers and producers is something that everyone experience without ever entering into an art gallery or museum.

With constant appropriation or strategic evacuation of roles, diversification or amalgamation of business areas and brand positioning as some of the building blocks of our contemporaneity there should be no reason why cultural production, if intended as an *economic avant-garde*³ should not lead the game in matters of refashioning of labour division.

¹ P.98, Charlesworth, JJ, 'Curating Doubt', as part of Rugg, Judith and Sedgwick, Michèle, 'Issues in curating Contemporary Art and Performance', Intellect Books, 2007

² p.14 O'Neill, Paul, 'The curatorial turn: from practice to discourse', as part of Rugg, Judith and Sedgwick, Michèle, 'Issues in curating Contemporary Art and Performance', Intellect Books, 2007

³ Groys, Boris, 'Art as an economic avant-garde', available on-line at:
[http://www.niallflaherty.com/textz/Art as an Economic Avant-Garde.rtf](http://www.niallflaherty.com/textz/Art%20as%20an%20Economic%20Avant-Garde.rtf)

Lacking the brute force of contemporary capital way of doing things by more or less overt violence, contemporary art can play up the same tricks through cheek, cajole and Orwellian reversals, edging towards a never ending semantic critical mass and its revolutionary promises.

The emphasis repeatedly placed across the collection of papers edited by Rugg and Sedgwick on the blurring of roles between artist, curators, producers and distributors as one of the central and most subversive tenets of the curatorial impulse to reshape art and its modes of presentation, appears to be propelled by the tantalising image of the player capable of occupying several positions at once, the broker, entrepreneur, author and distributor, maybe even its own public. The contemporary creative archivist/curator is liberated by the weight of the archive, like the contemporary creative manufacturer is liberated by the weight of the production line.

Of course not everyone has been convinced by the radical promises of the 'curatorial turn', particularly when confronting the evidence that surpassing strict antithesis between roles tends to emancipate only the most mobile ones, and necessarily those whose working apparatus is mostly managerial, and administrative.

In 2000, a long while before the awarding of the Turner Prize, Mark Wallinger wrote: *'Shrinking time into space, the here and now, the better to categorise, catalogue and compare, encourages a kind of historical amnesia where curators can pick and choose from a smorgasbord of narcotic sensation, a baseless landscape of outrage'*⁴

Whilst going through the various chapters of this publication, I started to have the impression that it bore more than a resemblance to the main problematic of its subject of inquiry, and had internalised what JJ Charlesworth in the same book defines as the *'preferred orthodoxies of contemporary culture'*, namely *'uncertainty, provisionality, open-endedness and deferral'*⁵.

For as much as the editors tried their best in breathing some air into the sometimes highly specific issues at stake in curating contemporary art and performance, they necessarily adopted the preconditions existing in the material they were handling, which was *'rising out of a series of symposia hosted during 2004 and 2005 by the University College for the Creative Arts at Canterbury on issues of curating as a form of critical intervention into ways of comprehending contemporary culture'*.

Constrained by the output of the symposia, the collection of text they ended up with, seems to provide –with a couple of exceptions– only another episode in the very conditions of contemporary culture as described by Charlesworth, rather than truly have a stab at comprehending it, whilst of course being a contribution that can be clearly of use for the burgeoning courses in curating incessantly in need of material to form their curriculum.

⁴ Wallinger, Mark, (guest editor), introduction of 'Art for All: their policies and our culture', PEER, London, 2000

⁵ Both sentences from P.98, Charlesworth, JJ, 'Curating Doubt'

But the necessity of providing a shared historiography within a curatorial teaching environment might end up replicating rather than correcting tendencies, asking whether such courses are much more than professional labour provision for the industry in a symbiotic relationship of survival and growth.

But if, as Liam Gillick proposes in the opening paper by Paul O'Neill, 'the most important essays about art over the last ten years have not been in art magazines but they have been in catalogues and other material produced around galleries, art centres and exhibitions', the circularity of curating intended as producing and distributing culture as well as its own exegesis, becomes suspiciously close to a tail wagging its dog, with the added wizardry of making us concentrate at the dog rather than the hand it is wagged by.

The results of such self-importance placed by the broker onto itself and its own claims towards radical heritage as proof of its pedigree, whilst disjointing a previously more or less stable division of labour in the name of emancipation, are clearly manifested at all levels of the 'food chain'.

Despite the attempts of the editors of this volume to open up the rather claustrophobic ambiance set by the overwhelming presence of 'curators talking about curating', the insistence towards reinstating rather than jolting the reasons why curating do or should occupy such a centrality within contemporary culture is subsumed in the introduction by proposing that *'the concept of curating is a complex field of enquiry'*.

And indeed it is, but who is standing to gain from such constant refrains of complexity in the face of a constant growth of the cultural sector? Would we read with the same gusto of the complexity of industrial relations of corporate practice unless we were directly involved in their inner workings?

Of course, it may be too much to ask from an academic publication so clearly targeted at a field of professional practice, but if 'issues' exist *within* curating contemporary art, than they also exist *outside* the confines of those partaking of its inner reasoning, or benefit from its networking.

Unless the next stage of the stretching of curatorial practice into other fields might also incorporate its own epistemology, and notwithstanding the undeniable importance and political agency of a critique of modes of presentation in cultural production, the ambitious program of 'curating as a form of critical intervention in understanding contemporary culture' set at the outset of this publication lacks in some of its essential elements, first and foremost the effects on contemporary culture and its socio-political outfalls derived from the status of curating and the centrality of its operative strategy.

The rise to prominence of any professional category is always based on interplay between an emancipatory move from its constituents and a set of interlocking social, economic and political conditions that propels it by fostering and adopting its demands into its own through mutual co-option.

Any revision of employment and labour ranks and their respective power shares in any industry is usually regulated by the imperative to maintain its own power, if necessary through temporary allowances of radical encampments into its midst, breathing new life into hegemonic ring-fenced territories. As JJ Charlesworth again notices, 'during the period in which the self-reflexive discussion on curating has emerged, the power of institution has grown'⁶

It seems therefore implicit that in adopting the case of the rise of the curatorial profession and the ensuing mythology as one of the axiomatic cultural events of the last two decades, it would be more effective rather than only thinking in terms of historiography, to explore first and foremost the wider political ecology that hatched its coming into being, so as to unhinge the self-evident state of affairs that propagate its own discourses.

In other words, take away from curators the pre-eminence on discourses of curating, as if that was all that mattered in contemporary cultural discourses, and take an approach that start with considering for example how the changes in governance in the system of art that the rise of the curator provoked are to be seen as concurrent or even prescient symptoms of the rise of managerial and administrative ranks typical of post-industrial tertiary capitalism.

But maybe this is the role of a curatorial research project based on the colliding geographies of cultural and economic capital.

It might then take an unsympathetic swipe from an artist to shake the wand from the hands of the curator/magician, as when in 2000 Mark Wallinger wrote: '*in the late 1980s... in the absence of any meaningful debate, a new apolitical orthodoxy gave the opportunity of power and influence to a swill of artists/curators who might previously have found employment in PR*'⁷.

In the end, whilst clearly bracketed by their specificity to an area of expertise, some of the most enjoyable reading in this publication comes from those papers less reliant on the rhetoric of the importance of the curator in unearthing hidden histories, performing institutional critique or subversively shifting roles in hegemonic cultural hierarchies.

Rather, the narration of a case study such as Chris Dorsett, Catherine Elwes or Sophie Phoca are straightforward incursions in the hidden aspects of a profession that might in the end have been damaged by the limelight shone by some eager protagonists more than it gained.

However, for a more sound approach on an overall 'critical ecology of curating', read JJ Charlesworth's 'Curating Doubt' and move along elsewhere.

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⁶ P.96, Charlesworth, JJ, 'Curating Doubt', as part of Rugg, Judith and Sedgwick, Michèle, 'Issues in curating Contemporary Art and Performance', Intellect Books, 2007

⁷ Wallinger, Mark