Imagining Curatorial Practice after 1972

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If, as the editors of this volume encourage us to do, we are to conceive of a curating after the global, much rests on the ambiguity of that ‘after’; an ambiguity that is only emphasized when they propose that we read this to mean “after the historical emergence and possible demise of a particular globalism”\(^1\). Hence, if this “particular globalism” remains tied to what we, for want of a better phrase, might call “global capitalism,” several possibilities suggest themselves: that we understand contemporary curating as emerging in the wake of this process of globalization; that we speculate on what it might become after its demise; or, finally and most tantalizingly, that we propose a curatorial practice concerned with the task of bringing about such a demise.

The first of these possibilities seems fairly uncontroversial. As Paul O’Neill has suggested elsewhere, curatorial practice today can be understood as a “recently formed field of activities that is fundamentally different from earlier historical forms of curatorship,”\(^2\) we could add that the moment of its formation coincides neatly with that of the global expansion of capitalism on whose networks and infrastructures it has come increasingly to depend.\(^2\) This already suggests that the idea of a curatorial practice whose task it is to bring about the demise of this globalism must remain, for the time being at least, prescriptive rather than descriptive. Despite the committed political efforts of some curators and the often inflated rhetoric of curatorial self-deﬁnitions, there is little to indicate that such a task is currently underway. I would like to propose, however, that some of the insights that those “earlier historical forms of curatorship” produced in the wake of 1968—when the need to speculate on what curatorial practice should become after the demise of capitalism might have felt like a pressing concern—can still serve us today. The 1972 of my title, however, does not aim to assert a singular point of origin, but a bifurcation, one that can be traced through the legacies of...

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two contemporaneous events: documenta 5 in Kassel and the ICOM Roundtable of Santiago de Chile. The intent is not to advocate the nostalgic recovery of an unrealized past political project under radically transformed historical circumstances, but to unset a dominant genealogy of contemporary curatorial practice and discourse by highlighting the former event and obscuring the latter has served to foreclose its political potential.

The year 1972 was, indeed, the year of documenta 5, an event whose own mythology seems to have grown in step with the role it served to cement. Even if documenta 5 was a more collaborative affair than its public presentation might have allowed for, it was Harald Szeemann’s careful choreographing of the exhibition as a personal oeuvre, his staging of curating as an “individual methodology,” that is routinely taken as inaugural for a new model of the curator as both auteur and entrepreneur that has come to define the new practice. The extent to which Szeemann’s authorial persona served to blur the boundaries between artists and curators continues to be the subject of much debate, but it is hard not to read the flurry of indignation that this provoked among artists at the time as a disavowed attachment to a division of artistic labor that already at that point had become residual. What is striking is not that the exhibition should have become an artistic medium at a time when anything and everything could claim the name of art; what is striking is the kind of artist that Szeemann saw fit to revive. The figure of the curator as romantic artist possessed of individual Geist rather than scholarly or technical knowledge was in many ways a throwback to the nineteenth century, but would come to inform the curriculum of curatorial courses, shaping subsequent generations of contemporary art curators.

Writing in 1990, just as the first accredited courses in contemporary art curating were getting underway in Europe, French sociologists Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollack described how the role of the traditional museum curator involved a paradoxical professional remit, brought into sharp relief with the purchasing of contemporary art, when the expectation to acquire works “as yet uncertified by art history,” relying on highly subjective inclinations was supposed to coincide with wider “collective values.” The only way to minimize the risks inherent in this impossible task was an “erosion of the person in the post” by establishing clearly defined procedures, protocols and deontological codes. The curator in this guise resembled Max Weber’s functionary and Talcott Parsons’s professional.

With the emergence of the new curator Heinich and Pollack detect a process of “de-professionalization.” As art curators began to refuse—as artists had already done—the idea that their work was bound by professional rules or wider collectivist values, they moved away from the ideal type of the curator as functionary/professional, and toward the curator as auteur. A move that was accompanied by a shift in emphasis from preservation, purchasing and research, and toward public presentation and display, which had traditionally been considered the less risk-prone, and, consequently, the less institutionally relevant aspects of the job. Heinich and Pollack found in the new curator a “singular figure” who was “as irreducible to the notion of the post (it is not the institution that defines the ‘author’—and as it happens the latter is so defined in opposition to the former) as it is to that of function (to the extent that the mere accomplishment of a task does not make an author, rather it is the singularity of an author’s production that does so).”


6 To wit, Szeemann’s highly idiosyncratic curatorial strategy resulted in a number of artists—notably Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Fred Sandback and Robert Smithson—refusing to participate in documenta; and others, like Sol LeWitt, Hans Haacke or Daniel Buren expressing their disagreement with Szeemann’s approach.


9 Ibid., p. 254.

10 Ibid., p. 257.
The new curator in this guise could then be understood as a politically progressive force, vis-à-vis the intrinsically conservative role of the traditional curator—the unfortunately named conservateur in French. This is a narrative that has been reproduced countless times: contemporary art curating as the fulfilment of a critical demand posed to the museum, as initiated by artists themselves through waves of institutional critique. But this was to happen, peculiarly enough, by a substantial narrowing of the curators’ field of operations, which now restricted itself to the exhibition. A move that allowed for the normalization of the figure of the itinerant, externalized art curator, who no longer had to speak in the name of the institution or to nationally held ‘collective values’, but in the precise manner of a modern(ist) artist, deployed their individual voice to address the world at large.

Indeed, for Heinich and Pollack it is the exhibition that provides curators with “an autonomous area... [where] the curator can permit him or herself things that would be impossible in a museum,” where subjective input might not only be allowed, but actively promoted. Nearly two decades later, Jens Hoffmann would echo this narrative: “curators began to emancipate themselves from being purely the custodians of the museum collections or the administrative organizers of exhibitions. Curators began to articulate a particular form of subjective creativity and to acquire unprecedented power, and over the last decades, we have seen a large diversity of curatorial approaches that have made this emancipation possible.”

What I take to be decisive about these statements is the idea of curators gaining their autonomy by escaping the institution, a scaled-down version of Greenbergian autonomy. Paradoxically, this idea continued to be productive as the exhibition was (rightly) decentered from the curators’ work in the name of the institution, during that brief episode that has come to be known as New Institutionalism. If the emphasis was placed on research and dissemination, the exhibition as the fulcrum of Western philosophy was reclaimed here, with the materiality of the exhibition putatively serving to ward off the threat of abstraction. This had already been anticipated by Szeemann’s model of the peripatetic curator as providing spiritual or intellectual ‘guest work’ to the art institution. As courses that specialized in art curating became normalized from the late 1980s/early 1990s, core components of previous courses in Museum Studies—including those that dealt with museum administration, education, communication or conservation—were gradually (or drastically) shed, and a broad component of ‘theory’, not a theory of anything in particular, certainly not a theory of curating, came to take their place.

The enduring currency enjoyed by the notion of ‘the curatorial’ attests to this. Broadly, ‘the curatorial’ is posited as an open-ended, theoretical drive, against the end-product oriented practice of ‘curating’ exhibitions. The “philosophy of the curatorial” as advanced by Jean-Paul Martinon has probably gone further than most in asserting this split. ‘The curatorial,’ we are told is:

... a jailbreak form pre-existing frames, a gift enabling one to see the world differently, a strategy for inventing new points of departure, a practice of creating allegiances against social ills, a way of caring for

12 Hoffmann, op. cit., p. 524. emphasis added.
14 In this way, for example, Maria Lind would write in 2000 that “an exhibition is just one way among many of working with and letting art exist,” while, somewhat prematurely, Alex Farquharson announced in 2006 “the end of the exhibition’s hegemony within the multifunctional institution”; see Maria Lind, “Learning from art and artists,” in Curating in the 21st Century, edited by Gavin Wade (Walsall: Walsall Art Gallery, 2000) p. 88; and Alex Farquharson, “Bureau de change,” Prieur, No. 101, September 2006.
humanity, a process of renewing one’s own subjectivity, a tactical move for reinventing life, a sensual practice of creating signification, a political tool outside of politics, a procedure to maintain a community together, a conspiracy against policies, the act of keeping a question alive, the energy of retaining a sense of fun, the device that helps to revisit history, the measures to create affects, the work of revealing ghosts, a plan to remain out-of-joint with time, an evolving method of keeping bodies and objects together, a sharing of understanding, an invitation for reflexivity, a choreographic mode of operation, a way of fighting against corporate culture, etc.18

These are hyperbolic claims that hint at a political import, but were always meant to remain untested in practice. ‘The curatorial,’ after all, is not curating. As a theoretical practice, the curatorial can fulfil these claims only speculatively, losing its potency as it gains any ground. And again, it is by departing from the institution, by relinquishing the burden of institutional work, that ‘the curatorial’ is meant to gain its speculative freedom. ‘The curatorial,’ we are told:

is a send-off that can never belong to the institution... a challenge of the limits of both the institution and that of curating... it pushes curating out of its comfort zones... the aim of the curatorial... is paradoxically to avoid at all costs proposals and projects, plans and designs, targets and objectives, strategies and tactics, programmes and platforms, that is, anything that aims to circumscribe the future, to render it ever more future-present.19

The problem with a philosophy of ‘the curatorial’ is not that curators have become too ‘theoretical,’ as those who would berate them for not sticking to the ‘craft’ of exhibition-making would suggest.20 The problem is rather that ‘the curatorial’ seems to bring with it little that is both specific and valuable to a speculative exercise. In short, a philosophy of ‘the curatorial’ is at risk of turning into philosophy minus the confrontation with philosophy’s problematic history, that is to say, of turning into pseudo-philosophy. Moreover, by refusing to engage with the problems it finds most at hand, those “proposals and projects, plans and designs, targets and objectives, strategies

and tactics, programmes and platforms” it so eagerly wants to assign to ‘the institution’ and leave behind, it is most at risk of becoming theoretically abstract, of falling into a theoreticism that functions in advance of a problem, leaving any politics in abeyance while putting “discourse first.”21 Indeed, talk of a “post-curatorial turn” betrays an already palpable dissatisfaction with this hypertrophy of discourse, but like so much in these debates, it is at risk of confusing terminological innovation for conceptual gains.22

The year 1972 was not just the year of documenta 5, it was also the year of the Roundtable held under the auspices of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Santiago de Chile, which was still at that point under the Unidad Popular government of Salvador Allende. Like documenta 5, it has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly attention, frequently posited as a point of origin for not the ‘new curator,’ but for what has come to be known as the “New Museology.” That these events have rarely been discussed as part of the same history is in itself symptomatic.

ICOM was hardly a beacon of radical thought: founded as an association of ‘museum leaders’ from North America and Europe, it quickly became an affiliated body of UNESCO, sharing its Eurocentric universalist mandate. In practice, this meant that the model of museum developed in Europe since the nineteenth century was taken as unproblematic, with efforts made to expand or impose its standards worldwide. In the wake of 1968, however, ICOM would be


20 This accusation, that would take any activity other than exhibition-making what some have called the “paracuratorial” as improper or accessory to curating, takes the exhibition as the ‘proper’ medium of curatorial work, in a barely conceived return to Greenbergian medium-specificity. For both sides of this debate, see for example The Exhibitionist, No. 4 (2011) and Jens Hoffmann and Maria Lind “To Show or not to Show”, Hausier, No. 31, November 2011, available online at http://mousemagazine.it/jens-hoffmann-maria-lind-to-show-or-not-to-show-2011-n31.pdf (accessed March 1, 2018).

21 I take the expression from Rita Meta Bauer, see “Foreword,” in New Institutionality, edited by Jonas Ericsson (Oevel: OKA, 2005) pp. 5-8, p. 5.

22 On this, see the special issue of Springerin, The Post-curatorial turn, No. 1 (2017).
made the subject of intensive calls for more internal democracy that would eventually be heeded, highlighting the tension between the old order and a new generation of museum workers for whom these universalist pretensions were part of the problem.25

The Allende government extended an invitation to organize an ICOM meeting in Santiago, which, aimed at Latin American museologists, was taken as an opportunity to transform the usual format of these discussions.26 The education theorist Paulo Freire, then living as an exile in Chile, was chosen to act as a general convener, and although his presence in the Roundtable was vetoed by the military dictatorship in Brazil, his influence was still felt in the general ethos of the proceedings.27 Previous ‘regional’ ICOM meetings had concerned themselves with museological questions, invariably bringing museum experts from Europe and North America to speak to contexts they knew precious little about. Indeed, since 1969, Georges-Henri Rivière and Yvonne Oddon had been tasked with devising a standard curriculum for museum professionals with the idea that ICOM would eventually be able to support a network of training centers distributed worldwide.28 The Roundtable in Chile departed radically from this model. While the meeting kept the innocuous title “The Importance and Development of Museums in the Contemporary World,” the organizing committee for Santiago, led by Grete Mostny, drew the discussion toward much more contentious aspects of Latin American society.29 Willfully transdisciplinary, the aim was to bring urgent social problems to bear on any possible discussion of the museum. In the process, a notion of museology centered primarily around objects in a collection, whether this involved knowing about them or acquiring the requisite technical skills to conserve, classify and display them correctly, was boldly refused.

Schematically four issues were identified to guide discussions at the Roundtable: the role of cultural development in rural contexts; the relationship between museums and urbanization; scientific and technological developments; and the importance of lifelong education. The keynote speakers included agronomist Enrique Ensenat from Panamá; Mario Teruggi of the Mineralogy and Petrology Division of the Museo de la Plata in Argentina; urbanist and architect Jorge Enrique Harody from Argentina; and César Picón from the Peruvian Ministry of Education. As Hughes de Varine, then director of ICOM, recalls: the only non-Latin American participants were Raymonde Frin, the UNESCO delegate, and De Varine himself. They were allowed to sit in on discussions, but not to take part, and as conversations were conducted in Spanish or ‘Portunhol,’ which neither of them understood, their participation was limited further.30 The spur for writing what came to be known as the “Declaration of Santiago de Chile” was the sense of consternation with which museum workers realized that the issues tackled in the discussions had been systematically overlooked in their museums, which remained tied to a colonial order. At stake was the promise of ‘development,’ with many of the speakers suggesting that economic or technological development alone, without a concomitant revolution in social structures, would only refine the means through which the poor, especially the rural and indigenous poor, would continue to be exploited. As Teruggi recalls, the point of departure was “the realization that museums were doing very little, and sometimes virtually nothing, on behalf of the underprivileged Latin Americans and it brought immediate reflection on the ultimate purpose of museums... our statement and conclusions were a kind of swansong of an

obsolete profession, with no notion or power of adapting itself to present circumstances.\textsuperscript{20}

The declaration they jointly produced served to establish the principles of what they called an “integral museum.”\textsuperscript{20} The museum, they wrote, should be “an institution in the service of society,” one that helped shape “the consciousness of the communities it serves,” and contribute to “stimulate those communities to action by projecting forward its historical activities so that they culminate in the presentation of contemporary problems… linking together past and present, identifying itself with indispensable structural changes and calling forth others appropriate to its particular national context.”\textsuperscript{33} The integral museum, that is, demanded that the problems of “underprivileged Latin Americans” be brought into the museum as its most direct concerns, demanding action, in and by itself, as a force for their overcoming. If a museum’s objects were not to be relinquished, they would have to be “supplemented, extrapolated; and interrelated in a multitude of ways for it to fit naturally into the panorama of social, economic and cultural development.”\textsuperscript{33} This demanded a temporal reorientation: “Up to now a museum has only been conceived in terms of the past… a vector which starts in the present and whose far end is in the past. With the Round Table’s agreement that the museum should take on a role in development, it was simply intended to inverse the direction of this temporal vector.”\textsuperscript{37} The point, then, was no longer to display the past, but to provide direction for the future.

The Santiago Roundtable took place in May 1972. By September 1973 a coup d’\textsuperscript{\textdagger}etat had brought Allende’s ‘Chilean path to socialism’ to a violent end, and, with it, what was the most immediately available context for the ‘integral museum’ to take shape. However, the basic principles laid out in the Santiago Declaration would continue to inform a collective and increasingly international effort to radically transform the museum. The decade that followed saw an unprecedented movement in this direction, one that would come to be known, variously, as New Museology, Ecomuseology, Altermuseology, Sociomuseology, or, more emphatically, Museology of Liberation.\textsuperscript{34} The ecomuseum movement, which had been established in France since 1971 at the behest of Rivière and De Varine, took on an increasingly community-led character from 1974 onward. By 1978 the ecomuseum of Haute Beauce, which more emphatically integrated the surrounding community in its management, was founded in Quebec, the first of many others in the region.\textsuperscript{35} Explicitly situating themselves in the wake of Santiago, these reformist currents called for a museum that was integral to the society in which it was ingrained. This meant that the museum had to worry much less about the collection, the building, and the public understood as a mere spectator. Instead, they foregrounded the links between territory, heritage, and a community that was to involve itself in the ongoing production of the museum itself.\textsuperscript{36}

Still, it was in Mexico that the more sustained effort to give shape to something akin to the ‘integral museum’ took place. From the early 1970s, the Casa del Museo (Museum House) was opened as a neighborhood branch of the National Museum of Anthropology, and the pioneering program of the Museos Escolares (School Museums) comprised at its peak over 600 small museums embedded in schools and were collectively produced by teachers, students and neighbors. It was also then that the first examples of community museums were trialed in Mexico.\textsuperscript{36} All of these were funded and managed by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), which turned out to be a mixed blessing; by some accounts, their excessive de-
It is bound to instances of local government which more directly represent the community, but it does not depend on state or federal institutions. The group that runs the museum is a community-based entity, whether it is connected to local government or constituted as a non-governmental organization. Throughout time, it fosters the development of skills, experiences and social resources that strengthen its ability to be self-regulated and autonomous. It does not promote vertical, dependent relations to authorities but rather horizontal relations between community members and with other communities as well.43

While the line of flight first traced in Santiago had been a necessary precondition for these museological experiments, by 2010 community museums had been sufficiently de-professionalized for Camarena to declare that these new community museums “did not come out of the 1972 declaration, they were not the product of institutional needs. The new project of community museums came out of the community’s own need to preserve their heritage.”44 Far from being the new star of the show, the curator in this schema figures only as a vanishing mediator.


The point of thinking about these two traditions together is not to suggest a simple translocation of one model onto the other, or even a virtuous synthesis of the two. Indeed, a significant element of the legacy of Santiago has been the emphasis on that “indissoluble link” between community, heritage and territory that would render such a translocation impossible and quite possibly undesirable. Despite their opposing political vocations, the community museum is always at risk of moving toward its “perverted forerunner,” the Heimatmuseum developed in Germany from the mid-1930s onward.\footnote{See Alfredo Cruz-Ramírez, “The Heimatmuseum: a perverted forerunner,” Museum International, Vol. 57, Issue 4, 1985, pp. 242-244.}

Any appeal to an existing ‘community,’ understood as homogeneous and ossified, as already sharing bonds, values and aspirations, should rightly provoke anxiety.\footnote{Indeed, the name ‘community museum’ has been widely used elsewhere for institutional models that share little of the methodologies developed out of Oaxaca, often serving to construct a reductive and nostalgic image of the ‘community’ or the ‘people.’} This is the case regardless of scale; to imagine that such an appeal could be unproblematic when applied to the Zapotec community of Santa Ana del Valle would be to fall into a reductionist fetishization.\footnote{For an account of some of these problems in the case of Shan-Dung, see Cohen, op. cit., and Miguel Durán Díaz, “Los museos comunitarios mexicanos en el proceso de renovación museológica,” Revista de Indias, Vol. LXXII, No. 254, 2012, pp. 177-212.}

But thinking about these legacies together might serve to denaturalize some of the ways in which both curating and ‘the curatorial’ have been understood and written about, hopefully serving to spur a much-needed exercise in institutional imagination. The curator-as-genius continues to rely on a model that is based on the universality of aesthetic judgment that surreptitiously served to distinguish those who could make a claim on the universal from those who could not.\footnote{46 In it is always worth remembering that the same philosopher who gave us the universality of aesthetic judgment has been credited with inventing the concept of race. On this, see Robert Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Rule in the Enlightenment Construction of Race,” in Race, edited by Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).}

The Santiago Declaration was an attempt to mobilize the museum away from its pretensions of both universality and political neutrality.

The lineage that I have outlined here has remained faithful to this principle, understanding itself as an act of “affirmative resistance” in the face of global capital rather than as its mere social ameliorative.\footnote{I take the expression from Brazilian museologist Odália Priotti and Yara Mattos, ‘Caminhos e percursos da museologia comunitária’ Cadernos de Sociomuseologia, Vol. XII, No. 28, 2007, pp. 71-92.} In part, however, the new museology has been diverted of much of its radicality and political intent. Indeed, the publication in 1989 of Peter Vergo’s eponymous anthology, with which the term is still most often associated in English failed to acknowledge a single source from Spanish or Portuguese and made no reference to either the history of new museological practices or to MINOM, the branch of ICOM devoted to New Museology, which had been established in 1985. These glaring omissions created a brand-new meaning and set of references for the term in English.\footnote{Peter Vergo (ed.) The New Museology (London: Reaktion, 1993).} The forgetting of this history might allow us instead to discover a “radical museology” for our times, without the burden of having to measure its radicality against anything that preceded it.\footnote{See Claire Bishop, Radical Museology (Cologne: König Books, 2005).}

But, more importantly, this forgetting allows for a complacency that is not warranted at a time when the emancipatory hopes once placed in art appear to be trapped in a perpetual collision course with its own infrastructures.

Moreover, the principled indifference that, since its establishment as an academic discipline during the 1990s, curatorial studies has demonstrated toward the rich debates of the new museology has served to reproduce an artificially narrow history of curating, pivoting around a number of figures who, by and large, are predictably white, male and based in Northern Europe and the United States. Nearly half a century ago ICOM’s plan for a set curriculum for museum professionals to be established around the world was rightly seen as inattentive to local needs and knowledges, but it had at least the advantage of providing local access to a standardized level of education. Today, we are in the unenviable situation of grounding access to the profession not just on a particular kind of Western-centric knowl-edge, but on the financially mediated ability to receive a postgraduate education in the handful of colleges with enough cachet to grant it. Predictably, again, these are overwhelmingly located in Northern Europe and the United States, their international cohorts increasingly tied to a transnational elite.\footnote{52 See William J. Robinson, “Global Capitalism Theory and the Emergence of Transnational Elites,” Critical Sociology, Vol. 38, No. 5, 2011, pp. 549-565.}

Common to both the traditions described here was the desire to reinvent the role, to think again about what kind of knowl-edges were useful and necessary to become a curator. That shift away from preservation, purchasing, and research, and toward public presentation and display that Heinich and Pollack detected in the 1990s was but a late echo of the earlier call for a museology understood not
as a technical discipline, but as primarily concerned with the social milieu within which it unfolded. For the new art curator this “de-professionalization” meant abandoning the idea that ‘collective values’ could be anticipated through the performance of highly standardized protocols, allowing for a relative freedom from institutional mores. The exhibition, the public program or the simple pursuit of (curatorial) speculation could then be conceived as relatively autonomous arenas within which to develop a singular, artistic practice. For the new museologist it was the transformation of those ‘collective values’ that was at stake. This meant giving up on the authority of expertise, opening up the institution as a space of uncertainty and negotiation. The institution could then become a tool for communal emancipation, fostering a collective autonomy that was not understood as freedom from institutional norms, but as the freedom to collectively institute such norms. This was to be achieved not through the virtuous deployment of an individual methodology, but through the frustratingly protracted rehearsal of a collective subjectivity. As we try to imagine a curating after the global, this still strikes me as our most urgent task.