Arriving at Goldsmiths College in 1998

My first encounter with the world of curating in higher education was in 1998 when I was appointed Assistant to Anna Harding who was then Program Director of the MA in Creative Curating at Goldsmiths College in London. I remember vividly my first encounter with the cohort of students of that year, twenty or so faces staring at Anna and I and expecting us to unravel the truths about curating and, more importantly, the tricks necessary to become a successful curator. Our pedagogical strategy was then on all accounts theoretically clear, but in practice difficult to achieve: each student had to devise their own interests and from there, their own curatorial trajectory. The process was not a new one. It was typical of the College's Art Department's strategy to put the student at the center of learning, what was then called the Department's 'student-centered approach'. The challenge the students faced at the time was basically to develop a personal cultural vocation that was both socially and politically engaged. As was expected, many could not. Their backgrounds, personal circumstances and own subjective interests rarely managed to cohere into a semblance of vocation. But a few took up the challenge and successfully developed their own personal career strategies.

At that time, there was only one other degree dedicated to this practice in London: the Royal College of Art Curating Course. Together we churned out roughly over forty curators per year. The idea that we were responsible for flooding the contemporary art world and the British one specifically with more curators than it could

cope with was much on our minds. What, indeed, would happen to these twenty or so students after they graduate? The failure to connect a fine art degree in curating with a paid curatorial job in the art world itself was indicative of how the profession itself would change in the future. If someone with a degree in curating could work as an arts editor for a website company or a department store clearly showed that the student-centered learning experiences of these degrees were wide-ranging enough to encompass a multitude of jobs beyond the narrow remit of the contemporary art world. In a way, both the RCA and Goldsmiths were not just churning out forty curators per year, but forty multi-valent individuals able to cope with a set of wide-ranging situations in global visual culture. The worry of flooding the art world with too many curators was then occasionally replaced with the jubilation of knowing that critically-aware individuals were actually helping improve the field of visual culture.

The most difficult aspect of the job was to set the parameters for examination. Unlike at the RCA, the students had no allocated funding for their projects, either for the group or individually. The questions, for us, were then these: How to evaluate an exhibition project before it happens? What criteria would demonstrate that the student has achieved the Programme's learning outcomes? Asking students to develop their own personal cultural vocation that was both socially and politically engaged did not exactly lend itself easily to examinable components. In a way, we were asking them to develop their own curiosity and critical faculties and yet in doing so, we were also hindering our ability to examine their output. Obviously the main fear at the time was to avoid disciplinary reductionisms and formulaic pedagogical tools. The last thing we wanted was to create strict criteria and then stubbornly abide by them. So the task was

extremely difficult. Each student was ultimately examined for their ability to creatively and critically come up with a project that was not only socially and politically aware, but also respectful of artists' intentions and viewers' sensibilities. This examination strategy often led to endless discussions amongst staff that were not always conclusive, however much we abided by the most stripped down of regulations imposed by the College.

Overall, my first experience of curating in higher education was an ambivalent one: on the one hand, I felt that I was participating in the creation of a new field of study, not only devising, but also inventing from scratch a new curriculum experience for an ill-defined cultural profession without previous academic disciplinary status. This innovative approach highlighted the dawn of a new age free from the shackles imposed by now obsolete institutions, such as for example, the formalism of art history. On the other hand, I also felt as if I was participating in the creation of a new type of hybrid cultural practitioner who, for good or bad, was able to navigate the treacherous waters of a neo-liberal world always eager to prey upon and exploit creative individuals in order to further consolidate its hegemonic sovereignty. Was it really that important to evade disciplines at all cost? Was it that crucial to favor creativity, inventiveness and resourcefulness over patient study, attention to the past and scholarliness? To this day, I'm still doubtful of our – Anna and I's – strategy. The only thing I know is that if I had proposed (or subscribed to) the latter, I would have never been part of the team. Ultimately, this first experience made me realize that although I was hoping to make the world a better place with such innovative educational practices, I was also participating in making it worse by encouraging what neo-liberalism favors beyond anything, namely

mobile self-sufficient individuals precariously battling every day a techno-driven world run mad on urgencies.

Own Apprenticeship in Curating

This first experience of curating in higher education was all new to me. My own apprenticeship in curating took place without any of these intricate considerations about the usefulness of curating. I effectively entered curating without prior training or schooling (except for a Masters' degree in International Law, which was here irrelevant). My first curatorial project was staged in a small shop on Great Ormond Street in central London in 1991. At the time, I knew nothing of fundraising, exhibition display methods, media relations, gallery management, not even how to invite artists to participate in a group exhibition. I had never visited an artist's studio and my knowledge of contemporary art was overall pretty limited. The challenge for me at the time was immense: learning very quickly not only a history (the history of art, but also the history of social and cultural contexts that informed this history), but also a method of operating – that of the art world. This meant knowing both the language of artists as well as that of all the key players in the art world: museum directors, curators, exhibition organizers, project directors, public relations companies, journalists, art critics, art editors, art dealers, etc. Inevitably, the feeling at the time was that of being a fraud. Having never been vetted by an arts educational institution, I always feared to being perceived as a dilettante. This forced me to double my learning efforts, thus ensuring that I would not pass for someone who effectively had no real commitment or knowledge about art or the ways in which it was presented. My specialization into site-specificity at the time

was, in a way, my trump card: if I knew enough of this area of work, I could pass off as any other professional in the art world. Little did I know that most people felt the same, even those who were accredited with a degree from a reputable art college.

Overall, my apprenticeship took place over the course of the next eight years, curating ever more ambitious projects, slowly learning the processes that lead to a successful exhibition. One steep learning moment was the realization that there was no point curating a show without hiring a PR company and no budget could exclude this. The difference between a show promoted by a PR company and one left to the vagaries, whims and quirks of the art press was incomparable. Even when – especially when – the art was poor, the publicity machinery helped make it a successful show. This realization made me see the art world completely differently. What people are led to believe are important shows are often the least interesting ones. The art world was effectively a gullible bunch of people easily falling for whatever a PR company force-fed them. The upshot of this was that in order to find an interesting show – and there are fewer and fewer today – artists, curators and interested viewers have to work really hard, casting aside the media machineries and machinations, in order to find exhibitions and projects that really matter not only for the advancement of the language of art and curating, but also for the way the world is culturally apprehended. This hard work turns out, in most cases, to be even more difficult today with the whirl of social media in as much as it locks exhibition going audiences into filter-bubbles distorting what matters and what does not, often sending into oblivion what should have been both 'front-page' and/or 'most-liked' news.

As my practice grew bigger, the danger became clear: I was slowly becoming not a curator, but a producer of large-scale projects, progressively detaching myself from the creative side of curating to encompass more and more administrative and fundraising duties. By 1999, it was time to stop and reflect on what I had done throughout the nineties. The triggering point was an encounter with a jet-setting curator at an opening at Tate Britain. While we were sipping cheap mock-champagne cocktails, the curator boasted of having three artworks that he had specifically commissioned included in the Tate's Collection of New Art. While I muttered some inane congratulations, I suddenly realized that all my site-specific projects had come to nothing. There were no public galleries or museums holding the ephemeral art I had shown over the last decade. I told myself that this was probably a good thing since I had prevented the unnecessary accumulation of artworks in national museums. And yet at the same time, I also reluctantly accepted that all my efforts in challenging and opening up the boundaries of exhibiting practices had come to nothing; that faced with the despotic hegemony of museums, my work, like that of many others before me, was just, at best, a faint footnote in the history of art, at worse, a forgotten blip in the history of contemporary art in Britain. Aware of such ambiguous outcome for all my curatorial efforts, I threw away my producer's hat and embarked on a PhD in contemporary art theory in order to make sense of all the ephemeral work I had helped 'produce' as a curator.

Inventing a PhD Degree

The idea of stopping and reflecting on what I had done made me realize that many curators should actually do the same: stop and think what on earth they are doing. This realization led to the decision a few years later to launch a MPhil-PhD Degree in curating at Goldsmiths. The feeling at the time was that there were indeed enough curators about, there were far too many exhibitions and projects and that there were enough schools training curators to enter the profession. What was needed was a platform for curators to reflect on what they do: curating. So Irit Rogoff and I set up the Curatorial/Knowledge PhD Program. The main gist behind this decision to set up a new PhD degree was to make the distinction between the practice of putting on a show and the event of knowledge that takes place after the exhibition is open to the public. This did not mean that I was not interested in the path leading up to the exhibition, but that the two could be studied with much more clarity than it had in the past. Very quickly, I sensed that I had different views on how this was to be achieved. While Irit thought that curators should acquaint themselves with ways of approaching urgencies in the world thus turning the curriculum into the study of 'the contemporary', I thought that curators should on the contrary stop to reflect on ways of defining their practice both historically, theoretically and culturally in order to better face these urgencies. The two approaches were not mutually exclusive and interestingly remain still in place, albeit blurred, to this day.

The idea of setting up this degree was also a reaction to our College's Art's department earlier decision to create a practice-based PhD Degree in curating. Our aim was not, as some erroneously thought at the time, to create a competing degree. It was simply an attempt to come up with the tools curating needed to evaluate itself. At the

time, in 2006, there were no criteria for a curator to examine their work. It was all done in a haphazard way through surveys and audits. Our ambition was not to establish a criterion of excellence or a toolkit for good exhibition practices, but to think through what curating and the curatorial was all about. What indeed I could not understand about universities deciding to establish practice-based PhD degrees in curating was this: how is one to determine that an exhibition is of doctoral standing? Was Documenta XI, for example, of enough quality to be awarded an imaginary doctoral degree? And what about more modest projects that have much more consequential impacts on the current social and cultural milieu in which they take place? Do they deserve a doctorate? There was something fundamentally absurd about this. Exhibitions are far too diverse in their form and contents to allow themselves to be channeled through a process of academic examination. The MPhil-PhD Program in Curatorial / Knowledge was thus set up from this second starting platform, which I laid out in my first lecture to the new intake of students: it was impossible to churn out validated accreditations to a practice that effectively defied all forms of accreditation.

Why was this the case and how then to proceed with this new degree? The questions I asked myself at the time were these: what constitutes a theory of curating? Who are the best writers and thinkers able to inform such a theory? What do curators themselves read and what should they be reading? The list was endless, disciplines and practices all hailed authors who could easily be included in a curating PhD program's reading list. Although there were no criteria, I still managed to create a tentative bibliography for curating and the curatorial that I ended up including at the end of the book *The Curatorial* (2013). What is most striking about this list is that no

discipline could be understood as being central to the practice of curating. Curators interested in anthropology could claim a number of books in their field as central to their practice. Others could claim books in psychology, art history, philosophy, politics, economy, sociology, etc. Curating was basically claiming to itself most humanities and social sciences and yet at the same time it was also incapable of channeling all these borrowed fields into a coherent curatorial reading platform. The ultimate scavenger of disciplines was also the least apt at constituting one for itself. Who has not sighed at the abuses of theory on exhibition walls and in catalogue essays, for example? This sigh also often took place when contemplating the way aspiring curators handle their research. The number of times I sat, for example, on a PhD Viva panel in curating despairing at the candidate's half-baked use of philosophy or political theory is too dispiriting to count. Curating is a woolly practice because it never coheres into a disciplinary narrative and needs other disciplines in order to articulate and justify itself.

Outcome of Journey

However, such wooliness is in my opinion what also, paradoxically, constitutes curating's most powerful tool in the contemporary world. This is a difficult thought because wooliness is never acceptable, always problematic. The question is then not to defend this 'wooliness', but to transcend it in order to turn it *not* into something acceptable, but into something altogether radically different. Put succinctly, curating cannot be taught through specific disciplinary narratives, it can only be taught in fragments borrowed from other disciplines. Such a fragmentariness shows not so much a predisposition for the unfinished, but most simply a refusal of the system. The

contemporary world is made up of fragments of indeterminable origin, import or potential. Individuals operate and navigate haphazardly through countless bits and pieces of information and snippets and scraps of facts that nothing ever coheres into any form of systemic knowledge. As a reflection of such a world, curating is really about broken comprehension, ambivalent competence, unhinged knowledge, unsystematic skill, arbitrary proficiency, accidental mastery and casual expertise. These are perhaps the limits and potential of the PhD in Curatorial/Knowledge. The last word of this PhD Program's name is both an aspiration and an ironic take on what can never be achieved.

So how then to turn this paradoxical wooliness into something altogether different? How to overcome this paradox of curatorial knowledge? The only way to begin addressing this is to rethink what curating is, that is, to radically detach it from any old disciplinary referent. Curating is indeed no longer confined to art, it concerns the much broader activity of engaging, selecting, arranging, critically evaluating and sharing culture in general. This means that the old and obsolete discipline known as 'art' is no longer central to the articulation of curating. Free from the old Enlightenment metaphysical referent, curating is now practiced in all fields in culture (online, fashion, perfumery, catering, advertising, etc.). It concerns a multiplicity of different eco-systems (including the Internet). These are slowly replacing the old institutions (museums, art history, art theory, etc.) as the privileged conceptual frameworks for curating. Performance and impact indicators (including online responsiveness: social media's like, wow, haha, sad, etc.) are prioritized over message, medium, code and referent. This means that both author- and viewer-functions become secondary to instant

experience and digestibility, and for online content, webpage readability, shareability, portability and filter-bubble consistency. Ultimately, curating is now a practice finally free of any institutional (historical, theoretical, socio-cultural or political) discourses and consequently can only be taught in fragmentary forms detached from any previous system, including any previously shattered disciplines.

From such a radical platform, one which no doubt will make art practitioners recoil in horror, the teaching of curating can therefore abandon – if it has not already! – any reference to a past history of projects, but also to a future promise. Refusing the system, curating indeed can no longer afford to refer to an always necessarily idiosyncratic and highly subjective history of (institutional) projects that can never cohere into a single narrative, notwithstanding publishers' attempts to do so through highly problematic edited collections. Why start, for example, with Szeemann's 1972 Documenta as a way of thinking contemporary curating? It makes no sense considering the current diversity of curatorial endeavours. If Szeemann's 'seminal' show is only a fragment, then any other fragment can be used as a starting point. *The Art Collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in Brussels* (c. 1651) by David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690), for example, would seem to me more appropriate, especially in relation to content curating. Curating can also no longer afford to refer itself to a future promise; the knowledge it imparts is so diffuse and confused that the idea that it would eventually know its self-sufficiency and, in the end, establish itself as a discipline in its own right, can only be abandoned. Curating proceeds as fragment without referring these to a future coherence 'to-come'.

Wither to, Curating?

Without reference to a history or to a future promise, curating's wooliness then reveals something much more important. It shows that basically meaning always comes severally, not in single solitary formats, but in a truncated shape. The crux of such realization is that ultimately 'One is always wrong', whereas, 'truth begins at Two'. The premise of all disciplinary apparatuses and institutional discourses is that it has 'One' as the driving motor piloting and perusing the narratives, the histories, discourses, theories. The academic system always assumes not only a unity of origin, 'Being', but also, and above all, a 'Being' able to navigate the world understood exclusively as narrative, history, discourse, theory. Universities are always about 'Being' understood as sovereignty. The idea of a 'student-centered learning experience' for example is symptomatic of such sovereignty. The same is true of other disciplines. Every time scholars think of sociology, philosophy or anthropology, for example, they tie themselves to 'Being', that is, to an ontological certainty that renders the discipline coherent, cohesive, prone to narratives, histories, discourses and theories. The more brilliant the system, the more it shines with the light of 'Being'. Curating curiously and annoyingly disrupts this centrality precisely because it is not able to rest on systemic organizations with 'Being' in the driving seat.

So instead of recoiling in horror at the loss of centrality of 'art practice' with regards to curating, curators and academics involved in curatorial studies might, on the contrary, revel at the idea of a practice that destabilizes all systemic endeavours. Curating is about *the exigency of fragmentation, the imperative of the smithereens*. This exigency does not mean that curating should wallow in bits and bobs and that

everything is irrational, absurd or illogical. This exigency simply means that curating is in fact solely concerned with the provocation of language. This is what the exigency of fragmentation means. An exigency is not a command coming from a desire to shatter, destroy or deconstruct things, but from a decision: the decision to not predicate a discourse (an exhibition, for example) on 'Being' or on its plural equivalent ('the multitude', for example), but to *insist* on fragmentation, that is, on the birth of language, the emergence of the Word. This exigency is what gives curating's wooliness its most remarkable vindication as the most astute of contemporary ways of apprehending the world. In the overwhelming deluge of information and the diversity of always contradictory practices, the smithereens are the only working condition conceivable today, and curating is its main agent.

But can this exigency be taught? Probably not. Students, these 'Beings,' have become far too entrenched in their forced-fed consumer-sovereignty that they can only desperately seek any threads of value that more or less holds water, discursively or institutionally. Conversely, art, curatorial and museums studies departments have become false advocates for 'liberal' values while blankly accepting capitalism's motto of 'more', always 'more'. The class is indeed divided: on the one hand, lost lonely souls desperately seeking values and on the on the other, schizophrenic teaching staff playing a double game of being the bastion of liberal views while un-consciously yielding to opposite prescriptions for their own institution's profit. But from this bleak, and some might say cynical view, a ray of hope can be seen to appear on the horizon. Amidst the smithereens, small isolated acts of learning pass from one person to another. These acts never take place in institutional formats or bureaucratic systems

and they can never win war or resolve the ills of the world. They take place behind the scenes, amidst discussions that often have nothing to do with curating, but inform curating from without. It is in these discrete acts that the exigency of fragmentation, this imperative of the smithereens take place, not only provoking new words and therefore new ways of articulating the world, but also new forms of goodness. The ray of hope appears in these small shifts, discrete agencies that navigate the path to a good always in need of a redefinition. These new forms of goodness are reminiscent of the last strophe of W.H. Auden's poem 'September 1, 1939', in which he expresses how the good takes place:

> Defenseless under the night
>
> Our world in stupor lies;
>
> Yet, dotted everywhere,
>
> Ironic points of light
>
> Flash out wherever the Just
>
> Exchange their messages:
>
> May I, composed like them
>
> Of Eros and of dust,
>
> Beleaguered by the same
>
> Negation and despair,
>
> Show an affirming flame.

(2007: 99)

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