

A Way of Curating, or, New Paths to Curating—Though for Me Alone—But Who Knows Who Leads and Who Follows—and to What End—Except That the Who or What Leading and Following in the End Will Be This Writing

Some title ... that draws us along even, it seems, to a conclusion. A title does not conclude; it announces. It calls and welcomes the reader within. It beckons and I follow. Situated outside and before the text it entitles, it invites me within in the crossing of a threshold that leaves its bidding behind in a forgetting of its function (hello become goodbye in the languages where one word signifies both arrival and departure). Might we not imagine this dissipation a metaphor for curating, whose prior act disappears as its audience passes from a thematic title that collects objects yet dissipates in their singularity through an uncontrollable transit of those we address this assemblage to? The welcoming face of curating would be this contrary disappearance, welcoming the viewer to where these things—objects and images—in all their disparity belong together. This would presume that, as curators, we would know—beyond an assemblage of objects and far beyond the ticket entrances of art galleries—what a welcome was and that we would be at home in that place, welcoming the guest within—both objects and audience in an experience of art, welcoming them to where they belong together for a moment in this understanding that we have introduced them to together. Across this threshold dividing inside from out, certainly *we* would be at home, *chez nous*, knowing, in the economy of its hearth, the ends to which these objects—“objects” of curating and objects of art—would be allocated, even before their audience arrived (before the audience came to this knowledge, before we imparted this knowledge to them). The threshold to this place where we would be at home would now, however, through the familiarity of our curatorial habitation, be a closed gate, not a welcoming opening, because we would be hosts without guests, since this habitation would be for *us* as curators, not for art’s audience. This passage forgetting the threshold’s welcome would be *our* mastery: welcome sublated in mastery through forgetting. The threshold would be a disciplinary transit that, at the same time, divides inside from out as the demarcated field of a discipline. The threshold would be more *elevation* than passage to professional competence. Lying “outside” the “text,” an exhibition’s title already conceives this division, which it surreptitiously introduces in its institutional marking. Only intending to bring a collection together, a thematic would instead be a divisive *entitling*. The title would be a disciplinary announcement as if by *theory* of what was *practiced* professionally within, a guarded place (indeed, a territory) where only we, as curators, have access to the definition and regulation of a discipline, the discipline of the discipline—rightfully so.

This disciplinary address to ourselves would be a forgetting that the welcoming of the threshold is neither a division between inside and out nor a passage to a shelter within. Through violation seemingly contrary to the inviolability of welcome, a threshold arises only to destroy boundaries; demarcations of boundaries become diverging paths by means of a devastating event. The unexpected appearance of the threshold in the arrival of the welcome guest does not institute the threshold as a demarcation that is a spatial separation. Arising in the face of welcome, it is a temporal event before it is ever a visual

apparition. The threshold could only signify welcome habitation if this inhabitation was, at the same time but not a time we know, if it was an *unwelcome* haunting—if it made our habitation *unfamiliar* to us. (How could competence then be adjudicated if habitation was now *unfamiliar*? ... This ghostly visitation, however, would not announce itself as a *category* of “uncanny curating.”) The institution might only tremble to this event but not collapse. *I* would be the one within without who, sundered by this crisis, must exile myself from the familiarity of my field in a “departure that is not the contrary of an arrival,” divest my identifying disciplinary credentials, and alienate myself in a wandering through an unfamiliar language. So pardon me for being contrary to the disciplinary purpose of this conference. Please forgive me for this excursion of a wandering writing that, although necessary for me in the sleepwalking risk I take following (as if a doomed film noir protagonist), may not be for you. How can I excuse writing that I claim is ghostwritten (and, moreover, a writing that is a thinking—a thinking-writing—that is only comprehended after the fact where there are no facts, and, in the end, no objects)? A writing that does not know where it goes or what it follows is inexcusable and likely irresponsible, too. So please excuse this experiment, which is not an experiment, that, nevertheless, you must bear here with me.

The rupturing crisis of the event is a pre-originating repetition that cannot be reproduced, even though it will happen over and over again—but who knows where when? Its repetitions are not a type that can be verified by the experimental model of science, which has already implicitly been given to us here in this session as a model for our practice, where we are to “test assumptions.” There is no curatorial laboratory in which we can test curatorial concepts. Yet, this automatically is implied once we invoke the language of “theory and practice” or the discourse of “theoretical practice,” which, rather, foresee these repetitions, like research scientists, ahead of time only as proof of the pre-given than as the repetition of the impossible, an impossible repetition. So it would be useless to unpack, as they say in academic circles, the assumptions of the thematic by which we were brought to the threshold of our discussions here, repetitively one by one, implicitly together. There is no time to unpack, not even to pack lightly: the rupture of the crisis allows us to escape only with the clothes on our back from the devastation of the categories of our disciplinary garrison.

Repetition—a repetition before the first time—does not belong to the temporal order of the present—or to representations of the present. The anachronicity of the rupturing crisis marks a before and an after only in the sense that time too is divisive, but not merely chronologically. It divides a text into a before and an after only to divert writing to a new path. This would be the case of my presentation. Responsibly intending, after participating in the Toronto curatorial roundtable of March 24, 2004, to address the issue of “curatorial practice” (a terminological redundancy I contested), I started a text I titled “What is this Thing that I Do?” At the point of picking up this text more than a year later, I found that, to be true to the writing I was now otherwise engaging, or to the writing that was engaging me, I must, as always, let curating answer to writing, let writing lead curating to where it might go—at least for me. Though OAAG generously entitled this session “Thinking Through Curating,” I find that I must take exception to myself (by a dissension that is only a divergence, by a departure that is no negation), that I must divest myself from what I possess as a responsibility to this writing, *my* writing

(though necessary to me then in an obligation to think through this discipline, yet written so long ago in 1991), that I must go to where another writing now takes me. (I see from the Abstracts that others, pursuing their own interests, already have departed from this set issue.)

So to repeat the Abstract, which is no abstract or prior outline but already finds itself placed here (in the past of its writing and the now of its performance), and so as well to contest myself through questions that I take as no offense because what is past is past, and I am beyond all that (in the sense that I am not obligated to my past writing): What would thinking through curating be that was not a thinking through to its end—or ends—as a “clear expression” of what its ends are? What if the thinking of curating was not responsible to clear expression of these ends—not responsible to “clear expression” or responsible to ends? To what, or to whom, would it be responsible? To what *time* would it be responsible in the time of *its* ir-responsibility, which may lead away from these ends? No negativity is implied in what is a departure to another response. What would curating be (or, more properly here, the *thinking* of curating) that took as its perverted “principle” deviance from its supposed ends, which no longer would be in clear sight? (I put “principle” in quotation marks because this *movement* is a passive surrender divesting itself of the clear pursuit of any ends.)

This thinking would not be, in *theory*, a representation that theory sets for itself as an end for curating. It would not be, in *practice*, an activity that realizes the idea that theory sets for “curatorial practice.” Curating would be no object of theory; curating could not theoretically define itself by identifying its “objects,” those that belong to it, inherent to its own field. These “objects,” of course, are not works of art but concepts, curatorial concepts, concepts curating has of itself, or gives to itself. Curating would be no “object” (no ob-ject) that speculation would throw ahead to catch up with again in a perfect symmetry of knowingness, where it would grasp what it had already put within easy reach, because the trajectory of its “identity” cannot be foreseen as a revelation of theory in practice; because the answer to its “identity” cannot be posed within the problematic of the question “what is” (What is curating?); because the divesting de-definition of curating’s identity would mean a dangerous dispossession of my own.

The answer to the question “what is curating?” was already there but not as a question we pose ourselves in the arrogance of our disciplinary address. Its formulation would be otherwise: no answer but rather response to a call. The call to which it responds has already been placed to curating. Would a theory of “curatorial practice” *see* what was before it if the call was a beckoning it cannot see, a beckoning to what it cannot see? Who or what would place a call to curating if theory were indisposed to, or if curating was pre-disposed not to answer to theory, if the place of call—the place of calling from (a place, however, that will not identify or define the practice of curating or localize its territory)—were no place but a time—but a spectral time, as well, that could not be localized? Would theory, in the insight of its speculation, respond to this call calling curating, calling but not *naming* it—at least not naming it a practice, a curatorial practice?

No call forward analogous to speculation; no return call; no call waiting. The call does not come from us. It does not belong to us: we belong to it. It calls us and calls curating into being along with us, although such belonging divergently together may take

place away—away *from* curating, as a way *to* curating, as a way *of* curating. Displaced and divergent for a time, we would only thus find ourselves as curators in the *time* of coming to this place, which would be no circular return of curating proper to its identity, no thing, nothing but this time. Certainly, we would be other there, otherwise there.

I would be on the path of curating where I claimed to lead others. Whether it would be a path *to* curating I would not yet know. Moreover, it would be for me alone. I could not claim already to be there at the end guiding others by the light of professional knowing and doing: in other words, through theory and practice. This path and process would be for me alone because I alone can surrender to this writing (a writing that I cannot claim for myself, though thankfully welcome, ghostwritten as it is through me), a writing, which through writing itself answers a call, a call beckoning me through it to an arrival I am oblivious and irresponsible to, a call I can only know as a writing that is this departure. All I can know, and comprehension is not the aim here, is that new “principles” must impose themselves through the rupture that this crisis exposes, as a following follow-through. Could we welcome such wounding in a sundering surrender of self to this exposure that divests us of all certitude, comprehension, and identity? Devastation’s divisions are no exposure of inside to out through a demarcating divide between the two—except that it exposes a wound (a wound not yet known to have been received). The spatial dislocations and temporal disjunctions of the devastating event disclose a path—or, rather, a departure in what only thus then becomes a path made by pursuing passively being led. The decisive wound is a divergence within a demarcation that opens us to another spatiality and temporality, a temporality that overcomes, or, rather, underwhelms spatiality. The always-diverging-demarcating path is temporal rather than spatial (it “marks” the duration of writing’s temporality). Yet, there is not *one* path. These paths disclose themselves in a play of language I sometimes gleefully but always curiously follow as it propels producing itself towards an unknown end; but, in its own disruptive time, there never is a destination to this writing, since writing folds over and erupts where I had already written “before.” The “principle” of this writing is a following along flowing in and as this diverging path: continually divergent-diverging in the repetition of its disrupting time that produces, becomes, issues as, or is this writing. This uncontrollable process was already announced in my title, dispatching it onwards, as a passive following of what calls and leads to what issues as this writing. Writing arrives before me; it arrives before my comprehension, taking me to what I may not have wanted to know but now need know what more there is to know following.

To say there is not one path is not to admit a different way for each of us who is other. There is nothing but divergent paths, together. Following all these very divergent paths at once and together (though they may unravel in time rather than space yet cleave to different time zones, so to speak, or expose themselves together non-contemporaneously) to where they lead would picture where these things as works of art belong together. Yet not in all this divergence senseless. How could one at the beginning have pictured this divergence? Would the application of theory be a guiding principle to this end? There, where we are, where we have been brought alone and together, *there*, at the end, would not be an art exhibition. I would not know what I already knew as a practicing curator, what I had already come to through “practice,” that which I have

articulated in the past as *my* practice: I would not simply know why these dissimilar objects and images now belong together here in what is similar within them. This would have rather been my curatorial process, which is one of thought and imagination before it is one of material placement. I would not know as a thinking towards objects and their placement in space in which they must be approached through no prior statement but in a movement through space becoming the narrative that their placement wordlessly together is. I would not know what I already knew of this subjective, durational process, of my own experience. In the end, if there is an end to what is only divergent, I would be brought to an understanding (an understanding, though, that risks devastation, particularly of categories, here of curating), I would be brought to an understanding but only through this process of writing I follow, of how the *disparate belong together*. This disparate belonging would be no *relation of objects*, no *relation of images*. *There* would be “where the disparate itself *holds together*.” Might I, thus, not be in a beyond of objects (a null space, voiding space), dangerous for a curator? *There* would be no objects, only the disparate. What could I practice of my profession there? This “beyond objects” would be no “conceptual” or “theoretical” curating—absolutely *not*.

Each of us can only pursue these paths in his or her own way, in our own time, when the wound and exposure of the event becomes a decision for us. I perform this risk of exposure now in front of you as one more (decisive) marking of time, but my exposure is only repetition of a risk I have already decided, though passively, to surrender to in my writing. My reward, a gift really, has been writing that creates itself in and as this disrupted time, as eruptive repetitions of haunting visitations. I have learned to welcome this unexpected haunting that teaches me otherwise than theory. I surrender and place my trust in what I follow leading me along to who knows where, or when, because I know leading is a guidance teaching me where the artwork takes me. The artwork leads me only through the resources of language addressed to looking at art, yet only away from its presence, when art is absent. Only after the fact of having sleepwalked through this writing do I realize the “principles” that therein become exposed in a welcome association of artwork and writing that opens to philosophy, though not derivative of it. This exposure belongs to the writing of art, art writing itself through language. Both art and writing are perpetually resistant to any application of theory prior to or outside this happening together.

The passive surrender to a thinking-writing that thinks and writes outside of me—outside of *my* self, of *my* identity: hence the professional risk I perform here—is a provisional abandonment into exile of another language, the language of another. This haunting of my writing by another language, though now my own, is my only means—toward no pre-established end—of learning. I realize that any “application” would be further ongoing departures; only after the fact do I “realize” that the “end” is only always another abandonment, divergent once more. Whether, when I return from wandering exile to the welcome of familiar habitation, I can then *apply* “what” I have learned, I do not yet know (though I doubt, as above): this wandering writing has not finished calling me. Whether here today it is of value to you, I cannot say, though it is necessary for me, and I cannot say otherwise. The other wise—those to whom I owe the impossible debt or gift of being haunted by their writing in this process, you will have recognized—have

informed me that this return will not be to where I came from.... Provisional is permanent: we are always in exile where we are at home.

If you will bear with me for a few more moments now that I have awoken from this somnambulist trance and can address what *I* have said here (yes, I take responsibility before you), in other words, to *speculate* and *derive* some conclusions from it, what would I derive—at least for *my* curating? What could I derive from my inability to conclude—not to reach an end where I am happily still going, *praise be*, not to conclude categorically, not to derive conclusions—but from my “not-being-able-to-conclude?” Could this non-conclusion beckoning nowhere possibly make me tremble to a repetition of the event in the abyss or aporia of *the* question I might face there? Would this writing, setting off happily irresponsibly, have led me to where I did not want to go, to what I did not want to face? Would this “beyond objects,” to which I had been guided in part by passively following an unconscious writing, which “appropriated” an unfamiliar (to me) ethical language that I then need respond to and read, bring me face-to-face to the responsibility of the face-to-face? Would I have arrived at *the welcome of the other*? Would I have arrived through this exile to where I belong, though still, forever, exiled? Would I have been guided to *my* responsibility for welcome, to my responsibility *for* the other, for a selfless welcome that is myself? I shudder to think what this means for me—or for curating.

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[A paper originally written for, but not delivered at, the Ontario Association of Art Galleries’ Unspoken Assumptions—Curators in Context, Banff, July 16, 2005.]