



Other than Whom?

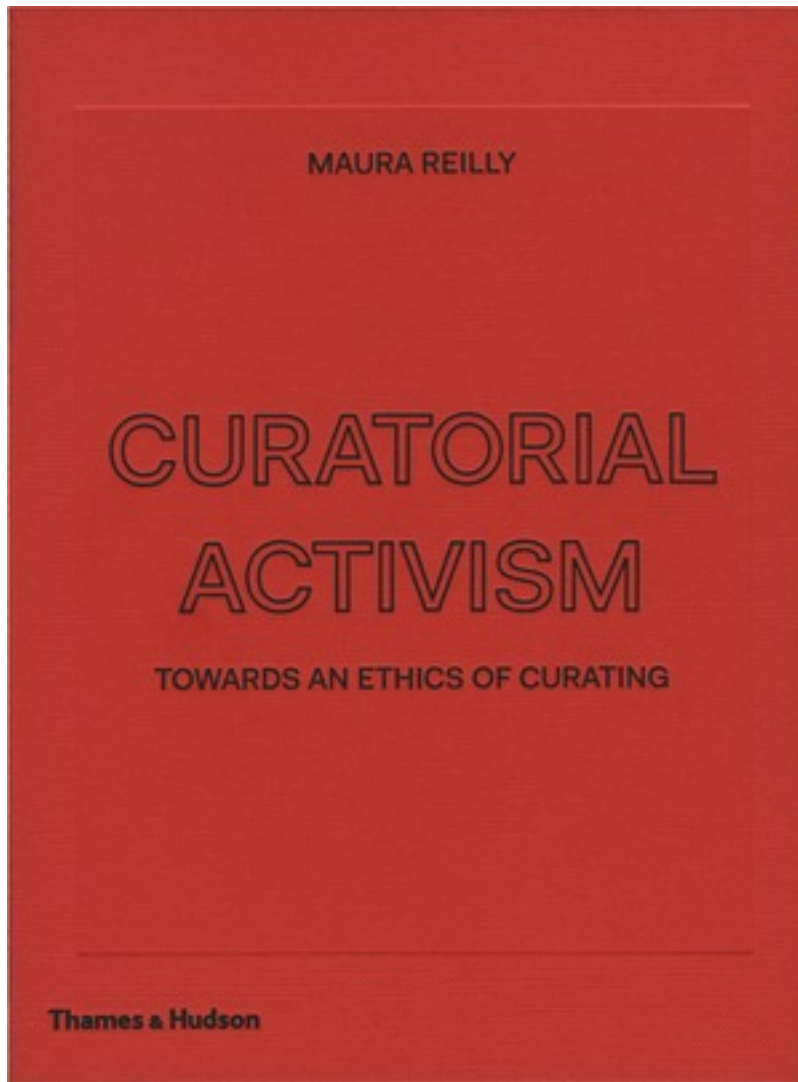
“There is no curatorial passivism, any more than there is a passivist war.” Michal B. Ron reviews Maura Reilly’s book *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* and adds a note about the heroless politeness of the recent Berlin Biennial.

Critique / Michal B. Ron January 20, 2019

Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, Thames & Hudson, 2018. 240 pages.

The title of Maura Reilly’s book, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, is misleading. “Curatorial Inclusiveness: Towards Equality in Curating”, would be a more accurate title, if I may suggest so. The book lists exhibitions from almost four decades: from “Women Artists: 1550-1950” (curated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976)¹ to “Venice Biennale 2015: All the World’s Futures” (curated by Okwui Enwezor, 2015) and “Art Aids America” (curated by Jonathan Katz and Rock Hushka, Tacoma Art Museum, 2015-2016).² All of these have promoted marginalized artists systematically neglected by established institutions on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Curatorial Activism.jpeg



[1]

Front cover of Maura Reilly's *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, Thames & Hudson, 2018.

Reilly, the founding curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and founding member of [The Feminist Art Project](#) [2] (TFAP)[3](#), reveals statistics that expose the outrageous extent of favouring white Euro-American heterosexual men over artists “who are women, of color, and LGBTQ” (17). She shows that “despite decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorizing, the art world continues to exclude ‘Other’ artists” (17). It is undoubtedly valuable to highlight exhibitions that defy the discriminating status quo, and to chronicle past projects that may offer a point of reference for new endeavors, but unfortunately, the book suffers from irritating vagueness in its articulations, as well as in its arguments. Judging the book by its quality, however, falls into a trap its author is setting: Reilly encourages readers who identify with her cause to dismiss negative criticism to the highlighted exhibitions as camouflaging “masculinism and sexism,” “white privilege and western-centrism,” and “heterocentrism and lesbo-homophobia” (to quote from the section titles) that may be lurking behind the undefined term “quality.”

[Women_Artists_1550-1950,_Installed_at_the_Brooklyn_Museum_October](#)



[1, 1977 through November 27, 1977_03.jpg](#) [3]



[4]

[Installation view](#) [5], [Women Artists 1550-1950, the Brooklyn Museum, October 1, 1977 - November 27, 1977](#)

[5]Curators: Dr. Ann Sutherland Harris, Dr. Linda Nochlin

[Women Artists 1550-1950, Installed at the Brooklyn Museum October 1, 1977 through November 27, 1977_0.jpg](#) [6]



[7]

[Installation view, Women Artists 1550-1950, the Brooklyn Museum, October 1, 1977 - November 27, 1977](#) [8]

Curators: Dr. Ann Sutherland Harris, Dr. Linda Nochlin

The book's argumentative weakness begins at its title. Throughout its pages, the author contrasts "curatorial activism" with "mainstream" curatorship. In this dichotomy, the former stands for being "consistently counter-hegemonic" (21), and the latter for everything else. Yet, conservative curators, too, actively confirm and promote an agenda: institutional, political, aesthetic, hierarchical, elitist, hegemonic. There is no curatorial passivism, any more than there is a passivist war.⁴ An extreme example that comes to mind is the Nazi propaganda exhibition of "degenerate art" (1938), which put artworks on display to mock them as products of the condemned artists' allegedly sick minds and distorted natures.

Approaching Reilly's book, I expected more from the term "curatorial activism" than a demand to accumulate higher rates of "Others" within the existing power structures. I was thinking of the renowned Swiss curator Harald Szeemann and the way he revolutionized the understanding of the role and possibilities of the curator and the exhibition, in Documenta V (1972), for example, which he titled "[Questioning Reality - Pictorial Worlds Today](#) [9]." Incorporating artworks with images of popular culture, he orchestrated a groundbreaking event that politicized the artfield against *l'art pour l'art* ethics, for the first time in Documenta's history. Forty years later, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's [DOCUMENTA 13](#) [10] (2012) stimulated an active spectatorship, by triggering relations not only between artworks, but between humans, animals, plants, and minerals, thereby challenging



anthropocentrism. Bearing these examples in mind (which the book doesn't handle), I was eager to learn about further ways to subvert oppressing distinctions. "An Ethics of Curating" could offer a critique that analyzes what a curator obeys and whom does she serve when she creates an exhibition.

[PenoneKasseld13.JPG](#) **[11]**



[12]

[Giuseppe Penone, Idee di Pietra, documenta 13 \(2012\), Karlsaue, Kassel, Germany](#) [13]

But this book, in general, falls short in deep analysis. It offers poor descriptions of the featured exhibitions, in which the author mainly cites curatorial intentions as they appear in catalog texts. The



107 illustration, sometimes of key artworks, sometimes exhibition views, do not always help in getting a good grasp of the shows. The handling of the exhibitions' reception is limited to quoting critics, in such a manner that leads the readers to assume that the negative tones are just a choir of "mainstream" voices to be ignored. The book ends with Reilly's "Call to Arms: Strategies for Change," which pretends to be a manifesto but is actually a list of demands: among them, that gallerists and collectors rethink the criteria upon which they invest in artists, and promote more "Others" (219). To lead the argument ad absurdum would be to demand to find larger numbers of non-heterosexual-white-men among the richest, for a better, more correct, and, and more equal world.

Perhaps the book's main flaw lies precisely in relying on a given concept of "Others." Other than whom? Reilly writes from an American perspective, and presents western institutions as central global platforms, which must therefore have more inclusive programs. Shouldn't activism put this centrality in doubt? Moreover, Reilly focuses on women, non-western and LGBTQ artists. What about other "Others"? Disabled, children, animals, autodidacts, whom hegemonic systems conventionally ignore?

Despite these shortcomings, the author succeeds in bringing the reader closer to some of her examples. One such example is "Women Artists: 1550-1950 (1976-1977)," curated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, which consisted solely of works by women (42-7). Those have waited in museums' storage for the moment when the paradigms changed, finally getting the attention they had received at the time of their making, and being stashed away later, only because a woman's signature decorated them.

[Women Artists 1550-1950, sound clip \(40:51 min\), Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) [14]

Another exhibition, "Magiciens de la Terre" (Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande halle de la Villette), curated by Jean-Hubert Martin in 1989, decentralized western artworks by showing them next to art from other parts of the globe (106-11). On that ground it was also criticized, for example regarding the display of Richard Long's *Red Earth Circle* next to *Yam Dreaming* by Yuendumu Community, which highlighted Long's work on the wall at the expense of the Yuendumu work that laid on the floor. I suggest looking at this the other way around, though, as evidence of the self-centralizing attitude of people of the West.

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[16]Salle de l'exposition documentaire dans la galerie du musée, Magiciens de la Terre (1989)

Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande halle de la Villette. Photo: [Jean-Pierre Dalbéra](#) [17]

["mining the museum" / revisited / after twenty / baltimore / 2013 / part 2](#) [18]

Video of "mining the museum" / revisited / after twenty / baltimore / 2013 / part 2
التنقيب عن ثروات المتحف بعد عشرين عاما، فرد ويلسون، ليسا كورين، 22.5.2013، بولتيمور

"[Mining the Museum](#) [19]" (The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, 1992-1993), a project by Fred Wilson, is an artistic intervention rather than a curated group exhibition, in which the artist-curator reorganized the collection of the Maryland Historical Society in a way that targeted the black and native American history that artefacts from the collection attested to (118-23).⁵ "Art Aids America" (2015-2017), curated by Jonathan Katz and Rock Hushka, is the project concluding the book, and is another exhibition one could wish to have witnessed. It places the AIDS epidemic on the stage instead of in the shadows - AIDS as a cultural agent (208-13). Douglas Crimp comes to mind here, talking about using the characteristics of the gay community in order to fight AIDS: sharing



information with multiple partners could help stop the spread of the disease.⁶

A final thought: in this book, the curator stands as an institutional actor, of whom the author expects to make better use of her position as gatekeeper.⁷ The question of inclusion becomes a question of hospitality – whom does the institution invite to enter through its doors.⁸ This was now evident in the 10th Berlin Biennial, “[W \[20\]e Don’t Need Another Hero \[20\]”](#), curated by Gabi Ngcobo. The exhibition could have easily entered Reilly’s book, showing a majority of women and non-Euro-American artists. And yet, Ngcobo’s show could be summed up as a polite reply to a host’s invitation. The curator declaratively refused to impose a new narrative with new heroes. The old order remains: heroes hide in selection committees, among those who cast cultural actors. What heroism could we expect from selected artists, curators, or activists, besides cooperation?⁹

- ¹. The exhibition traveled to the University Art Museum in Austin, Texas, then to the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and finally to the Brooklyn Museum in New York.
- ². The exhibition was also shown in multiple locations throughout the USA between 2015 and 2017: the Bronx Museum of Arts, New York, the Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, Georgia, and Alphawood Gallery, Chicago.
- ³. Together with Linda Nochlin, Reilly curated the exhibition “Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art” (Elizabeth A. Sackler for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York, and the Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, 2007), which appears in the feminist section of the book, pp. 74-79.
- ⁴. Paraphrasing Marcel Broodthaers’ remark on the term “experimental” regarding films: “I hardly like the word experimental, no more than I like the word hard. To be defined as an experimental film? As far as I know, no one could imagine an experimental war.” Gloria Moure, *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), p. 180.
- ⁵. Kent Monkman’s intervention recalls Wilson’s strategy. See [Liora Belford, “Relinquishing Freedom \(Willingly\) to the White Man,” TOHU Magazine \(30. May 2018 \[21\]\)](#).
- ⁶. Douglas Crimp in a symposium celebrating his 70th birthday at Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art, Berlin, August 29, 2014.
- ⁷. In her forward to the book, Lucy R. Lippard emphasizes the possibilities to act from outside the institutions, which eventually invite such activist ventures in.
- ⁸. On the aporia of hospitality see, of course, Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (Stanford University Press, 2000). Derrida shows that hospitality is based on sovereignty and power, on imposing the law and setting a border. He points out the paradox, for example of: “I want to be master at home [...] to be able to receive whomever I like there”, p. 53.
- ⁹. For a bored response to the 10th Berlin Biennale, read, for example, [An Paenhuysen \[22\]](#).

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- [5] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Women_Artists_1550-1950,_Installed_at_the_Brooklyn_Museum_October_1,_1977_through_November_27,_1977_03.jpg
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- [8] https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/Women_Artists_1550-1950%2C_Installed_at_the_Brooklyn_Museum_October_1%2C_1977_through_November_27%2C_1977_05.jpg
- [9] <https://www.documenta-archiv.de/en/documenta/112/5>
- [10] https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_13



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- [19] <http://www.mdhs.org/underbelly/2013/10/10/return-of-the-whipping-post-mining-the-museum/>
- [20] <http://bb10.berlinbiennale.de/>
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