

ALTERNATIVE

NOW



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Curatorial Alternatives to What?

From alternative forms to the everyday technologies

The emergence of curatorial projects such as *äda'web* in 1995 and *Gallery 9* in 1997 might be seen as defining moments in the curatorial encounter with information technologies, and at the same time as informing the development of a distinct curatorial approach that has led to what can be broadly described as information-oriented curating. (1) This is not to say that curators were not interested in information technologies before then, indeed a number of exhibitions as early as the 1960s focused explicitly on technology-based art, addressing the increasing impact of technology, and introducing concepts of cybernetics, programming and software to art. (2) However, projects such as *äda'web* and *Gallery 9* can be seen to directly influence a trajectory of thinking about curating that places information at its core. (3) Initially, curators began to explore the potential of online spaces simply as presentation and production venues, then through the development of dedicated software driven curatorial platforms (4), and most recently through the appropriation of social networks and participatory platforms (5).

Historically positioned within the disciplines of museology and art history, the second half of the twentieth century saw the rapid development of the curatorial field in its own right and the proliferation of curatorial practices (and curators). Contemporary commentators link this partly to radical changes in and broadening of contemporary art praxis and the expanding art markets in particular since the 1960s (in which 'internationally networked service providers' offers their skills to a diversified and globalised exhibition market, often ending up presenting their curatorial concept as artistic product), and partly to an increasing demand for art-mediation on the part of artists in a system that places economic value on contemporary art. (O'Neill 2007, Funken 2004, von Bismarck 2004) (6)

The shift of emphasis to the mediation and framing of art in the 1980s (or what has been otherwise described as 'the curatorial turn'), has resulted in a new degree of visibility and agency for the individual curator involved in the framing of these practices. (O'Neill 2007; Rogoff 2008, Tannert and Tischler 2004) (7) Furthermore, a parallel expansion in curatorial programmes and training courses in higher education in the 1990s has resulted in the continuing tendency towards a professionalisation on the one hand and further proliferation of curators and curatorial practice on the other. (8) Consequently, the understanding of the practice of curating has expanded beyond traditional institutional models to more diverse descriptions, methodologies and working models, including considerations of independent curating outside of institutions, development of collective and participatory models, new understandings of public/cultural spaces, and the impact of developments in information technologies as proto-curatorial systems. Indeed, the emergence of independent curatorial practice in the 1980s, increasingly described in terms of 'creative production', can be thought of as 'alternative' at that time. (9) Today, so-called independent curating has almost become the orthodoxy, a fashionable position to occupy (even for artists), and one that has been incorporated into institutional frameworks (demonstrated, for example, in the position of 'adjunct' or 'associate' curators at major venues). (10) This suggests a certain urgency in rethinking alternative curatorial models at this point in time, and addressing the questions: 'how can individual curators exceed the political economy of the curator as (...) an institutional functionary? Or less, optimistically: what prevents curators from *doing something else?*' (where 'something else' stands for a range of positions that 'resist complicity') (Beech and Hutchinson 2007: 57).

In the current changing cultural landscape (post-financial crash), there is an urgency to reassess the possibilities of what can be done with limited resources. One possible consequence of this might indicate a move away from the global mega-shows for a mass audience (such as contemporary art biennales, media

art festivals, and even commercial art fairs) with a move towards addressing much more specific audiences and contexts. This goes together with the reconfiguration of museum spaces, which on one hand increasingly expand to becoming more like other public spaces (a good example of this is Reina Sofia in Madrid or the Tate Modern in London) where people go to socialize and to be seen, and on the other a gradual contraction of physical exhibition spaces and exhibition programmes. Adding to the complexity of current changes, there is a growing interest in information-oriented working methods evident within contemporary art and theory that considers the special characteristics of immaterial production, and is articulated in an expansion of curatorial work in online environments.

Christiane Paul reiterates this point, making link between the emergence of online curating and independent art: 'There is an online art world – consisting of artists, critics, curators, theorists, and other practitioners – that developed in tandem with the art outside of institutions' (2008: 7). (11) In this connection, Patrick Lichty argues that online spaces (and online curating) operate more like 'Cultural Autonomous Zones' (making reference to Hakim Bey's 'Temporary Autonomous Zone') in which established cultural and institutional contracts do not apply'; accepted curatorial protocols are suspended (especially selection and evaluation) and 'the greatest degree of ad hoc organization for an exchange of creative material and discourse' are enabled. (2008: 183) At the same time he suggests that 'the evolution of networked and mobile distribution systems, curatorial practice and artistic expression in new media' remains ambiguous much in the same way as the position of unaffiliated new media curators in the social infrastructure of the largely object-oriented traditional artworld. (2008: 166)

Although today the online environment is also dominated by discussion of the curatorial in much the same way as already mentioned, albeit in new forms, it can be argued that the concept of curating, and to some extent the practice, is rather different not least in the way it has entered everyday experience, and in so

doing broken its specialisation. (12) With the pervasive use of popular technologies, such as the social web, mobile and networking platforms, users have assumed roles of amateur curators of their own lived experience. Even technology developers now liberally use the term, for instance in referring to the selection of 'Apps' for an iPhone as 'curating' them. Wikis, listservs, existing social networking sites all become platforms for potential curating, tagging and blogging become curating too, in addition to the proliferation of curatorial software and custom-build curatorial platforms in themselves. By curatorial platforms, I do not mean online sites where material is simply displayed in virtual exhibitions, but rather I mean to refer to the more complex socio-technical system that facilitates curatorial processes with various degrees of participation and interaction of multiple agents (including the public, software, network, and so on). Together these stand in for the figure of the curator in distributed form that facilitates and even automates other elements of the curatorial process. In this way, the various agents of the network are involved in a distributed curatorial system. (13)

Although the issues I have stressed are derived from informational systems, the ideas are more broadly applicable to creative processes and cultural production in general that is increasingly defined in relation to these ideas (for instance, in concepts like networking and the commons, relational database paradigms, archiving, intellectual property rights and open licenses, and so on). These have been most recently extended by the pervasive use of social media and their proto-curatorial methods, wherein collecting, storing, arranging and displaying objects demonstrate new ways in which data and information can be understood as curated material. One of the significant aspects of this is the way that the figure of the curator can now be described in terms of both the individual and collective, and in a combination of human and nonhuman (or technical) processes. This reconfigures the traditional understanding of the term curating as caring for 'objects' or 'collections', to be extended to caring for 'social cooperation'; indeed caring about the efficiency of the system through the

interface of curating.

Examples of this are projects *unDEAF* (2008) and *common practice* (2010), both offering a platform for self-curation that unfolds through the logic of technological system and without a pre-defined curatorial plan. *unDEAF*, a satellite event of the DEAF (Dutch Electronic Arts Festival) festival in Rotterdam initiated by Rui Guerra, was organized (self-curated) entirely through the use of a wiki platform. Rather than a traditional top-down and centralized curatorial model, a model is developed that is familiar in technical circles and software development (e.g. a bootlab) where participants and the technical apparatus combine to develop a self-organised event. The description of the event on the wiki clarifies that it is 'uncurated'. (14) The second example *common practice* is a reading group also uses a wiki and skype for a series of real-time events to perform a simultaneous reading/writing and reworking of selected (code) texts to 'co-produce untagged and free style body/ies of knowledge'. (15) Magda Tyzlik-Carver, the project curator, explains: '*common practice* references the widespread and increasingly familiar activity of using online tools in everyday to communicate, contact, work, socialise, play, research, be entertained etc. The practice embodies the curiosity to experience ways in which human and machine skills and abilities perform together. More importantly, however, common practice also refers to the fact that it is done in common - together with others. Thus it is social space of knowledge materialised through co-labour, codeworking and language. (16)

If there has been a resistance in the mainstream art world to engage with informational systems, this seems to be shifting at this point in time, where institutions such as *Documenta* are rapidly making reference to connectivity and digital culture. As the Artistic Director *Documenta 13*, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev states: 'In an art world dominated by the curatorial, to act without a pre-defined curatorial plan offers a possibility to both repeat the network of connectivity of the digital age, while also reflecting on its shortcomings and implications from a critical viewpoint.'

Can we expect to see *unDocumenta*, or indeed *common documenta* too in the near future? An engagement with curatorial practice that extends to technological processes and online environments might be timely and strategic in situating curating in relation to broader trends, but if so, can it still offer an alternative? Some commentators would still suggest that the whole of 'new media art' is an alternative to institutional or mainstream art, (17) and the related issue of media art curating as 'alternative' to the wider field of contemporary art curating. This provokes an important question for any discussion of the issue of 'alternative' curating now - the question of what it is an alternative to? Doesn't the comparison miss the point?

It remains that opportunities for new thinking often emerge in the spaces outside of the artworld as such, in the cracks between practices where other cultures such as those related to coding cultures thrive, as with the examples given. The distributed authoring platforms of wikis also present opportunities and it is hard to ignore the implications of wikileaks at this moment in time. Can we also begin to think of this as a curatorial project? (18) There are ever more alternatives yet to be discovered.

NOTES

1. Created by Benjamin Weil in 1995, *äda'web* was an online gallery and digital foundry originally located at <http://www.adaweb.com>. Currently, the project is hosted at the Walker Art Centre Archive <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/2/AD737122FD544FA56164.htm>. On the history of *äda'web* see Weil (1998) 'UNTITLED (ÄDA'WEB)' online at <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/A/AC7371BBE6DD46CA6165.htm>. The Walker Art Center's *Gallery 9* (1997 – 2003) was established as an online venue for the presentation and contextualisation of Internet art, hosting its own programme and archive collection, as well as becoming a repository for external sites. The original *Gallery 9*, established and run by Steve Dietz from 1997 to 2003, is available in the Walker Art Centre's Web Archives online <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/7/96D3639B6E5717946167.htm>. The current version of *Gallery 9* was launched in April 2004 and is available online <http://gallery9.walkerart.org/>. More contemporary, a similar approach is reflected in the curatorial project Artport (2001) established by Christiane Paul and hosted by The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and located at <http://artport.whitney.org>. It is an independent website designed as a comprehensive portal to Internet art and online gallery space. It followed a similar model to *Gallery 9*, but in addition to the programme of exhibitions, commissioned works and its collection, it also includes a 'gatepages' section with splash pages created by invited artists and that are subsequently archived in a database collection of net art projects.

2. For instance much quoted *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1986), or *Software, Information Technology: its new meaning for art* (1970.) *Cybernetic Serendipity*, exhibition curated by Jasia Reichardt at the ICA (The Institute of Contemporary Art) in London in 1968, was not the first computer art exhibition as such, but the particular significance of the project was in that rather than focusing on computer generated work it took a wider focus and for the first time drew attention to cybernetics, then a new field of scientific inquiry concerned with control and communication theory, and explored cybernetics in relation to creativity (see for instance <http://www.mediaartnet.org/exhibitions/serendipity>). *Software, Information Technology: its new meaning for art*, exhibition curated by Jack Burnham at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1970, is significant in explicitly using the term 'software' as a metaphor for ideas, processes and systems, as opposed to the 'hardware' of traditional object-based practices.

3. Elsewhere I have discussed this issue proposing the concept of 'software curating'. In this emerging curatorial model of practice, the curatorial process, already collaborative and involving other agencies in addition to a singular curator, now becomes closely integrated with dynamic socio-technological networks and software; software that is not simply used as a tool *to curate* but demonstrates the activity of *curating in itself* and that expands curating to the whole of the network. (Krysa 2006, 2008, 2008a)

4. Examples include *C@C - Computer Aided Curating* (1993-1995), and *runme.org* (2003). *C@C* was software-driven tool and a curatorial online system developed by the artist Eva Grubinger in collaboration with computer programmer Thomax Kaulmann. The platform combined production and presentation of artworks, and provided a context for selection and presentation of other artists' works. In this way, the system created a structure of a social network and offered the artists and the public to assume degrees of curatorial roles.

(http://www.aec.at/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=8638; <http://www.evagrubinger.com/>). *Runme.org* is a collaborative project, a software art repository and an online presentation platform structured as an open, self-submitting and moderated database system. The repository is structured through a taxonomy of and more intuitively through keywords that provide further descriptions of submitted projects. The curatorial process is based on a relatively open, yet somewhat moderated database, that allows users to self-submit their works - an option almost embedded in the software. (<http://www.runme.org>)

5. Examples include curatorial practice of the Vienna-based group CONT3XT.NET that used del.icio.us as an exhibition platform and blog and tagging as a curatorial method (their projects are for instance *TAGallery/EXHIBITION_link.of.thought* (2007) (http://del.icio.us/TAGallery/EXHIBITION_link.of.thought) and *TAGallery/EXHIBITION_l.tag_you* (2007) (http://del.icio.us/TAGallery/EXHIBITION_l.tag_you). I have extensively discussed these and other examples of curatorial practice in this field elsewhere (Krysa 2006, 2008, 2008a).

6. The issue of curating as mediation at the heart of art market has been discussed for instance by Soren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen in their essay 'The Middleman: Beginning To Talk About Mediation' (in O'Neill 2007). The argument draws an analogy between curators and the mediator; agent, third man, or a middleman (who operates 'at the outskirts of every market town', 'breaking off relations between producer and consumer, eventually becoming the only one who knows the market conditions at both ends of the chain.' They emphasise, after Fernand Braudel, their rise to power through not only breaking up the relations between consumers and producers but taking over the relations itself. (2007: 25)

7. Irit Rogoff refers to the curatorial turn as 'the possibility of framing those exhibition-making activities through [a] series of principles and possibilities' (Rogoff 2008).

8. On the issue of proliferation of curatorial programmes, see Ute Tischler, Christoph Tannert, eds. (2004) *MIB-Men in Black: Handbook of Curatorial*

Practice, Berlin: Revolver Books.

9. Paul O'Neil further notes that 'the term curator as "a form of creative production" already began to be applied to a few independent practitioners in the 1960s working beyond institutional posts'. (2007)

10. Patrick Lichty also notes changing role of the independent curator as a consequence of the rapidly developing new curatorial practice over the past ten years. He further explains: 'The title independent curator is not new; entire organizations, such as Independent Curators International (ICI) are devoted to this form of cultural practice. But there is a distinction between this traditional autonomous curatorial practice and the new independent curators whose venue is not the institution, and whose audience is not the museum-going public.' (2008: 164)

11. An extensive discussion on the relationship between what is broadly termed 'new media' art and institutions is offered by Sarah Cook in her chapter 'Immateriality and Its Discontents' (2008) to explore alternatives to the traditional museum exhibition (alternative ways as looking at exhibitions including exhibition as software program or data flow; a trade show; and a broadcast) and alternative models of curating new media (including iterative model; modular model; and distributive model).

12. Earlier, Patrick Lichty made an interesting point about 'curating everyday life' referencing such projects as Jeremy Turner 'Digital Pocket Gallery', 2002; Eryk Salvaggio 'Pictures of the Night Time Sky' and 'Museum of Modern Living, 2002; Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July 'Learning to Love You More', 2002). (2008: 176-177)

13. The idea of distributed curating was discussed extensively in my chapter 'Distributed Curating and Immateriality' in Christiane Paul's edited anthology *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond. Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, (2008).

14. *unDEAF* was a project from 2008 by artist/programmer/designer Rui Guerra, located at: <http://undeaf.v2.nl/>

15. *common practice* was a series of events curated by Magda Tyzlik-Carver, hosted by the Reading Room in Arnolfini, and online by Department of Reading <http://automatist.net/deptofreading/wiki/pmwiki.php/CommonPractice>.

16. Perhaps it is worth noting that both of these projects can be thought of alternative curatorial practice at this point in time, demonstrate an ambivalent relationship to institutions. *unDEAF* provides a critique, or from another perspective, an extension to the established art venue and project (the *DEAF* festival organized by V_2). But from any perspective it 'needs' it in order to provide a reason for taking place. In case of *common practice*, the project

exclusively unfolds in an online space and does not need an institution to happen. Yet, another 'venue' is added alongside skype and wiki, an established art institution (Arnolfini, a contemporary art centre in Bristol), in what appears a parasitic relationship. To some extent, this kind of ambivalent curatorial approach to art institutions is evoked by Marina Vishmidt's description of the figure of artist/curator - amateur. The amateur reflects a potentially ideal model of engagement 'beyond measure' by being semi-autonomous from institutions and the dominant economy, and semi-independent from 'external validation beyond a network of like-minded enthusiasts'. To Vishmidt, the amateur: 'embodies the indiscernibility of life and work, a desideratum for capital that would incorporate "whatever" moment of existence as potentially creative of value. On the other hand, the amateur precisely marks the split between life and work as he/she spurns the profits of specialisation, preferring to keep their field of amateur virtuosity apart from financial gain or professional legitimacy.' (2006: 52)

17. For instance, the curatorial group CONT3XT.NET in their recent interview with Sarah Cook, 'Re:Interview #017: Art, New Media and the Curatorial', 18 March 2011, published on their website (<http://cont3xt.net/blog/?p=4538>).

18. Florian Cramer & Ted Byfield, 'WikiLeaks Has Radically Altered the Military-Diplomatic-Information Complex – 10 Reasons For and Against' *Mute*, March 2011, http://www.metamute.org/en/articles/wikileaks_has_radically_altered_the_military_diplomatic_information_complex/

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