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When Travesty Becomes Form

By Alberto Duman

The problem with critiques of curatorship is that they usually end up reinforcing the central importance of the curator. Alberto Duman contemplates a recent addition to the field and suggests ways to break the cycle of self-affirmation

Taking issue with curating — whether this entails curator-bashing or curator-praising — seems a very popular pastime in all art and culture related fields. The flurry of public debates over the contemporary form and status of curating provides the context as well as the content for *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. The defining characteristic that emerges from Rugg and Sedgewick's collection of texts is that nobody is keener to take issue with curatorship than curators themselves, making self-reflexivity a creed and the dilemma of how to articulate critical intervention within the institution a matter of endless discursive folds. In the process the necessity, potential and authority of both curator and institution within cultural production are legitimated and reinscribed.

[IMAGE]

Narrative 6: Hans Ulrich Obrist Narrates, Michael Diers Listens

With creative insertions, travesties, posturing, relationality and role-playing taking the place of overt confrontation in contemporary critical art practice, it became obvious that the role of the infiltrator in the network had to insistently assume a prominence at all levels in the production and dissemination of cultural products. Although critique of the system of art and its institutions could suggest tactics of creating a deliberate distance between centre and margins, the emergence of the independent curator has progressively revealed itself to be a key element in healing such rifts and providing a means of reintegration into mainstream circuits. Bridging the gap between nascent tactics and overarching strategies, the curator/artist or artist/curator is the footloose agent of creation and dissemination of knowledge, stretching across previously unestablished axes or exploiting existing ones in the name of a progressive redistribution of governance, and counter-hegemonic positioning.

But when ambiguity is the norm and travesty becomes form, the alleged radical defiance of endless ambiguity leaves little room for antagonism, or the concrete refashioning of relationships across the systems in which we operate. This becomes particularly insidious when such degrees of creativity and mobility — previously the tools of those forced to conceal their aims to avoid repression — are internalised to the point that institutions appear more (tactically) creative than anyone else.

Positioning as marketing and homogenisation of strategies at all levels ultimately flattens the territory and leaves power relations unchanged, as J.J. Charlesworth points out in his contribution to the book:

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, while we await the emancipatory urge of the slide librarian to rise above his/her limited powers of indexing and subvert the institution from within we are *ipso facto* deeply involved in the continuous rise, metamorphosis and expansion of the role of the curator. As Paul O'Neill tells us: 'the separateness of the artistic and curatorial gesture (is) no longer apparent in contemporary exhibition practice.' [2]

Clearly he is right. Witness the practice of Maurizio Cattelan as an example, who repeatedly sent his alter ego Massimiliano Gioni to interviews in his place, delivering stock responses lifted from various texts, curated a nonexistent Caribbean Biennale as holiday opportunity for his friends, opened a mock-franchise of the Gagosian Gallery in his capacity as co-curator of the 2006 Berlin Biennale, and 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 be just a more spectacular version of what already happens everywhere around us. If we briefly depart from the shores of cultural practice one sees this metamorphosis of roles occurring everywhere, from energy suppliers doubling as telecommunication providers, tyre manufacturers as real estate players or estate agents as independent property evaluators. With the constant appropriation or strategic evacuation of roles, diversification or amalgamation of business areas and brand positioning representing some of the building blocks of our contemporaneity, there should be no reason why cultural production, if intended as 'an economic avant-garde', should not lead the way in refashioning labour division.[3]

[IMAGE]

Maurizio Cattelan-Style Head

Lacking the brute force of contemporary capital's way of doing things by way of more or less overt violence, contemporary art can play the same tricks through cheek, cajolment and Orwellian reversals. But when, as is usually the case, the destabilisation of signs is operated at the level of discursive practices lodged safely within major institutions and voiced through their distributive channels, the work of the curator/artist is immunised from effect by operating in a self-consciously controlled sandbox.

Through their selection of texts, Rugg and Sedgwick repeatedly place the emphasis on the blurring of roles between artist, curators, producers and distributors. This is cast as one of the central and most subversive tenets of the curatorial impulse reshaping art and its modes of presentation. The contemporary creative archivist and/or curator is liberated from the weight of the archive, and released into the fantasy of a ceaselessly shifting identity. A transformation comparable to the contemporary creative manufacturer's liberation from the weight of the production line.

Of course not everyone has been convinced by the radical promise of the 'curatorial turn', particularly when confronted by the evidence that the move beyond a strict antithesis of roles tends to emancipate only the most mobile – namely the managers and administrators. In 2000, some years before he received 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.[5]

Whilst going through the various chapters of this publication, I started to have the impression that it bore more than a passing resemblance to the main problematic of its subject of enquiry, and had internalised what J.J. Charlesworth in the same book defines as the 'preferred orthodoxies of contemporary culture,' namely, 'uncertainty, provisionality, open-endedness and deferral'. [6] For as much as the editors have tried their best to breathe some air into the highly specific issues at stake in curating contemporary art and performance, they necessarily adopt the academic preconditions existing in the material they are handling. (The material itself arose '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 to the output of the symposia, the collection of texts seems to amount to, with a couple of notable exceptions, yet another episode in the very conditions of contemporary culture as described by Charlesworth, rather than a stab at comprehending it. Of course *Issues in Contemporary Curating* will clearly be of use to the burgeoning courses in curating perennially in need of material to form their curriculum. But the necessity of providing a shared historiography within a curatorial teaching environment might end up replicating rather than correcting existing tendencies. All of which begs the question of whether such courses amount to 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 to produce and distribute culture as well as its own exegesis, becomes suspiciously close to a tail wagging its dog.

The results of such importance placed by the broker upon itself and its claims to a radical heritage as proof of its pedigree, whilst disjoining a previously stable division of labour in the name of emancipation, are clearly manifested at all levels of the 'food chain'. Despite attempts by the editors of this volume to lighten the claustrophobic tone set by the overwhelming presence of 'curators talking about curating', the insistence on reinstating rather than jolting the reasons for curating occupying such a central position within contemporary culture becomes clear from their introductory blandishments in which they claim 'the concept of curating is a complex field of enquiry'.

[IMAGE]

Curator's Desk, c. 1870

And indeed it is, but who is standing to gain from such constant refrains of complexity in the face of the cultural sector's consistent growth? Would we read about the complexity of the industrial relations of corporate practice with the same gusto, 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, then they also exist *outside* these confines. Unless the next stage in 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 is lacking in some essential elements. First and foremost any reflection on the effects curating's high status and central role is having on contemporary culture and the social politics it gives on to.

The rise to prominence of any professional category is always based on the interplay between an emancipatory move from its constituents and a set of interlocking social, economic and political conditions which propel that category by integrating and neutralising its demands. As J.J. Charlesworth again notices, 'during the period in which the self-reflexive discussion on curating has emerged, the power of the institution has grown.'[7]

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 â rather than only thinking in terms of historiography â to explore first and foremost the wider political ecology that hatched its coming into being, to unhinge the self-evident state of affairs that propagates its own discourses. In other words, take away from curators the pre-eminence of discourses on curating and take an approach that starts by considering, for example, how changes in art governance provoked by the curator's rise, parallel or even pre-empt the rise of the managerial and

administrative ranks typical of post-industrial 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.

In the end, whilst clearly bracketed by their specific relation 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 more harmed than helped by the limelight shone by some eager protagonists. However, for a more sound approach on an overall 'critical ecology of curating', read J.J. Charlesworth's 'Curating Doubt' and move along elsewhere.

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Footnotes

[1] J.J. Charlesworth, 'Curating Doubt', in Rugg et al, *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, Intellect Books, 2007, p.98.

[2] Paul O'Neill, 'The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse', Rugg et al, *ibid.*, p.14.

[3] Boris Groys, 'Art as an Economic Avant-Garde', available online at:
http://www.niallflaherty.com/textz/Art_as_an_Economic_Avant-Garde.rtf

[4] J.J. Charlesworth, 'Curating Doubt', Rugg et al, *op. cit.*, p.98.

[5] Mark Wallinger, (guest editor), in introduction to *Art for All: Their Policies and Our Culture*, London: PEER, 2000.

[6] J.J. Charlesworth, *op. cit.*, p.98.

[7] *Ibid.*

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