
RED HOOK JOURNAL

Press Releases

In Reserve: A Curatorial Education

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To a degree, when considering the parameters of a program such as the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, one is, in fact, examining the very institutions of art as they exist today. Saying as much is partly to state the obvious: by necessity, if not by definition, curators grapple not only with images and objects that appear and circulate in the physical architectures of museums and galleries, but also with the concepts and language used to organize this material into meaningful relations, regardless of literal context. Simply put, our ideation of the curator is intimately linked to that of art.



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Yet even the briefest consideration of just the history of this particular school reveals such a plain assertion to be on anything but stable ground. When the CCS first materialized nearly twenty years ago, its appearance reflected a growing sense that curating should be regarded as embodying more than the caretaking operation implied by its etymology, and that its pedagogy must entail more than a skill set whose pragmatic tools included conservation, installation, and inter-institutional communication. Rather, just as artists were often migrating to cultural spheres far removed from art's traditional contexts, so curators wanted to see their work in an expanded field, wanted to take into account (and desired suitable environs for exploring) newly developing questions of globalization, neoliberalism, and cosmopolitanism. Subsequently, and just as for artists, these regular forays into other cultural arenas have prompted a new kind of self-reflexivity (or self-consciousness) among curators, for whom a definition of their discipline—if curating can or should be considered a discipline—is perhaps not so clear. The task for those of us teaching and studying at the CCS today is thus redoubled, in a sense: not only must the school consider the institutions of art as they exist now, but also—through such close examination—undertake the project of creating novel terms for those institutions. Indeed, in a time of potentially radical shifts in artistic practices and their place in culture, the school seeks to arrive at new criteria by which to explore and articulate those shifts.

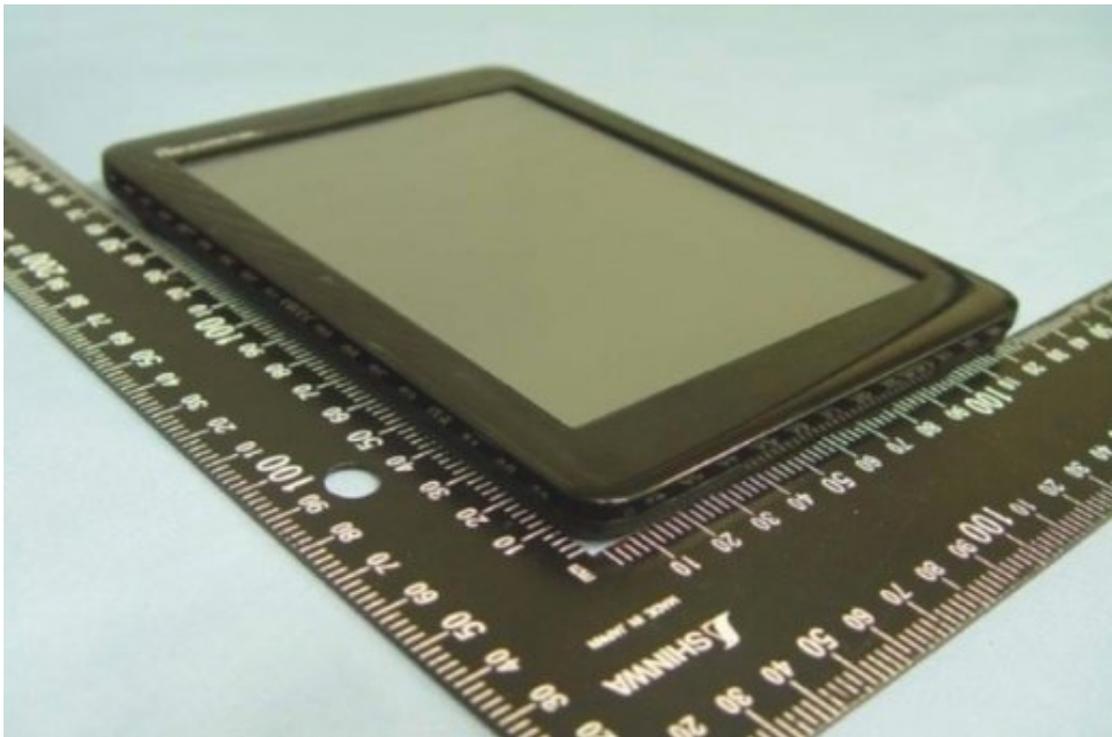
Or, more accurately, to arrive at “other” criteria for such assessments. I borrow Leo Steinberg's terminology while I bear in mind especially this art historian's assertion that any “critic interested in a novel manifestation [of art]”—or, for that matter, prompted to recognize alterations in the contours of art given changed cultural circumstances—initially “holds his criteria and taste in reserve [s]ince they were formed on yesterday's art.” In such a situation, Steinberg asserts, nothing should be deemed “irrelevant” until the work's inward objectives come into focus and the critic may “feel along with it as with a thing that is like no other.” For me, such an approach is crucial not only for a critic (or art historian), but also for any program of study in the discipline of curating. While cultivating art-historical and critical practice in the classroom, gallery, or journal, one should, I believe, seek nevertheless to place such understanding in historical perspective—continually summoning and holding at bay previous artistic, critical, and curatorial models in order to tease up to the surface what is unique about our own time. In this regard, one must grasp as well that established tools by which art and its institutions have in previous decades been appraised and (whether by artists, curators, or critics) problematized are themselves also susceptible to losing vitality. Indeed, they might become formal devices that merely obscure the unique situation of contemporary art, and merely reinscribe things as they are. What seems provocative or progressive on its face can be, in fact, very conservative in its disallowing of thoughtful reflection on art-making today; and what seems conservative or obtuse on first glance might, as in Steinberg's postulations, open onto alternative modes of art-making and reception that otherwise would have been inaccessible.



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I think this last point is all the more pressing among curators and artists today, given their work's increasing extension into other cultural spheres. Considered in light of art-making during the past few decades—and particularly in light of those artworks that sought to underscore the power structures and ideologies of institutions in art and in society more generally—such maneuvers, ostensibly skirting the prevailing systems of art, would seem absolutely necessary. Indeed, if artistic and curatorial practice takes as part of its mission today the very disruption or eliding of institutions, then how could artists and curators ever possibly wish to work within them? In response one immediately asks what long-term, generative impact such efforts might have on the field of contemporary art and, moreover, whether many modes of critique today, steeped as they are in yesterday's art, have become the stuff of performance, parody, and gesture. (Recall in this vein critic Isabelle Graw's claim that institutional critique had by the mid-1990s—as its practitioners were invited time and again to collaborate with various museums—become “subversion for hire.”) If there is a strong impulse today to disengage from institutions, perhaps we should recall Steinberg's holding of “criteria in reserve” and ask whether it is the institutions themselves writ large that require changing.



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This is not to assert that institutions *as such* are appropriate for every artistic venture, or that moving more nimbly among broader, multivalent cultural settings in art is not productive today. Rather, I mean to suggest that novel models in art and its institutions need to be proposed and described, and that such languages for art as those appearing in this journal should act as springboards for arriving at new meanings in art when they are urgently desired. More simply put, perhaps we need to reevaluate our most near-to-hand contexts in order to see what they foreclose, as well as what they might yet be pressed to provide. Curatorial programs and institutions—including the one from whose platform I currently write—may well bear both the promises and the perils of the very future we seek to create.

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