

CURATORIAL CULTURES – CONSIDERING DYNAMIC CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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This paper will look at how responsive methods and approaches are called for when curating media-art-works, and how they shift the curatorial role to that of an active practitioner.

It will discuss exhibition strategies employed by the author, and how dynamic curatorial approaches can be integrated into mainstream curatorial roles, and how these can subsequently evolve thinking on the presentation and display of contemporary art.



Fig.1. Player Printer, 2006, Simon Blackmore, mixed media. Installation shot. Copyright Karen Gaskill.



Fig.2. Fast and Slow Networks, 2006, Exhibition view. Copyright Karen Gaskill.

“What”, I want to ask, “would it mean to think of art practice as the search for collaborators rather than as the search for an audience?” [1]

The practice of curating is live and temporal. It has shifted dramatically from its anonymous backstage origin within dusty museums to a role at the forefront of modern art, and is responsible for conjuring both a synergy and a dynamic that operates across a multitude of levels. Curation is a rapidly growing practice and discourse that is fundamentally shifting the ways in which we view and receive art.

This paper considers the curatorial role as that of an active practitioner, positioning it at a point of perspective. An excerpt from a recent PhD, this text presents a synopsis of a much longer articulation of the currency of the curatorial role in presenting and contextualising socially-engaged art practices.

Joan Gibbons, in her introductory narrative to the curatorial section of Hothaus Papers, reveals how the etymology of the word curate (as in 'curate' as a noun) goes back to the Latin word for care, 'cura', and through the religious art of the middle ages evolved into 'curatus', in reference to the care of the soul. [2] This is a particularly evocative description of the actions of the contemporary curator, as one that cares for our cultural products and their critical significance. Contemporary curators are summarised with a range of descriptive words such as caretaker, facilitator, mediator, catalyst, context provider, collaborator and negotiator. These have come to rise through the continuing prominence of the curator within exhibitions.

Traditionally the curatorial role was to collect, archive and preserve works of art, and was seen as separate from its variable display. Ramirez situates the curator as an internationally recognised expert of the artworld establishment, I quote: "in this elite context, curators have traditionally functioned as arbiters of taste and quality. The authority of this arbiter role derived from an absolute - ultimately ideological - set of criteria grounded in the restrictive parameters of the canon on western Modernism/Post Modernism." O'Neill, in Rugg and Sedgewick, [3] discusses the ascendancy of curatorial criticism since the 1960s, describing the critical shift away from the object of art, to a critique of the space of exhibition. More relevantly, he references the ascendancy of the curatorial gesture in the 1990s and how this 'began to establish curating as a potential nexus for discussion, critique and debate'. The rise of the curator can therefore be tracked through critical requirement. The role has adapted according to paradigm shifts, movements, cultural perspectives, and through the requirements of the work it chooses to curate.

The activity of the curator draws analogy to the Cabinets of Curiosity in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. The Cabinet of Curiosity, in its collection and display of often foreign and unseen objects, presented a tightly coordinated and rich tapestry of contexts and histories. Suggested as an early precursor to moving image culture (the notion of an audience roaming through a narrated space) the cabinet provided a specific audience with a metaphorical lens through which to view and understand alternative genealogies.

Such groupings of objects began the notion of storytelling and narrative within displays, and the provision of context and representation. Tony Bennett [4] writes of such museological cultures, 'the space of representation constituted in the relations between the disciplinary knowledges deployed within the exhibitionary complex thus permitted the construction of a temporally organised order of things and peoples'. Thus this aspect of the contemporary curator's role is not new, but through the lack of documentation of our curatorial history, many connections are still to be made.

The focus of the curatorial role has evolved from being that of a "behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter to a centralised position on a broader stage, with a creative, political and active part to play in the produc-

tion, mediation and dissemination of art itself.” [5] The practice of collection within museums and galleries still remains the same, with a continual need for the assimilation of art collections and their preservation and display. This ‘time storage’ as it has been labelled, is still massively important in cataloguing and preserving works. A perfect example is media art, where the necessity to archive digital and often ephemeral works is completely reliant on the survival of particular software and hardware. Therefore, to preserve the work, the associative technology must also be collected and conserved by the museum or gallery. The practice of archiving contemporary artworks has broadened relatively with the expansion of practices, and the responsibility of ensuring the future presentation of many works is thus massively reliant on the preservation of increasingly obsolete technical platforms.

Curatorial practice has come to embody one of the most dynamic forms of cultural agency available today. The challenges represented by this role and its ability to affect a series of interdependent areas inaccessible through other, more restricted, modes of cultural practices requires a fluid and multidimensional approach. [6] In the shift from the curator as master planner, Obrist [7] articulates how exhibitions have shifted from a historical approach of order and stability, to a place of flux and instability: the unpredictable. In thinking about the curator’s role at the helm of such uncertainty, it becomes much clearer how the position has evolved and its contemporary requirements shaped. This is also made clearer by the consideration of the types of work curated in contemporary exhibitions in relation to those being curated a century ago. The span of practices is growing rapidly, with new understandings and forms of hybrid practices being established all the time.

Therefore the position in which the contemporary curator sits is one of emergence and flux. I argue that the curator should be continually responsive to the type of work they are curating, if necessary changing their approach and looking sideways are what tactics of display best represent the work in question. The relationship between media art practices and traditional galleries is a recently formed one, with a history of littered with contextual and presentational misunderstandings. The main issue being that historically curation and its contextual knowledge has been developed and orientated around that of the art object. There has been no presentational challenge in displaying the works of painters and sculptors, obviously this is done with great knowledge and experience, but rather the challenge occurs when works come into being that are process-based as opposed to object-based.

As a contextualiser, the curator is often perceived as an “expert on art’s mediation by the sites of its display”; the area of curatorial expertise sits markedly between the “private sphere of the production of art, on the one hand, and the public sphere of consumption, on the other.” [8] However with this expertise comes a responsibility to the artist and their work in parallel to the audience. With experts drawing on their past knowledge of curation has meant that with the proliferation of more dynamic practices coming to the forefront of contemporary art, that this experience is not always relevant. It is difficult to curate work that is process-led with an approach that deals with art objects. So the question for many was how does one go about curating a process that involves audience members to make it manifest and in many cases realise the work. This issue was obvious in many of the early gallery shows, especially those which were not dedicated to media or participative practices entirely, or were solo shows, but were a selected mix of mediums. For me it felt that media works in many such shows were being curated on their physical presentation mediums as opposed to their relational attributes.

At this early point, the display monitor or computer was perceived as the work, it was a physical object, thus it was placed alongside other objects in the show accordingly. I use this as a broad example to iterate a point, and to reveal the difference between the curation of an object for display, where the curator takes into account the space required for viewing and exhibition sightlines, etc, to the curation of a

process. In this, where the physical presentation method is often purely a method of display, and where the essence of the work is revealed by the interaction of a user, viewer, participant, or otherwise, the curator needs to respond and work with the requirements of the piece, effectively curating the social, dialogical and reciprocal characteristics of a work.

The curator's relationship with site and space is ever evolving. Again I cite media arts as a prime example of how such practices have existed away from the formal agendas and white walls of the traditional gallery space. Such practices have always sought alternative spaces, primarily for the space requirements and that the significance of the gallery space is not entirely relevant to the dialogues they present. There have come to be more 'off-site' (non-gallery based) projects in recent years as exhibitions shift away from the white cube's signified emptiness [9] and critically acknowledge the role of site as part of the exhibition's context. I quote Brian O'Doherty [10] here, in order to contextualise Nick Kaye's description above, in his description of an ideal gallery, extracted from his book, *Inside the White Cube*. 'The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art". The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values'.

This merging of two critical directions; the white cube space of the object and the site-specific context of spatial works, has seen a new dialogue regarding the aesthetics of the relationship between artwork, place and audience develop. Exhibition spaces now exist 'off the map', and in the world, citing real life as their critical horizon and conceptualising the relationships and processes that occur within this context. (See fig.1).

I consider curation as being about establishing and contextualising a site of exchange: a space where artwork, site and audience converge. The 'exhibition space' exists where these conditions are met, and with Media Practices in particular focuses on the process of this convergence itself. This coming together of social, spatial and critical contexts generates a political space that exists within a wider cultural sphere.

There is no one set example of how media art practices function within a confined space, each performs differently, exerting different pressures on the conditional aspects that both determine and limit their relational capacities. Most works that function well in such spaces are often produced or commissioned to work within such parameters, and therefore are perhaps more site-specific in the traditional sense as they are intrinsically embedded within the site of production. However, such locations differ from their traditional predecessors in that the curatorial process also takes into account the relationship between site and artwork, and therefore is much more reliant on the audience to acknowledge and legitimise the connections made between the two.

This raw space provides a blank canvas for both the curator and artist that can be worked with accordingly to capture the characteristic of what the exhibition seeks overall to explore. Away from the agendas set by gallery spaces and the critical expectations of gallery audiences, alternative spaces reveal a space of potential, a space where anything can happen. This is very much a live space working with the conditions of subjectivity and presence, and dependent on an engagement across all elements. It is in this 'conditional' space that socially engaged and media practices projects sit, where contexts are formed and experience is lived. As an example, Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* are critically positioned by the artist, realised by the audience, influenced by the site, and politicised by the multiple perspectives

and opinions of the participants. This condition of immediacy where a conflux of ideas, perspectives, conditions and experience meet mimics in Kaprow's eyes the grit and texture of everyday life.

Such conditions of immediacy are also opened up through interactive media works and emphasised or furthered by the opportunities afforded by the chosen exhibition site. As suggested, alternative exhibition spaces remove the audience's 'authenticity', permitting them to function in a more natural role. These circumstances allow a public authoring of the exhibition itself, with the public's interaction with artwork and site both contextualising and realising the exhibition as a space of engagement. (See fig.2).

I want to touch on some examples of curatorial strategies that I have been implementing, and how these experiences have informed my knowledge as a curator. From 2005-2009 I directed and curated a small arts organisation called Interval. Based in Manchester, UK, it aimed to support artists using technology in their work through regular exhibition opportunities and networking events. Through Interval I attempted to approach the exhibitions I planned and curated from the perspective of curating the process of the selected artworks. This involved much more consideration of the appropriateness of space and site, and instead of thinking how the physical attributes of the show would be presented, I considered how the social space of each work would function, how they would work in relation to one another, and the potential for dialogue and exchange.

This curation of spaces for interaction and exchange very much shifted my perspective on the potential of exhibitions, and even working in gallery contexts with participative or socially-engaged artworks of all kinds, has reiterated the engagement that the curator needs to make with the 'exhibition space'.

So to conclude; 'Curator' is a term in the constant state of 'becoming' writes O'Neill, [11] 'as long as "curating in practice" is continuously willing a flexible "common discourse" into being'. It can therefore be said that curating is no longer about being somebody else, e.g. curator as negotiator or facilitator, it is about being a 'curator' as understood in discourse. The actions of curating mean different things to different curators, who again work in different contexts and situations, locations and sites. It is very much a cultural commentation role, experimental and discursive, necessarily responsive to socio-political and artistic shifts in a fluid culture. Our evolving curatorial dialogue seeks to embody movement and continuation in its descriptive qualities, and make visible and transparent the links and networks between meanings.

Curating is 'becoming discourse' where curators are willing themselves to be the key subject and producer of this discourse." I consider how Niklas Luhmann's writings on art as a social system, and in particular his articulation of a reflective practice, could be applied to curatorial practice. I suggest that this would compare the action of 'exhibition making' or curatorial practice as being the equivalent of making an artwork. Luhmann understands art as an autopoietic system that is self-referential and recursive. [12] I view curation as a similar thing. Curation enables the space of exhibition to open up new possibilities for dialogue and exchange, with these new perspectives feeding back into the way in which the exhibition is perceived and reflected upon. The 'artwork' or 'practice' of the curator is the exhibition and all of its associated processes, thus again coming back to Luhmann's notion of practice as not being solely concerned with agency but rather the work's understanding of itself and how this reveals possibility for an exhibition to raise questions about itself and its environment.

This becomes relevant when thinking about the broader social, cultural and political remit of curation and its practice. In its responsibility for the collaborative creation of context - that includes the artist/s; the artwork; the concept of the work and its representation; the facilitation of an exhibition's content;

orienting the body of work, and finally the space of engagement with an audience - curatorial practice is very much the actions of a bricoleur. In reflecting the messiness and complexity of everyday contexts and building a knowledge formulated by experiences and relationships, the curator is a responsive practitioner; a collaborator in art's social relations.

References and Notes:

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12. Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 49.