

DAVID BALZER

CURATIONISM

**HOW CURATING TOOK OVER
THE ART WORLD
AND EVERYTHING ELSE**

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For Nadja

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.