

# What is Critical Curating?

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The term “critical curating” came into use with the emergence of the independent exhibition-maker in the late 1960s. Since then, what constitutes curating both as a critical practice and a discourse has been in constant flux. Discussions have focused as much on critical curating within contemporary exhibition formats and institutions as they have on creating resistance outside traditional sites of cultural production. This has been accompanied by a shift in the role of the curator from a caretaker of privately owned collections to an individual author of public exhibitions, and, more recently, a mediator of more wide-ranging, interdisciplinary, and regionally diverse forms of artistic expression. The latter have been presented in alternative or artist-run spaces, as well as networks outside institutions. Suffice it to say that the role of curators and the objects to which they attend have changed radically since the 1960s. These developments reached their zenith in the 1990s—the “era of the curator,”<sup>1</sup> as art critic Michael Brenson characterized it in 1998—with the increase of international biennials and triennials organized by influential, celebrity curators.

By the 2000s, the concomitant consolidation of curatorial discourse surrounding the global phenomena of biennialism and of expanded forms of curating fostered the emergence of a new field of study: the history of curatorial practice. Art historian Paul O’Neil dubbed this development the “curatorial turn,” a reference to the transition from practice to theory, and from a notion of the exhibition as discourse on the work of art to a reflexive approach to curating in which the space of the exhibition takes precedence as the object of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Despite the vitality and relevance

of this discursive turn, two problems persist. First, discussions have remained centred on exemplary exhibitions and high-profile curators. The result has been to reiterate more often than not art history’s Eurocentric canonicity rather than focusing on ideas or concepts. Second, the curatoriate—the small group of elite curators often in charge of biennials—could hardly refuse the rapid ascendancy of the global biennial art system or the dictates of the market and of the cultural industry in general. Along with the rapid proliferation of large-scale, curator-led international art exhibitions worldwide came the art dealers, art fairs, and auction houses.

Yet, if curating constitutes itself as a discourse, it is because it implies a consciousness of its own conditions of possibility and of the artistic, theoretical, social, and institutional issues at play. What are these issues? And what are the debates taking place today in curatorial discourse? Canadian and Indigenous scholars have been crucial in shaping the emergent field of curatorial studies, leading discussions that work towards the project of decolonizing world-making practices and challenge the disciplines of art history and museum studies—long bastions of the dominant colonial knowledge.

This special issue of *RACAR* explores discourses and practices of curating, particularly critical curating, to probe the ethical, social, and political issues currently driving, or continuing to impinge on, current scholarship and exhibition-making. In response to the celebrity curator-as-auteur<sup>3</sup> or curator-as-*artiste* so often lauded uncritically, we appeal to the curator-as-producer<sup>4</sup>—that is, the curator as a cultural agent of social change. The

latter may take the form of one or more people—it might even be a collective—who come to curating from a political, social, and ethical position. In critical curating, the expanded role of exhibition-makers involves, at some level, an engagement with activism or social justice work. And, crucially, such curators remain wary, at times unnervingly so, of the re-institutionalisation of critical curating that inevitably occurs in the academicization of the practice. This discussion might even go so far as to include what could be called “radical curating,” to draw from what art historian Claire Bishop, in her description of how museums revisit their own history from a critical contemporary perspective, refers to as “radical museology.”<sup>5</sup>

The authors brought together in this issue—some emerging and others more established scholars—address these topics from different perspectives and suggest insights that both concern museum curatorial practices and other, more-radical or activist practices that question institutions, such as the museum, and their epistemologies. Their contributions show that critical curating can take place both inside and outside of institutions and the art system in general.

Each text also contributes new examples to the history of exhibitions, enriching a field that has remained, to date, highly determined by a canonical vision of art history. Elitza Dulguerova delineates the ways in which some curators—Michael Fehr, Véronique Souben, Rebecca Duclos and David K. Ross—have sought to reverse exhibition norms in order to “problematize the ideology of singularity” that contributes directly to the “fetishization of artworks,” the “cult of the figure of the author,” the transformation of “symbolic value into market value,” and the “retreat of the field of art within itself.” In the exhibitions she analyzes, the exhaustiveness of collections is placed in tension with the curatorial gesture, if only because the latter privileges singularity and consists largely of choosing, selecting, and exhibiting artworks according to aesthetic or historical biases.

For the most part, the authors in the issue consider critical curating as a means of questioning the dominant discourses of art history on which museums constantly rely, and in particular

their historically Eurocentric and colonial methods. Amy Bruce provides an analysis of the Third Havana Biennial, which, in 1989, positioned itself not only at the intersection of politics and contemporary art, but also as an international event for marginalized, so-called “Third World” artistic communities. Drawing from intersectionality studies, Joana Joachim recounts the critical approach of two Toronto-based Black women curators—Gaëtane Verna and Andrea Fatona—in regards to the heritage of colonialism and racism in Canada and its deep entrenchment within museums and artistic institutions. Joachim gestures toward the relatively high profile of Black Canadian art over the last decade, which has been concurrent with the resurgence of Indigenous arts. Julie Bawin shows how ethnographic museums—of “civilization” or “world culture,” as we tend to call them today—have, since the beginning of the 1980s, been introducing exhibitions of contemporary art into their programs and working with artists and curators as a way to re-evaluate the ethnographic museum’s modes of presentation and classification and to represent their collections from a critical, postcolonial standpoint. Is this simply a strategy, or does it mark a truly critical approach toward their own history? The question remains unanswered.

The articles by Véronique Hudon, Treva Michelle Lagassie, and Helen Gregory and Kirsty Robertson focus on how a critically engaged practice entails a reassessment of museographic models and of the notion of the exhibition as a space in which to display objects. Hudon analyzes the ways in which dancers and choreographers Boris Chamatz and Xavier Le Roy subverted conventional curatorial practices by transforming the exhibition into a “performative apparatus” (*dispositif performatif*). In a similar vein, Lagassie examines the practices of bio art at the intersection of two “disparate spheres of cultural production”: the scientific laboratory and the museum. The artists and collectives Lagassie discusses—Tissue Culture & Art Project (TC&A), Kathy High, and Jennifer Willett—use curatorial strategies to reinvent both the space of the laboratory and that of the exhibition in order to question the power structures that undergird them. Gregory and Robertson reflect on micro-museums

that strategically and critically use museum culture to create institutions that function against their own norms: *The STAG* (The Strathcona Art Gallery), the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), and the Museum of Fear and Wonder. They argue that these instances of critical curating resist the curatorship generally practiced in institutions and in the art system.

These last two articles compel readers to return to the etymological origin of the word “curate”: the Latin word *curare*, meaning “to care”—that is, to take care of objects, communities, or the living, with all the aesthetic, social, political, and environmental difficulties and differences that this might involve.

The special section “What is Critical Curating?” includes a number of scholars who have recently entered the academy or graduated from various curatorial programs. Our invitation was simply stated as a call for dynamic, inspired, or manifesto-like contributions that spoke to our (global) contemporary moment in curating from an ethno-culturally diverse Canadian/Quebécois/Indigenous perspective. Unlike the call for peer-reviewed articles, this curated section is an attempt to highlight the diversity of curatorial voices—and the perspectives and places from where they come—that rarely appear in academic journals. It is, of course, by no means comprehensive or exhaustive.

This issue as a whole therefore also addresses the necessary “response-ability” of the educational turn in curating as a practice of world-making. As art historian Simon Sheikh astutely remarks, “The intrinsic relationship between curation and education needs mentioning: that curating is always already educational ... as it is a mode of address that places viewing subjects, as well as objects, in a relation to knowledge, history, and ... futurity.”<sup>6</sup> Our hope is that this issue might contribute to the wider project of diversifying curating as a critical practice whose potential lies precisely both in its decolonizing methodologies and in its transformative pedagogy. ¶

1. Michael Brenson, “The Curator’s Moment,” *Art Journal* 57, 4 (1998), 16–27.

2. Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse (2007),” *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, eds. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal et Solveig Øvstebø (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 240–259.

3. Steven Lubar, “Curator as Auteur,” *The Public Historian* 36, 1 (February 2014), 71–76.

4. Luke Skrebowski, “The Limits of the Possible,” *Manifesta Journal* 10 (2010), 73–83.

5. Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology: Or, What’s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (Cologne: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2014).

6. Simon Sheikh, “Curation and Futurity,” *The Curatorial Conundrum*, eds. Paul O’Neill, Mick Wilson and Lucy Steeds (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 153.

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