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Review of Curating Immateriality by Luis Silva

Posted by [Luis Silva](#) on June 23, 2006 9:14 am

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 Review of Curating Immateriality
 (Autonomeia, 2006, edited by Joasia Krysa)
 by Luis Silva

Curating Immateriality: the work of the curator in the age of network systems is the third volume of AutonomeiaOs DATA browser series, after Economizing Culture and Engineering Culture. Edited by Joasia Krysa, co-editor of the book series, curator, and teacher at the Faculty of Technology, University of Plymouth in the United Kingdom, Curating Immateriality features texts that are to a large extent based on the papers presented at Curating, Immateriality, Systems, an event held at Tate Modern in June 2005, but re-edited for the purpose of publication. The book features articles by Joasia Krysa, Tiziana Terranova, Marina Vishmidt, Grzesiek Sedek, Geoff Cox, Christiane Paul, Eva Grubinger, Jacob, Lillemose, Josephine Berry Slater, 0100101110101101.org & [epidemiC], Alexander R. Galloway & Eugene Thacker, Franziska Nori, low-fi, Trebor Scholz, Beryl Graham, Piotr Krajewski, Olga Goriunova & Alexei Shulgin and Matteo Pasquinelli.

At the Curating, Immateriality, Systems event, the debate was centered around how curators can respond to new forms of self-organizing and self-replicating systems, databases, programming, net art, software art and generative media, and in general to systems of immaterial cultural production and what new models of curatorial practice are needed to take account of shared, distributed, and collaborative objects and processes. Curating Immateriality not only follows this line of investigation, but also tries to go deeper in exploring some of the critical ideas that were central to the conference. As Krysa stated in her introduction to the book, "The site of curatorial production has been expanded to include the space of the Internet and the focus of curatorial attention has been extended from the object to processes to dynamic network systems. As a result, curatorial work has become more widely distributed between multiple agents including technological networks and software. This book

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reflects on these changes and asserts that the practice of curating cannot be dissociated from social and technological developments."

One of the ideas put forward in this volume, giving it its critical structure and theoretical framing, is one derived by Italian autonomists, linking immateriality--seen as a response to the changes undergone by labour in post-Fordist or networked societies, and curating. Immateriality (or immaterial labour) is a Marxist concept that redefines labour in the age of general intellect. Lazzarato and Negri identified how labour, control, and power relations have changed and are currently structured, due to the ever-growing importance of communication technologies and distributed production. Curating, seen through this perspective, cannot be dissociated from these changes and can be thought of as their reflection.

Besides investigating the notion of immateriality, the book also introduces the concept of a distributed curatorial practice, or put in other terms, the action of curation within the context of networked systems. This vast exercise addresses issues of what can be curated and what challenging new possibilities for curating itself may arise from such a systemic point of view. Once again the political context in which these changes occur is taken in consideration and control and power relations are examined. For instance, in Pasquinelli's article, the end chapter of the book, free software is seen as something other than simply liberating. It is seen, like other cultural products, as symptomatic of the new immaterial conditions discussed previously.

Practice is an important part of the book. If some very interesting articles constitute the theoretical backbone of this collection of contributions, examples are by no means reduced to a simple illustrating role. If different forms of curatorial practice are discussed, and Christiane Paul's text is a good overview of the multitude of possibilities within new media curating, the concept of distributed curating, presented and debated, is extended by the introduction of the idea of software curating--that is, online curatorial systems that incorporate software and networks in the curatorial process itself.

Two examples deserve a closer look, *kurator* and the better-known *runme.org*. The *kurator* project is a free software application programmed to curate source code. After being submitted the code is made available for further processing through a set of modules. It actively tries to reconfigure curatorial practice in line with the curatorial object. The interest lies in the fact that both the practices and their framing adhere to the same principles, the organization of data. It transforms curating into a generative experiment about social relations, distributing the curatorial activity over a network of people and thus breaking the domain of the curator as a single individual. Also, it deletes, to a certain extent, the issue of the importance of taste, by partially automating activities associated to the curator. According to Vishmidt's text, "*kurator* deploys opens source programming technology to distribute the function and de-privilege the figure of the curator as specialized subject of institutional power." She later writes, "By displacing the curatorial function from abstract subjective potential to binary code, it reproduces the singular curator as a collective executable. In this way it preserves the curator by exceeding the curator, the perfectly consistent paradox that any art practice grounding its critique (...) is structurally bound to enact."

Runme.org, the software repository emerged out from the *Readme* software art festival, is a system of dynamic data storage and a presentation tool. Its curatorial process is based on an open system, but with moderation and a database allowing for the self-submission of works. Not quite as radical as *kurator*, *runme.org* shifts the emphasis on the curatorial role in different ways. After the broad initial filtering caused by the moderated submission procedure, additional filtering happens in the classifying and labeling of work, through the project's "taxonomical" system. Software submitted may be classified according to a list of software art categories and a keyword cloud, describing the projects and allowing navigation. It is the interaction between the processes of filtering, categorizing, and labeling, with their imposition of boundaries and the democratic possibilities of an open repository and database, that makes this project curatorially interesting.

In these two examples, and all of the others presented throughout the book, there is a more general acknowledgment of software curating, which seems to place the strength and validity of Curating Immateriality in the context of politics of curating.

This act is portrayed as both a critical and a creative practice and much connected to a wider socio-economical system beyond the traditional art system.

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