

CURATING AS MEDIATION PRACTICE

HISTORY, PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

by Brandon Farnsworth

■ The idea that New Music can be curated has become a popular idea among festival directors in recent years. Many artistic directors, programmers, etc. now self-identify as curators, or call their work curating. There is still however a significant lack of reflection about what this change of title implies. In three sections, this article will examine the historical emergence of the curator in the visual arts, what curating could mean for New Music, and end with an example of thinking curatorially about New Music.

The word curating stems originally from museum curators who were charged with the care of the growing collections of newly-established museum of the 19th century. This meant mostly looking after and cataloguing works, as well as mounting them for display. Changes in artistic practice beginning at the turn of the 20th century, as well as the expansion of the global art market after 1945, saw curating increasingly transform into a practice of exhibition-making, rather than caring for collections.

FROM AN ARCHIVIST TO A PUBLIC STAR

Artistic practices such as minimalism, land art, or performance art that emerged as of the 1960s for their part focused much more on the event of art as ephemeral and transient, and less on the work as a self-contained entity with complete perspective system.¹ Curators, responding to these changes, shifted their focus to designing the event of the exhibition rather than the preservation and mounting of works. Many began working independently of museums on a project-basis. Early independent curators such as Harald Szeemann in Switzerland, or Seth Siegelaub in the USA also worked closely with a specific scene or group of artists, often developing exhibition concepts in close collaboration with them.²

Over the following decades, the importance of the exhibition as the nexus of artistic production continued to grow. Curators increasingly became the arbiters of taste; they became the authors of exhibitions through selecting works for inclusion.³ Individual curators were given a high amount of visibility, presentations and explanations of their exhibition concepts were seen as giving a level of accountability missing from the facelessness of the traditional museum. The danger became that a celebrity cult would form around these exhibition auteurs.

In the 1990s, the globalization of art meant also the globalization of curators.⁴ These new figures helped establish the mythical profile of the «global biennale curator»; living life in airport lounges as they jet from one biennale to another. Prominent figures such as Okwui Enwezor, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Klaus Biesenbach helped solidify the image of the curator as having a distinct profile and taste.

The global biennale curator is the first important concept key to understanding the relevancy of the curator to the field of music. These figures represent not only a level of personal and financial success for individuals, but their international networks also elicit a sense of global urgency for the visual arts they present. Their ascendance to power in the visual arts makes for an easy transplant of the term to established authority figures in music. If theatre scholar Tom Sellar writes that the curator can act as «the cure» and a «great white hope» for experimental theatre undergoing a crisis of relevancy in regards to its public, then it is unsurprising that New Music should also seek hope and a «cure» in curating.⁵

CHRONIC DEBT

The focus so far has rested on the curator and the work they do assembling exhibiti-

ons. As famously seen already in Szeemann's documenta 5 (1972), artists have complained about the overimportance of these singular figures, whose subjective choices can be to the detriment of artists' control over their own work. Similarly, curators of music run the danger of replacing the composer-genius with the festival-genius, with artists experiencing a similar loss of control.

Exploring what curating could mean, an action rather than a profession, is a way of escaping this cult of individual genius. Emerging around the mid-90s, the emphasis on the event of the exhibition shifted to an emphasis on the event of knowledge-creation.⁶ Curating becomes less about creating specific exhibitions, and more about a practice of mediation between forms of knowledge more generally.

By «mediation» is meant that curating takes up a position in the middle of a situation, and works with its various stakeholders in order to achieve its intended goal. In New Music for example, this can be sources of funding, restrictions of the space, requirements of ensemble(s) or limitations in their repertoires, commissioned composers, expectations of the audience, logistics of presentation, relation to tradition, etc. Curating becomes a situated knowledge about how to successfully negotiate this thicket of stakeholders, while simultaneously making sure that a project is «rendered public in a manner that articulates criticality, intelligence, pleasure, and an informed response to the matrix of social and political relationships that tie local contexts to global realities.»⁷ It becomes de facto a game of compromise, never making everyone happy, but managing to negotiate between them to find the best possible imperfect result; curating thus exists in a permanent state of guilt.

What makes curating a unique field is that it attempts to negotiate this goal

through at least two separate avenues. The first is curating as an artistic practice, one of selection, contextualization, and staging. The second is a managerial practice of conflict-resolution and administration. How these ultimately combine together is always unique, making it a situated practice that therefore resists total formalization into a discrete discipline. The concept of curating then should be used as a «jailbreak» out of pre-existing frameworks, and as a way of resisting structures of confinement, be they of structures of administration, or of artistic practice.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

If the simple speech-act of calling yourself «curator» rather than «artistic director» is not enough to establish curating as an approach to New Music, then what could curating mean here? It is worth repeating that curating should not be seen as a discrete set of practices that can be put in a handbook, however presenting an example can help illustrate some of the decisions involved in pursuing it as a practice of knowledge.

Daniel Ott and Manos Tsangaris (together «DOMTS») have been the co-directors of the Münchener Biennale für Neues Musiktheatre since 2016. Their second edition in 2018 bore the subtitle «Privatsache» and saw productions address various issues around privacy, personal history, and intimacy, to name a few.

Under the previous two directors, commissions mostly consisted of a chain of collaborations between specialized actors beginning with a commission to a composer, and ending with the performance during the biennale. The festival's new direction under DOMTS saw the implementation of a «platform» or workshop format for developing productions. For each platform, they invited a group of young creative talents – not just composers, but also writers, directors, dramaturgs, scenographers, and others to develop commissions in teams. The goal is that the artists, who know each other as little as possible beforehand, condense into groups during the platform, with the most promising projects having the possibility of being picked to be supported in making a final production for the biennale itself.

These platforms are significant for at least three reasons. The first is that they subvert the myth of the genius composer by making works collectively, a critique of the cult of authorship that still plagues New Music.

The second is that these platforms involve a mix of artists from diverse backgrounds, not just directing or composing, but also e.g. installation art. This allows for the concept of music theatre to have an open definition, one that is always answered anew, not set within one tradition of music-making, which promotes a heterogeneity of approaches. Third, these platforms have taken place in many cities across Europe, but also across the world.⁸

The platforms have been a way that DOMTS have tried to address the issue of the Eurocentrism of the biennale and by extension, New Music. They address this not through the setting of a theme (as many who conflate concert dramaturgy with curating would have it), but rather they take a stand through how they organize the infrastructure of the biennale, which in turn has a tremendous effect on the festival's outcomes.⁹ The result is that the 2018 edition had a commission from Buenos Aires and one from Hong Kong, and DOMTS intend to bring more productions from outside Europe in the future.¹⁰

However, just presenting works from outside of Europe does not mean that the festival is free of criticism. In the commission from Hong Kong, *Bubble <3* (2018), audience members were taken on a guided sound-walk of a neighbourhood three consecutive times, before being led into an apartment where a large inflatable «filter» bubble expanded to fill the space and isolate each spectator against the wall. The sound walk itself was enhanced by small performances and interventions by the artists, such as a singer on a motorbike, dancers activating architecture in public space, or the delicate filling of plastic bags with air.

The work *Bubble <3*, by a group of Hong Kong (sound) artists, was typical of the sound art scene in that city. This style is itself a product of the city's complicated history of colonialism, first of England, and now of China. Its filigree approach, creating fragile interventions in the brutal cityscape, is both an empowerment of the barely-discriminable gesture, while also being extremely practical in a city with an extreme shortage of space (for rehearsal, for storage, for solitude).

Bubble <3 received negative reviews from the German critics, whose irreverent behaviour at least at the premiere was itself telling. Two aspects of its shortfalls are interesting here. The first is that the work's micro-gestures were on a formal level better suited

to the booming Hong Kong where they were rehearsed than sleepy Munich where they were performed. To address these shortcomings, the biennale's infrastructure, its curatorial approach one could say, would need to be refined: an awareness of the difficulties of adapting a work to its site, given their very diverging histories. This takes on an additional dimension when you consider that in music theatre, management models typically assume works are universally transportable, given a detailed-enough technical rider.

Second is that the biennale would have had to better invest in the contextualization of the production to its audience. This means trying to guide the audience to an understanding of the aesthetic questions being raised by the Hong Kong group. A better realization of the curatorial responsibility DOMTS had towards the commissioned production could have meant adapting the work, advertising it to a different audience in Munich, or adapting how it was presented. It would have also meant that they perhaps reconsider the link between work and audience, or create new internal administrative workflows that would better allow for a greater diversity of works to be more effectively realized.

Thinking of curating like this becomes about considering how content and infrastructure are intertwined, and being dedicated to the amateurism of leadership within constantly-shifting constellations. This is what constitutes the tentative field of what curating can mean for New Music. ■

¹ Brian O'Doherty: *Inside the White Cube*, Berkley 1976, p. 16.

² Paul O'Neil: *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge 2012, p. 16.

³ Boris Groys: «Multiple Authorship», in: Boris Groys (ed.): *Art Power*, Cambridge 2008, p. 93.

⁴ On the expansion of global biennales as of the 1990s, see: Ronald Kolb/Shweta Patel: «Survey review and considerations», in: *On Curating*, 39 (<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-39-reader/survey-review-and-considerations.html>).

⁵ Tom Sellar: «The Curatorial Turn», in: *Theatre*, 44/2, p. 21.

⁶ See for instance Jean-Paul Martinon (ed.): *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating*, London 2013.

⁷ Raqs Media Collective: «On Curatorial Responsibility», in: Filipovic, et al. (ed.): *The Biennale Reader*, Bergen 2010, p. 285.

⁸ Platforms have taken place in Munich, Bern, Buenos Aires, Lima, Rotterdam, Stadberger See, Bern, Hong Kong, and Athens: <http://www.muenchenerbiennale.de/plattformen/> (accessed all websites 18.08.2018).

⁹ To be clear, as mentioned earlier, the 2018 edition did have a theme, but the concern here is with how the issue of Eurocentrism was addressed, which was not related to the theme per se.

¹⁰ Daniel Ott, in discussion with the author, October 2017.