

# Curating as Verb

By Renato Osoy

As we attempt to produce a clear reading on curatorial practice in contemporary culture, we encounter at first that the term 'curating' is not yet clearly defined, and that its definition is currently in a process of reconstruction in both concept and form. Although the activity of curating takes place actively on a day to day basis, we cannot yet put a finger on what a constituted curator really is, or what it is that the curator is supposed to do, in order to legitimize the activity of curation as a category. In this light we can also note the rise and institutionalization of educational programs across Europe on the topic, one just needs to enter the key words "curatorial program" on e-flux's [www.artandeducation.net](http://www.artandeducation.net) webpage to discover the array of possibilities, but more interestingly is to note how many of these offers present themselves as 'new programs'. Currently we also notice an amount of texts discussing the curatorial or the curator position; contemporary discourses that have come to surface primarily in the last three to five years. For matters of this argument let us cite some of these titles, essentially because we can suggest that in the chosen words for their titles resides a lot of information to be pondered on. Let us read carefully some of these names, while not only looking at them as titles but as 'meta-titles' since they appear to have a tone of urgency and remedy in them. This offer on text production related to the curatorial might shed light in the actual status of the topic: "Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance by Judith Rugg and Michele

Sedgwick (2012). Curating and the Educational Turn (Occasional Table Critical) by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (2010). Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating by Jean-Hubert Martin, Sara Arrhenius, David Carrier and Boris Groys (2007). The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader by Mark Pierson (2010). Curating Subjects by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Jens Hoffmann, Irene Calderoni and Robert Nickas (2007). On Curating: Interviews with Ten International Curators by Carolee Thea, Thomas Micchelli and Hans Ulrich Obrist (2010). Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media (Leonardo Book Series) by Beryl Graham, Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz (2010). Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating\* But Were Afraid to Ask by Hans Ulrich Obrist and April Elizabeth Lamm (2011). A Brief History of Curating (Documents) by Lucy Lippard, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Walter Hopps and Pontus Hulten (2008). Thinking Contemporary Curating by Terry Smith and Kate Fowle (2012). The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s) by Paul O'Neill (2012)."

We'll begin by surveying the title "Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media, by Beryl Graham, Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz (2010)". We note that when reading the title as a statement, the title itself poses an interesting question, as it address key words in it, and adjoints the prefix (re-) which has its implications to a previous moment. On the one hand we read the word 'rethinking' and later we encounter the word 'new', preceding the words 'curating' and 'media' respectively framing the concept of art in an 'after' thought. As we move to the introduction of the text, the authors historicize

progressively both of these events, being one, the evolution of art and the apparition of new media, and secondly they shed light to how this event problematizes current forms of curation. In the text a series of approaches and cases are proposed to curators in order to reassess values on curatorial practice. This new values tend to focus on proposing new modes, or 'behaviors' on curating, essentially a clear emphasis is given to the ethical. The ethical aspect as the authors propose, can be present in the activity of curating as a reassessing value in contemporary cultural production, we read the following: "We deliberately describe the ways of curating as "modes" rather than as "models" to avoid the impression (however devoutly wished) that we have a silver bullet of an answer to the curatorial challenges of new media art. The practices of making and curating new media art are notable for their participative and collaborative ethics and discursive formats--including discussion lists, conferences, blogs, and websites. Our main activities here have therefore been naming, categorizing, digesting, moderating, and editing rather than imparting godlike opinions"(pg.12). Later on that same paragraph we read "This book is not a theory book", as they go on to address the importance to focus their views on the application of processes and modes, rather than on fixed theories. A question of embracing an ethical attitude seems to appear as common denominator in contemporary curatorial practices as a possible mechanism to justify the figure of the curator in the distributions of power.

Although a number of authors and texts coincide with the idea of the ethical, we could also enquire if the sole power of

'good' curating resides entirely in its ethical approach or if there are other possibilities to divert or intervene the concept of curation towards alternative fields of thought. The reason we might feel inclined to explore another possibility is simply because ethics always runs parallel to the problem of becoming too transparent or just 'common sense'. With the ethical approach alone we might run the risk of creating ethical formats or ethical protocols in order to standardized practice. To avoid these cases, rather we want to propose the possibility of considering curating in a ambiguous and fluid manner, we might want to approach curating 'as verb'. Curating as verb because it appears that it is in its activeness, in its movement and in its constant reconstitution, that curating could actually become problematic and hence open to scrutiny. The afore mentioned titles somehow imply the word curating as verb as well, when read carefully. Currently it appears as if the definition for curating is on the move or constantly moving within the context of cultural representations. So far none of the titles or authors mentioned above have canonized themselves entirely, although they all appear to be in a race to do so. Consequently, it appears that the activity of curating is becoming defined within the context of cultural mediation and production by having their authors following classical protocols of exhibition montage while attempting to shyly experiment within those frames. These activity becomes contextualized and somehow legitimized in the frame of theory, by handpicking isolated essays on the topic, while simultaneously shuffling them with institutionalized parameters

to create coherence in their respective arguments. This mode of operating can cause, as we mentioned before, the apparition of structures, formats and protocols that can eventually operate as a common sense knowledge into what 'good' curating is or could be. Let us say that by accepting this condition too quickly, we can precipitate ourselves into definitions, hence, this might lead us to establish norms and conditions, or situations that can further on, and eventually promote an institution of curating. In that case curating can become a formula, curating for all, a manual for curating. On the other hand we should enquire on the idea of curating as verb mentioned before, because it is here in this paradoxical encounter precisely, that we want to point to the difference between the 'verb curating' and its definition, opposed to the use of curating as verb. In curating as verb we must consider ourselves as part of a contemporary culture that has inherited a wealth of cultural knowledges, and as well as a people that nourishes itself in a global society. We might want to insist and point to the implications of an ongoing cosmopolitan grammar for curating, in that case we also have to consider the multiplicity of meanings a word can have in different languages and contexts, and ultimately we have to consider the possible intervention of poetry in forming new constellations of thoughts for this concept. In curating as verb we might find new and unexpected conceptions to engage with curatorial activities as concepts and contexts multiply their meanings in endless combinations.

An example comes to mind as we survey the notes from Philippe-Alain Michaud's

on "Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion, (2004)". We read as follows: "[...] This attempt at reconstruction allows us to begin to find our way through this strange landscape imagined by Warburg, in which a new style of apprehending aesthetic phenomena is elaborated--where knowledge is transformed into a cosmological configuration and the rift between the production of the works and their interpretation is abolished."(pg.251). As we traverse through Michaud's findings on Aby Warburg's processes and ways of operating in his Mnemosyne Atlas project, one thing becomes evident, that is of course, the uniqueness of Warburg's approach towards the presentation of knowledge, or for the case in discussion we could dare to say, Warburg's curation of knowledge. Warburg's approach relies on making and remaking new compositions that propose non-verbal systems of communication in a series of montages of intricate combinations. Essentially we could say that his methods are quite basic, he utilizes technics of fragmenting, montage, sequencing and juxtapositioning, as his basic curatorial grammar. Techniques which in any case might not be all that impressive for the contemporary spectator, but nevertheless, let us say that the strength of Warburg's approach seems to appear not so much in his technique, as in his subjective position towards knowledge, but more precisely in his original capacity to implement the elements of temporality and poetry to construct non-verbal systems of communication. Michaud goes on to argue on the efforts of Warburg "to bring disparate things together" through effects on montage, later he points to the following: "The disparate objects whose

images Warburg collected for the panels of his atlas are like the material from which poetry, according to Hofmannsthal, is made. They are objects taken from different levels of the past, freed from functionality, abandoned to a strange figural floating.”(pg.260). Lastly, we would like to point to the inherent implication of movement within ‘the verb’, as is the case of building a sentence, a narrative; when the construction of a sentence demands motion and action, it is the verb that performs the role of bringing this effect into meaning. In Warburg’s work the verb incarnates not only in the articulation of his panels and tables, but also inside the spectator, as he/she has to move around the displays, in Warburg’s mature spectator is also expected to move the images in the mind, this in order to actively construct subjective meanings.

By attempting to utilize the verb in a correct grammar, curating as verb also runs the risk of formalizing itself in order to make sense and be coherent. As we proposed before, we see a possible solution in dealing with this conflict, by actually implementing the nature of the verb itself as an active condition, a verb in motion. We also put forward other notions related to language and poetry to somehow materialize possible abstractions in the coming about of modes of curating. Developing models based on a single conception or defining curating too fast might lead us into a trap that can push curating into a ghetto, into the single space of ‘the curatorial’. Rather we might proceed to develop more questions on the topic, and continue to amplify the vocabulary of curating by pushing the curatorial activities towards differences

and occupations, while actively subverting and changing their roles. So far we have not encountered any considerable resistance or antagonism towards curation, although most of the literature available points towards the ethical and the functionalities of the curator, it still feels that there is plenty more to be discussed on curating, specially if we pose curating as a social activity that deals with processes and meanings.

Consulted texts:

- “Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media, by Beryl Graham, Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz (2010)”.
- “Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion, Philippe-Alain Michaud (2004)”.
- “e-flux’s [www.artandeducation.net](http://www.artandeducation.net)”