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Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems

by Joasia Krysa, Editor
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*Reviewed by Jonathan Zilberg
Independent Scholar*

jonathanzilberg@gmail.com

Curating Immateriality will prove interesting for museum professionals concerned with curatorial processes in an expanded digital field in which the art museum no longer has any walls, never mind material objects. In short, the digital environment presents

qualitatively new challenges for curators - especially for those who would prefer to reduce the traditional role of the curator to a network manager.

Through investigating the immaterial nexus of culture and technology, the contributors to this volume take up on the standard questions in curatorial studies about the nature of power relations and control, in short - on curatorial politics. The key assumption here is that distributed network systems (DNS'), and software, require new forms of curatorship. The following types of questions are posed: Are we witnessing the emergence of qualitatively new democratic potentialities or new forms of totalitarian control? What are the implications raised for curating immateriality in future cybernetic environments? And finally, how open are these so-called "open systems"?

Though Joasia Krysa's introduction is a utopian expression of anti-authoritarianism, many of the contributors express a pronounced ambivalence about the democratic potential of DNS curatorship in which curatorial power is imagined as radically curtailed. Deeply inspired by a political agenda and the cybernetic transformation of cultural production, *Curating Immateriality* explores the centripetal tendencies of elitist control versus participatory freedom that exist in this rapidly expanding art world.

The central issue here is this: If the traditional curator operates as a gatekeeper in a centralized network, how should curators operate in a distributed network? Accordingly, the contributors examine how curators have experimented with exhibiting art in this context and how such new media can be theorized. Using diverse populist neo-Gramscian and post-Fordist positions, and bringing together a useful compendium of experience, they examine the new curatorial models which have emerged and consider how these new systems have been integrated into curatorial practices. Of all the contributions, Christiane Paul's "open source" model, in her chapter

"Flexible Contexts, Democratic Filtering and Computer-Aided Curating: Models for Online Curatorial Practice" will be especially useful for museum professionals looking for practical guidance in tackling the gatekeeper versus network manager dilemma.

Beyond such practical issues, this is a surprisingly fertile book intellectually speaking, that is for those aestheticians with a Marxist bent. For example, Tiziana Terranova's chapter, "Of Sense and Sensibility: Immaterial Labour in an Open System," is particularly interesting in its treatment of the notion of "general intellects" and how value has been reassigned from the product to the process and from the material to the symbolic. In terms of art and democracy, per se, Terranova's chapter is fundamentally important as a problematic rejoinder as she so eloquently reviews how subjectivity is always plural and never determined by a universal instance. In addition, she reiterates how diverse psychic investments are continually being rethought in a world that is not reducible to a dualist clash of production oscillating between freedom and control. Furthering a fascinating collection of discussions on power and technology, on digital as opposed to mechanical reproduction, Terranova provides a sobering assessment of idealist democratic potentiality by arguing that these new cybernetic systems are relentlessly controlled and compressed. This notion that a new form of totalitarianism has emerged, contrary to the introduction's liberation aesthetic, is decisively advanced by Mateo Pasquinelli in the Orwellian concluding chapter "Cultural Labour and Immaterial Machines".

In assessing how such digital collectives have sought to promote social change through creating communicative environments which de-center the curator and destabilize hierarchy, Trebor Sholz's chapter on the nature and dynamics of extreme sharing in networks is, especially, interesting as are the other chapters which theorize notions of dematerialization and immateriality.

In all this, there is, in my view, a problem about the assumed

democratic nature of this new networked method for curating the immaterial. Can a democratic, read collaborative community, effectively curate through partly automated self-generative digital filter-feeding? Is it not inherently problematic to argue that these largely amateur curators are democratic information managers while professional curators are authoritarian gate-keepers? Is the issue of curatorship really ultimately reducible to control versus freedom?

Few museum professionals today would argue against the idea that curatorship should be open to creative collaboration and contestation. Yet at the end of the day, a curator must curate. Their task is to make informed decisions and today, whatever they do, controversy is inevitable. In fact, this dissent is the true measure of the 20th Century democratization of art.

In the final analysis, despite the books apparently emancipatory aim, it is debatable whether democratically minded digital filter-feeders differ fundamentally from their traditional predecessors working in formal institutions. Why? All curators have to describe, classify and re-contextualize artistic object (and processes) whether they are material or immaterial. All curators remain managers of symbolic information. Worse still, in these networked systems, in performing "filtering" functions and "highlighting" "best works", are not these small teams of like-minded curators not merely recapitulating the much maligned role of the traditional curator? Moreover, though "open" communicative platforms surely promote greater participation and information sharing, especially in terms of blogging and reduced curatorial control, contrary to the ideals expressed here, they remain unable to affect real social and institutional change - never mind over-ride the curatorial conceit that they are less guilty of authoritarian judgment by having somehow arrived at a collective democratic decision as to what constitutes the "best work".

Curators are damned if they do and damned if they don't. They must operate according to the St Peter Principle, making informed though

ultimately subjective decisions. Should such professional curators be replaced by filter feeding protocols and democratically managed machines? I think not. To parasitize one creative idea in this book, that is, the semantic linkages between the words curate, cure and curare, curating like curare, if modified and applied in the right dose and distributive contexts, can either educate or irritate. But someone is going to have to make the unpleasant decision as to what is "good" and who is in and what is "bad" and who is out - unless the new digital democrats throw out the filter.



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Contact LDR: ldr@leonardo.org

Contact Leonardo: isast@leonardo.info

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