

## Melanie O'Brian

### Art Speaking: Towards an Understanding of the Language of Curating

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Good morning—I hope that's not too loud. I just wanted to say I feel very privileged to be here this weekend and also to be first this morning, so thanks for that. So, the title of my paper is “Art Speaking: Towards an Understanding of the Language of Curating”.

If art is considered a system, strategy, or activity of engagement, curating has become an increasingly integral part of the process. Traditionally, a curator has been defined as the custodian of a museum or other collection: essentially, a keeper of things. While a traditional curator maintains a collection of art, artifacts, or curios, by preserving a collection—preserving, exhibiting, and studying the objects therein—the contemporary curator need not work with a collection or objects at all and instead engages with the cultural meaning and production of art, often from a position of development shared with the artist.

In recent years, curating has been touted as a discipline in its own right, as demonstrated by the rising number of curatorial degree programs, which Jenifer pointed out last night, albeit one that varies widely, dependent on institutional, market, and intellectual affiliations. This has resulted in the appearance of the verb “curate”, where previously it existed only as a noun, “curator”, belying the growth of the discipline and a need to verbalize new strategies. The verb “curate” suggests a revisitation of the conception of what a curator does, a change from working at some remove from the processes of art production to becoming actively involved in its development. This shift in the definition and role of the curator can be seen as a response to the changing meaning and relevance of the art object over the last four decades.

Dematerialization prompted a redefinition of art to incorporate conceptual, processual, and performative strategies, among others. The language of curating is comparable to that of editing. The shared activities of selecting, assembling, arranging, and overseeing ideas bring the two roles into close alignment. As the

verb “curate” is a back-formation of the word “curator”, “edit” is an early back-formation of “editor”. As editors of ideas, curators bring forward art and cultural practices to make the ideas available to audiences, not only through exhibitions, but also through publications, talks such as these, websites, forums, and other events. The curator is arguably the filter through which the work becomes known. Obviously, there are other filters, and the work is translated through recontextualization, text, reproductions, etc.

So as a parallel example to our discussion here this weekend, I’m showing a work by Vancouver artist Jillian Pritchard. It’s entitled *Artist Statement*. It’s from 2005. She’s a young artist, and this will just run continuously while I talk. It’s actually, a three-hour DVD, and really it’s a monitor work which focuses on a computer screen at which the artist sits, working through a textual statement for several hours. Pritchard’s interest and text takes its cue from earlier conceptual practices to comment on the articulation and editing of visual processes. She’s a recent graduate from Emily Carr. This was her grad piece.

Finding the language to discuss a visual practice prompts a reinterpretation of art into text, something that is also increasingly being taught. Mary Kelly argues that “it is within the exhibition system that art is produced as text.” She notes that “an exhibition is a discursive practice involving the selection, organization and evaluation of artistic texts that are ultimately preserved in exhibition catalogues.” In the exhibition’s system of meanings, Kelly states that “the catalogue assumes greater importance than the exhibition in that the catalogue’s longevity and possession of images is the predominate form of information dissemination.”

Implicit in the making of exhibitions, and thus in curatorial language, is this act of “filtering”. The power of selection, i.e., “The curator curated the artist”, functions in direct relationship to the economy or system of the art world—and this is again arguable, i.e., “the powerful curator curates the powerful artist”.

Of recent, there has been a curatorial usurpation of attention from artists in a star system. Asking the question of whether or not curatorial practice is contingent on the artists involved reveals an institutional shift where artists can be replaced by

concepts that might approach global and political issues, yet can exist outside the art practices they are using as reference points. A prime example of this might be Bruce Mau's *Massive Change*, which was recently at the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario. As curators become more participatory in the production of art, the curators' relationship to artists, art works, exhibitions, texts, education, the market, and institutions becomes increasingly complex.

The change in the language around curating remarks on the economies at work in contemporary art, whether global, institutional, or market. It might be assumed that, as art practices expand, curating expands to accommodate or reflect them. The recent discussions around the professionalization of contemporary art and the collapsing definitions of "curator" into "artist", and vice versa, reveal art and curatorial practices to be ever-evolving as boundaries are elided. It is, perhaps, the shifting landscape around artists and curators that give rise to new debates on curatorial roles. These power shifts demand consistent relational consideration, as well as an examination of the shifting territories of language.

First I want to consider the changing institutional landscape and the curator's role in it. As previously mentioned, the curator's role has a great deal to do with affiliation and responsibilities to various organizations. Despite this symposium's attempt to address a wider language around curating, in fact, the challenges of defining this plurality must be acknowledged. In a moment where art fairs such as Basel are aspiring to biennale status, and biennials such as Venice are looking more and more like art fairs, a reconsideration of the categories of the institute must be undertaken, and a consideration of specificity of a singular reading encouraged.

Commercial galleries are more often undertaking risky performative endeavours. For example, Geoffrey Farmer's performative and durational works at Catriona Jeffries Gallery used its site as the medium—used the gallery site. Museums and large public galleries are now supporting laboratory practices. The Vancouver Art Gallery has a Next programme, in which new works are commissioned and the space of the museum is reconsidered and challenged. Artist-run centres do continue to support artists and new practices but are also institutionalizing with increasing bureaucracy. If, as I suggest, curatorial roles are dependent on context, those

contexts are continually shifting in the commercial realm, in the large public institution, in the small non-profit organization, and for independent curators, which I won't talk so much about, because I know less about.

Ultimately, at every institution, the affiliated curator must accommodate a mandate. The languages of those mandates affect the language of the specific curatorial gestures and strategies. Is the goal to sell work? Build a collection? Support artistic practices?

Curating at a commercial gallery is full of possibility and problems. Possibility, in that the gallerist could be open to any myriad of projects; problems, in that the gallery is a business and, potentially, sales drive the selection. The first show I ever curated was by default with artist Kyla Mallett at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, where we both worked. The show was entitled *Self Conscious* and included both gallery artists and those not yet part of the gallery: Geoffrey Farmer, Germaine Koh, Damian Moppett, and Kelly Wood. The show, in fact, was not as much a curatorial endeavour, although we might have thought it was, and although it was accompanied by an essay by us "curators", rather than expanding of Catriona's roster of artists, how in fact did our curation differ from Catriona's selection? Here at the commercial gallery, the goal of the curated exhibitions is cultural capital to assist with the elevation and sale of artworks.

At large institutions, such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, curating certainly involves acquisitions, borrowing works, and, more recently, the development of new work. It is the latter that aligns these institutions more closely with the laboratory spirit of artist-run centres. While at the VAG, I was able to commission and exhibit a major new work for the gallery by an emerging Vancouver artist, Robert Arndt. I might argue that the autonomy of choice here is more often subject to the goals of the institution, and that this laboratory risk is calculated and small by comparison to other types of institutions.

At artist-run centres, the goal is to support artists and their practices, albeit on small budgets. The fiscal restrictions encourage different kinds of projects, but also demand much of the energy of the directing curatorial staff in fundraising and

grants. At Artspeak, my main task is to support the development of Vancouver visual and writing practices by showing that work, bringing in significant practices that speak to those in Vancouver, and publishing books that expand the notion of these practices. Here, the development of practice is far more accessible and expected of me; I have autonomy, as far as mandate and funding bodies allow. The critical engagement at Artspeak is higher, perhaps, than at other institutions I have worked at, but arguably has less impact due to its limited audience.

The notion of “impact” is important to raise for this discussion, given that the relationships the curator has with the wide community also affects their role—and I know that there’ll certainly be people addressing audience in particular. An in-exhaustive list of the relationships and responsibilities that curators have are to the following: artists, audiences, institutions, funders, collectors, dealers, writers, press, publishers, technicians, photographers, editors, and other curators.

Further to this, it should be pointed out that curating is a social as well as an intellectual and aesthetic endeavour. Like Mary Kelly’s proposition that the exhibition and catalogue function together as a necessary diatext, recent relational consideration makes note of the requirement of two. Artist Colleen Brown writes, “By requiring two, relation has been inserted into both how we come to know the world and also the nature of the world itself. The social aspect of curating brings us back to language and communication.”

Language is a social convention in that it originates and exists in a social context. The meaning of words is determined by their use in language, and thus words constantly shift in meaning. The Wittgensteinian theory of language is that it is practical; language is inherently public, as its practical goal is communication. Wittgenstein argues that language’s expressions do not have a common essence but are a complex network of relations in which similarities, like family resemblances, allow users to traverse the network and see connections without words and objects always corresponding.

How does the language of curating accommodate artists? If the curator’s role is to research and present artistic practices, there is a tension that resides in how

much authority the curator has in making the work. As works are less and less autonomous in a Greenbergian sense, and come to rely more on their context and, specifically of recent, their social relations, the curator and their institution can claim more handiwork in the making of art. In a perceived professionalization of the institute of art, the economy of curating—i.e., curating’s system or condition, its concerns and resources—is worthy of examination. Its language reveals power structures and products. Capitalism, the market, tourism, and cultural consumption are ubiquitously seen in the biennial and art fairs, and are increasingly forces that need to be recognized and addressed in other institutional arenas. In curating’s varied system—and ergo, art’s system—one might want to return to the specific to avoid devolving into generalities.

Such an investigation is part of an editorial project that I’m working on, one that often feels much like a curatorial project. I’m editing a critical anthology entitled *Vancouver Art and Economies*, that is a forum for critical dialogue on Vancouver’s contemporary art practices in the face of globalization and our remarkable recent history. The book is comprised of nine writers, academics, curators, and artists that will consider art in Vancouver over the last decade and a half, remarking in particular on the economies at work, whether global, institutional, or market. Addressing a perceived professionalization of the institute of art, the anthology will collectively consider Vancouver’s position within local, national, and international art economies. While it can be seen as a trope of contemporary practice to approach the mechanics of cultural production, many Vancouver artists and thinkers are investigating the complex web of authorial power and visual arts processes...

I’m losing my spot... [laughs]

...visual arts processes, roles, and spaces. Speaking to the systems of cultural authoring, much of the work coming out of Vancouver are “meta-pictures”, a term that refers to pictures as theory, second-order considerations of the practice of making pictorial representations.

Considering that all art is infested by other art, these artists build on this contamination to acknowledge and disclose an economy of production. The shifting

roles of artist, curator, critic, dealer, educator, and collector, together with the meaning and structure of the exhibition, have occupied a great deal of space in recent dialogue. Whether seen as a crisis or an opportunity, the professionalization of the institute of art is a rich platform for approaching recent practices. In thinking about professionalization, one might ask why we are attempting to define curating as a practice. An unspoken assumption of curating is that curators have power in the language of choice that is both subjective and responsible to an institutional economy, with its own tentacular relationships.

This language will continually change and evolve. What we conclude today, and this weekend, will shift, given another context and time. In understanding language as practical communication, a definition of curatorial practice will engage with the conditions of its own making.

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