

Curationism

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How Curating Took Over the
Art World and Everything Else

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Introduction

My research for this book began quickly and fortuitously. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was in town; I snagged an interview. Christov-Bakargiev was the artistic director of Documenta 13, the 2012 version of the contemporary-art event that takes place in the small town of Kassel, Germany, every five years. For decades, Documenta has set the pace for what is current in contemporary art. Christov-Bakargiev was of particular interest, for Documenta 13 was free-floating and amorphous, and she had refused to call her team of curators *curators*, instead using the term *agents*. Surely she would have something to say about the increasing use of the noun *curator* and the verb *to curate* outside the art world, where playlists, outfits, even hors d'oeuvres are now curated.

‘That is a sociological question, not an art question,’ she told me, irritated. The generalizations we were making were obvious, verging on meaningless. She pointed to Italian philosopher Paolo Virno’s 2004 essay *A Grammar of the Multitude*, which, she claimed, ‘says it all.’

Still, she furnished me with an exegesis. ‘We now live in a society where everyone [fears] they’re the same, so they want to specify and differentiate,’ she said. ‘My playlist is different from your playlist; my Facebook page is different from your Facebook page. It’s a sense of anxiety, where you think you don’t exist if you’re not different from everybody else. You can’t be part of the multitude. Whereas at the time of [Thomas] Hobbes, it was the opposite. You can’t be part of the country, the community, the society, unless you become the same, because you are born different, specific, unique.’

‘Now we’re all fucking the same. We have the same iPods, the same airports. And in order for the political system to work, everybody has to be driven by that drive [to be different]. If they don’t do that, their energy will explode into a Third World War.’

'I'm being polemic,' Christov-Bakargiev joked, finally. And she was, but she had lit a fire. I determined I did not want this book to focus on the popular understanding of curating as an expression of taste, sensibility and connoisseurship. This is not to say that I don't deal with these things, but rather that this book takes for granted a reader's understanding of the current *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *to curate*, as an extension of museum and gallery practice, an act of selecting, organizing and presenting items in the vein of an arbiter-editor. (It should be noted that genetic labs also employ curators, who essentially do the same thing, with scientific data.) Instead of writing about taste, then, which would risk fetishizing the curator, I wanted to write clearly about *how* we got to this point. How did the curator ascend? How did the curator's practice bleed into popular – especially popular-consumerist – culture? The connection was, in my view, intimate and essential.

Hence *curationism* – a play on *creationism*, with its cultish fervour and its adherence to divine authorship and grand narratives. Curationism is also, of course, a poke at the contemporary art world and its pretentious, strained relationship with language (which Alix Rule and David Levine of the magazine *Triple Canopy* recently dubbed 'International Art English'). We now not only use *curate* as a verb, but also the adjective *curatorial* and the noun *curation*. Curationism also speaks to our general fixation, since the early-twentieth century, with isms, with camps and paradigms – our internet-age affiliations with them an extension of personal branding. (One of my heroes, Erykah Badu, called her first album *Baduizm*, suggesting the only ism to which she subscribes is her own complex, constantly evolving one.)

Curationism is, then, the acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being. I contend that, since about the mid-1990s, we have been living

in the curationist moment, in which institutions and businesses rely on others, often variously credentialed experts, to cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers. As these audiences and consumers, we are engaged as well, cultivating and organizing our identities duly, as we are prompted.

Hence the two sections of this book, 'Value,' in which a chronology of the curator is the primary focus, and 'Work,' in which the hyper-professionalization of the art world as well as our own shifting definitions of labour are addressed. Our obsession with the curator as an 'impartor of value' (a phrase I reiterate in the coming pages) has implications for everyone, inside the art world and out. Complicit in this matrix of value-making, we (often unwittingly) take on new personal and professional responsibilities. As Christov-Bakargiev said to me, in a comment clearly inspired by Virno, 'The curator is the most emblematic worker of the cognitive age.' This book is not anti-art world or anti-curator. It is strongly critical, but also merely an account, an acknowledgement, of curation's close alliance with capitalism and its cultures. As Tom Wolfe points out in *The Painted Word*, an admitted lodestar for *Curationism*, the art world has long been loath to admit its fundamental affiliations with, and origins within, the bourgeoisie, engendering, in Wolfe's view, a paranoid turn away from the object, which nonetheless (or, rather, inevitably) engenders various cults of objectification.

Like *The Painted Word*, this book is for a general, non-art world and non-academic audience. Despite the influence of Virno and others, it does not employ what has become known as critical theory. Academics will no doubt recognize affiliations with this or that theorist, with whom I may or may not be familiar. Critical theorists, who were and are essentially philosophers, are now often miscast as discrete thinkers, when in fact

many are expressionist ponderers, explicitly repudiating an authorial, proprietary view of ideas and their histories. Indeed, without their diction and personae, many critical theorists would seem to hold self-evident, even plainly unoriginal, thoughts. Lacan did not invent the use of the mirror as metaphor for formative semiotic development; neither did Freud, from whom Lacan borrowed the idea. Foucault was not the first to speak of punishment, madness, order and sexuality. Barthes espouses any number of obvious thoughts; it is the genius of his articulation that sets them apart. (Most students read these French writers in translation, confusing things further; it's akin to listening to Serge Gainsbourg in translation.)

This mismanagement of theory represents several problems that typify the curationist moment. Firstly, it subscribes to an avant-garde understanding of the generation of ideas – in which ‘new’ and ‘original’ are paramount and successive, like a string of dictators, each making their elders obsolete and rearranging their country. As I argue in this book, the value-imparting system of the avant-garde has reached its inevitable (and glorious!) terminus in the early twenty-first century, where an idea no longer has to be ‘brand-new’ or ‘never-been-done-before’ in order to be valid. On that note, I believe in deep learning and context, certainly, but excessive fretting over attribution and precedent is paralyzing to dynamic intellectual thought. Any idea can be original if the mind that expresses it is confident and cultivated enough. This is what I strive for. It need hardly be said that this book contains no footnotes.

A myopic devotion to critical theory secondly engages in a pattern of demystification and remystification that is a key, obfuscating modus of the curationist moment – a not-so-covert method to instate, canonize and brand. Curators have become expert at presenting exhibitions and biennials that appear radical and oppositional, whether to museum ortho-

doxy or to regimes, common behaviours and codes, when curators in fact employ such radicalism and opposition precisely to attract audiences and to increase their events' cultural capital. In the 1990s, underfunded museums recruited curators who in turn recruited artists devoted to audience engagement and seemingly unusual, participatory actions as a means of making the institution appear more enlightened and be more popular. These artists and curators are not outsiders; they have become some of the most successful, established cultural figures of our time. Similarly, the academy has used critical theory, in particular French poststructuralism, gender theory and queer theory, as a way of welcoming new students and diversifying (indeed revivifying) humanities departments. While an important political advance, such theory has become its own industry, merely trading an old canon for a new one, and retaining the same hierarchies and worshipful groupthink. There is little subversion to putting Judith Butler or Slavoj Žižek on a T-shirt, or to liking them on Facebook.

Is the curationist moment over? Not quite, nor, in many respects, will it ever be, as long as we continue to consume things, be particular and create culture – that is, be human. I deal with the specifics of this in the last chapter of this book, contending that we are moving on to something else, or at least could be. Katherine Connor Martin, Head of U.S. Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, who generously walked me through the provenance of the verb *to curate* (which has its roots in the early-1980s performance-art scene), thinks the word is very important. 'If you were going to choose your vocabulary developments in the aughts,' she says, 'this would be on my list of things that are really emblematic of what's happening in the language.'

That said, Martin notes, 'it's entirely possible that in, say, 2018, someone will look at [the use of *curate* as a verb] and

say, “Ugh, that’s so dated, nobody says that anymore.” But *The Oxford English Dictionary* includes lots of obsolete and dated terminology. It’s an inventory of the entire history of English. So when we add something like [*curate* as a verb], we’re saying, “Regardless of what happens in the future with this usage, it’s important enough and well-tested enough now to be recorded for posterity.” We generally like things to have history behind them, and when we saw this went back to 1982, [we deemed] three decades of usage good enough. We think of it as writing the biography of these words.’

Dear reader, the biography of the curator, the curated, the curatorial and curation – a story for our times.

Prologue Who Is HUO?

Miami's South Beach is nothing like a white cube. On its easternmost side, along Collins Avenue and Ocean Drive, lies an impressive fleet of art deco hotels and, among them, the mansions of the resort neighbourhood's current and erstwhile residents, from J. C. Penney to Gianni Versace, who was shot dead on his front steps in 1997. Everywhere is colour, traffic; life is instinctive, vulgar, dangerous, fun. The cacophony of capitalism defines the area, from these hotels, to the clustered, modest houses and apartment buildings lying slightly west of them (many, in their lingering decay, redolent of South Beach's 1970s and 1980s depression – a period, with its cocaine dealers and crime, depicted in Brian de Palma's 1983 film *Scarface*), to busy Lincoln Road, one of the U.S.'s first pedestrian malls, and its surrounding, riotously colourful surf stores.

December is tastefully warm in South Beach. The sun toasts rather than scorches. Historically, this has not been a big tourist time, but over the past decade or so that's changed. I arrive in 2013 as a journalist, part of the hordes of mostly Europeans and Americans who have come to see Art Basel Miami Beach.

Art Basel typifies the ever-growing popularity of the fair in contemporary art, in which international commercial dealers converge in large cities at convention centres, piers, custom-built tents and hotels, securing high-priced booths in which to display and sell work from their stables of artists. Founded in Basel, Switzerland, Art Basel chose Miami Beach as an outpost more than a decade ago because of the wealthy Miami collectors who frequented its flagship event. Since then, around two dozen fairs have cropped up alongside Art Basel Miami Beach, most within walking distance – to say nothing of the myriad of parties, pop-up shops and ribbon cuttings that have come to comprise what is now Miami Art Week. South Beach is not

transformed so much as intensified: more preening, more plastic surgery, more partying, more celebrities. Contemporary art seems put there by a production designer. Depending on how you see it, it's either the best or worst kind of ambient noise.

Much has been written about Art-Basel-as-Wasteland. In a 2012 piece entitled 'The Eight Worst Things About the Art World,' fashion writer and Barneys New York 'creative ambassador' Simon Doonan put Art Basel at the top of his list, snidely describing it as 'overblown... [with] all that craven socializing and trendy posing.' There is a lot of art at Art Basel, to be sure, but what, implies Doonan, does it add up to? As if at a crowded, expensive party, works jockey noisily for attention, devoid of gravitas and thematic order. It is no museum or gallery, in other words. Curators, those trusted sybils of the contemporary art world, are conspicuously absent.

Or are they? Famously, advertisements for bars and events are towed by planes above South Beach's long, populous white-sand beach. I go swimming one day, looking up from the crashing waves to see a different banner: 'HANS ULRICH OBRIST HEAR US.' I laugh. It's such an obscure plea – a knowing combination of unctuousness and plaintiveness. Hans Ulrich Obrist is one of the world's top curators, and a few nights previous I had attended a panel discussion he had moderated between Kanye West and architect Jacques Herzog. (Obrist calls both, to varying degrees, friends.) Clearly, Obrist is here. But why?

The banner's culprit was Canadian artist Bill Burns. Over recent years, Burns has made drawings, postcards, sculptures, watercolours and digital mock-ups addressing a variety of art-world authorities. The works express (and parody) the desperation and vulnerability felt by contemporary artists when fathoming the internationally known directors, curators and collectors who could make or break them. One Burns work is a proposal to affix a large sign to the roof of London's Tate

Modern reading ‘Hans Ulrich Obrist Priez Pour Nous’ (in English, ‘Hans Ulrich Obrist Pray For Us’). In Miami, Burns hired airplane banners every day to make similar appeals, not just to Obrist, but to other power or star curators, like Hou Hanru and Beatrix Ruf.

It’s likely the beach crowd stared up in indifference at Burns’ banners. Outside of Obrist, is Burns certain anyone he had appealed to by name was actually present at Art Basel? ‘I have no clue,’ he tells me. ‘The fairs are very big events, but they take a certain kind of personality to enjoy, like going shopping at Christmas.’ What would a curator do at Art Basel Miami Beach? ‘It’s true that curators over the last two hundred years have been understood as taking on a kind of public-service role. But now there’s a curious mixed economy in the art world. A curator’s job is often, at a fair, to cajole a collector into buying something for a museum – which I’m sure, for many, is not very pleasant. Artists, curators, collectors: we’re all part of a regime. I’m part of it as well. You are too.’

After seeing Burns’ banner, it occurred to me I was in eyeshot of the fuchsia tent of Untitled, one of Miami Art Week’s newest fairs, whose press materials emphasized its use of a curator, Brooklyn’s Omar Lopez-Chahoud. Lopez-Chahoud selected the galleries for Untitled, in some cases overseeing the arrangement of the fair’s booths and works. But Untitled’s gambit is not, in fact, novel. There’s Frieze London, and now Frieze New York, both of which rigorously jury their exhibitors, using curators to handle ‘special projects’ such as sculpture parks on their tent grounds. And Frieze’s template is arguably Art Basel’s, whose former director, Samuel Keller, pushed curation to the forefront of the fair’s brand (in Switzerland and in Miami), collaborating with Obrist as early as 2000 to launch, at first, a series of talks at the Swiss fair.

Now, within the sterile, chaotic confines of the Miami Beach Convention Center, there are, for instance, curated sections

for artist films and videos. Art Basel Miami Beach's Nova and Positions sectors, the former meant for gallerists to display new works and the latter for gallerists to showcase the work of a single artist, do not have apparent curators, but suggest a 'curatorial sensibility': things judiciously selected and sleekly arranged, granting the fairgoer an experience much closer to that of a gallery or museum. When one considers Burns' (correct) guess that curators also come to fairs to acquire art for their respective institutions (or, more frequently, to function as advisors for trustees and the like who hold those institutions' purse strings), the fair becomes not anathema to curators, but specifically tailored to them. They occupy – and when not occupying, compellingly inform – both of the fair's essential roles, those of buyer and arranger-facilitator.

If curation is everywhere, it is also both strangely embodied and disembodied. The curator is no longer just an art-world figure. Within the art world, a select number of curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist dominate their institutions but also transcend them, playing roles in media and culture. Outside the art world, curation is powerful but also diffuse. Celebrities act as curators not just for exhibitions, but for music festivals and boutiques. We 'curate' in relation to ourselves, using the term to refer to any number of things we do and consume on a daily basis. Curators are visible in so many likely and unlikely ways. Are we witnessing their ultimate triumph, or a troubling, fascinating moment of their undoing?

While it can be said of professionals from many fields, it is particularly true of curators that no two are exactly alike. There is certainly no one quite like Hans Ulrich Obrist, who is affectionately known in the art world by his monographic acronym, HUO. One could begin by citing his dependable inclusion in the art-world 'power lists' that have become so omnipresent over the past five years or so. In 2009 to 2013,