

# RE/VIEWING THE LITERATURE

**Martinon, Jean-Paul. 2020. *Curating as Ethics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press**

*Reviewed by Ed McKeon*

“Be careful what you wish for” could be this book’s adage. Jean-Paul Martinon’s willingness to take seriously the slippage of curatorial authority from its institutional anchoring in the museum and gallery arts—into the live arts and beyond—has far-reaching consequences. If the notion of curating is to remain meaningful in the age of platform curation, another model of value needs to be acknowledged: one that is predicated on neither the sanctity of the autonomous artwork nor forms of economy (of measurable and transactional relations, of popularity, likes, or of monetary equivalence). This radical value above all quantifiable values is life: an art of living. “There is no price tag on mortals” (149). *Curating as Ethics* is then an attempt to follow the implications of living value through the responsibilities that the curatorial entails.

Martinon is emphatic that this is distinct from an ethics *of* curating. Rather, “if curating is caring, then curating needs to take on board the whole range of meaning of the word *caring* and not just focus on a banal ‘looking after artworks’ or an equally banal ‘responding benevolently to the other, the audience, the public’” (157–158). Responsibilities multiply. In what has no doubt already been dubbed a caring “turn” (have we come full circle?), the conventional wisdom that we are all now curators begins to carry much greater import (see also Krasny et al. 2021). The curatorial—the philosophy of which Martinon (2013) has explored previously—becomes not just *a* way of life but compels *the* way of life as such, the embodiment of ethics.

Martinon draws on Heidegger’s (1993) framework of the fourfold to unfold this, but does so at an angle to this thinking and in the company of an assembly of other theorists. The correlations of Mortals and Gods (life expressed both as finite, individual and unrepeatable, yet also constantly re-



newing, heterogeneous and plural) and of Earths and Skies—the way that a world appears (or rather, “worlds”)—provide a method to weave an account of living with care that embraces aesthetic practices. These terms, which cannot be compressed precisely to give a true synopsis, can be understood as concrete abstractions, paradoxical means to articulate the nature of Being (and being) that necessarily exceeds conceptual determination. The book of life is always being written, always at the edge of language.

*Curating as Ethics* is a philosophical text, then, but it is also a curated one that Martinon likens to an exhibition in three parts, each with ten short pieces introduced with summaries akin to wall labels. Curatorial paradigms such as the materiality of the (art) object and the production of knowledge follow on from the ontico-ontological structure of the ethics; acts of curating—Saving, Caring, Midwifing, Intuiting, and so on—comprise the third section.

The correspondence of exhibitions and books is long-standing, of course, not only through catalogs that—at least since Seth Siegelaub’s (1968) *Xerox Book*—have sometimes replaced the “primary information” of the exhibition itself, but also when galleries’ white walls have become so many blank pages, as in Bernard Tschumi and RoseLee Goldberg’s 1975 show *A Space: A Thousand Words* (Kaji-O’Grady 2008). This is somewhat different, however. It stages not a display, even a virtual or imaginary one, but rather a relationship between author, text, and reader(s). We are not compelled to follow the galleried linear trajectory from cover to cover but can choose equally to dwell with pieces that grab our attention, to flit ahead or flip back to others as links offer themselves.

In contrast with the unrepeatability of a performance, then, whose three acts or three sets can only be experienced sequentially in time—or synchronously, as with John Cage and Merce Cunningham’s practice of indeterminacy and interpenetration—it is us as readers who must *perform* the text. Responsibilities multiply. Martinon indicates as much with his piece on Words, addressing the curatorial concern with utterance. The curator’s speech act is not presented in the conventions of an authorial voice but is itself a contribution to discourse that precedes and exceeds them, a contribution that obliges us to care equally for our reading—the temporal singularity of each reading—without sitting in judgement.

Without origin or destination, the obligation (“be just”) thus moves from artists to curators, from curators to viewers, and between viewers. The obligation takes place with only one task: that of passing on the obligation without questioning its origin and without a specific aim in sight. (101)

Here, the curatorial production of a performance, an exhibition, a gathering, or a text is concerned with the paradoxical task of realizing a durable world that is always nevertheless open to an “unhoped for future,” a world that we

cannot model in advance, strategize for, or anticipate but that is always coming into being. (The piece on Preparing will resonate with every performance curator.) Be careful what you wish for, indeed.

As its readers, and after letting it rest, we are this text's living curators. Repeat performances, improvising different itineraries, are encouraged. It is not the easiest book to read, but it rewards the effort and will be one to revisit.

**Ed McKeon** is a musician who neither performs nor composes. Codirector of Third Ear, he produces and commissions music and mixed-media events at the point where music indisciplines other art forms—whether theater, installation, or performance. He completed doctoral research on musicality and the curatorial and leads a master's program on music management at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

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