

## Rosemary Donegan

### Developing a Discourse of Curatorial Practices

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I've been thinking about this presentation over the last weeks. Then on Tuesday I discovered I was to be the first symposium speaker, so I have decided to try and use this time to introduce some of the questions and ideas I had in response to the brief for the symposium and then get on to some questions about curatorial methodologies and curatorial education. One of the things that makes this type of conference or symposium somewhat difficult at the beginning is that for many of the people in this room, their curatorial work is well-known to each other, while others are new acquaintances and their curatorial work unknown. However, as this symposium develops, we hope to form new working relationships and exchanges, and I hope to bridge some of these gaps of knowledge and history. Let me give you a brief idea of where I'm coming from.

I've been working as an independent curator since the early '80s. My work—research, writing, and curatorial—is primarily historical in nature, which differs, I think, from most people here. My curatorial work is focused on urban and industrial imagery, combined with a long interest in social and cultural history. I have researched and written about Toronto urban history, artists' communities, and their particular urban experiences. I have also organized some contemporary exhibitions and community arts projects. However, although I've lived in Toronto for a long time, most of my major exhibitions have been at public galleries outside Toronto, except for the Spadina Avenue exhibition which was at A Space in 1984. For the last fifteen years, I've been teaching at OCAD in a variety of areas in the Liberal Studies Department, such as Design History, Canadian Art History, Urban Design, and I'm now the Chair of the Criticism and Curatorial Studies Program. In that capacity, I teach a course in the history and practice of galleries and museums and alternate spaces, and work with the fourth-year thesis students with Ian Carr-Harris. This has led me to researching other curatorial studies programs and talking to students who have been through these various graduate programs in the States and the UK. I've done ongoing research and investigation on the history of

curatorial practice and how the art world structures operate, from public galleries and museums to alternate spaces, commercial galleries, and community-based art projects. We'll get into some of that a bit later.

First, I would like to tell you about one of my most recent curatorial discoveries, which is called Curator Defense. This is a computer game, designed by David Howe, who is presently completing his degree in Computer Science at Central Washington University in the States. Let me read you the game summary and see what you think (and this is quoted directly from the site):

You are the long-standing curator of a museum of arts. It is your duty to protect the sanctity of the works. Your benefactors stubbornly believe that modern art does not belong in your museum. As your paycheque comes from them, you must uphold their wishes. An association of local curators known as MARTIA (Modern ART Is Art)—in brackets—feels that your museum should reflect a more balanced representation of the art world. Some of these more radical members of MARTIA have taken several recent pieces of their collections and installed robotlike intelligence so they can move on their own accord. Word has reached your museum that tonight is the night MARTIA plans to coordinate a stream of seemingly endless waves of their modern art against your storeroom. Should any of their work reach your storeroom, your brain-dead staff will place MARTIA's art on your walls. To thwart this midnight attack, your benefactors have donated a hundred museum bucks (the museum gift shop's currency) for you to begin fortifying your museum. Thankfully, the next-door museum supply shop has agreed to exchange your museum bucks for their wares. With an arsenal of their defensive gizmos and gadgets at your side, you should be able to defend your museum. To prevent this attack on your museum from ruining your career, grab your thinking cap and get the job done.

And that's the game. I just thought it was fascinating that somebody who has nothing to do with the art world, apparently, has come up with this notion which really is something that you would think existed in 1890, or 1920, but not in 2005. But it is an indication of how out-of-touch some elements of the so-called digital world are!

On a slightly more serious vein, I would like to address the possibility of a conversation we're hoping to engage in through the brief for this symposium, "Roll

Call: (re)Placing Curating”, as it helped me clarify some of my own experiences and understanding of curating over the last twenty-five years. I would like to discuss some of these unspoken assumptions which are embedded in the opening brief and, hopefully, to unpack them and see where that might lead us. This is not to criticize the organizing committee, as I know they put a lot of time and effort into providing a jumping-off point for this symposium and I think it is a good one. Whether we will be able to muster the curator’s defence or whether we will side with MARTIA will be seen as this symposium progresses. But I thought it might be interesting to examine some of the assumptions and ideas that were raised for me in reading the brief.

It begins with (and I quote), “Contemporary art has long since expanded beyond its visual and plastic object-based underpinnings to embrace experiential, kinesthetic, time-based, conceptual, relational, and activist concerns. This dynamic, possibly postdisciplinary, environment challenges the form and roles of art’s players—the work itself, but also artists, audience, and the institutions that collect, preserve, exhibit, interpret, and/or produce art.”

Even though I don’t really disagree with the observation, it raises important issues. It assumes a number of ideas that I feel needed to be examined in some detail. Held within the first phrase of the Brief is the postmodern position that art and its traditional objects has ceased to be a major player in the art world, and it is now the newer forms—whether new media, performance, political or activist, community-based projects, that are of real interest. The critique of the now-old Modernist objects—paintings, sculptures, and architecture—has deemed them elitist, impenetrable to the public, universalist and thereby symbolic of Western and predominantly male white values. None of this critique of Modernism is new or unfamiliar to any of the participants in this symposium. They were, or *are* in many cases, still legitimate critiques that have brought to the foreground many issues and problems that contemporary theory has been addressing. If we look at ourselves at this symposium as a curatorial cross-section, much has changed in the last twenty-five to thirty-five years in the art world, not just the form of the objects and events, but particularly the players. As we can see, probably two-thirds of the people in

this room are women. But major elements are still remarkably the same. Most of us are of European descent and I would venture that most of us come from fairly middle-class backgrounds. In theoretical terms, the critique of the museum/gallery is rooted in Pierre Bourdieu's view of art and its institutions as a form of domination and that these "forms of hegemonic ideology" preserve and reproduce the dominant positions and dominant class. In Bourdieu's view, the gallery, the museum, and therefore curating, serves these larger instruments of domination and the manner in which cultural capital operates. To me, Bourdieu's views are very deterministic and define a power structure that doesn't allow any space for change or movement.

In contrast, the ethos of the contemporary art world, as Chin-Tao Wu, in her book *Privatizing Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, has argued, "To counter Bourdieu's view is that young artists today see themselves as anti-status quo. They see their work as questioning, critiquing the dominant ideology." I would say that this attitude is shared by many in this room and is especially important for those who work in major public institutions of culture and education. Many of us are working within a critical framework and we're continually attempting to redefine our roles, to deal with these elements which Bourdieu was defining as cultural capital.

I would suggest that we need to see the institutions of culture and museums, galleries, educational institutions, and alternate spaces, as a series of fields of contestation that are not immune to change and pressure. Their existence does not predetermine other uses and possibility, although the new demands have to coexist with more traditional mandates within the various spaces of traditional visual culture.

In a similar vein, Danielle Rice, in her essay "Museums: Theory, Practice and Illusion" in an interesting collection called *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, observes how recent graduates of art history and museum studies who enter the museum and gallery world experience a considerable shock when they discover that these institutions are actually much more complex and in a continual process of change than the theoretical and critical lit-

erature, like Bourdieu's, would have us believe. They're aware of the critique of the museum/gallery as symbols of institutional power relationships, as exclusive elite preserves of privilege and hegemonic culture, yet they have little or no experience of the practice of these institutions. Most public galleries in Canada actually operate at and through a number of different kinds of crossing points between art history, established art traditions, new forms of avant-garde art practice, popular culture, education, private wealth, corporate donations, and many, many volunteer hours. This is a complex and changing territory which we need to acknowledge, and I think we will hear more about from Janna and Michelle later. In my personal experience of working as a researcher and coordinator at major institutions like the National Gallery, and as an independent curator in smaller galleries like the Dunlop, the Victoria Art Gallery, the Windsor Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Sudbury, and in artist-run spaces and in community arts, curatorial work is not in relation to artworks, audiences, and institutions, but involves a much more complex dialectic of motives, resources, and audiences, which requires a kind of intricate dance of individual work and collaboration, similar to what Rice elaborates in her longer essay.

The brief also refers to more practical terms. I was interested in the inferred problems of the various new media for the institutions of visual culture. However some of these are fairly straightforward. For collecting institutions, they are often questions of size, scale, and material storage problems, whether it's trying to figure out how to move John Scott's *Trans Am Apocalypse No. 2* at the National Gallery or how to deal with Louise Bourgeois's giant spider *Maman*, which has to be either on display on the exterior of the gallery or to be entirely dismantled for storage. These problems, like the problem of video preservation, can and are being solved every day by curators, registrars, conservators, and administrators. What they need is more space and more money.

The other challenge of these newer art practices, such as performances and street art, is their recording, documentation, and archival survival. In these instances, the adaptability of the art world, whether private collectors, public institutions, or alternate spaces, appear to be able to collect and document these various event-

based practices and have shifted their operations to figure out how to do this, by and large. However, some of these problems have been somewhat muted as we start to see performance artists now exhibit and archive their props, such as in the YYZ exhibition *Beans, Bananas, and Yams*, curated by Dave Dymant, or the Los Angeles exhibition *Out Of Actions*, which included performance relics and leftovers... or, for that matter, the recent sale of the residues of performance pieces, of Chris Burden's crucifixion nails sold in a velvet box, which speaks volumes to the ability of art dealers to turn anything into a commodity.

Some of these questions on performance art and documentation came up last spring at a panel organized by Jessica Wyman on performance art and documentation, at which a number of people here were present. It is interesting that most of the performance artists whose names kept coming up were Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and it's interesting how performance art, although often cast as kind of a revolutionary art project, has within the space of thirty years established a highly traditional hierarchy of art history which is now firmly embedded. Yet on the other hand many of the performance artists who were actually in the audience, such as Clive Robertson, Johanna Householder, Tanya Mars, and a number of other people, were virtually ignored, plus their various contributions to the documentation of performance art in book form (which, for all its limitations, is still one of the most widely accessible public formats). Their work went undiscussed and unacknowledged and their roles as active mentors of the Toronto and larger Canadian performance scene, and this was within the performance community.

I would like to get back to the brief, and one of the ideas that it puts forward—that in this shift to new art forms, there is a space, a possibility of a postdisciplinary challenge that the curator should take up and work with, providing new responsibilities and possibilities for the curator. This is actually the topic that the symposium is challenging us to deal with, and I think many people here already do in their own practices. However, I'd like to question this notion of a postdisciplinary curatorial practice, because curating, as far as I am aware of, has never been formally defined as a discipline. Disciplines are actually formal academic divisions of

knowledge, which are defined and debated through their methodologies. However I would argue that curating in its many contemporary forms is actually a cross-disciplinary or multidisciplinary series of practices. It brings together history, theory, a variety of visual media, popular culture, audiences, education—all of those things that Suzanne so eloquently mentioned in her long list last night.

I'm also not sure what a postdisciplinary practice could be. What would the "post" part be? That's what I really was fascinated by.

In response to some of this, I'd like to briefly talk about some of the things that I've learned and observed from students. It is important to note that many of the students I'm working with in an undergraduate curatorial and criticism program will go on to work in the cultural world, not just as critics and curators, but as artists, educators, administrators, gallerists, publishers, etc. Students are generally not disenchanted with art. They're fascinated and interested in both art and artists, and how the art world operates. They're confused sometimes, and other times naïve, but they're intensely engaged and hopeful in their own futures as artists, designers, curators, and thinkers. Their response to the critique of the museum, that we're talking about a lot, is sort of muted but accepted, but really rarely of any major fascination to them. Their response is sort of like "Oh yeah, sure, yeah, fine", but I've never had students engage me in this critique of the museum that a lot of critical literature focuses on. Their ideas of the art world and their involvement in it reflects realities that ten or fifteen years ago would not have been formally on the agenda.

They, more than most of us here, see many art worlds and many art communities. They're interested in starting their own commercial galleries. They see private rental galleries as legitimate operations. Nor do they have any qualms about exhibiting in restaurants. They also appear to be quite uninterested in the artist-run centres established by artists and curators over the last twenty-five years. This is a phenomenon that I don't really understand completely but it does seem to appear to be true. They're well aware of the complexities of the art world, but they think they can bring anything into the gallery space, whether it's music, the homeless, hair dryers, or the intimacy of their own personal lives and loves. In their

naïvete, they do not have the limitations of experience. The critique and analysis of the white cube gallery and its modernist heritage is not really an issue. They aren't worried about its limitations. To them, it's a potential for their own ideas and projects.

I myself have actually had to reconsider my critique of the white cube after arriving in Lethbridge last year, at the Galt Museum, and discovering I had to install my historical photographic exhibition *Mining Stories* in a total black cube—black walls, black ceiling, black floor. I now have renewed sympathy and interest in the white cube. It has flexibility and can shift and change depending on the intervention it encompasses, something a black cube can't do. A black cube is a fairly rigid format.

Working with students has also led me to questions regarding the role of formal curatorial and critical studies as an educational process, and how we came to be curators. How did we, as individuals, come to our curatorial practices? The traditional channel was art history, but that's no longer true. Many contemporary curators have come to curating from their own art practice, through mentors, relationships, collectives, and friends and associates. I would be interested in knowing how many people here have had formal education in the area of curatorial or museum studies. So I think that's one of the interesting conversations for me— is “How did we get to where we are today?”

Also, my recent teaching in the field of contemporary critical, curatorial, and criticism has opened up for me some questions. This has led me to researching the current literature on the evolution of curatorial practices for reading and discussions with students. In this process, I've become aware of a new and burgeoning literature and writings on curating and documentation, on various types of critical symposiums outside Canada and the US, particularly in Eastern and Northern Europe. Most interesting is the Amsterdam-based journal *Manifesta Journal*, or *MJ*, which is published in coordination with the museum in Ljubljana in Eastern Europe, which has done issues on the revenge of the white cube, biennales, exhibitions as dreams, and teaching curatorship. I've also investigated a number of websites which profile the various graduate programs in the area of

curatorial studies. At this point, I've been able to trace major programs, particularly in England, the Royal College of Art and Goldsmiths College in London, obviously Bard College in New York, but others like l'Ecole du Magasin in Grenoble; De Appel Foundation in Amsterdam; the Brera Fine Arts Academy, Milan; the Estudios Curatoriales in Mexico City; the CuratorLab at Konstfack, at the University College of Art, Craft and Design in Stockholm, the California College of Arts in San Francisco, etc.

What I find particularly interesting is how much of this growing body of literature emanates from outside the art world metropolises of London and New York. There's also been a lot of interesting conferences. There was a major conference in Helsinki in 1997, which proceedings have been published in *Stopping the Process: Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibition*.

There's a book by Julia Noordegraaf—*Strategies of Display: Museum Presentation in 19th- and 20th-Century Art*. It's interesting to see that the Banff Curatorial Institute's publications now add up to a substantial body of publishing on curating in North America. So what we can start to see is the development of a body of literature and graduate programs that grapple with contemporary curating as an independent practice as opposed to an institutional practice.

Now I'd like to come back quickly to the ongoing process of developing and elucidating curatorial methodologies, attempting to explore this question of why there has been so little written directly on the subject. A lot of people talk about it in different kinds of ways, but I've found very little writing directly focusing on curatorial methodology. One of the only places that I found the title "Methodology" was an article I actually wrote, which was published in *Naming a Practice*.

Examining this area has helped me clarify a basic concept of developing a curatorial methodology... which I think most people here would share... and that is that it would be cross-disciplinary or multidisciplinary. It is a complex practice of ideas, observation, and synthesis based on visual imagery and visual actions. It is really a multiplicity of practices that one works through, with, and around. Working methodologies, particularly before they are written down, are always refining

and redefining themselves based on the artists, the thesis, the location, and the range of audiences and viewers. Therefore what would a curatorial methodology, or methodologies, look like? What work and imagination will it take till we get to this point where we could even consider a postdisciplinary practice?

So, what would a methodology of curating be? What do we see as our own individual methodologies? How do we approach curatorial problems of selection in an exhibition? (I forgot, you're not supposed to say "problems" any more. Everything is a "challenge". Have you noticed the word "problems" has virtually disappeared?)

How could we write this down? Should we be writing this down? Is this a valuable area of investigation for us? What would be important for artists if curators started writing this down and formally declared a methodology of curating? What would it look like? Would it be a series of lists? Long, theoretical essays? Visual diagrams?

I'm not completely sure at the moment. All of this will have to evolve from the work we do and requires a lot of energy and thought, in particular if we imagine this is a range of methodologies which are synthesized and realized around particular exhibitions, events, and critical writings. These are some of the questions that I hope we can engage in our discussions in the next two days.

Thank you.

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