

Public Service Announcement: On the Viewer's Role in Curatorial Production

Lara Perry

As many have observed, recent decades have seen the transformation of the role of the curator from someone who is primarily concerned with building knowledge about and preserving a collection, to someone whose primary responsibility is for interpretation and public engagement. The rationale for this development is ostensibly the privileging of democratized access to public collections, but can also be accounted for as a function of neoliberalization, in which 'public service' is conceived as services provided to individual beneficiaries rather than for a collective public good¹. The 'curatorial turn' of the last twenty years can be understood as a reconfiguration of the labour of the curator from the work of preservation to the work of presentation. This work has a gendered dynamic which has been increasingly explored by feminist critics of the curatorial function; but it also has a reciprocal relationship with another form of labour which has received less attention in the curatorial literature, the work of consumption performed by the audience that the curator addresses. This work also has a gendered dimension that may illuminate the transformations at play in the making of art exhibitions.

In Helena Reckitt's 2013 essay "Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics" and in other essays in this volume, this transformation of the labour of the curator is considered in relation to gender and especially the question of care labour². The labour of care, which is sometimes referred to as the labour of "social reproduction", is the primary form of adding value through labour in a post-Fordist economy, although traditionally an unwaged form of labour allocated to women³. Rather than fulfilling the author (or auteur) function normally accorded to the (male) exhibition curator, the curator in the new service-based economy is understood to be tasked with performing the social labour that is required to mediate the artist and her artworks for the exhibition's audience. This labour is partly necessary because of the context of the growing pressures on art institutions to demonstrate their value to individual users. Concomitantly (and perhaps not accidentally), the audience is increasingly involved in the realisation of the artwork itself, in an era when contemporary art is commonly constituted directly through immaterial and social exchanges.

The nature of these engagements between the art institution (within which the curator works) and its audiences can be thought of as two complementary or even integrated forms of labour. Normally understood as the necessary binary function to production, consumption is a highly gendered form of labour that has been structured through capitalism to correspond with new forms of production: for example, the invention of department stores to distribute mass-produced ready-to-wear clothing in the nineteenth century, which displaced the production of bespoke garments in the home or by individual makers⁴. Consumption in the form of shopping for ready-made goods is the form that domestic labour increas-

ingly takes in industrialized economies. As home food-raising, home cooking, and sewing are replaced by the use of ready-made clothing and ingredients, or indeed whole meals, the purchase of commodity forms replaces the production of goods in the household. A historical continuity between these quite different functions has been created by ensuring that both are typically gendered female. Whether the provision of everyday needs takes the form of the production or the acquisition of domestically consumed items (in Britain at least, and I believe in other industrializing economies also), the labour involved continues to be scripted as part of women's household labour, even when it primarily—and contradictorily—takes place in the 'public' sphere of urban commerce.

There is an analogous relationship between consuming art in exhibitions and consuming household goods that should not be ignored, especially when we consider the nature of the labour involved. The processes of viewing, judging, selecting according to practicality and 'taste' are equally at play in the visiting of an art museum as they are in a trip to the supermarket or department store. The importance of the museum collection as a mechanism to educate consumers in the characteristics of good design was a recognized function of both the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (which is also a museum of design, as visitors to the shop understand). This manifests itself both in the collections, which include objects for domestic use, but also in the character of the displays. As Julia Noordegraaf, Charlotte Klonk, and others have written, there is an observable traffic between the design of museum displays and that of retail spaces⁵. As I have written elsewhere, the strategy of associating Tate Modern with routine and familiar leisure consumption by imitating retail forms of branding was deliberate. The frequent co-location of art museums and galleries with commercial districts and vice versa, affirms the relationship between the production and exhibition of art and its commodity status. For example, the Burlington House / Burlington Arcade / Bond Street axis, which associated the Royal Academy in London with luxury retail from its removal there in 1838, sustained the evolution of nearby Bond Street as a luxury trading district incorporating art auction houses and independent galleries through the nineteenth century and into the present.

That shopping for consumer goods and visiting art exhibitions are both popularly constructed as forms of leisure rather than forms of labour should be considered in relation to their feminization. Read through Sylvia Federici's argument, one could say that these are forms of labour that have been exempted from the wage economy, in order that the capital that accrues from them can be more easily appropriated from the labourers. But should we consider the purchase of oranges and the contemplation of a Whistler exhibition equally as forms of value production? David Graeber has suggested that the widespread use of the terminology of consumption—suggesting a metaphor for eating or a literal appropriation—to describe a range of cultural activities which extend far beyond the use of materials is itself an effect of capitalism, which demands that social relations be always reimagined as property relations. The constant recourse to 'consumption' as an analytical term indicates the extent to which every form of human activity has been subjected to the language of commodification, even when it is not part of a system of profit-bearing production, or may even resist such processes⁶. His preferred perspective is to consider 'social life' as having the purpose of the 'mutual creation of human beings', which is a position which most of us would share, although he leaves untouched the question of the historic and enduring gender inequalities of that work.

It may be that viewing art in an exhibition format is an excellent example of an activity that is neither production nor consumption (Graeber's example is a baseball game). One could argue that the process of putting art in an exhibition/museum context is to withdraw it from the world of commerce, and to protect it (through rules about touching and taking) from any literal material use that Graeber suggests is entailed in processes of consumption properly observed. But the exhibition/collection is also, of course, a kind of advertising for artists and their dealers, and read through a more complex account of the production of commodity value, the exhibition may not be so removed from its processes. Pierre Bourdieu's account of the formation of cultural capital and other accounts of the world's 'hidden curriculum' would tend to confirm that visiting exhibitions and commanding the vocabularies that art introduces can be converted into a form of capital⁷. Institutions, artists and curators can be complicit in fostering these different forms of capital value even as they deny them, challenge them or refute them⁸. The work entailed in the 'mutual creation of human beings' or the labour of 'social reproduction' is more complex and extensive than the provision of consumable food and clothing, even if capitalism might wish that work into a profit-generating mode of commodification.

That the work of intellectual, emotional, and social cultivation that takes place through the enjoyment of art should be designated as leisure, or consumption, or via a new category of immaterial or social labour, is a symptom of the extent to which such labour is always the negative partner in the binary systems of valuing labour or 'production'. Attempts to account for the political consequences of looking are equally subject to being expressed in an unstable gendered dynamic. At the same time that Laura Mulvey was formulating her pioneering account of the (male) gaze which objectifies the representation of the (female) subject⁹, the Italian art critic Carla Lonzi proposed the opposite formulation, that the viewing subject was typically gendered female to sustain the authority of male cultural production. Giovanna Zapperi explains Lonzi's position:

As Lonzi tried to explain her abandonment of art criticism, she insisted on her refusal to play the role of the artist's spectator, thereby introducing the problem of the artistic gaze. Contrary to the then (almost) contemporary theorizations in the Anglo-American context, for Lonzi the woman is not the object but the spectator of the artwork; it is she who passively observes and thus legitimizes male creativity through her exclusion¹⁰.

Lonzi's account of the viewer as gendered feminine against the masculine authority of the artwork, or the exhibition, or the museum, is consistent with interpretations of the museum like Carol Duncan's essay "The MoMA's Hot Mamas"¹¹, which also positions the museum exhibition format as an assertion of (masculine-gendered) authority invested in the artwork; or in my account, of the (masculine-gendered) authority of the curator and the museum, which assume responsibility for conserving and interpreting the items in their care.

The relation between the curator and the artist is normally the binary within which the role of the curator is framed; the argument that I have been developing here is that the relationship between the curator and her audience is equally significant—although the nature of a feminist analysis of this relationship is, for me, not yet obvious. As the work of the curator devolves from a role of authority over the artwork to one of social mediation and affective labour, is this gendered dynamic between the exhibition and the audience also subject to transformation? If so, how can we theorize the nature of the relation between the (feminized) curator and the (feminized) audience for her work? Studies of visitors in museums tend to be for-

mulated in quite empirical terms, although even empirical studies of the gender of visitors are hard to locate (though families are present in that literature). My concern is not that art might be increasingly appropriated as a practice through which women* might enter into dialogues with one another about their social labour, but that the whole endeavour might be consequently under- or de-valued through its location in the realm of the *unprofitable*. If it is the work of capitalism to reimagine social relations as property relations, then the feminization of the exhibition may be a symptom of the relegation of art and (some of) its enterprises to the margins of the globalised economy. How we can mutually reclaim and reassert the importance of these dialogues should be a central concern of the feminist curator.

*inclusively defined to include LGBT+ women

Notes

1 For the debate over the curatorial function, see James Cuno, ed., *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004. Karsten Schubert's *The Curator's Egg: The Evolution of the Museum Concept from the French Revolution to the Present Day* (Ridinghouse, London, 2009) gives an account of the neoliberalization of national art collections.

2 Helena Reckitt's essay appears in Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, eds, *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2013.

3 Associated with feminist critiques of Marxism, the thesis of 'social reproduction' as a form of overlooked production has informed various feminist historical and social analyses. Sylvia Federici's *Caliban and The Witch* (Autonomedia, New York, 2004), a synthetic account of women's 'social reproduction' labour in capitalism, is a recent and influential account.

4 See for example Philippe Peron, *Fashion and the Bourgeoisie: A history of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994.

5 Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800–2000*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009; Julia Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display: Museum Presentation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Visual Culture*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2004.

6 David Graeber, "Consumption," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 52, No. 4, August 2011, pp. 489-511.

7 See Felicity Allen's introduction to her edited volume *Education* (Whitechapel, London; MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2011, pp. 14-15.

8 There is a growing interest in examining the interface between the commercial market for art and the non-commercial aspects of art practice. For a critique of the current situation, see the final pages of Andrea Fraser, "L'1%, C'est Moi," first published in *Texte zur Kunst*, 83, September 2011, pp. 114–27. <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2012Biennial/AndreaFraser>, accessed 21 March 2016.

9 This, of course, is the position initiated by Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", published in the journal *Screen* in 1975 and widely reproduced. It has been subject to wide-ranging criticism and supportive reformulations of her thesis—see, for example, Mandy Merck, ed., *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, Routledge, London, 1992.

10 Giovanna Zapperi, "Challenging Feminist Art History: Carla Lonzi's Divergent Paths," forthcoming in Vicky Horne and Lara Perry, eds, *Feminism and Art History Now*, Intellect, Bristol, 2016.

11 Carol Duncan, "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," *Art Journal* 48(2), Summer, 1989, pp. 171-178.

Lara Perry is an art historian with specialist research expertise in portraiture, gender, and art museums. She was the leader of an international research network exploring feminist curating practices that ran a programme of symposia and seminars held in locations from Washington, D.C., to Tallinn between December 2010 and May 2012, and was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. She co-edited a book of essays on feminism and curating, *Politics in a Glass Case*—with Angela Dimitrakaki, a member of the research network. Lara leads the programme in the *History of Art and Design* at the University of Brighton.