

# Curating Degree Zero Archive. Curatorial Research

## Dorothee Richter & Barnaby Drabble

When we started a discourse on curating in 1998 with the conference “**Curating Degree Zero**,” we could not have imagined the intensity of interest in this subject in the coming years. In 2003 we wanted to re-examine the field together with Annette Schindler, but when we failed to organise enough funds, we changed the concept and concentrated on the archive, which originally should have just accompanied the symposium. This decision, half by chance and half out of a deeply felt interest in archival practices, proved to be valid, insofar that the archive grew and developed rapidly. **Curating Degree Zero Archive** was invited all in all eighteen times and therefore spatially reinterpreted and also extended eighteen times in different contexts. Our goal was to use the archive as a discursive situation; it was also presented in amazingly different ways, which made it visually alluring and convincing. We recognise that some reviewers did take this shininess as a problematic side of the archive, but for us the idea of stirring up discussions was the main focus. During the tour of the archive it became clear that the different ways to present it, a task that we handed over to our cooperation partners more and more along the journey, also created a discourse about spatial and visual representation, about interpellations through settings, and about ways to involve the public.

Finally, the archive as a body of publications, folders, CDs, invitation cards, and websites is now situated in the library of the Zurich University of the Arts, ready to be researched and re-interpreted. This publication and the upcoming ones related to the Archive want to play back into the written discursive mode and, in using the webjournal *OnCurating* for this undertaking, we want to make the material again internationally accessible.

The first issue related to the archive concentrates on **curatorial research**. Contemporary curating exists as a media conglomerate; the production of meaning is achieved through a combination of artworks, photographs, commentary, publications, design, gestures, music, film, press releases, websites, and interviews. It is situated in a specific political and cultural context. To analyse these complex situations we need a variety of approaches; for every project the combination should alter, it makes a bricolage of methodical approaches necessary. The undertaking to discuss curating on a profound level also inspired the conferences *Curating as a Glittering Myth*, *Curating as a Social Symptom*, *Curating as a Revolutionary Force?*<sup>1</sup> and *Curating Everything (Curating as Symptom)*.<sup>2</sup> In the symposia, and therefore also in this publication, we have invited contributions from Elke Krasny and Avi Feldman, two

candidates from the PhD platform, a cooperation between the Postgraduate Programme in Curating with the University of Reading, Department of Art.

The ironic title of the second conference, *Curating Everything*, already proposed reading the activity of curating as a social symptom. We presume that the contemporary urge for a curatorial position has an imaginary side: the wish to gain authorship and agency as an illusionary closure in an overall unsteady and precarious labour situation for cultural producers.

We would like to discuss curating in relation to changes in image production, changes in experiences of distance and modes of perception, changes in the conception of subjectivity and communities, changes in ways of the circulation of images, and changes in digital and material infrastructures. We would like to question curating with respect to topics of "race", class, and gender. What can we propose as a critical attitude in curating achieved through ruptures, gaps, inconsistency, failures, and dissent? All contributors share an interest in political agendas in artistic and curatorial practices.

The articles we want to present here show exemplarily how curating can be discussed not so much as case studies, but as scientific analyses. As for every critical debate, the writers have clear positions; they are not uninterested or aloof in any way or "neutral" and instead centre their arguments around a specific urgency. This urgency is then argued throughout in depth. With these varieties of approaches, we hope to offer future researchers some trajectories, new perspectives, and "methods"—in the above-mentioned sense—of debating curating.

Two of the contributions in this first publication are centred on examples of artistic-curatorial practices. They have been specifically chosen because they are relating the art world as a space of representation and discussion in new ways to digital spaces; they change and questions formats and they also re-configure relations of artists, curators, and other experts.

**Felix Ensslin** developed his argumentation for our symposium *Curating as a Glittering Myth, Curating as a Social Symptom, Curating as a Revolutionary Force?*, and already the title of his contribution, "The Subject of Curating," shifts in an ambiguous way between meanings: addressing on the one hand the subject that is hidden in the curatorial act (as curator or as addressee) as well as the inner kernel of curating, the topic of curating, what curating is about. Revolving around recent proposals of implied concepts of subjectivity made by curators and theoreticians, Ensslin strives towards a radical rereading through Foucault's theory of power and Lacan's four discourses to analyse the contradictory structure of curatorial practice.

**Sabeth Buchmann** uses Anton Vidokle's complaint about art without artists to draw historical trajectories. She shows that the struggle against politically compromised role models and representation conditions could be observed from the perspective of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari. After all, the "curatorial system" that evolved from the 1960s shows that critique of power goes hand in hand not only with democratic-political strategies of self-empowerment, but also with the transversal dissemination and reterritorialization of power functions. In so far the institutionalised form of curating is an aspect related less to individual intentions and strategies as to structural frameworks. From my perspective, having discussed the shift of power from self-organisation to a hierarchical re-organising of the field with a specific interpretation of "curatorship", Buchmann's thoughts add to the

discussion of this shift that was based on institutional critique and therefore opened up new forms and structures of cultural production.

**Sergio Edelsztein** asks in his contribution, "Are Boycotts the New 'Collective Curating?'" He shows that censorship and boycotts have started to be intermingled in an uncanny way, not necessarily aiming at state powers but confusing the situation for local art communities. Whatever a boycott has been installed to target, the local reception often leads to a reduction in financial support, especially for critical art. He argues for re-establishing a differentiation of state power and ideological forces, which might be contradicting or fighting against the actual ruling system. He thus wants to evoke a deeper understanding of the historical and political situations.

As editors we believe that some of today's boycotts target indiscriminately an imagined "racial" group. By aiming at participating artists and hosting art institutions, some of the boycotts are conducted precisely against the parts of a society that actually offer critical voices a platform. With our roots in the German context, with its history of fascism and extreme ideological violence, we would like appeal to cultural producers to take this into consideration and to question calls for boycotts.

In her contribution "Feminist Thought and Curating," **Elke Krasny** addresses the gender politics of curating. She argues that feminist thought has historically emerged as politics, whereas curatorial practice has emerged as a distinctly cultural practice.

"Feminist thought provides the methods of analysis in working out how curating is responding to specific historic conditions and how curating does or does not address the social changes wrought by feminism within these specific historic conditions." Curating as a social practice is part of the historic conditions which feminism seeks to change. In her view, feminist thought relies on opening up, over again and again, both of these questions: What is feminist thought, and what does feminist thought do? The resistance to definition and to categorization opens up the potentials for ongoing questioning, considerable conflicts, transformation, and future change.

**Avi Feldman** undertakes, under the title "Performing Justice – From Dada's Trial to Yael Bartana's JRMiP Congress", to cross-read artistic/curatorial practice with legal aspects.

The "Trial of Maurice Barrès", created by Dada in Paris in 1921, serves as an early example of pioneering experimentation with aesthetics and politics. Again, these artistic actions to imitate and comment on society with its institutions have to be situated in the historical context, which brings up a relation to the Dreyfus Affair. In the essay, Feldman seeks to not only further explore the trial from a legal perspective, but relates it the specific historical and political circumstances, and also he draws conclusions to contemporary practices. In order to do so, he has chosen to focus on the first Congress of "The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland" (JRMiP) created by Yael Bartana in 2012.

In this publication on researching curating, we would also show how an artistic/curatorial practice adds to a certain kind of curatorial knowledge production with its specific mix of visual, textual, and spatial media, and, as a new development, projects which take the digital space especially into consideration. All these different media components form a media conglomerate, to speak with Roland Barthes: specific mythological constructions. To conceive the digital space as part of a contemporary cultural public space, as a space of communication and conflict,

of a very specific cultural production, which one has to use, to react to it and to interfere with it.

This is shown in two totally different examples. One project is discussed by **Brian Holmes**: *The World of Matter* (<http://www.worldofmatter.net/>). This project shifts between a research project on natural resources and a series of exhibitions and meetings. It is multi-authored on the one hand, but can also be connected with some specific names, for example with the artist **Ursula Biemann**. Interestingly enough, Ursula was invited by us to our first Curating symposium, because she has acted as both curator (Shedhalle, K lt r etc.) and artist from an early stage onwards. Until now her position has shifted constantly and has developed into cooperating on a larger scale with researchers, activists, and artists. The outcome of the research and debate is often accessible on the Internet, and the projects are also presented in exhibitions and films. Brian Holmes discusses the project(s) from a philosophical perspective, relating the imaginary institution of society to utopian thinking. The question for Holmes is, *What do we invent, how do we see the world? How do we institute a new territory, a new reality?*

In the second project, an avatar of a curatorial subject reacts to cultural production in the imaginary (digital) space—but in an artistic intervention in the exhibition space. The “as such”, the doubling of “personalities”, the intrinsic confusion of identities that comes with the digital realm does its work: the figure of the curator is hijacked by artists. “The Curator and Her Double” is the title of the reflection by **Ellen Blumenstein**, when she invited the artist Ulf Aminde. In the spirit of Antonin Artaud and his concept of cruelty, which demands that one should relentlessly call into question one’s own *ideas about reality and [man’s] poetic place in reality* and force the spectator to do likewise, the “avatar” represents an attempt to become aware of those ideas oneself and to make them visible and palpable to visitors. This project, a collaboration between an artist (Aminde) and a curator (Blumenstein), sets out to champion the role of institutions, aiming at the imaginary digital space with its central artificial figure, the avatar of the curator.

Undoubtedly CURATING is a new discursive formation, as defined by Michel Foucault, which has rapidly developed since the 1970s. We are aware that we are also part of this instituting process, with the developing of an Archive, with the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at ZHdK, and with the PhD platform, a cooperation with the University of Reading and our various publications. This formation is instituted in hierarchical formations and power relations. Therefore we strive to open up processes, to question what instituting and de-instituting means, and to make our thoughts, struggles, and research accessible. As in all forms of cultural production, content and form are interrelated (but not the same), and it matters, as an ideological production, what one does, what one brings into existence.

To mirror our approach of teaching as practice with its impact on curatorial projects and possibilities, the last article by **Dorothee Richter** discusses a specific “pedagogical” attitude which is fundamental for the Postgraduate Programme in Curating she directs. She tries to show how this works as a practice that is intensely informed by theory which influences and reflects actual projects and attitudes. So curatorial knowledge production, understood as a complex offering of visual, spatial, theoretical, context-related and historically situated meaning production, is therefore based on concepts of theory as a practice—a deeply politically motivated construct. In this article she tries to formulate this based on the example of Gasthaus zum B ren / Museum B rengasse in Zurich—one of the curatorial experiments supported by the programme.

#### Notes

1 *Curating as a Glittering Myth, Curating as a Social Symptom, Curating as a Revolutionary Force?*, concept Dorothee Richter, Zurich 2014, Zurich University of the Arts.

2 *Curating Everything (Curating as Symptom)*, concept Dorothee Richter in cooperation with Alena Nawrotzki, Zurich 2015, Migros Museum fuer Gegenwartskunst.

**Dorothee Richter**, curator, since 2005 head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating (MAS/CAS) [www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org) at the University of the Arts Zurich ZHdK (Co-founder and concept), she also co-founded with Susanne Clausen the "Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Cultural Studies, Practice-Based Doctoral Programme" a cooperation of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and the Department of Fine Arts, University of Reading. From 1999 to the end of 2003, Richter was artistic director of the Künstlerhaus Bremen where she curated a discursive programme based on feminist issues, urban situations, power relation issues, institutional critique. She worked as a curator ever since. She co-curated numerous symposia. She co-conceived and coordinated the research and archiving project Curating Degree Zero (2003–2008) which explored critical and experimental approaches to exhibition making at the beginning of the millennium. PhD "Fluxus. Kunst gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft", publisher of [www.on-curating.org](http://www.on-curating.org) which presents current approaches to critical curatorial practice; In 2013 she finalised a film together with Ronald Kolb: „Flux Us Now! Fluxus explored with a camera.“ 2014–2015 artistic director of Gasthaus zum Baeren/ Museum Baerengasse, Zurich. At the moment she is working with Ronald Kolb on a digital archive/ film on Curatorial practice, a cooperation project of ZKM Karlsruhe and ZHdK.

**Barnaby Drabble** is a writer, teacher and curator based in Girona, Catalonia & Zurich, Switzerland. He was curator of contemporary art at the National Maritime Museum, London (2000–2004), initiating its program of temporary projects in relation to its collections and exhibitions. He co-conceived and coordinated the research and archiving project Curating Degree Zero (2003–2008) which explored critical and experimental approaches to exhibition making at the beginning of the millennium. He formed one half of the artistic/curatorial duo Drabble+Sachs (2001–2006) whose work focussed on issues of public-space, inter-disciplinarity, urbanism, intellectual property & civil disobedience. Currently he is managing editor of the Journal for Artistic Research (since 2010) and, as a critic and author, he regularly contributes to art magazines and publications. He holds a doctor of philosophy (PhD) in visual culture (Edinburgh College of Art, 2010). His ongoing research involves a focus on the public's role in the exhibition, sentimental approaches to museology and artistic responses to questions of sustainability and ecology. In 2005, together with Dorothee Richter he co-founded the Postgraduate Program in Curating at the Zurich University of the Arts. Since 2009 he has been a faculty member of the MAPS program (Master of Arts in Public Spheres) at the Ecole Cantonale d'Art du Valais, in Sierre, where he also conducts his research.

# Curating Degree Zero Archive as a Research Resource

In 2011, the material collected during the touring exhibition was gifted to the Media and Information Centre (MIZ) at the Zürich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Since the opening of the University's new premises in the Toni-Areal in 2014, the archive is accessible as a permanent reference collection in the lower floor of the MIZ.

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