

***How might recent theorisation of 'the curatorial' be valuable to the 'artist as curator' in the context of the art school environment?***

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**Biography**

Susan Ostling is a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Her research agenda is to explore ways for exhibitions to provide catalysts to frame and question the conditions of contemporary society. Susan's curatorial projects have consisted of *Place.Product* which investigated the social history of clay, tiles and ceramic manufacture in the Ipswich area Brisbane: *Future Factor*, which toured nationally, examined the impact of new technologies on craft and design practice; *Lingua Franca* considered the shared language between art, design and craft; *The course of objects—the fine lines of inquiry* mapped the triggers that inspire art practice and lead to rigorous lines of inquiry; *Radical Romanticism* brought artists together whose work considered anew the experience of the everyday. Her PhD investigated the shaping and defining of the contemporary art curator.

**Abstract**

Generally, the concept of the 'artist as curator' is discussed through examples of the dramatic and growing compendium of artist initiated projects, identified from the turn of the twentieth century. The role artists have played in transforming the experience of art in art museums in the last two decades has been well acknowledged; as has the influence of artist practices on the formation of the contemporary art curator. This paper then will shift the focus in the discussion of the artist as curator from the influence of artists on curatorial practice. Instead it will discuss the emerging theorization of "the curatorial" and argue for its value within art school education.

Significant here is the differentiation of the terms *curating* and *the curatorial*; curating is a set of skills with the purpose of bringing art into the public domain; Beatrice von Bismarck describes it as a "constellation activity" making new links between things: artworks, artifacts information, sites, contexts, resources defined through aesthetics, the social, economics, institutions and the discursive. On the other hand, the curatorial is seen to subsume technique, formats and aesthetics not unlike, von Bismarck says the "concepts of the cinematic or literary". It is she says a dynamic field where the "constellation condition comes into being". Irit Rogoff identifies how conceptualizing the curatorial makes it possible "to affect a shift in emphasis to a very different place, to the trajectory of activity". She talks of the curatorial as "an epistemic structure" where existing different knowledges come together to produce the "event of knowledge". Here she draws on Jacques Derrida's metaphor of the "send-off" focusing on a space that is slippery and less material, and is concerned with effects in the world. These positions will be drawn out in the paper arguing that 'the curatorial' brings to visual art students a greater understanding of the conditions through which art and culture become public.

**Keywords:** artist, curator, mediating, fields of knowledge

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***How might recent theorisation of 'the curatorial' be valuable to the 'artist as curator' in the context of the art school environment?***

Generally, the concept of the 'artist as curator' is discussed through examples of the dramatic and growing compendium of artist initiated projects (or artist commissioned projects), identified from the turn of the twentieth century. The role artists have played in transforming the experience of art in art museums in the last two decades is becoming fully acknowledged, as has the influence of artist practices on the shaping of the contemporary art curator. This paper however, will shift the focus in the discussion of the artist as curator from the influence of artists on curating, and exhibition practice, to discussing an emerging theorization of 'the curatorial'. I propose that 'the curatorial' potentially offers to visual art students a greater understanding of the conditions through which art and culture become public. As an introduction to the paper I will revisit briefly the twentieth century trajectory of artists as curators.

Nicholas Serota in *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (1996, pp. 20-1) identifies Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911) as marking the beginning of artists 'self consciously' exploring the relationship between their own work and its placement within a setting or environment. Matisse calls it the *Red Studio* but despite the pack of pastels on a table in the foreground, this is not exactly a working space but a space for viewing art works in relation to each other in the space. And while the space is too informal for an art museum, *The Red Studio* references the ideas of art display, suggesting that the experience of art extends beyond each picture's frame. Serota sees *The Red Studio* as looking forward to Matisse's later work where control of the environment through active use of space and light was to lead to memorable environments like Chapelle du Rosarie, Venice (1951).

Serota also makes mention of the way Constantin Brancusi uses photography in his studio from 1918-46 to record the relationships formed between his works in different spatial configurations. Through the evidence of this photographic documentation it could be said that Brancusi was testing the ways his works occupied space, and the potential viewing experience of this. Clearly 'the work' was more than a particular object. Serota says Brancusi developed a 'singular sensitivity' to the placement of art

(1996, p. 26), which was to have a profound effect on the making and the experience of viewing twentieth century art.

Serota tracks the impact of Minimalism on the art museum, through artists' direct engagement with its physical space: spaces were "invaded" and "more radically ... absorbed ... into the work itself" (1996, p. 33). Carl Andre sums this up as the move from objects being about form, then structure, and finally, becoming *place* (cited in Serota 1996, p. 33). Many works were created for particular locations, or came into being within "the place of the exhibition itself" (1996, p. 36).

The way artists changed the face of the art museum came from another front as well. This was through what Marcel Broodthaers called "the fiction of the museum" (cited in Serota 1996, 38). Serota says that the way artists reinvented museum displays, or selected works for display was as both homage to the traditional museum and parody of its authority, and systems of display (1996, p. 38). That may well have been the motivation for Andy Warhol in his *Raid the Icebox* (1969-70) at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art where he emptied out the museum's storage rooms of artefacts and reinstalled them in main gallery spaces. But for other artists there was much more at stake in reforming the art institution itself. Broodthaer's first use in 1968 of the word *Museum* as a label on the door to his studio, signified "a place least like a museum" (Smith 2012, p. 104). For the artists gathering in Broodthaers studio, it was this non-Museum where the important questions about art and society were being asked, while the official museum in Brussels, like other institutions, was in lockdown mode in response to the mass protests of May '68.

Two years later Broodthaers was to expand the museum-idea further at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle. Here he gathered the borrowed packing crates he had used in his studio for the inauguration of his *museum*, added objects obtained from antique shops, and from local art and natural history museums. The array of objects was named "Musée d'Art Moderne" "Section des Figures" Labels assured viewers that all the eagles (some 500) were not works of art (Smith 2012, p. 104-5). There was play, and parody galore here. But as Broodthaers said in 1972 (1972, p. 139) the work was "quite simply a lie, a deception". And further:

To talk about this museum, means to talk about how to analyse the deception. The ordinary museum and its exponents merely represent a

form of the truth. To talk about this museum is to discuss the conditions of truth.

Overall it seems Broodthaers' aim was to question the economy of art objects and the histories of truth that pervade their display, a critique that artists like Joseph Kosuth and Fred Wilson were to continue some twenty years later.

It was Joseph Kosuth's exhibition *The Play of the Unsayable: Preface and Ten Remarks on Art and Ludwig Wittgenstein* in 1989 at the Weiner Secession Vienna, and at the Palais de Beaux Arts Brussels, which was to have a far-reaching impact on Jean-Hubert Martin. Martin, as Director of the Musée National D'Art Moderne Centre Pompidou was then in preparation for the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* 1989 Paris. Kosuth's exhibition, showing the works of eighty-four avant-garde artists from both ends of the twentieth century were interspersed with text from Wittgenstein's writing on the relations between philosophy and the aesthetic. The works and text played, linked, provoked, teased and generally stirred relations between language and art, culture and politics. The situation encouraged the search for meaning beyond the artworks themselves — by playing with confluences and the disruptions of written language. Martin notes the way that Kosuth installed the exhibition:

... with a freedom that conventions of hanging has made us forget ... Some works were juxtaposed to provoke unexpected formal comparisons, others were brought together for meaningful conceptual encounters ... [Kosuth] found a subtle balance ... creating visual and imaginative associations to open up imaginative ways of seeing (cited in Smith 2012, p. 116).

Nevertheless, despite the way artists have opened up *imaginative ways of seeing* or have 'reformed' in some ways 'institutions from within', Smith argues that pressure within the art museum to maintain the prevailing "contract of care" between museums and their publics "makes almost invisible the critical work done *inside* institutions" over the last twenty years (2012, p. 137). The "contract of care" Smith likens to theatre's "fourth wall", which is "the shared fiction" that art is "a world that you can observe from close up, but never enter" (2012, p. 137). While acknowledging the impact of "ground-breaking shows" curated by artists and independent curators, Smith says the full understanding of them within the institution of the museum is still "to be told" (2012, p. 138).

Claire Robins in *Curious Lessons in the Museum: the Pedagogic Potential of Artists' Intervention* (2012) notes the exponential increase in the frequency of artist interventions within museums since the 1990s. Robins notes there is “a lineage of critical, disruptive, immersive and parodic approaches” to artist interventions, which have the possibility of “inciting change”. However, Robins emphasises, it is a mistake to think that “the act of intervention” is always oppositional, or, to think that interventions are always “an exclusively radical, declarative gesture against a supposedly conservative institution”. In fact some interventions Robins sees as no more than “brightening things up” (2012, p. 138).

Bearing in mind recent criticism directed to the impact of artist interventions in museums, and the proliferation of curatorial activities emerging from the increased numbers of curator courses, residencies, and prizes, “much of which” Martinon and Rogoff say is “less than fully considered” (2013, p. iix), I would like to turn to consider the theorisation of ‘the curatorial’. I propose that engagement with ‘the curatorial’ brings to visual art students a greater understanding of the conditions through which art and culture emerge and the means by which we know and experience them (von Bismark, Schaffaff et al. 2012, p. 8). ‘The curatorial’ is described as practices that operate “away from, along side or supplementary” to curating exhibitions. As a developing and contested field, O’Neill and Wilson say ‘the curatorial’ often references “modes of becoming” which are “research-based, dialogical practices in which the procedural and the serendipitous overlap with speculative actions and open-ended forms of production” (O’Neill and Wilson 2015, p. 12). There is an alignment with ‘the curatorial’ and research. Maria Lind argues that ‘the curatorial’ goes beyond “roles”, suggesting it is “a method, even a methodology” (Lind 2012, p. 12). Jean –Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff in the Preface to *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, note that if ‘curating’ is a constellation of skills, abilities and practices linked to setting up exhibitions and displays, ‘the curatorial’ in a way disturbs this procedure. (2013, p. ix). It is a particular kind of knowledge “produced through trespassing across various fields” (Rogoff cited in Lind 2012, p. 18). It is “a disruptive activity” because “[i]t disrupts received knowledge” (Martinon and Rogoff 2013, p. x). This is in contrast to curating where there is an emphasis “on the end product”. With the curatorial Rogoff says “the end product is far less relevant” for “the emphasis is on the trajectory of ongoing, active work ...” (von Bismark, Schaffaff et al. 2012, p. 23).

Interestingly, Beatrice von Bismarck sees curating folding into the curatorial. 'The curatorial', she says is created by the curating process, and the participants and their different backgrounds, agendas, experiences, knowledges, and disciplines, as well as "the material and discursive framings", which could be "institutional, disciplinary, regional, racial or gender specific" (von Bismarck, Schaffaff et al. 2012, pp. 24-5). However, Rogoff argues for a separation of the two strands. In this way she sees a distinction between curating and 'the curatorial' made on the basis of concepts of representation. Curating is a range of skills, practices, abilities and materials, relying on "institutional and infrastructural conditions". It is she says characterized by "a series of transfers" of works that shift from one place/site/world to another. It is in this horizontal movement they become a presentation, and in this way Rogoff says "they are operating in the realm of the representational" (von Bismarck, Schaffaff et al. 2012, pp. 22-3). Further, generally curating carries expectations that an exhibition will make connections between an assembled series of works and a theme, or an objective, so that the work "functions as the representation of that thematic" or, instantiates that thematic. And while not an uncomplicated mission, it remains "within the regime of the representational". (von Bismarck, Schaffaff et al. 2012, p. 22-3).

'The curatorial' on the other hand is viewed beyond the representational, looking to "a set of possibilities for larger agendas in the art world". It enables a shift in emphasis "to the trajectory of activity" of "an ongoing project". Rogoff speaks of 'the curatorial' as an "epistemic structure"—where existing knowledges are brought together to produce "an event of knowledge" which is "something that transcends their position as knowledge" (von Bismarck, Schaffaff et al. 2012, pp. 22-3). 'The curatorial' then is a trans disciplinary methodology that is highly responsive and reactive to different knowledges, or, as Rogoff puts it 'the curatorial' "seems to be an ability to think everything that goes into the event of knowledge in relation to one another" (von Bismarck, Schaffaff et al. 2012, p. 23). The open-endedness of this proposition is very apparent in using as a metaphor of Jacques Derrida's concept of the university as "a send-off" where questions are opened up, and are sent off into the world, but ends or conclusions are never known in advance. As Rogoff says this metaphor of the "send off" for 'the curatorial' makes for ideas that are "far more slippery and far less material". Nevertheless the question that hovers over this is how to embody this as a process, how to prevent things from solidifying, and how to create spaces for others to take part (von Bismarck, Schaffaff et al. 2012, p. 23).

There is an example where I believe we can see the ideas of Rogoff and Martinon on 'the curatorial' in play. This is in the restructure/reinvention of the post-ethnographic museum Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt (2010-2015). Clémentine Deliss (2012, p. 61), as director of the Weltkulturen Museum with experience as contemporary art curator and with a background in anthropology, drew on the writings of Carl Einstein, a German theoretician of African Art. In 1926 Einstein spoke of the importance creating an intellectual lifeline between the museum and the research institute. He wrote:

... the greatest strength of a collection lies in its mobility ... in the intentional act of switching the position of exhibits back and forth from analysis and interpretation to public visibility (cited in Deliss 2012, p. 61).

It was the itinerancy of objects that Einstein believed would make viewers look again, understand better and 'take apart what they believed or assumed'. Collections would carry "the extremes of intellectual exploration and exhibitions would speak of human experience or knowledge" (cited in Deliss 2012, p. 61). Deliss took as her starting point the word *remediate* as a conceptual tool to "rethink the object of study in a *post-ethnographic* context". *Remediate* leads to thinking about "a shift in medium"; experimentation with other ways of describing, interpreting and displaying objects. As well its meaning leads to thinking about putting something right. In this case "the ambivalent resonance of the colonial past" (cited in Deliss 2012, p. 63). Drawing on the input of artists, writers, philosophers and scholars from various fields was important for the process of remediation. For instance, Senegalese artist Issa Samb suggests the following approach:

One-way of proceeding with an ethnographic museum is to begin with an inversion: exhume these objects place them at the forefront ... Walk, look, and name the directors who preceded you, and recall their preconceptions. With this critique you can start to mark your passage. You will be able to socialize each object and discover the life within them. No object in a museum is useless. By reading them you can learn about current affairs ... (cited in Deliss 2012, p. 67).

A further consideration was to think of each object in the collection as a *prototype* "to trigger future concepts". Previous ethnographic research on the objects "offer[s] a seedbed for further knowledge production and cultural mediation". The leading questions Deliss asks are: How can narratives and histories informing ethnographic

objects “become tools for contemporary identification?” How can connections be reconfigured between objects and people “in line with present and future trade routes?” How to “cross-connect China and Africa” or “the Middle East and Europe?” What platforms could be constructed “to provide emotive connections to these objects from the past?” (Deliss 2012, pp. 64; 68). In order to pursue 50% inquiry and 50% exhibition production Deliss created a laboratory with studios and apartments for guest artists and scholars, an experimental project space, and an image archive. Investigations conducted by guest artists and scholars feed into each exhibition, seminar and publication in a manner Gregory Bateson calls “an ecology of ideas” (cited in Deliss 2012, p. 62)

While the Weltkulturen Museum provides an example of exhibition making drawn more from a social history field, than a contemporary art field, I contend that it does allow us to see how objects might be configured very differently and read very differently, from existing conventions. Ethnographic museum objects are usually displayed and discussed in a highly analytical and disciplined manner and might appear (in the West at least), to have less cultural meaning outside that interpretive field. So, it is an example that enables us to think what could occur in working with objects in an environment without such analytical constraints or conventions. Just as Deliss arrived at questions through a methodology that sought to find new relevance for objects within the museum’s collection, so within an art school environment questions of this order have the potential to bring to visual art students a greater understanding of the conditions through which art and culture emerge, the means by which we know and experience them, and the means by which they might have significance in the future. Concepts of ‘remediate’ and ‘prototype’ could well be useful strategies to rethink, or as Martinon and Rogoff say *to disrupt* conventional exhibition methodologies. Of course there are many other concepts that might enable a mediation that looks wider than the object at hand. I come back to Issa Samb’s observation: “No object in a museum is useless. By reading them you can learn about current affairs ...” (cited in Deliss 2012, p. 62).

This paper has considered the means by which artist practices have moved from the studio to the museum and the changes and effects that have incurred in the museum through this shift. The artist as curator has been embraced by museums to bring new ways of *seeing* into the museum. However as stated, theorists consider that the extent of the impact of artist intervention in museums is not fully understood. Within art



schools where making exhibitions has become so central to making art, recent theorisation of 'the curatorial' I argue, has the potential to create a more nuanced and potentially more radical intellectual environment from which artists as curators could emerge.

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