

Abstract

The number of books and PhD dissertations dedicated to the history of exhibitions in art history is constantly growing. Most of these publications originate from curatorial studies, a field that is only loosely connected to the discipline of art history. A striking feature of these texts is that “art works” are almost entirely absent, and more or less the same can be said for “the exhibition”. Instead of discussing the exhibition as such, these authors are interested in biographies (most of the time in fact hagiographies) of curators or descriptions of exhibitions, while avoiding theoretical questions about the status of exhibitions. My article deals with what I consider a major problem with these texts, i.e. the absence of a theory of exhibitions and the substitution of such a theory by the vague construct of “the curatorial”.

I offer a symptomatic reading that looks at how different actors in the field of exhibition-making establish an understanding and discourse concerning exhibitions. This reading focuses on “the curatorial”, which, even though it does not qualify as a theory in the proper sense, nonetheless performs the function of a theory in curatorial discourse. To be sure, the texts (by authors such as Beatrice von Bismarck, Maria Lind, and Jean-Paul Martinon) that I analyse do not constitute a cohesive notion of “the curatorial”, but they do exhibit some unifying aspects: the distinction between “curating” and “the curatorial”; the expansion of “the curatorial” to fields other than the exhibition; the claim of autonomy; and the understanding of “the curatorial” as an act of institutional critique. In this article I argue that the concept “the curatorial” functions less as an explanation of a certain practice than as the reproduction of a certain consent and, accordingly, serves to regulate discourse. I analyse both the epistemological impact and interest of the construction of “the curatorial” as well as the context in which texts focusing on this concept are produced (which includes asking what consequences they have for art history proper). ●

Resumo

O número de livros e teses de doutoramento em história da arte dedicados à história das exposições tem sido crescente. A maior parte das publicações sobre o tema tem a sua origem nos estudos curatoriais – um campo vagamente ligado à disciplina da história da arte. Um aspeto surpreendente dos textos publicados é o facto de as “obras de arte” estarem praticamente ausentes, e quase o mesmo poder ser dito em relação à “exposição”. Em vez de discutirem a exposição enquanto tal, os autores destes textos estão interessados em biografias (na verdade, na maior parte das vezes, em hagiografias) de curadores ou em descrições de exposições, evitando questões teóricas acerca do estatuto das exposições. O meu artigo aborda o que considero um problema grave nestes textos, isto é, a ausência de uma teoria de exposições e a substituição dessa teoria por um conceito mais vago: o de “curatorial”. Proponho uma leitura sobre o modo como diferentes atores no campo da realização de exposições têm definido um certo entendimento e um certo discurso sobre a ideia de exposição. Essa leitura desenvolve-se em torno do termo “curatorial”, que, embora não se qualifique enquanto teoria em sentido próprio, funciona como teoria no discurso da curadoria. Na verdade, os textos que analiso (de autores como Beatrice von Bismarck, Maria Lind e Jean-Paul Martinon) não constituem uma noção coesa do “curatorial”, mas exibem alguns aspetos unificadores: a distinção entre “curadoria” e “curatorial”; a expansão do “curatorial” a outros campos para além da exposição; a defesa da sua autonomia, e o reconhecimento do “curatorial” como um ato de crítica institucional. Argumentarei que a função de um conceito como “curatorial” não é tanto a explicação de uma prática específica, mas antes a reiteração de uma certa validação e, conseqüentemente, a regulação do discurso. Analisarei o impacto epistemológico e o interesse do conceito de “curatorial”, bem como o contexto em que textos sobre este tema são produzidos (o que significa também interrogar as suas conseqüências na história da arte propriamente dita). ●

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Carlos Garrido Castellano

Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, University
College Cork, Ireland

Nuno Faleiro Rodrigues

Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo, Escola Superior Artística do Porto, Portugal

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RESISTANCE TO THEORY

THE IDEOLOGY OF “THE CURATORIAL”

AND THE HISTORY OF EXHIBITIONS

FELIX VOGEL

Post-doctoral Research Fellow and
Lecturer, University of Basel
felix.vogel@unibas.ch

I. Curatorial discourse

Roughly twenty years ago, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne argued in the introduction to their influential anthology *Thinking about Exhibitions* that, “despite the growing importance of exhibitions, their histories, their structures and their socio-political implications are only now beginning to be written about and theorized.” (Greenberg et al. 1996, 2). A decade later, Florence Derieux claimed that “the art history of the second half of the twentieth century is no longer a history of artworks, but a history of exhibitions” – however, one that “still largely remains to be written” (Derieux 2007, 8). Since then, the number of publications on the history of exhibitions has been constantly growing, while the largest portion of these originates from curatorial studies and thus from a field that is only loosely connected to the discipline of art history.¹

A striking feature of these texts is, to quote Julian Myers (2011, 27), a “phobia of artworks”, which is visible in their focus on curatorial concepts, exhibition layouts and above all the figure of the curator. What is furthermore striking – at least from the perspective of the discipline of art history – is their lack of methodological and theoretical rigor. Exhibitions are complex entities and, in order to grasp their singularity and historicity, it is necessary to develop an appropriate terminology. A history of exhibitions can be successful only if we have a concept of its object – that is, we first need a theory of exhibitions before we can write their history. Martin Jay argues that “what makes theory necessary, if by itself insufficient, is precisely the no less blatant incompleteness of its others. That is, in the imperfect world we inhabit [...], no possibility of self-sufficient immanence exists on the level of

¹ In some cases, the two fields are explicitly demarcated from one another. To name but one example: Jens Hoffmann characterizes the aim of the journal *The Exhibition* to be “by curators for curators” (Hoffmann 2010, 3), which suggests a separation between curatorial studies and art history. Needless to say, one cannot draw an accurate line between the two. For a comparison of the different fields in which publications on the history of exhibitions appeared and how each form a specific canon, see my article: Vogel 2017.

practice, experience, hermeneutic interpretation, narrative intelligibility, or empirical facticity” (Jay 1996, 178). We could paraphrase Jay by stating that one of the reasons for the necessity of theory lies in the inaccessibility of its objects. In order to understand a given “thing” (be it art, music, exhibitions etc.), we develop theories, even though we know they are insufficient. What is paradoxical about this movement, however, is that theories do not just find their object; rather, they first construct it. That is why no object can persist without the meta-layer that essentially declares it as the object of study (cf. Jahraus 2011, 25).

In curatorial discourse, we find a certain reluctance, if not resistance, to theorize about the exhibition. In lieu of a theory of exhibitions there is discussion of “the curatorial”. This substitution is neither an equivalent, nor merely a makeshift replacement. Instead, as I would like to argue, it performs, like any substitute, the task of masking more fundamental underlying problems. The aim of this paper is thus to reconstruct the emergence of the term “the curatorial” through an examination of its function in curatorial discourse, which also means inquiring into its relevance for art history proper.

A blurb on the back of the anthology *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* reads: “Stop curating! And think what curating is all about.”² This sums up Paul O’Neill’s description of the “curatorial turn”. It not only explains the rise of the exhibition as “the main means through which contemporary art is now mediated”,³ it also helps account for the “the respectability of the phenomenon of curating” (O’Neill 2011, 15), including the growing discourse surrounding it, manifested in “[d]iscussions, lecture programs, conferences, publications, and discursive events” (ibid. 18). Starting in the early 1990s and intensifying in the early 2000s is the inclusion of discursive formats in (and sometimes *as* or *instead of*) exhibitions – sometimes referred to as the “paracuratorial”⁴ – and also the production of books, magazines and other publications written about curating, by curators and in some cases intended for curators: “Curating is ‘becoming discourse’ in which curators are willing themselves to be the key subject and producer of this discourse” (ibid. 19). One of the objectives of these publications is “self-historicization”, i.e. the construction of narrative that explains the present by linking it to a precedent in the past.⁵ Curatorial discourse is determined predominantly by curators themselves, actors within the field of exhibition talking about their own object and even about themselves.⁶ Not surprisingly, the interview is the most frequent genre or type of text within curatorial discourse. Curators thus have a double capacity to produce the object both on the level of practice and, subsequently, on the level of history (or theory). In addition to collections with interviews, we find volumes on formative curators, which in some cases resemble accumulations of materials, whereas in other cases they are to be understood as something like a catalogue raisonné. Then there are journals. *The Exhibitionist*, for example, published between 2010 and 2016, claims to be the first magazine dedicated to curating.⁷ The 2010s were marked by the founding of a number of other short-lived journals on curating, most of which were connected to a curatorial studies program, such as *Red-Hook* (CCS

² Ivan Gaskell wrote a brilliant review of this book, especially about the recurring call for a “new epistemology” that some of the volume’s authors found in the idea of “the curatorial”. His review is summed up in the following sentence: “I am left wondering whether there is, in truth, any epistemological crisis whatsoever, rather no more than a failure to think clearly” (Gaskell 2015, 210).

³ One may very well ask whether there has ever been a time since the establishment of the Salon in 1667 when this was *not* the case.

⁴ For example: Paldi 2011.

⁵ Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s *A Brief History of Curating*, a collection with influential curators, is maybe the most telling example. In the afterword to the book, Daniel Birnbaum describes the curators assembled in the book as Obrist’s “parents” and “grandparents” (Birnbaum 2008, 293).

⁶ In another article I offer a bibliography and paradigmatic examples: Vogel 2014.

⁷ This claim is not entirely correct. Earlier examples include *Manifesta Journal* (since 2003) and *ONCURATING.org* (since 2008). Even *META* (1992-1993), published during Ute Meta Bauer’s tenure at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart can be understood as a magazine that is solely dedicated to curating.

⁸ The peer-reviewed journal *Stedelijk Studies* (since 2014) is worth mentioning here, but it is a somewhat peculiar case as a hybrid between a journal for exhibition studies and a publication that is (if only loosely) connected to the collection, history and program of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and thus more in the tradition of museum yearbooks.

⁹ Maria Lind's text is an exception insofar as it was initially published in *Artforum*, but later re-published in her *Selected Writings*. Lind reiterated her notion of "the curatorial" on several other occasions.

¹⁰ It is telling that those publications focused on "curating" and not "the exhibition", which means they focused on only one aspect of a relatively large complex (to phrase it as an analogy: "curating" is to "exhibition" what "writing" is to "literature"). A theory of exhibitions would also encompass a theory of curating.

Bard) and *Well-Connected* (HGB Leipzig). A journal that still exists, and the only one that is independent and academic, is the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*.⁹ The content of the first two is not so much a theorization of practice (cf. Glicenstein 2015, 184-189) nor especially a "How To" of exhibition making, but rather a mixture of (often very personal) accounts of exhibitions by other curators (something in between a historical account and a review), musings over one's own exhibitions and more general thoughts about curating. The same trajectory can be found in countless anthologies with generic titles such as *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, *Curating Subjects* or *Everything you always wanted to know about curating: but were afraid to ask*. Despite the difference in formats, approaches and contexts, they are all united in their aim to establish a tradition and thus justify their own practice through discursive accounts.

In the following, I will focus on texts devoted to the question of "the curatorial", i.e. texts that were published in anthologies, written or edited by writers active in the field of curatorial studies.⁹ These texts are paradigmatic and representative of curatorial discourse, and are of particular interest because they intend to define the very objective of this discourse.

II. Curating vs. "the curatorial"

Not long ago, in 2003, Alex Farquharson could muse over the "recent appearance of the word 'to curate'" which he understood as a "shift in the conceptions of what curators do, from a person who works at some remove from the processes of artistic production, to one actively in the thick of it." (Farquharson 2003, 8). While "to curate" is still a rather young verb, its triumph cannot be overestimated (cf. Balzer 2015); by contrast, the noun "the curatorial" is even younger and even more ambiguous. It is a truism – which does not facilitate an analysis, quite the contrary – that the emergence of a new field of study enforces its own terminology. In the case of curatorial discourse, this applies especially to the concept of "the curatorial". The discussion of "the curatorial" appeared at a specific moment in time and marks a certain progress in curatorial discourse. While "the curatorial" as we understand it today, i.e. as a relatively fixed concept, is virtually absent from discursive formats and publications in the 1990s, this period nonetheless established an initial thinking about the practice of curating¹⁰ – about one's own doing – and tried to legitimize the first wave of curatorial study programs. The 2000s contributed to the meta-layer of this specific moment, inquiring about the essence of one's doing (and, here too, legitimizing the second wave of curatorial study programs): Thinking about the thinking about curating. This shift is marked by the shift from "curating" to "the curatorial".

An important feature in the discussion about "the curatorial" is thus its hierarchical relation to curating: "The curatorial" is introduced as a conceptual difference

and adopts an operational role in the ongoing process of self-legitimation of curatorial practices. Maria Lind begins her seminal text on “the curatorial” with the claim “that curating is much more than making exhibitions”; there is something beyond curating, namely the curatorial as a “multidimensional role that includes critique, editing, education, and fundraising” (Lind 2010, 63). In her differentiation between curating and “the curatorial”, Lind draws a parallel to Chantal Mouffe’s differentiation of “politics” and “the political” – a differentiation based on Martin Heidegger’s conceptions of “ontic” and “ontological”.¹¹ Politics is for Mouffe an empirical realm, part of political science and “business as usual” – parliaments and laws are located in the realm of politics. The political, by contrast, is the domain of the philosopher, because the philosopher does not inquire into the facts of politics, but instead into its essence. Politics operates on the ontic level, whilst the political operates on the ontological. This means that politics is focused on various political practices in the conventional sense, whereas the political concerns the manner in which society is structured. When applied to “curating” and “the curatorial”, this means that “curating” is the mere technical side, the sheer organization and administration of an exhibition. But what is “the curatorial”? This remains unclear in Lind’s argumentation. She argues that “‘the curatorial’ [is] a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth, a presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas.” (ibid. 64). This could mean everything – or nothing at all.

In another text, Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck start their dialogue by distinguishing between “curating” and “the curatorial”, which is between a “professional practice” on the one hand, and an “event of knowledge” (Bismarck and Rogoff 2012, 22-23) that is rather difficult to pin down, on the other.¹² While curating happens in the regime of representation, “the curatorial makes it possible for us to affect a shift in emphasis to a very different place, to the trajectory of activity. So if I am curating, the emphasis is on the end product [...], in the curatorial, the emphasis is on the trajectory of ongoing, active work, not an isolated end product but a blip along the line of an ongoing project” (ibid. 23). The following passage has a similar impact, when Beatrice von Bismarck understands “curating” as a “constellational activity”, which is only the basis for “the curatorial”: “the curatorial is the dynamic field where the constellational conditions comes into being. It is constituted by the curating techniques that come together as well as by the participants [...] and finally by the material and discursive framings, by the institutional, disciplinary, regional, racial, or gender specific” (ibid. 24-25). Again, both Rogoff and von Bismarck make it rather hard to understand what actually qualifies as “the curatorial” or to identify cases in which “curating” transforms into “the curatorial”.

In the same vein, Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff, both co-founders of the PhD program “Curatorial/Knowledge” at Goldsmiths College in London, make the distinction between “curating” and “the curatorial” into a central feature of their argument: “Initially we recognized a necessity to distinguish between ‘curating’ and ‘the curatorial’. If ‘curating’ is a gamut of professional that had to do with setting up exhibitions

¹¹ Lind takes Mouffe’s terms for granted. Lind does not question this structural conception (Heidegger via Mouffe), nor does she reflect upon the usefulness of such a transfer of philosophical concepts to the field of curating.

¹² It is worth mentioning that, already a decade earlier, Beatrice von Bismarck wrote a text in which she tried to define the activity of curating; the text does not, in any way, anticipate the appearance of the concept of “the curatorial” (cf. Bismarck 2004).

¹³ Prominently, for example, in: de Man 1986, 10.

¹⁴ It is remarkable that a different form of the expansion of curating – i.e. the diffusion of the term to restaurants, shoe shops, blogs etc. (cf. Balzer 2015) – is absent from the discussion. This absence, in turn, sheds light on how “the curatorial”, even though it starts from an expanded understanding of its activities, for better or worse still insists on rather conservative delineations of the art system.

and other modes of display, then ‘the curatorial’ operates at a very different level: it explores all that takes place on the stage set-up, both intentionally and unintentionally, by the curator and views it as an event of knowledge. So to drive home a distinction between ‘curating’ and ‘the curatorial’ means to emphasize a shift from the staging of the event to the actual event itself: its enactment, dramatization and performance. ‘Curating’ takes place in a promise, it produces a moment of promise, of redemption to come. By contrast, ‘the curatorial’ is what disturbs this process; it breaks up this stage, yet produces a narrative which comes into being in the very moment in which an utterance takes place” (Martinon and Rogoff 2013, ix).

Two observations are important here. First, Martinon links “the curatorial” directly with the curator. He privileges the curator. This stands in direct contrast to Maria Lind’s view, for example, who does not limit the appearance of “the curatorial” exclusively to the curator and instead opens it to other actors in the field of the exhibition. The second observation concerns the moment of disturbance: While it is unclear what is disturbed and what such a disturbance looks like or why it occurs, it is through such a rhetoric of disturbance that “the curatorial” is structurally assimilated to concepts such as “literariness”. The concept of “literariness” – to stay with this example – does not concern all forms of literature, but rather the very essence of literature in the realm of language. And very often the appearance of something like “literariness” is framed as a moment of rupture, of disturbance – a moment of rupture within the realm of “normal” (i.e. non-literary) language.¹³ In drawing an analogy to common topoi of theoretical thinking, Martinon ennobles the idea of “the curatorial” as an autonomous category.

Although the three discussions of “the curatorial” differ from each other, especially in how “the curatorial” is contrasted with “curating”, they do have a common denominator: the very fact that they try to establish a difference between “curating” and “the curatorial”. It is also a way to avoid talking about the practice of curating and thus also about the theorization of practice. And it can furthermore be understood as a way to avoid talking about “the exhibition”, which is considered a topic primarily for museum studies and art history. We could thus rephrase what Julian Myers identified as a “phobia of artworks” (Myers 2011, 27) in curatorial discourse as a “phobia of exhibitions”.

III. Expanding the domain of “the curatorial”

A second common characteristic of the conception of “the curatorial” is its expansion to other fields.¹⁴ “The curatorial”, especially when framed as a kind of condition, finds a place not merely in the realm of exhibitions, but also in other activities and fields (cf. Lind 2010 and Martinon 2013). Such a dissolution of limits – or

how Theodor W. Adorno (2003, 368) phrased it: “fraying” – is also a key feature of contemporary art.¹⁵ This is, again, another strategy to align curatorial practices with a common *topos* of how other cultural practices are understood. One could even speak of a “mimicking” of contemporary art in order to ennoble curating as a form of art, contrary to the “traditional” role of curating as serving art.

It is, however, astonishing that most of the texts on “the curatorial” avoid specific examples in which “the curatorial” may or may not be found. This also means that the argument is not based on reference to a specific historical precedent, even though it is clear that all implicitly agree on such a historical moment, namely the 1960s, with canonical forerunners in the early 20th century.¹⁶ This is surprising insofar as a large part of the curatorial discourse is preoccupied precisely with its history, not only by focusing on a certain object in this history, but also by inscribing its authors into this history. Examples used – however rarely – to support the definition of “the curatorial” are usually taken from what could be called curatorial practice in an expanded field, that is, exhibitions that test the limits of what an exhibition can be. Lind, for example, talks about the biennial of São Paulo in 2008, specifically about the decision of the curators to leave most of the biennial’s building empty; here “the curatorial” emerges in opposition to a usually crowded biennial display (cf. Lind 2010, 64). By the same token, Rogoff argues that the A.C.A.D.E.M.Y exhibitions in Hamburg and Eindhoven, in which she was involved in 2005 and 2006 respectively, were discursive projects and process-related structure challenged the notion of what an exhibition could be (cf. Bismarck and Rogoff 2012, 30-31).

We thus find, in unison with the distinction between “curating” and “the curatorial”, an understanding of “the curatorial” that stems from the exception (if not an extreme exception): The norm of “the curatorial” is the exception. While such a conception of “the curatorial” may help us to understand very specific curatorial practices – most of them in the wake of (post-) relational aesthetics and New Institutionalism¹⁷ – the theorization of an implicit curatorial exceptionalism excludes most of the exhibition practices and thus merely postpones (and distracts from) the problem of developing a theory of exhibitions.

IV. Presentation instead of representation

I mentioned that historical forerunners are only indirectly mentioned in texts that try to define “the curatorial” (whereas numerous publications talk indeed about important exhibitions and curators as role models). One example of such an unmentioned reference is Lind’s emphasis on presentation instead of representation: “Rather than representing, ‘the curatorial’ involves presenting – it performs something that in the here and now instead of merely mapping it from there and then.”

¹⁵ While the effort of authors such as Terry Smith (for example, Smith 2012) can be understood as a theorizing of such a “dissolution of limits” of curating that investigates in practices that go beyond mere exhibition-making, it has to be noted that they look at this expansion from the view point of the exhibition. (In fact, upon closer examination, one sees that those incidents are in reality still tied to a rather narrow institutional setting of exhibitions). It would be an interesting task to assume the contrary position and look at such phenomena from the view point of (radical) pedagogy, political activism, or civic engagement.

¹⁶ It is no coincidence that the emergence of the (“autonomous”) curator and the formulation of new museum concepts happened at the same time and in connection with the emergence of post-studio practices and institutional critique since the 1960s. The discipline of curating cannot be cut off from this development. This parallel development is marked by frictions from the very beginning. To name but two examples of artists criticizing curatorial practices, then and now, see Robert Smithson’s *Cultural Confinement* (1972) and Anton Vidokle’s *Art Without Artists?* (2010).

¹⁷ For a critical re-evaluation of New Institutionalism and all its ambivalences, see Voorhies 2017, 71-138.

¹⁸ “Aesthetic experience [...] exists only *in relation* to an aesthetic object; conversely this object becomes aesthetic only by virtue of the process of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic object cannot be objectified outside aesthetic experience, nor does the subject ultimately become, on the occasion of an object that must be bracketed, the object of its own experience” (Rebentisch 2012, 11).

(Lind 2010, 65). Here Lind addresses a feature that has been central to exhibitions and contemporary art since around 1960, which has focused less on a representative grouping of works than on the production of what could be called “spaces of experience” – often producing works on site while using the format of the exhibition as the work of art as such (to name some obvious, yet very different, examples: Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Smithson, Group Material, Martha Rosler, Willem de Rooij). For Peter Osborne (2013, 27 and 162-168), the shift from representation to presentation may be a key feature of contemporary art that he directly links to global exhibitions. I would also argue that this shift has become a well-established topos in defining art since the modern period – think of the anti-mimetic impulse of early abstractionism as an anti-representational desire or Marcel Duchamp’s emphasis on the exhibition value through his ready-mades as a shift towards presentation, but also conceptual art’s manifestation in then uncommon modes of presentation or the already mentioned use of the exhibition form as a work of art. With such reasoning, the discussion about “the curatorial” places itself in a deep-rooted tradition that legitimizes what qualifies as art, without acknowledging the specificity of art works and asking how such a transfer of categories from art works to the exhibition could succeed.

It is unclear, however, whether terms like “the curatorial” can be useful in that context, because the curatorial act is still one that operates on both levels, presentation and representation. Focusing merely on the presentational aspect of curating excludes everything related to the surplus of meaning that is produced in an exhibition. Yet the similarity (and mutual influence) between artistic practices since the 1960s that could be reduced to the common denominator of “installation” and curatorial practices may be a good starting point for a theory of the exhibition. Such an understanding could be based on Juliane Rebentisch’s *Aesthetics of Installation Art*. She pleads for a concept of art that mediates between aesthetical experience and an aesthetical object, while establishing their mutual dependence.¹⁸ In light of her concept, one could inquire first into the significance of exhibitions in supporting and structuring both the aesthetical experience and object, and second into whether exhibitions are to be understood as aesthetical objects themselves.

V. Autonomy and institutional critique

Tied to the understanding of “the curatorial” as a quasi-artistic phenomenon is the recurring claim of autonomy of “the curatorial”. Again, autonomy is not something that is explicitly mentioned, but an idea that is visible between the lines. In fact, there are at least two different notions of autonomy present in the discussion of “the curatorial”. The first one designates the movement of specialization of “the curatorial”, that is, a distancing from other fields and the idea of self-reliance. (I have already touched upon this notion in the differentiation between “curating” and “the curatorial” and in its freeing from disciplinary constraints of art history.)

The second notion of autonomy is more difficult to pin down. To cite one telling example: “The curatorial is an event from which nothing can be gained because, contrary to curating, which is a constitutive activity, the curatorial is a disruptive activity. It disrupts received knowledge: what we understand by art, art history, philosophy, knowledge, cultural heritage, that is all that which constitute us, including clichés and hang-ups. [...] Nothing can indeed be gained from this event that we call the curatorial. The curatorial is really an unnecessary disruption of knowledge, that is, paradoxically, but necessarily, the birth of knowledge” (Martinon 2013, 26). All this sounds very similar to Immanuel Kant’s discussion of the “purposiveness without purpose”, which leads to a “disinterested pleasure”, and Theodor W. Adorno’s argument about the “double character” (“its autonomy and *fait social*”) (Adorno 1997, 229). This notion of autonomy of “the curatorial” – however simplified this reference appears in the texts – describes a genuine quality of all (modern) art forms. Here “the curatorial” claims to be an artistic form in its own right. But, as Juliane Rebentisch, notes: “Art is not autonomous because it is constituted in this or that way, but because it allows for an experience distinct from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason, by virtue of the specific structure of the relation between its subject and its object” (Rebentisch 2012, 11). How can we understand the exhibition – both “classical” exhibitions, but also exhibitions described as “exceptions” – on such a basis? If the exhibition is understood merely as support for art works and for an aesthetical experience, then it does not qualify as autonomous. But if we, on the contrary, frame the exhibition as an aesthetical object itself and the reception of the exhibition (i.e. a spatio-temporal setting of (art) objects with all its different layers of mediation) as an aesthetical experience – for which there are sometimes good reasons – then one should be allowed to ask whether terms such as “the curatorial” are at all necessary and whether concepts such as “installation” would not be more adequate.

What can be gained if “the curatorial” is understood in terms of autonomy? What does it consequently mean for the relation between exhibition and art work? There is no indication whether “the curatorial” produces autonomy or merely sustains autonomy once it has already been guaranteed. If we do not want to simply dismiss such arguments as art-speak nonsense (cf. Levine and Rule 2012), but inquire into their function in defining “the curatorial”, we can at least note two different effects that are tied to the two different notions of autonomy: First, the emergence and specialization of any new field always operates through a claim of autonomy; second, the alignment to established notions of art – especially the assertion of a purpose-free or pure character of art – results in an understanding of curatorial practices as quasi-artistic practices with the very same entitlements and freedoms. The insistence on the autonomous character of “the curatorial” may also help explain why most of the examples used to illustrate “the curatorial” are highly self-reflexive exhibitions; in turn, the choice of examples can be understood as a claim of autonomy on yet another level, that is, the self-reflexivity of (modern) art. The claim of autonomy seems to be contradicted by a functionalization of “the curatorial”, precisely through the use of a vocabulary familiar to us from institu-

¹⁹ On the relation between autonomy and (or rather *in*) institutional critique, see: Fraser 2004 and Fraser 2012.

tional critique.¹⁹ To name just a few examples, “the curatorial” “breaks open existing structures” or it “questions boundaries” and institutional limits. Thus “the curatorial” is framed as a politically potent tool. Other terms that regularly point in this direction are “intervention”, “gap”, “friction” and “disturbance”. I will not go into the discussion about the relation between curatorial practices and institutional critique – that is, artistic practices that are functioning “curatorially”, albeit *as* artistic practices – or the institutionalization of institutional critique in “New Institutionalism”. But it is worth asking what epistemological impact such an analogy has for our understanding of the term “the curatorial” and why exactly curatorial discourse should be politically privileged.

The claim of criticality is one of the most important assets in the realm of contemporary art. It is, to speak with Marina Vishmidt, the “sine qua non for discursive legitimacy in the circuits of art production and mediation” (Vishmidt 2008, 253). She develops this thought as follows: “It is a familiar grammar of power, which sporadically adopts the strategies of the ‘weak’ as a means of legitimation, either by invoking the socially marginal symbolically, or by disregarding power differentials in promoting strategies of flexibility and evasion which can only tend to affirm domination when such differentials are not taken into social and historical account. [...] Moreover, it repeats the idealistic error characteristic of academic cultural studies that sees ‘boundaries’ as semiotic prejudices rather than material facts, taking the signs of injustice as such, provoking solely discursive remedies” (ibid. 259).

Vishmidt’s argument is quite fitting to the curatorial discourse. Here, too, one is faced with the emphasis on criticality and political efficacy for the field of “the curatorial”, whereas power relations and actual political entanglements are, by contrast, concealed. (One could even argue that this disguise is one of the main reasons for producing texts.) It is important to note that this concerns not only the politics of institutions and their agendas for which curators produce exhibitions, but also the production of curatorial discourse in general, the very possibility of speaking about “the curatorial” as a system based on political mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that define the position of each participant.

VII. The function of theory in curatorial discourse

While “the curatorial” may very well be a legitimate concept that designates something important, it should not be taken as the starting point for a theory of exhibitions (i.e. “the curatorial” for exhibitions is unquestionably not what “the literary” is for literature). Efforts to understand “the curatorial” nonetheless show – against its intention – that it occupies a function in the discourse of art. Paul de Man identifies one of the greatest problems of theory in the “tension [that] develops

between methods of understanding and the knowledge which those methods allow one to reach.” (de Man 1986, 4). What de Man argued in the context of literary theory can be applied to the theory of exhibitions. This would then concern the gap between actual exhibitions or the historicity of certain exhibitions, on the one hand, and theoretical models that fail to offer valuable explanations of its object, on the other. In other words, there is a discrepancy between what concepts such as “the curatorial” say and the phenomena they supposedly refer to. This has to do first and foremost with the refusal to talk about “the exhibition”, which has been substituted with “the curatorial” – albeit this is merely a diagnosis and not an explanation. We need to look at the epistemological and political aspects on which the discussion of “the curatorial” is founded, with a view to the epistemological and political consequences it causes or tries to stabilize.

Let us stay with de Man: “Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value” (ibid. 7).

Applied to a theory of exhibitions, this could mean focusing not on the historical value of an exhibition or its meaning, but rather on how meaning is produced in exhibitions in the first place. This shifts the focus away from a simple progress-oriented narrative – one invention follows another – based on constants and central categories, accompanied by deviations to these constants.²⁰ Understood in these terms, my depiction of attempts to define “the curatorial” does not qualify as a theory. But I would like to argue that, even though it is not a theory qua definition, it is nevertheless used and treated as a theory in curatorial discourse. This is further supported by the hypothesis that the function of theory in curatorial discourse is one of legitimacy, in fact, in a double sense: legitimacy of a certain object or objective, and legitimacy of the speaker’s position.

While the legitimizing aspect of theories applies, to a certain degree, to all fields where theory is used, the curatorial discourse exhibits some special features and problems. In curatorial discourse, the development of theories and key concepts is always connected to the establishment of a certain practice that is then, circularly, taken to support the accuracy of the theory. In relation to autonomy, we see how models of authorship are naturalized for the object of the exhibition, a privileging of certain actors against other actors. If “the curatorial” is used as a theory in curatorial discourse, this entails not merely reflecting on one’s own activities. In fact, it has two more important consequences: First, it guides the reception and gives a set of categories on how to evaluate exhibitions, and second, it fosters specific commitments that imply a kind of standardization, making it a prerequisite to engage with certain ideas, exhibitions and practices. In this sense, conceptions such as “the curatorial” do not only provide a setting for curatorial practice, but also establish a manner of speaking with diverse terms and categories. It is not the practice alone that forms a field and ensures a certain esteem, but also the posi-

²⁰ I understand this as one of the urgent tasks of art history: to work on a theory of exhibitions. This is, I believe, only possible if the position of its authors is marked by a certain distance to the object of study. The fact that established concepts such as “the curatorial” do not suffice to grasp what *the* exhibition is not a sufficient reason to jettison theory altogether – this would be, as Paul de Man argued, “like rejecting anatomy because it has failed to cure mortality” (de Man 1986, 12).

²¹ An in-depth (praxeological) study, backed by empirical data (curricula, funding structures etc.), of the history of curatorial study programs still needs to be written. This study would have to look not only into the professionalization of curating as a reaction to contemporary curatorial practices in the wake of the expansion of contemporary art, but also into the restructuring of HE, especially the shift towards professional training in the humanities under the pressure of the Bologna Process. The argument that is brought forward here makes the simple point that there is a convergence between the establishment of terms such as “the curatorial” and the introduction of curatorial study programs: Theories have consequences – and not merely because all authors who have formulated an understanding of “the curatorial” are (or were) also directing curatorial study programs.

²² A thread that this paper could not follow is the relation between amateurism and the professionalization of curating through academic programs and how this might shed light on the success of concepts such as “the curatorial”. This question would have to be discussed in at least two different steps. A first line of thought would look into how the “social turn” of curating – especially through collectives or DIY initiatives – has blurred the figure of the curator and how such practices forward a self-understanding that is similar to conceptions such as “the curatorial”. (This is, as I have shown, a key aspect in the discussion of “the curatorial”, but there is still the necessity to confront the “theoretical” claims with actual exhibitions and their political and economic constraints.) A second inquiry would look into the seemingly paradoxical task of curatorial study programs to professionalize what they themselves very often proclaim to be an “amateurish” practice.

tion within a discursive formation and the establishment of a common vocabulary. A concept like “the curatorial” is less an explanation of a certain practice than it is the reproduction of a certain consent and, accordingly, the regulation of discourse. Thus, we must always ask who is speaking, and from what strategic position of power these speech acts are performed. Furthermore, we must reflect on what they covertly suggest, including those things that remain unsaid.

VIII. Coda

While all the above-mentioned aspects of “the curatorial” contribute to its (implicit) ideology – i.e. the (hegemonic) production of meaning that legitimizes (and excludes) certain curatorial practices, including its consequences in the wider world of contemporary art – I would like to conclude with an aspect that relates to ideology on yet a different level, to be more precise, to institutional-political issues between art history and curatorial studies.²¹ The very shift from “the exhibition” to “the curatorial” also concerns a dissociation or distancing from other disciplines such as art history, whose point of departure is the exhibition. But such a distancing is not only a dissolution from a discipline; it also fosters the establishment of a new discipline or at least supports a discipline in the making, namely, the field of curatorial studies.²² In this sense, the appearance of concepts like “the curatorial” have the legitimizing function not merely of framing or sustaining a certain object or practice, but above all of producing a common discourse.

Why, though, did concepts such as “the curatorial” only appear in the past ten years or so? If they operate to legitimize objects, practices and actors, why did they not appear already in the 1960s or 70s, or even earlier, during the formation and establishment of what is called curatorial practice? Maybe it is not so much, or not only, a certain practice that needs to be legitimized *as* practice and concepts *as* concepts. Rather, those concepts may also serve to politically legitimize the establishment of curatorial studies programs. It is obvious, for instance, that these terms developed within the framework of such programs and that they serve to justify their existence – especially in opposition to other academic programs and in the process of the marketization of the university. The introduction of study programs such as “curatorial studies” has to be seen as part of a larger shift in the humanities, which are under (economic) pressure to produce graduates with a clear job profile. This is also a question concerning the allocation of funding. In the concluding paragraph of her text, Maria Lind even suggests that “the curatorial” – now understood as a method – is a way out for the overproduction of graduates in curatorial studies: “If ‘the curatorial’ [...] can be present in the work of practically anybody active in the field of contemporary art, it could also be used as an escape route for someone who, like myself, is responsible for graduating fifteen curatorial students per year. Where will they find work? Given the proliferation of curatorial programs across the

globe, some creative thinking has to be done to determine which jobs they should look for. The existing curatorial positions simply won't suffice" (Lind 2010, 65-66). Such an understanding of "the curatorial" makes another layer in its function in the curatorial discourse clearly visible: its position in the academic system as a form of legitimation of certain programs that need to distinguish themselves from others (and these are, for the most part, very costly post-graduate programs). I would thus advocate for an understanding of those texts that does not only inquire into their epistemological impact or interest, that is, their sense and value, but also into the practices and context that produce such texts and what consequences they have. In other words, what is their agenda? And this entails examining the academization of curating and the establishment of curatorial studies at universities and art academies – a particularly pressing task if we recall that one of the key features of the curatorial discourse is its self-understanding as a form of institutional critique. ●

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