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Outtakes from Another Conversation: Further Thoughts on Curating and Education

Johanna Burton

Those of us invested in curating and in education are often asked about the relationship between the two. To say that such recent attention to “curatorial education” is often anxious in tenor is not to put too fine a point on things. This anxiety is less directed at learning, experimenting, and testing via exhibitions and projects—the importance of which almost everyone agrees on, if in widely different forms—than on competing ideologies within the very terrain of curating, to say nothing of the various arguments about whether or not curating can be taught, who should do the teaching, and what any curriculum devoted to this task might look like. During a recent roundtable discussion in which I took part, Jens Hoffmann posed the question of whether now is the time for curatorial programs to ground themselves more overtly in visible modalities and types of training. Overt alignment with *this* style of curating but not *that*, he implied, would allow for identifiable impulses and paradigms to become consolidated institutionally; such “specializations” would lead to exterior branding (institutions competing with one another for faculty and students on the basis of what amounts to a kind of form).

But there is something limiting, I think, about these portrayals of position taking—both in terms of institutions and the students who identify, or don’t, with their aims (and, equally important, those who mis-identify). Indeed, I fervently hope that making predilections, arguments, and even politics visible can amount to more than increased accrual of cultural capital around institutions, artists, and curators. Having long believed in the importance of articulating stakes when it comes to cultural production and one’s role in it, I nonetheless find it shortsighted to imagine that ideas-in-formation can be fully accounted for. Curatorial studies, at its best and as a young field of inquiry, is poised to utilize inherited methodologies, political struggles, and modes of aesthetic intelligence, but should also be understood as poised to articulate new such formations. While rejecting traditional exhibition practices would cut off our proverbial nose to spite our face (indeed, I’ve argued elsewhere for the importance of a return to “institutions” of all kinds, in order to re-engage and re-imagine their contours), I can’t agree with those that argue for a wholesale return to curating as a material-based practice. De facto proclamations on either side offer only formalized solutions, and serve, unnecessarily and ironically, to limit the vicissitudes by which curatorial enterprises can take adventurous shape. All I am suggesting is that the implements of exhibition making, expansions of the “curatorial,” and interdisciplinary conversations are themselves simply tools, able to be brandished radically or conservatively, and sometimes one in the name of the

other.

It's interesting how often curatorial education is discussed relative to other disciplines, in terms both of subject and results—how such learning might be judged once deployed by students as they enter the “field.” Here I would point to the ways in which questions asked of curatorial programs are somewhat different from those of other disciplines. In art history, for instance, a student pursuing modern and contemporary art is required to know the broad strokes of art from at least 1850, if not before. The curator is not often called upon to account for the entire narrative of such a scope, but is understood to bring to bear—overtly or not—something of this wide berth when considering more recent enterprises. Yet students, even classically trained this way, find their own immediate and persistent methodological directions through blundering their way intuitively to them. No one insisted that I read psychoanalytic or feminist theory, yet I not only found such texts more or less on my own but also integrated them into my approach to the “requirements.” They offered the crucial apparatuses I'd been looking for, along with language and histories for locating certain aspects of the art I was drawn to. In other words, the theory and methods I discovered and then committed myself to offered ideas not to be applied to the work but rather inherent in it—or at least inherent to my understanding of it. In a sense, then, these ideas served to reaffirm, expand, and deepen my own hunches, legitimizing but also pressuring my burgeoning thinking, even as they offered a vast context to enter.

To this end, I've lately been wondering what it would be like to have areas of competency discussed in terms not of geography or time or medium but in terms of approach: art historians not as “modernist” or specializing in “Latin America” but instead as “psychoanalytic” or “Marxist” or “feminist”; curators as “formalist” or “non-object oriented” or “discursive.” I recognize the reasons why this would be a real mess, but I think we must remember that while seemingly agreed-upon nominations such as “modernism” are useful for organizing the field of art history, the participants who gather under such a banner are hardly united in the way they define the terrain they ostensibly share. Indeed, the conflicts around “modernism” allow it to operate as more than history.

In a discipline / practice / discourse such as curating, I think it's also best to highlight warring internal impulses rather than smooth them. As evidenced by my discussion of art history above, I find this kind of irreconcilability within a single field or discipline quite standard and so I end up a bit weary with the endless circling and commenting upon this condition with regard to curatorial practice and education. Part of any evolving epistemological inquiry is an interrogation of the changing conditions, framework, and contextualizing ideologies; indeed, such questions around aims, methods, and blind spots almost serve to define advanced discourse. That said, I take seriously the way in which this dialogue seems largely to mark (and I believe over-determine) curatorial education; students often tell me that they know curating is exactly what they want to do, but that they can't point to a stable definition of it that they can either embrace or challenge.

In part, this has to do with the way that contemporary curating, in its current self-reflexive state, must be seen as something other than a discipline, such as art history, even if the two often retain intimate connections. There are, of course, histories of curating, and models to study; yet, unlike art-historical terms that provide foundations (however debatable), curating is a limber moving target. Part of its ontology is a driving uncertainty that positions it differently from other kinds of knowledge production—differently said, “curating” is often taken as both the subject *and* object of inquiry. There is no canon of curating to be plumbed by this or that method. Instead, “curating” shape-shifts, and so too must any speculation around it.

To return to the anxiety I often hear voiced: How do we build a rigorous and meaningful conversation, if the very shared terms we aim to utilize are forever themselves under debate? Such a question has less

to do with any actual urgency or need to pin down the curatorial per se, but instead marks the unique conjunction of theory and practice we grapple with in curatorial programs. The best considerations of this situation emphasize the ways in which material practice are, always, already theoretical in nature (they can't help but confirm or oppose conventions of all kinds). Theoretical postulates are only as convincing as their trials in time and space. Maria Lind's description of "the curatorial," for instance, usefully troubles the notion that critical curatorial practices can be located either within histories and theories of curating or within the enactment of the many aspects of on-the-ground production. Her emphasis on "mediation" situates meaning making as always spanning these otherwise split sectors. Yet even this approach reinstates the very binaries it aims to dismantle, if only because in these terms curating itself becomes both very precise and endlessly abstract.

One strategy at a school like CCS Bard is to consider past practices in light of current ones, and vice versa. In conjunction with various kinds of practicum classes (designed to give students time and space to experiment with solo and group curatorial projects), students have recourse to historical case studies, which, it is hoped, will encourage their informed self-reflexivity. The combination doesn't always work, and the conceit of an easy connection between what we study and what we enact curatorially is most often disabused. But the urgency of testing this relationship is itself interesting, as maddening as it may be.

Johanna Burton is the director of the graduate program at CCS Bard.

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