



In Search of Critical Curating

In light of the recent criticism of documenta 14 and the Venice Biennial, Noah Simblist returns to the book/magazine issue "Curating Critique," to comment on whether and where curating and criticality might meet today.

Review / Noah Simblist August 31, 2017

Marianne Eigenheer, Barnaby Drabble, Dorothee Richter (eds.), *Curating Critique*, Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007, reissued as *On-Curating 9*, 2011.

What is critique? What is its object and how is it deployed, especially in relation to curatorial practice? For those who are familiar with the theoretical and critical discourses that have permeated curatorial texts over the last twenty years, the notion of criticality is paramount. It's so common that it's often unexamined. Some find this discourse comforting, like code words that signal belonging to a community of common ideals. While others find criticality to be filled with a kind of cloying myopia that is more about posturing than politics.

As I write this, a number of essays and reviews about the most recent editions of documenta and the Venice Biennale have emerged and it is clear that the relationship between curatorial practice and critique is fraught and unresolved. Many found documenta 14's political posturing to be empty and even reifying the very power imbalance between Germany and Greece that it had sought to challenge.

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CURA- TING CRI- TIQUE:

[1]Front cover, Curating Critique, Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007, reissued as On-Curating 9, 2011.

[Curating Critique](#) [2] is a collection of essays first published in 2007, reissued in 2011 as an issue of [On-curating journal](#) [3] that addresses the confluence of curating and criticality. Edited by [Marianne Eigenheer](#) [4], it was originally conceived of by [Barnaby Drabble](#) [5] and [Dorothee Richter](#) [6]. In the introduction to the volume, Richter and Drabble cite [Irit Rogoff](#) [7]’s [definition of critique](#) [8]:



“rethinking a structure” – rethinking the relationships between artist, curator, exhibition, and public – as a starting point to define the goals of the volume. Citing Louis Althusser, they also ask how exhibitions can constitute the visitor subject. This point gets at one issue that many essays in *Curating Critique* circle around. That is, how exhibitions address problematics within society and, more pointedly, within the institutions in which exhibitions are staged.

Institutional Attitudes, Irit Rogoff: On Being Serious in the Art World

Dorothee Richter touches on the fact that museums and curatorial practice emerged at the same time as the modernist ideals of the public sphere. For example, in the wake of the French Revolution, the Louvre palace, which served the aristocracy, was turned into a museum for the people. This shift in address was a critique of not only a political system but also the context in which art was made and displayed. The invention of the museum was a rethinking of the very structures in which art was experienced. But, as we know, the emergence of democracy and the museum wasn't free of the machinations of power. Aristocracy was soon replaced by capitalism and the nation state. The commodification of artworks and the institutionalization of museums led artists to critique these new structures. In the twentieth century, the history of museums, the curators that work in them, and the artists who produce work for their exhibitions have led to a series of critical gestures from the avant garde, to the neo-avant garde, and to institutional critique. The only thing that proved to be as resilient as power was the various forms of critique that had appeared again and again to challenge it.

Curating Critique was written in the context of the twenty-first century, a time in which Andrea Fraser, one of the central artists of institutional critique, declared that [l'1%, c'est moi](#) [9]. In that essay, Fraser acknowledged the ways in which artworks that are critical of institutions can easily be co-opted by the very forces that they meant to critique. Similarly, in an interview in *Curating Critique*, [Maria Lind](#) [10] worries that the radical strategies of institutions like the [Moderna Museet](#) [11] or [Kunstverein Munich](#) [12] under her leadership, or that of curators like [Charles Esche](#) [13], cannot be sustained in an environment of political and economic forces that resist radicality. This is because there are structures greater than the institution that normalize radical practices by softening their critical edge. This point was also made by [Ute Meta Bauer](#) [14] in an interview with [Marius Babias](#) [15]. She notes that critical practices can be instrumentalized by anyone, including the Israeli military, as analyzed by [Eyal Weizman](#) [16], who showed that contemporary spatial discourses have been used to further the occupation of Palestine.

Andrea Fraser, L'1%, c'est moi. MACBA: The Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art.

In [Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt](#) [17]'s contribution to *Curating Critique*, “False Economies – Time to Take Stock,” she asks: “What do we mean by critique? Is it to effect change or raise awareness?” With this question, she addresses a key issue with curatorial practice that engages in political critique. She notes that many of the projects by artists connected to Relational Aesthetics produced situations that represented social phenomena, but never really addressed the relationship between these practices and the art market. She then notes that to address a major issue in representations of sociality, notably income inequality, we must first address the problems that exist within the art world. She explains that in Scotland the majority of arts funding goes to institutions and not artists, and cites statistics that show that most artists are unable to live off of their work. She looks at [a program organized by Maria Lind](#) [18] at the Kunstverein Munich, which looked at self-organized artist groups as a method to effect some form of change to the income inequalities that exist within the economics of the art world.



While this is an accomplished set of writers, held together in an interesting volume, one thing that I found missing from *Curating Critique* was a sustained analysis of examples of artist projects that take on the issue of effecting real change and move beyond representations of social ills to raise awareness. While [Carey Young's Viral Marketing](#) [19] at the Kunstverein Munich or [Martha Rosler's If You Lived Here](#) [20] at the DIA Art Foundation were mentioned, other examples that weren't mentioned that I believe shift more fully from representation to the real include the [Mejor Vida Corp. by Minerva Cuevas](#) [21], which distributes products and services for free. Another is [Project Row Houses by Rick Lowe](#) [22], which organizes free and subsidized housing, education, and community services. A greater engagement with projects like these would have help ground the discussion of the differences between effecting change and raising awareness.

[The+Revolution+is+Us+-+Carey+Young.jpg](#) [23]



[24] Carey Young, *The Revolution is Us!*, 2004
Looped digital animation

© Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Another issue with *Curating Critique* is the lack of a sustained attempt to define critique. In “Merz-Thinking – Sounding the Documenta Process Between Critique and Spectacle,” [Sarat Maharaj](#) [25] attempts to define critique in relation to spectacle. He defines spectacle as a mindless retinal experience of the senses, while critique is a form of rigorous discursive analysis. In [Oliver Marchat](#) [26]’s “The Curatorial Function – Organizing the Ex/position” he argues that the critique enters the curatorial practice once the exhibition becomes a politicized public sphere. But neither of these definitions goes into the implied relationship between critique and judgement.

In her essay, “[What is Critique](#) [27],” Judith Butler notes “an interesting parallel between what Raymond Williams and Theodor Adorno, in different ways, sought to accomplish under the name of ‘criticism’ and what Foucault sought to understand by ‘critique.’”¹ Williams says that critique should not merely involve fault finding or judgement of the object of critique, but rather should be a practice that suspends judgement and replaces it with a new system of values. Adorno takes this sentiment one step further, saying that the danger of critics who use critique as a form of judgement is that they separate themselves and do not acknowledge their complicity in the very object of critique. Foucault builds on this by saying that critique is not one thing but is heteronomous – it is subject to a



wide range of definitions, including the very framework in which it operates. For instance, if one engages in the critique of a social condition, the critique necessarily is defined by the object of the critique, the subject that makes that critique, and the framework through which the critique is enacted. Butler describes Foucault's view of critique as one that resists obedience to governmental or ecclesiastic authority but still seeks virtue. Butler understands this definition of critique as one that exposes illegitimate authority. But then, she asks, how can critique use a new set of paradigms for virtue without risking the same kinds of hegemony that it sought to resist?

If we return to some of the criticisms of the most recent documenta exhibition, such as those made by [JJ Charlesworth](#) [28], [Liana Fokianaki and Yanis Varoufakis](#) [29], or [Susanne von Falkenhausen](#) [30], we can see these issues playing out. Its curator, Adam Szymczyk, sought to critique the top-down relationship between Germany and Greece by displacing an exhibition from one country to the other. But he has been accused of reproducing the very systems of oppression that he had sought to attack through this displacement. Thus we can see that the issues discussed in *Curating Critique* are still relevant but could use some more rigorous work to define their terms. This would not merely be a theoretical exercise, but rather would have illuminated the very real formations of critique in curatorial practice.

- [1.](#) Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," 2001, in: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en> [27] (accessed 20.8.2017).

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