

# Curatorship and New Media: Possible Dialogues

## Priscila Arantes

Universidade Anhembi Morumbi  
São Paulo, Brasil  
priscila.a.c.arantes@gmail.com

### Abstract

One of the discussions related to contemporary curatorial practices focuses upon the impact of new media and digital media in the formats and exhibition circuits. In addition to only exploring curatorships that showcase digital media art projects, what interests us in this article is to investigate how certain characteristics of media culture – such as collaborative processes and networking – are present in current curatorial practices. Examining this premise, we divided this article into two parts. In the first, we conducted a small curatorial history to show how the curatorial procedures have been adapted to the changes occurring in the field of contemporary art. In a second part, we use as a study case the curatorial projects developed by the Paço das Artes<sup>1</sup> such as the *Livro-Acervo, MaPA and Ex-Paço*.

### Keywords

Curatorship, New Media, Digital Culture, Exhibition, Contemporary Art.

### Introduction

The principle of curating, as we know, is linked to museums, which in turn refers to their origin in the cabinets of curiosities. The obscure *Wunderkammern* began to emerge in Europe during the Renaissance. They were collections of zoological, botanical, and archeological objects, historical and ethnographic relics, paintings and antiques. Unlike traditional museums, however, which have among their responsibilities the documentation, organization, and arrangement of objects in accordance with a filing methodology aimed at the conservation of artifacts for future exposure, cabinets of curiosities lacked the concept of cataloging. Their standard for the exhibition

In spite of the fact that the curator was historically

linked to the maintenance and display of collections, in recent decades the curator's role has gained new dimensions. The curator has ceased to act merely as a head conservator for museums, and started to carry out independent curatorial projects as well, quite often imposing an authorial perspective to the exhibitions. It is clear, in this sense, that there is a change in the role of the curator as keeper of collections and head conservator of museums – whose primary concerns are about the permanence and integrity of collections – to the curator who often articulates a personal vision within temporary exhibitions. These authorial perspectives often incorporate other spaces and exhibition formats into the curatorial practice.

We should remember that until the 1960s, it was the artists themselves who organized their shows. In fact, one of the characteristics of modern art was the initiative of certain artists to come together to set up exhibitions, beginning with the example of the precursor *Gustave Courbet*. He built a temporary structure to exhibit some of his paintings, which were rejected by the *Exposition Universelle de Paris* in 1855.

Courbet's example was followed by other exhibitions organized by artists who were on the fringes of the *Salons* or who had artworks rejected by the Academies. In 1863, having had two canvases rejected in the official salon of French artists, *Manet*, along with other artists, organized a parallel exhibition to the official salon. It became known as the *Salon des Refusés* [Salon of the Rejected]. After its exhibition, various artists such as *Renoir, Degas, Cezanne, Monet* and *Morisot*, began to organize their own exhibitions.

Some of these exhibits, developed by one or more members of a group or of a movement, established the independent exhibition. Those were organized by what today might be called the artist-curator, or artist/etc, as Ricardo Basbaum refers to it. A good example of a precursor to the artist-curator was *Marcel Duchamp*,

<sup>1</sup> The Paço das Artes is a contemporary art cultural center of the São Paulo (Brasil) Department of Culture. Created in the 1970's, its mission is to disseminate, promote and make room for young Brazilian contemporary art.

who was invited by the surrealists to put together two exhibitions. One of them – *First Papers of Surrealism* – was held in New York in 1942. That show became famous for the white threads with which Duchamp entangled the whole space, thus hindering the movement of visitors in the gallery as well the visibility of the paintings.

But it is from the 1960s that the role of the curator and the curatorial practice begins to appear more prominently within the system of the arts as a component for conceiving, producing and disseminating an exhibition. In the 1980s, following the explosion of the market accompanied by the growth of temporary exhibitions and contemporary art museums, the activity of the curator indeed expanded (in response to the phenomenon of globalization, the privatization policy of the governments of Reagan and Thatcher, and the opening of new markets). Many people attribute the phenomenon of the emergence of the figure of the curator as the author of a concept, to the emergence of the mega-exhibitions – biennials, Documentas, manifestas – whose organization would be almost unthinkable without the presence of the curator. Others suggest that changes in the art's system, as well as in the practice of art itself, which began to incorporate all sorts of media productions, were responsible for the expansion of the role of the curator in the 1980s.

It is important to note that the expansion of curatorial practice brought about the creation of new formats and exhibition circuits, often in dialogue with parameters that exist in the production of art itself: curatorial projects based on process, curatorial practices that manifest themselves in circuits beyond the institutional exhibition space, collaborative and networked curatorial projects, are among the examples we could list.

### Curatorial Practices and Contemporary Art: New Formats and Circuits

The exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, by the curator Harald Szeemann, held in 1969 at the Kunsthalle in Bern, was one of these milestones. The idea of designing a theme for the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, besides being unprecedented, reversed the usual process of an exhibition and marked a major change in the methodology of structuring an exhibit. Until then, exhibitions were conceived according to predetermined formal categories, styles, and chronology, or based upon artists who were part of the same movement. Normally, traditional artworks were completed. They were cho-

sen by the curator and subsequently exhibited. Harald Szeemann proposed a challenge to the artists. Based on the suggested concept, he allowed artists to present concepts and actions, which could be accomplished in the actual exhibition space, or even outside of it. The essence of the exhibition was not in the exhibited artworks, but rather in the —attitudes! arising from the creative process. The theme promoted by Szeemann was —take over the institution.

Because of this, the artist Lawrence Weiner cut a 90 x 90 cm hole in the plaster of one of the walls of the Kunsthalle, which became one of the most emblematic works of the concept of the exhibition. Joseph Beuys filled the corners with his well-known —fat! and Richard Long removed a piece of the structure of Kunsthalle and took it on a three-day hike through the Swiss mountains.

In Brazil we must mention the role of the curator Walter Zanini, not only in the 16th and 17th São Paulo Biennial (1981 and 1983 respectively), which abolished the setting up of spaces reserved for certain countries, but also in exhibitions and proposals such as *JAC's* (1972), *Prospective* (1974), and *Visual Poetics* (1977), which were held when he was the director of the MAC – Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo.

In *JAC's – Jovem Arte Contemporânea* (1972), for example, besides the fact that Zanini opened the space for the production of new media (xerox, video, etc.), he raffled off spaces in the museum for artists to produce their work while requesting in the registration form, that the artists attempted to give greater emphasis to the artistic process over the finished object. *Prospective 74* was further groundbreaking, in the sense of creating a network of known artists, in which each one would invite another one, and so on and so forth... This network of friends resulted in an exhibition with over 150 artists who produced works that exceeded the limits of conventional media, such as video art and mail art. In addition, *Poéticas Visuais* (1977) were ever more innovating by giving the public the chance to select artworks, which they would like to take home with them. This exhibition provided the public with photocopies of the documents and artworks displayed, thus setting up the spontaneous participation of the viewers who were able to create many potential portable exhibitions.

It is important that we mention Seth Siegel's *Xerox Book*, 1968, one of his best-known curatorial projects in the form of a publication. For that show, seven artists – Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Huebler, Joseph Kosuth,

Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Laurence Weiner – each contributed a 25-page work. The title *Xerox Book* was a bit misleading. Although inspired by photocopying, the book was made utilizing traditional offset printing due to the high cost of photocopying at the time.

On the other hand, it became common among contemporary practices, in dialogue with artists exploring circuits outside the traditional ones, that curators invite artists to hold exhibitions in unusual places, such as shut-down factories, churches, abandoned hotels, occupied neighborhoods and parks, radio stations, advertising venues, among others. An example is the exhibition the *Chambres d'Amis* (A Friend's Bedroom). This audacious curatorial project was conceived by the Belgian curator Jan Hoet in 1986. The curator had previously requested that some residents of the city of Gent, Belgium, make their homes available for 50 artists to do installations or interventions in one or two rooms in their homes. Armed with a map, visitors could go door to door and visit the —exhibitions! for two months. Most of the spaces used by the artists were living rooms, gardens and passageways, such as stairs and doors, except Daniel Buren, who chose the master bedroom to paint red stripes on a white wall.

Another example of exhibitions in this context was the show *Arte/Cidade* [Art/City], which took place in São Paulo and had its first edition in 1994. Created by Nelson Brissac Peixoto, each edition includes new curators invited to define the theme, the participating artists, and the locations of the public actions. The former Municipal Slaughterhouse of Vila Mariana was the first site chosen to reflect on the weight of abandoned buildings in large cities, with the theme: *City Without Windows*. The following year, the theme was *The City and its Flux*, using the top of three buildings as a base for artists to work on concepts of lightness, light, movement and scale. Laura Vinci made use of a hole in a flagstone to propose an installation in one of these buildings, turning two floors into a large sand hourglass. In the 2002 edition, Krzysztof Wodiczko presented an alternative for scrap paper collectors by building a 'utopian' aluminum cart with a canvas awning to protect the scrap paper collectors from exposure to the rain and sun.

However, it is not only in the transformation of sites in the city that curators today seem to be interested. Many also explore cyberspaces, networks, and the Internet. It is worth remembering the exhibition of net art *CODEDOC* (2002) curated by Christiane Paul for the

Whitney Museum. This show made explicit the criticism of the monopolization of technological knowledge. For this exhibition, the artists were invited to create codes with a specific theme: connect and move three points in space. The strategy of the presentation *CODEDOC* was unique: before —seeing the work!, the viewer-user was asked to access the source code of the work. In this way, the curator made her objective clear: not only to explore the source code as a fundamental part of the work to be developed but also to stage discussions about the democratization of the access to information and free software. Among the showcased artworks we highlight the Sawad Brooks Perl, a project in which the source code changed and interfered with the home pages of three major world newspapers.

### Curatorial Collaborations

Many of these curatorial undertakings conceptually rooted in contemporary art, dialogue with the idea of relational practices in the form of collaborative narratives. On occasion, they also include the space of the Internet in their web. Within this perspective we can highlight the project *Do It* by the Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, an exhibition that is somewhere between the actual and the virtual, between repetition and difference. This project is modeled as an open exhibition (like an open work of art in constant motion) in which artists, invited by the curator propose work instructions that can be activated by the public who that way become the —maker! of the work. Whoever wants to make the performance, the installation, the drawing, ultimately follows the script of the artist who created it. The project is ultimately authored by all participants.

In a similar perspective, we can highlight the curatorship of (*Approximadamente 800cm3 of PLA*) designed by Gabriel Menotti and presented at the art gallery of the Federal University of Espírito Santo and also through the website *800cm3*. The project explored the relationship between 3D printing and the —supposed! immateriality of digital means putting into question the illusion of technology as an inexhaustible source.

Unlike traditional curatorial procedures where the artwork is usually chosen a priori by the curator of *Approximadamente 800cm3 of PLA* used the feature of —business call! as a trigger for the curatorial process, in which any artist and/or interested party could sent their proposal to be displayed on the site. What defined the curators criteria, so to speak, was the amount of raw

material available for printing: a roll of 3D Printing Filament, containing approximately 800cm<sup>3</sup> of material, thus giving its name to the exhibition.

Between scale variations and malformations, the printed articles have created a kind of curio cabinet containing algorithmically generated sculptures, cartoon characters, computed tomography, and three-dimensional models of trash cans, made by more than thirty artists from around the world.

*Approximadamente 800cm<sup>3</sup> of PLA* sought to employ in an unusual way, the digital manufacturing technologies, by testing their limits against idiosyncrasies of certain fields established for human knowledge and action. As the name implies, the project takes as its starting point, the plastic raw material of the most popular type of 3D printing. More specifically, a limited amount of plastic; a standard roll of 3D Printing Filament.

The curators shed light upon discussions regarding the use of 3D printing technology for preservation and access to art works in museum collections. *Approximadamente 800cm<sup>3</sup> of PLA* sought precisely to question certain assumptions by providing the technology for the production of anything submitted to the project on the basis of —first come, first served. In this way, the exhibition intended to challenge the museographic hierarchy by calling attention to what is less important and mundane, thus recovering the notion of curiosity which existed in the old cabinets of curiosities—as a guiding principal of the exhibition. In this sense, the curatorial concept not only worked through a collaborative form and on the network as well, but touched upon a very important point when we think of museums and curators: the collection and its accessibility.

### **Curatorship and Collections: Livro-Acervo, MaPA and Ex-Paço**

To question traditional museographic standards, to create more experimental curatorial structures, as well as to make the collections more accessible to the public, have been some of the strategies utilized by the Paço das Artes.

Given that the Paço das Artes is not a museum in the strict sense of the word (it does not have a collection of artworks), in addition to its active promotion of the emerging young Brazilian contemporary art, it makes its archival and research work, the cornerstone of its — collection.

We could say that the actions of the of the Paço das Artes constitute a kind of imaginary museum, as defined by Andre Malraux: The Paço das Artes collection are the artists, the Paço's activities, curators, critics, educators, and the public that passed through its doors. It was in this perspective of opening up the debate and discussing issues related to collections and archives, that the Paço das Artes curatorial and exhibition projects Livro/Acervo, MaPA and Ex-Paço were conceptualized.

### **Livro-Acervo**

The first project, *Livro-Acervo*, was designed by me in 2010 for the commemoration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Paço das Artes. The initial idea of the project was to develop a — big! curatorship that could not only rescue the memory of the Paço das Artes—the actors and agents who were part of its history—but also offer the public the opportunity to have access to a curatorial example beyond the traditional exhibition space.

It was in this perspective that a new idea was born: to develop not only a curatorship in book form — portable and of easy circulation — but to also develop a curatorial concept based upon the concepts of the —archive and —collection of the institution, thus rescuing one of its most important projects: A Temporada de Projetos [an annual open call for projects].

This large project was composed of three main parts<sup>22</sup>. In the first part, the thirty artists who went through the annual *Temporada de Projetos* were invited to develop a new work on paper (such as the flip book *Shipwreck*, developed by the artist Laura Belém). These works were printed as hard copies for distribution and inserted together with the other items comprising the project. In the same folder of notebooks worked on by the artists, we have the Encyclopaedia, the second part of the project, with information about each of the artists, curators and jury who participated in the *Temporada de Projetos* since its first edition. The third part of the project consisted of a sound work of up to one-minute-long, recorded on a CD-ROM, developed by artists and curators, who participated in the *Temporada de Projetos* since its first edition. It is noteworthy to mention that the project (consisting of these three parts) were given in the form of a box / archive alluding precisely to the idea that this device contains an important part of the

<sup>22</sup> From the initial idea of the project, we invited the artists Artur Lescher and Lenora de Barros as curators overseeing the development and design of the first edition of of the *Livro/Acervo*.

history of the *Paço das Artes* and its share of emerging Brazilian art.

### MaPA

Giving continuity to the project *Livro-Acervo* implemented in November 2014, *MaPA: Memória Paço das Artes* (MaPA Memory of the Paço das Artes), a digital platform for contemporary art, brings together all the artists, critics, curators and members of the jury who have participated in the *Temporada de Projetos* since its inception in 1996.

The platform consists of a database with more than 870 images of works exhibited in the *Temporada de Projetos*, and approximately 270 critical texts and video-interviews that have been especially developed since 2014 for this project. Bringing together more than 240 artists, 14 curatorial projects, 70 art critics and 43 jurors, the platform was built as a relational device and a *work-in-progress*, offering the researcher the opportunity to access information and existing relationships within the *Temporada de Projetos*.

On the *MaPA* home page, the public is presented through a random system, to a number of names (of artists, critics, curators and jury members who went through the *Temporada*). By hovering the mouse over any of these names-links, the map highlights in bold the other names involved in that particular year of the *open call for projects*. That is how one starts the research on the *MaPA* platform: as a relational device that allows one to know the trajectory of each artist alongside those of the critics who evaluated him/her, and the jury that selected him/her. The emphasis given to this — relational history is explained in the dialogue with the *Temporada de Projetos* proposals, which in selecting artists, curators and critics early on in their careers and serves to validate new talent into the art scene. It is for this reason that the organization of information and references on the platform are made through the names of the artists, curators and critics. It documents their trajectories and the creative development of all those involved in the production and circulation of contemporary art, therefore validating the trajectories and creative development of all those involved in the production of contemporary art system.

Finally, the *MaPA* could be seen not only as a recovery device for the trajectory of the *Paço das Artes* and the institution's archives, but also as a research device for all those interested in the trajectories of the young

Brazilian contemporary artists. Last but not least, the map is a trigger vehicle for developing other narratives on the history of Brazilian art, the young Brazilian art, which quite often has no opportunity, or does not appear in the official discourses of art history.

### Ex-Paço

As the final project of this trilogy, I would like to highlight the work in progress of *Ex-Paço* conceived and designed by myself and Sergio Nesteriuk.

The *Ex-Paço* is a three-dimensional virtual replica of the *Paço das Artes*, with outputs for computer (local and online), mobile devices, and cardboard virtual reality goggles. Modeled in 3D from the last site of the *Paço das Artes*, the *Ex-Paço* is not only a space for memories in the sense that it recovers, in virtual reality, the former building where the institution previously existed, but rather a digital museum dedicated to housing different curatorial projects and contemporary art manifestations.

This new interactive space, located in virtual reality, is the starting point for thinking about new curatorial and exhibition dynamics enabled by new technologies. It is not, therefore, just digital artworks exhibited in a museum or site, but rather it is the exhibition space itself that is now digital, virtual, thereby opening up new creative possibilities in the curatorial and exhibition fields.

If in the *Livro-Acervo*, and on the *MaPA* digital platform, what was in focus was the access to the strategies and information about the *Paço das Artes* activities — in the sense of contributing to new narratives of the emerging Brazilian Contemporary art — in the *Ex-PAÇO* development project, what is at stake, is not only the creation of a digital museum for the development of online curatorship, but especially the highlighting of the of the *Paço das Artes* as a space for artistic creation and experimentation.

The interface between curatorship and new media could offer us interesting ways to understand the changes in the spaces and current exhibition formats. These new formats often dialogue with questions concerning the very modus operandi of art and of contemporary media culture. Curatorial process, curatorial collaboration, online curatorship, curatorial projects developed on and for the internet, are some of the strategies adopted by us, the current curators.

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### **Author Biography**

Priscila Arantes is a researcher, curator, professor and museum director. Currently she teaches in the Master and PhD in design program at the School of Arts, Architecture, Design and Fashion of the Universidade Anhembi Morumbi She holds a PhD in Communication and Semiotics from PUC/SP and a postdoctoral degree in Art Criticism and History from the Penn State University. She is currently artistic director and curator of the Paço das Artes, a museum of São Paulo, since 2007. Her publications include *Arte e Mídia: perspectivas da estética digital* (Art and Media: perspectives of the digital aesthetic), *Arte: história, crítica e curadoria* (Art: history, criticism and curating) and *Re/escrituras da arte contemporânea: história, arquivo e mídia* (Re/writings of contemporary art: history, archive and media). She has curated a number of exhibitions. Recent curatorial projects include *Arquivo Vivo*, *Projeto 5X5* and *MaPA*, held at the Paço das Artes.