

Interfacing the commons: curatorial system as a form of production on the edge

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At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century the commons are everywhere. Or to be precise, the struggle over the commons, as well as the ideological appropriation of the concept of the common by the market, is all around us. Movements such as edu-factory or a recently launched project of co-research, Uninomade2.0 , current students struggles in UK to protect access to free education, or global discontent with methods and forms of state control as exerted over WikiLeaks site in recent months, are only the Western examples of struggles over what is considered to be a common good, in these cases education, knowledge, and information.

We can observe an increased interest of art and curatorial projects in the commons as a subject (Carpenter; Dragona; Pelhjan and Biederman). Starting from the assumption that curating is always linked to some form of collaborative production, especially when taking place with the use of socio-technological networks, my proposition here is to think of curating as facilitating forms of collaborative production which, when taken together, are part of some common yet unenclosed activity. Specifically my focus is on the ways in which immaterial labour is mobilised in such a context. What Lazzarato says about immaterial labour has been applied to the field of curating and curatorial systems (Krysa). Relevant here is Lazzarato's description of immaterial labour as "the interface" which links it to the "immaterial commodity", enlarged and transformed by the process of consumption. It is exactly that place of intersection and transformation where many curatorial systems using social technologies in the production of events, situations and forms of knowledge, operate. By proposing to think of the curatorial system as an interface I want to analyse how curating is a practice on the edge – as it precariously balances between the struggle over and appropriation of the commons it facilitates.

From the abundance of various definitions of the commons, I want to start from the definition of the commons articulated by Massimo De Angelis in an interview for e-flux. He recognises three elements which are part of the commons where "the third and most important element in terms of conceptualising the commons is the verb 'to common' –

the social process that creates and reproduces the commons” (An Architektur). The concept of ‘commoning’, which De Angelis takes from Linebaugh’s *Magna Carta Manifesto*, I understand as referring to constantly negotiating and learning how to share and produce common resources. And it is in that sense that this concept is most useful when considering how networked art or curatorial projects engage with the issue of the commons – not just as a subject but as a practice in common.

The Free Software movement, peer-2-peer networks or Amazon’s Mechanical Turk are examples of different approaches to processes that create social and capital relations. At the same time they fall under two categories described by De Angelis as two sides of the same coin. Enclosures, argues De Angelis, are a “continuous characteristic of ‘capital logic’” and “a *force* with totalising drives that exists together with other forces that act as limit on it” (60). He says “it is either capital that makes the world through commodification and enclosures, or it is the rest of us – whoever that ‘us’ is – that makes the world through counter-enclosures and ‘class struggle’” (61). Certainly a project like the Free Software Foundation initiated in response to early attempts of limiting open and free access to free software, is an example of the latter. What’s interesting is that it organises access to resources through the use of free software licenses (GNU GPL) and at the same time propagates certain practices of engaging with free software which ensure freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve. As such, the Free Software Foundation or indeed the Free Software movement in general, is an example of a social process that creates the commons, and an interface that frames the forms of contact that have to be engaged in order to access those resources. A similar capacity of organising forms of interaction is a feature of a curatorial system. And my argument is that exactly this faculty makes it possible to think of a curatorial system as an interface.

So what is a curatorial system? Firstly, we need to identify various elements that are part of this system. Curating is one of them, but also online platforms, networked tools, software, and public as users/producers/immaterial labourers. However, the notion of a curatorial system also recognises the interactivity among all the elements, the relations generated and forms of production mobilised within the system. If a curatorial system is a collection of contingent elements (technology, networks, users/producers, curating, immaterial labour) understood as different forms of agency which interact with each other within it, then the system becomes an interface that facilitates and

frames a way to access those elements also from the outside. Similarly, the organisational functions of curating, also understood as immaterial labour, become operative in such a system as they “manage social relations” and extract “social cooperation” (Lazzarato, 138). Joasia Krysa’s notion of immaterial curating recognises the political dimension of curating by situating it within the context of immateriality and she considers the immaterial curator as “akin to the figure of the manager, or in Lazzarato’s terms ‘facilitator’” (31). Furthermore, paraphrasing Lazzarato, she identifies the curator as “central to the new forms of participatory management” (31).

Immaterial labour is an interface of “a new relationship between consumption and production”, which instead of being based on consumption of commodity and in consequence its destruction, “enlarges, transforms and creates the ‘ideological’ and cultural environment of the consumer” (Lazzarato, 138). The appropriate question to ask next would be how this relationship is interfaced not just within, but by a curatorial system? I would argue that in a networked art context, a curatorial system is an interface which translates this process of ideological transformation and communicates it to the public. And this takes place through engaging workers’ subjectivity as a productive force that turns consumption productive, this “real and proper social process that for the moment is defined with the term *communication*” (141). What is being produced and in effect what is “communicated” by the curatorial system is exactly the point here: namely if it is possible to access each element of the system and in what way.

If one is interested in curating as a form of agency that can redistribute power relations, or as the case might be, facilitate environment for production and reproduction of the commons, then there is a need to re-consider immaterial labour in its potential to become an emancipatory practice that doesn’t end at the point of reproducing capital relations but actively develops immaterial practices of ‘communing’.

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