

## The Curatorial Constellation and the Paracuratorial Paradox

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“As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it will fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers.”  
—Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*<sup>1</sup>

After more than 20 years of increasingly intense curatorial production and debate, we appear to be witnessing a contestation of the existence, and legitimacy, of a specifically curatorial field of praxis. In this moment of consolidation in the discursive field around curating, many protagonists are attempting to inscribe certain constructions, limitations, and definitions of what curating should be, or should seek to be, and to determine which bodies of knowledge will have enduring consequences for the practice of curating and its parallel discourses and histories. This tendency is particularly apparent in recent attempts to distinguish the concepts of the curatorial and the *paracuratorial*, with the *para* conceived of as operating away from, alongside, or supplementary to the main curatorial work of exhibition making.<sup>2</sup> Instead of taking sides in the debate by celebrating or rejecting so-called paracuratorial activities, I wish to problematize the term, and to argue for the paracuratorial as a terrain of praxis that both operates within the curatorial paradigm and retains a destabilizing relationship with it via (para-)texts, sites, works, and institutes.

The *para* concept—an understanding of something “other than,” “beside,” “outside,” or “auxiliary,” operating at a distance from the main act—assumes a binary between primary and secondary curatorial labor. The divisive logic of such thinking suggests that something is in need of hierarchization. In turn, this could be perceived as a conservative urge to return to the more stable distinctions between the work of the artist, the curator, the educator, the public, and so forth, that preceded the turn in recent years toward more discursive, or educational, forms of practice. This turn to education also resulted in a kind of curatorialization of educational formats and the cooptation of the political potentiality of the discursive. This has been evident in biennials and art fairs in particular, which often employ adjacent events as a means of falsely bolstering critique in support of their market-oriented economies.

Having said this, the trend toward diversification should be more generally welcomed within the curatorial field as a moment of expansion, a turning away from the prioritization of the gallery exhibition as the only inevitable outcome of curatorial work. But on another level, these developments in the field also highlight the need to differentiate between curating exhibitions *about* “education,” or in relation to “discourse,” versus curatorial projects that are inherently educational or discursive in their forms of production and ultimate objectives. This way of thinking allows the group exhibition to become only one among many possibilities within the accepted nexus of a curator’s professional activities.<sup>3</sup>

In considering how the paracuratorial might begin to perplex curatorial practice, I would first like to explore the ways in which recent concepts of the curatorial have themselves looked to the margins of practice, resisting categorical resolution and operating instead as a constellation of activities whose precise definitions and

objectives sometimes intentionally prove elusive, with discourse not always realized in actual practice. Irit Rogoff, for example, articulates the curatorial as critical thought that does not rush to embody itself, but instead raises questions that are to be unraveled over time. Maria Lind's notion of the curatorial involves practicing forms of political agency that try to go beyond what is already known. Beatrice von Bismarck's understanding of the curatorial involves a continuous space of negotiation contributing to other processes of becoming. Finally, Emily Pethick's proposition of the curatorial presupposes an unbounded framework, allowing for things, ideas, and outcomes to emerge in the process of being realized. Illustrative of the contested territory around curating, these definitions cannot be reduced to a set of positions that exist in opposition to exhibition making. Rather, they support forms of research-based, dialogical practice in which the processual and the serendipitous overlap with speculative actions and open-ended forms of production.

Certainly these varied definitions of the curatorial can be read as resisting the narrative-oriented authorial model of curation, which might be defined as commissioning or working with extant artworks for a public manifestation within an exhibitionary frame or organizing principle defined by a curator. But I would argue that this ought not to be the primary objective of the curatorial as defined by these various theorists. Instead, the curatorial at its most productive prioritizes a type of working with others that allows for a temporary space of cooperation, coproduction, and discursivity to emerge in the process of doing and speaking together. However dissensual, this cohabitational time can be made public, warts and all. The discursive aspect of curatorial work should be given parity with—rather than being perceived as contingent upon—the main event of staging exhibitions. Similarly, the work of exhibition making is not only there to legitimize the *para* work in relation to it; rather, processes are set in motion in relation to other activities, actions, and events within the curatorial. Instead of conforming to the logic of inside and outside, a constellation of activities exists in which the exhibition can be one of many component parts.

Rather than forcing syntheses, this constellation (an always-emergent praxis) places together incommensurable social objects, ideas, and subject relations in order to demonstrate the structural faults and falsities inherent in the notion of the hermetic exhibition as primary curatorial work. The curatorial, conceived of as a constellation, resists the stasis of the curator-artist-spectator triumvirate and supports more semi-autonomous and self-determined aesthetic and discursive forms of practice that may overlap and intersect, rather than seeking a dialectic (image) or oppositional presentation (form). It is not about being either for or against exhibitions. As a constellation, discursively led curatorial praxis does not exclude the exhibition as one of its many productive forms. From curatorially driven spaces such as bak, Casco, The Showroom, PiST, or FormContent to practices as diverse as those of Sarah Pierce, Transit.hu, Komplat, Anton Vidokle, If I Can't Dance . . . , Ashkal Alwan, or WHW, the curatorial is a constellation of activities as main public event. Rather than being either in opposition to one another or integrated, all of these practices function in the Adornian sense of a constellation, proposing a more juxtaposed field of signification, form, content, and critique. The constellation, in this sense, is an ever-shifting and dynamic cluster of changing elements that are always resisting reduction to a single common denominator. By preserving irreconcilable differences, such praxis retains a tension between the universal and the particular, between essentialism and nominalism.

Paracuratorial practices are part of this constellation, but could also be considered a type of practice that responds to certain irreconcilable conditions of production. They attach themselves to, intervene in, or rub up against these conditions. They might occur at the points at which the main event is critiqued from within, or when the restrictive scenarios into which art and curatorial labor are forced or sidestepped in some way. They employ a host-and-uninvited-guest tactic of coordination and invention, enabling parasitic curatorial labor to coexist alongside, or in confrontation with, preexisting cultural forms, originating scenarios, or prescribed exhibition contexts.

In the first instance, artists' zines and magazines are good examples. From General Idea's *FILE Magazine* to *The Fox*, Stephen Willats's occasional *Control*, or *North Drive Press*'s exhibitions in a box, the paracuratorial facilitates an extended artistic practice in which diverse activities commingle while employing an existing cultural form within which, and through which, many other ideas and propositions intersect and interrelate. Similarly, projects such as e-flux employ a parasitic economic model that latches onto extant marketing and online communication strategies as a means of funding a public program of curated events, art projects, and publications.

Exemplary paracuratorial projects have emerged from an initially limited curatorial context. *Cork Caucus*, *The Paraeducation Department*, and *The Blue House* are but three semi-autonomously aligned projects that fulfill the function of guest to their hosts. *Cork Caucus: Art, Possibility, and Democracy* (2005), co-curated by Annie Fletcher, Charles Esche, and Art / not art, was realized in the context of Cork, Ireland's year as European Capital of Culture. Exhibitions and commissioned projects were curated alongside performances and discursive events across multiple formats, from seminars and lectures to workshops and publications. Exhibitions, events, and extensive formal and informal discussions took place in and around the city of Cork, each corresponding to the others as part of a curatorial whole.

*The Paraeducation Department* (2005) began when Annie Fletcher was one of six curators invited to take part in a project called *Tracer* at Witte de With and TENT, two institutions occupying two separate floors of the same building in Rotterdam. The invitation was to seek art in the city, to comment on Rotterdam's cultural pulse, and to convey this through an exhibition or project that engaged with the city's art scene(s). Fletcher invited the artist Sarah Pierce to collaborate with her, and together they resisted the conventional exhibition as the default curatorial format by setting up a common discursive space in a room on the floor in between the two institutions, where the employees of both could meet informally. In the process, an informal network of individuals was established that generated a multidirectional dialogue with temporary communities, audiences, and gatherings programmed across the project, some of which (such as a reading group) continue to this day. Fletcher and Pierce enacted a response instead of responding reactively. They relocated the space of the curatorial to correspond with existing structures while performing at some distance from the institutions' expectations. In this sense, *paracuratorial* is a useful term to describe transitional temporal processes of engagement with people taking precedence over exhibitions as the primary end product.

This is illustrative of a range of practices in which multiple participants are involved as co-creators with a view to shaping counter-public spaces, as seen in artist projects by Tania Bruguera, Pablo Helguera, Temporary Services, Oda Projesi, Annette Krauss, Skart, Ultra-Red, Hiwa K, Can Altay, Park Fiction, or Jeanne van Heeswijk. In many of these practices, the moment of publicness is never fully revealed. The function of the curatorial proposition is to create situations of potential agency for the co-productive processes initiated by the artist, or curator, as post-autonomous producer. An understanding of the curatorial is put forward as an accumulation of interactions, with the work of art configured as a cluster of interventions and interactions gathered together over time to result in more dispersed forms of distribution.

Jeanne van Heeswijk's project *The Blue House* illustrates the ways in which such nonrepresentational processes of communication and exchange can form the content and structure of the work of art as a kind of paracuratorial practice. *The Blue House* began with van Heeswijk sidestepping the original brief of a restrictive site-responsive public art commission to instigate new fields of interaction. Situated in a newly built suburb of Amsterdam called IJburg, she collaborated with the urbanist Dennis Kaspori and the architect Hervé Paraponaris in arranging for a large villa in a housing block to be taken off the private market and redesignated as a space for reflection, artistic production, and cultural activities. Over a four-year period (2005–9), the Blue House Association of the Mind functioned as a changing group of local and international practitioners who took up residence for up to six months as part of an open-ended organizational structure. Invitees conducted research; produced works of art, films, and publications; and were involved in discussions and other activities. This resulted in numerous interventions being made by practitioners in and around *The Blue House*, which responded to the specifics of a place undergoing construction as part of an extensive urban renewal plan. Rather than producing artworks with intrinsic aesthetic values, *The Blue House* was a para-institutional model based on social relationality. The result was the culmination of associated responses to the local context and an organized network of willing participants who collectively contributed to the production, where different levels of participation highlighted the complexities of artistic coproduction within the logic of succession, continuity, and sustainability rather than discontinuity in a unitary time and place.

I do not wish to fetishize process over product, nor to see curatorial discourses superseding praxis. Rather, my intention is to problematize the recently manifested desire for more procedural, exclusive, dominant, or instrumental forms of curatorial production. This is registered by a number of curators and commentators who have called for a regression to the artwork-first model of curation: curating as selecting from an already-sanctioned art market; the disappearance of curatorial self-reflexivity; curatorial labor restricted to object-oriented exhibitions; curating reduced to working within institutions; establishing a canon or selecting from within a canon; curating associated with, or working within, a private collection or museum context as the only way forward. This tendency is often accompanied by arguments such as “curating can never be taught”—as if curating was once something that could be transposed, and curatorial teaching was only about imparting knowledge and producing proto-exhibition curators—which often confuses the technical with the discursive requirements of curatorship. Underlying all of this is a troubling desire for a reductive field of curatorial practice within an art world based on privilege, as a place for the

few: those who have access, those who are “in the know,” those who have resources or clout, those who are able to operate within a limited, fragile, reputational economy that never wishes to challenge or exceed itself out of fear of discursivity, critical theory, and the unknown. I believe that paracuratorial work is part of an ever-expanding curatorial paradigm that will continue to offer up particular forms of resistance to this kind of conservatism so loudly expressed within the contemporary art field as an urge to return to more stable and traditional forms of production. In the face of such a reductive scenario, the paracuratorial is part of an evolving field of operations—a destabilizing curatorial constellation—that persists in resisting the established order of things.

## Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York & London: Continuum, 2007): 163.
2. The *Exhibitionist* formalized the term “paracuratorial” in issue 4 (June 2011) and prompted three writers—Vanessa Joan Müller, Lívía Páldi, and Emily Pethick—to develop and elaborate on its implications for curatorial practice.
3. For a broad list of examples, see Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating and the Educational Turn* (Amsterdam & London, de Appel / Open Editions: 2010). In 2007, Kristina Lee Podesva proposed that “education as a form of art making constitutes a relatively new medium. It is distinct from projects that take education and its institution, the academy, as a subject or facilitator of production.” Drawing on research undertaken at the Copenhagen Free University and elsewhere, Podesva itemized 10 characteristics and concerns across a spectrum of art and curatorial initiatives engaging with education-as-medium. These included: ‘A school structure that operates as a social medium’; ‘A tendency toward process- (versus object-) based production’; ‘An aleatory or open nature’; ‘A post-hierarchical learning environment where there are no teachers, just co-participants’; ‘A preference for exploratory, experimental, and multidisciplinary approaches to knowledge production’; and ‘An awareness of the instrumentalization of the academy’. See Podesva, “A Pedagogical Turn: Brief Notes on Education as Art,” *Fillip* no. 6 (2007) [<http://fillip.ca/content/a-pedagogical-turn>]. It is also worth looking at Anton Vidokle’s “Incomplete Chronology of Experimental Art Schools” in *Notes for an Art School* (Amsterdam: International Foundation Manifesta. 2006): 19.