

Mind the Gap: Unfolding the proximities of the curatorial

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Abstract

The curatorial is a discursive formation that has emerged from critical engagements with curating as a practice of object presentation and a rejection of dominant practices of knowledge formation traditionally associated with the museum. In this article, I argue that the curatorial in fact makes use of the relational potentialities of the museum display, but, in so doing, is in danger of overlooking the critical opportunity disavowed by traditional museology that lies at the heart of the museum: the irreducible gaps of the exhibitionary encounter. To unfold both the relational power of the museum's display mechanisms and the ever-presence of distance in moments of exhibitionary proximity, I use an early critique by Mieke Bal of the American Museum of Natural History. Arguing that what Bal makes evident is the impossibility of total coincidence in practices of museum 'showing', I turn, in conclusion, to the work of artists Fred Wilson and Jade Montserrat to suggest how the gaps within exhibition display may be (re)practiced.

One thing that is clear from the evolving discourse of contemporary curating is that the outcome of a curatorial process may not look like an exhibition. This is not to say that the outcome may not be an exhibition, but that the moment of exhibiting may not be confined to, or even involve at all, the presentation of objects in a gallery space traditionally understood to constitute an exhibition. Furthermore, the exhibiting moment may not be a singular, sited totality to be experienced as such, but may be a series of events that are as much a part of the process of conception and construction as they are a final outcome. In an attempt to wrest the possibilities of curating from the hands of convention, those involved in the production of what may be termed 'post-object-presentational' curating and its discourse have had recourse to an alternative term to describe this expanded field: the 'curatorial' (O'Neill 2007b; O'Neill, Steeds and Wilson 2016). Curator and theorist Maria Lind has written that the curatorial consists of 'signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places and ideas' (2010: 64). Exemplary of the curatorial as a processual, dynamic and discursive practice was Documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enwezor and a team of six other curators, operating across five 'platforms' and four continents over the course of a year (Enwezor interview by O'Neill 2007a). Accordingly, one

may understand ‘the curatorial’ as an enunciative act that brings to visibility a series of practices and forms that have long been a part of exhibitionary practices of relational proximity—diverse forms of ‘bringing together’, such as cultural programming, education or research. Or we may see the curatorial as constituting a distinct set of practices of relational connectivity that belong to post-institutions, such as the art biennial (Gielen 2009). But what is indisputable about the use of the phrase ‘the curatorial’ is the utterly reasonable desire of those embracing it to move curating beyond the traditional institution of exhibition and curating par excellence—the museum, and its historic forms of objectifying classification, narrative teleology and colonial administration (Haraway 1984; Duncan 2005; Pollock and Zemans 2007; MacDonald 2012; L’internationale 2015).

Here, I wish neither to dispute or affirm the success of those working under the auspices of the curatorial in moving beyond the form of the museum as the primary site of exhibitionary meaning-making. Nor do I wish to critique whether or not post-institutional forms, such as the art biennial, overcome hierarchical structures and unilateral positions by offering something more horizontal and plural. Instead, I want to ask: what sort of possibility exists through a continued engagement, critical and affirmative, with the exhibitionary proximities of the museum? I approach this question by examining how the desire for relations of connectivity and proximity, as expressed by the curatorial as an expanded field of practice, may be understood as emanating from, rather than working against, the museum display. My aim is not to re-instate the very form that forty years of institutional critique, thirty years of museum studies and more than a decade of curatorial discourse, underpinned by Marxist, feminist and post-colonial theory, has attempted to de-mythologize. Instead, I consider below what can be gained from examining the ongoing connection with traditional practices of museum curating that the word ‘curatorial’ itself maintains but disavows. To do this I will argue that the valorization of connection and closeness in ‘the curatorial’ as an expanded field overlooks the very thing that makes the curatorial element of the exhibition so valuable in its potential as critical form—its production of irreducible distance in moments of proximity: distance between object and label, object and object, exhibitionary moment and spectator. It is these distances, configured in terms of what I would call the non-coincidence of co-presence, escaping limited notions of evidence, meaning or narrative, that I wish to claim as the potential of the curatorial.

To explore this potential, I focus first on specific conventions of proximity within the exhibitionary mechanism. I identify how the presentational coincidence of words, objects and bodies in the moment of display creates powerful forms of alignment that serve to fix meanings. I then consider how these practices of coincidence, such as labelling and juxtaposition, fail to reduce the distance between matter and meaning, and how the opening up of this distance implicates us all within the construction of our presence in the present. To explore the power of exhibitionary proximity and the potential of its inevitable failure to produce complete coincidence I re-examine ‘Telling, showing, showing off’ (1992), a piece of significant early critical work on museum display by Mieke Bal. Using Bal’s article, which pre-dates contemporary curatorial discourse, I hope to build upon, but also suggest a deviation from, dominant ways of understanding the curatorial as a practice of relationality, connectivity and networked subjectivity. Finally, I turn to the work of artists Fred Wilson and Jade Montserrat to illustrate how the ‘gap’ of the curatorial can be opened up to produce non-reductive moments of proximity with the present.

De-constructing proximity

Common to numerous classic critiques of the museum gallery, which identify the non-neutrality of its mechanisms of display, is their exposure of the politics of distance and proximity. These include critiques of the distance that comes with the separation of culture from everyday life through its entombment within the museum (Adorno 1983 [1967]; Crimp and Lawler 1995); the particular distances and proximities created between forms of cultural practice, nature and culture, the canonical and the marginal, the valued and the worthless through practices of classification (Pollock 1999; Clifford 1988); and the intimate distances of ‘appropriate’ forms of looking, that in themselves produce a closeness between those who know how to look in the ‘correct’ way and a distance from those who do not (Bourdieu, Darbel and Schnapper 1991 [1969]). Such is the vital and policed role of relations of proximity in the museum, it is unsurprising that unsanctioned touching has been considered a particularly transgressive act of museum visiting (Candlin 2009). One classic text of museum gallery critique that explores the particular done-up-ness of the museum, its fixation on fixity and its absolute reliance on the fine architecture of proximity and distance, is Mieke Bal’s ‘Telling, showing, showing off’,

a critique of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). I choose to focus on this article, rather than Bal's analyses of curatorial practice from the realm of art that may seem more appropriate for a discussion of 'the curatorial' as an art-world phenomenon (for example, Bal 1996, 2007, 2012), because it is here that Bal most explicitly critiques the coincident structures of the display mechanism. Although varying in specificity from one type of museum to the next, these structures remain germane to all dominant museum contexts, in the shadow of which contemporary curatorial practices operate. Furthermore, by focusing on the display of 'natural' history, Bal reveals what is so troubling in all moments of museum exhibition: the apparent self-evidence of modes of proximate display.

In 'Telling, showing, showing off', Bal exposes the exhibitionary mechanisms that claim to neutrally display 'natural' history as being, in fact, productive of a history that is then naturalized. Bal starts with an exposition of the classificatory mechanism through which New York's AMNH is produced. This first classification, upon which all others within the museum are predicated, is the split between nature and culture across the museums of New York: nature being consigned to the west side of Central Park in the AMNH, and culture to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) on the east side. Bal considers the taxonomic shifts that occur in the evaluation of objects, after James Clifford, as art or not-art, but also the changes in display practice that accompany these classificatory divisions. In the case of the Met, the claim to the universal value of art and artefact relies on an 'abstracting [of] the artifacts from their social and historical environments' (Bal 1992: 559)—the establishment of distance from context and proximity through display to create the homology of artistic value. Whereas, over on the other side of the park at the AMNH, 'the environment takes over so insistently that the works are drowned in their own naturalness' (*ibid.*)—the eradication of all distance through total immersion in order to remove the possibility of anything other than contextual value.

While, of course, we know that the nature in the AMNH, like all natural history museums, is not 'natural'—animals that don't move, enclosures that are too small to be 'real' environments—it is the discourse of naturalism that must be understood as a given through the explicit exhibition of symbolic realism: naturalistic backdrops, documentary photographs and so on. In the same way, the technologies of gilt frames, or white-walls, clean floors or introductory biographical texts complete the circuit of self-evidence that fixes a work of art as valid as such. These devices are

metonyms for veracity that maintain the museum's categorical fidelity, invoking the power of display (that easily passes from taxidermy and frames to modern projection and surround-sound technologies). In other words, it is the virtuosity of the museum's fidelity to its own narrative that must be apprehended. However, it is not just the explicit displays of objects and images that fixes its objects and subjects within taxonomic regimes of unquestioned authority, but, according to Bal, the 'incredible density of metarepresentational signs, all symptomatic of a desire to make representation coincide with its object' (574, my emphasis).

To illustrate this process of coincidence, Bal focuses on a particular display entitled Prehistoric Storytelling, that consists of painted panels from nineteenth-century Siberia depicting hunting scenes, against a backdrop of a painting from Turkey c.6500 BC also depicting a hunting scene. Bal scrutinizes this display for the way in which it brings into incontrovertible relation 'archaeological traces' and 'anthropological parallels' (569). These two terms are not Bal's, but the ones then used by the museum itself, as its particular response to the question that the museum announced to its visitors: 'How did man achieve civilization?' It is the traces and parallels presented in the display that are meant to provide sufficient evidence of the development of civilization. Through this method, the subjects of the display are confined to the side of pre-history and pre-culture. We, the viewers, are aligned with the curators of the museum, for whom the parallel must be made because we are not identified with the 'Siberian' subject depicted. The panel makes clear that someone who is Siberian is precluded from the possibility of being a contemporary viewer, making the implied historical distance utterly non-traversable. Meanwhile, the text accompanying the display of hunting representations compensates for the lack of realism in the painting on the Siberian archaeological fragment by citing, with faux-surprise, the coincidence that a nearby display (a diorama of a Koryak hunting scene) happens to depict 'realistically' that that is artistically represented in the panels. At the same time, the historical validity of the 'realistic' display is assured by the archaeological trace of the Siberian painted panel that depicts the same scene—never mind who produced it, why and with what artistic interest (574–7). The original painted panel of a hunting scene, the copy of an older and geographically separated hunting scene, and the constructed display of a hunting scene, are made, through the device of labelling, juxtaposition and the homological rendering of the display mechanism, to coincide, obscuring any gaps that there may be in the evidentiary

circuit and thus refusing the possibility of other interpretations, identifications and proximities. For the particular evidentiary logic of the AMNH to work, the representation of a scene, a practice, a people or a moment, must be utterly coincident with the objects and subjects on display; the distance between what is shown and what is told through its particular narrative forms of showing must be refused.

Much of Bal's essay is concerned with such epistemological arrangements: how the museum produces knowledge, and how the production of knowledge qua knowledge is secured through conventions of proximity and relations of distance. In the final part of the essay, Bal makes the ethico-political stakes of this epistemological apparatus clear:

[A]s I have also tried to demonstrate, one particular element, the convergence toward an already very powerful tendency, prevails: the tendency to believe in the truth of the knowledge represented through fiction. 'Showing' natural history employs a rhetoric of persuasion that almost inevitably convinces the visitor of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon, largely Christian culture that is supposedly at the top of the evolutionary ladder, but is absent from the museum's displays. Showing, if it refrains from telling its own story, is showing off. (Bal 1992: 594)

Bal reveals the power of overlapping networks of signification to map the space of understanding and experience. The coincidence of juxtaposition between things and words in the production of meanings and in the production of our distance from those meanings is extremely powerful. Indeed, 'our' arrival to the Met on the east side of the park relies on 'our' distance from the pasts and subjects represented in the AMNH on the west side of the park. To complete this 'showing-off', it is imperative that the visitor, conceived as someone who has, supposedly, no relation other than a teleological one with the subjects and objects in the AMNH, is able to cleave the present from the past to create an understanding of the contemporary moment as a 'natural' development of a nature now civilized.

Reconstructing proximity

Within her critique of the AMNH, Bal demonstrates the particular epistemological opportunities that lie at the heart of curatorial practice; showing as a rhetoric of persuasion that may substitute for the act of telling through the proximity of exhibitionary coincidence. Such power has become widely acknowledged; the critical attention of exhibition studies has confirmed that there is no such thing as neutral presentation and that the associative and relational are powerful modes of narrative or extra-narrative formation (for example, Staniszewski 1998; Greenberg *et al.* 1996). This leads to notions such as the curator as auteur and uber-narrator and the exhibition itself as an object of critical analysis or as a filmic narrative of sequential unfolding (Heinich and Pollak 1996; Bal 2007).

In contemporary curatorial practice, this power is one either to be exalted and exploited, or refused and defused. Indeed, within fine-art curating, such a realization of the power of the exhibitionary mechanism has led towards a steady move away from the art-object as the site of exhibitionary value, and from 'good' curating as the least interfering mode of presenting the art work, to a consideration of the potentiality of building connections between objects and subjects—a shift that is often aligned with the discourse of the curatorial over the activity of professional or traditional curating. To quote Lind at greater length:

Today I imagine the curatorial as a way of thinking in terms of interconnections: linking objects, images, processes, people, locations and histories, and discourses in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions. (Lind 2010: 63)

Lind, and others who embrace the curatorial, revel in the constructive possibility of connectivity to create networks that may allow us to know positively and negatively what can arise relationally within the gallery and frequently beyond. The curatorial, as a descriptor of expanded practices of curating, performs the openness and continuous nature of the associative and the networked in the perpetual unfolding in display that is never foreclosed, but is, nonetheless, productive of something that is more than a sum of its parts. As such, the contemporary curator's task in the curatorial mode is as frequently the construction of a platform, method or forum, as it is the selection of content for an exhibition or the maintenance of object positions (see O'Neill and Wilson 2010, 2015; Hoare *et al.* 2016).

Contemporary curating in the field of art embraces the possibilities of structure to explore exactly what the AMNH attempted to conceal: the contingency of meaning formation as it arises through the network of words, things and beings that is inherent in the curatorial (Martinon 2013: 31). It is the possibility of tracing this network, while also constructing it, that makes curating the uber-practice of the contemporary as an ideal state of co-presence. The idea of the contemporary is, as Peter Osborne names it, ‘a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times’ (2013: 22). In other words, the contemporary is a fragmented totality of temporal co-presence—a critical moment of global unevenness (*ibid.*). As Giorgio Agamben has argued, in structural terms ‘the contemporary’ is a place that is at once a part of and, simultaneously, at a distance from the moment that it apprehends (2009: 39–54). The curatorial, in the field of contemporary art, is often tasked with assembling such impossible spaces of co-present discontinuity, as eluded to by the titles of the Venice Biennale 2015, All the World’s Futures, and Documenta 2017, Universes in Universe. Osborne proposes that the contemporary is a fiction of a global present, in that it cannot actually be experienced or seen in its totality, but only imagined or narrated as such (2013: 25). The curatorial is the practice that attempts to disillusion us of that fiction, while attempting to offer something like its promise of horizontal connective inclusivity. The curatorial is at once a parallel site for a critical reflection upon the conditions of the present and, simultaneously, a product of the unevenness of a particular geo-political configuration.

It is just this sort of curatorially reflexive, critical co-presence that Bal wished to see at the AMNH. Recognizing the predicament of the AMNH as constructed upon a disavowal of colonial violence, Bal insisted that its displays address the colonial history of the museum and explain how the museum’s objects were themselves documents of a colonialism that was not simply a chapter in a history now past, but constitutive of the contemporary exhibitionary encounter. She wished the museum to re-orientate the relationship between words and things, to show that the objects on display were not self-evident ‘facts’ of a natural history, but documents that related to ‘our’ collective timeliness: the structures operative in the present moment that keep people and things on different sides of a city and on different sides of ‘history’. To achieve this, Bal recommended:

Instead of the panels on which words give meaning to the order of things

(allusion intended), large mirrors would have been a better idea. Strategically placed mirrors could not only allow the simultaneous viewing of the colonial museum and its postcolonial self-critique, but also embody self-reflection (in the double sense of the word), lead the visitor astray, and confuse and confound the walkers who would thereby lose their way through evolution and, perhaps panicking a bit, wander amid diversity to their educational benefit. (Bal 1992: 572)

These suggestions were designed to make the museum evident as a part of the contemporary moment from which it separated itself. It is precisely this temporally reflective opportunity of the curatorial that has been celebrated by the art historian Claire Bishop as the dialectical contemporaneity of the museum (2013: 55–62).

Realizing the dialectical contemporaneity of the museum seems like a particular possibility for collection-based institutions that wish to maintain a relevance to the current moment, while remaining critically open to re-evaluations of its histories and materials. But is there something unsettling about the easy affordance of the curatorial as a space of poly-temporal connection and association? Not only may such a method enable an almost convivial co-presence with ‘archives’ of violence and oppression, but additionally there may be a certain hubris in the suggestion that the curatorial mechanism can (re)assemble the world to make sense of it. In an age of much touted hyper-connectivity with the availability of compositional digital platforms, do we all become like the curators of AMNH—omniscient presenters of associative narratives? Or, like the uber-curators of international biennials, do we imagine ourselves the omnipotent constructors of networks, platforms or situations: at once the micro-Gods of our assembled worlds and, concomitantly, the passive victims of unfathomably complex assemblages?

There is, however, something in the curatorial that exceeds the act of bringing together to serve a narrative, answer a question or solve a problem. The ‘tensions’ that Lind refers to suggest something like an associative dissonance—a non-alignment of signifying practices that Lind draws out in her praise for the ‘the wittiest, and yet most thoughtful audio-guide’ (2010: 63) created by the curator Tirdad Zolghadr for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale, that worked in a similar way to Bal’s desired mirrors, to help the visitor to productively lose their way. Perhaps one may understand this as an excess in the

curatorial's will to relate that Jean-Paul Martinon describes when he says that the 'curatorial can never be constricted... the curatorial seeps and bleeds into many different fields and practices' (2013: 3). This excess constitutes the other, neglected potentiality of the exhibitionary mechanism, which belongs to the viewer and viewed (those captured on either side of the exhibitionary mechanism), rather than the curator or producer, necessarily locked into their own intentionality. This excess exudes from the unfolding of the display and the holding-out of the exhibition. It is that which remains beyond the evidentiary loops of the coincident devices of the museum display. Bal points to just such an excess when she comments 'it would be feasible, although not easy, to walk backwards, to untell this Eurocentric story' (1992: 571).

Practicing the gap

The possibility that Bal notes, of re-writing labels in an ironic mode (1992: 591), or of walking the exhibitionary sequence in reverse, exists because of the failure of the exhibitionary mechanism to overcome the distances inherent in the proximities of juxtaposition. Beth Lord has argued that this is the museum's particular affordance: its presentation of the irreducible gap between words and things (2006)—and, I would add, between material and image, name and body. For Lord, this is what makes the museum a Foucauldian space, not because it is exemplary of governmentality or capillary bio-power, but because it is the space in which the temporary and constructed nature of discourse can be observed: where labels and objects, and objects and subjects fail to account for each other completely. Without wanting to pin-down what may exude from this gap, I do want to tell of two examples of how this gap may be opened-up—initiating an unfolding that belongs to the opportunity of the curatorial as a mode of dissonance and difference, rather than positivistic coincidence.

First, I turn to one of the most well-known and often-discussed examples of curatorial intervention, Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum (Maryland Historical Society (MHS), April 1992–February 1993). Wilson has described the museum as his 'palette' (Karp and Wilson 1996: 253), by which he means that he appropriates the work of the curator and the scene of their work—the museum—and claims this scene as his own. Wilson's appropriation is predicated upon his observation that '[c]urators, whether they think about it or not, really create how you are to view and

think about these objects' (Karp and Wilson 1996: 253). In what is arguably Wilson's most famous project, he seized control of the Maryland Historical Society (MHS) in order to reorder the relationship between words and things, things and things, things and displays, displays and visitors. Facilitated, not insignificantly, by the peripatetic curatorial institution 'The Contemporary', Wilson's intervention in the MHS lasted more than a year and involved an entire reworking of the collection displays. In one of the most iconic parts of Mining the Museum, Wilson created a vitrine of repoussé silver with the title 'Metal Work 1793 - 1880', incorporating a pair of slave shackles that Wilson had found in the museum's store into a display of ornate tableware. This display has come to symbolize what for many was at the heart of Wilson's intervention—his bringing to light of the skeletons in Maryland's closet and the reality of slavery as a part of American/African-American history, which the MHS had chosen not to display or represent. For many who have discussed Mining the Museum, the fact that such a re-orientation of the collection was effected, not to mention the number of visitors who went to see the exhibition and its lasting impact on the MHS, makes this project, to quote Wilson, 'a huge success' (Karp and Wilson 1996: 258).

Not to downplay this success, my reason for re-collecting this now-canonical piece of museological intervention is different. I do so because of Wilson's exploitation of the exhibitionary gap. The enduring power of the image of the display 'Metalwork' does not solely lie in the fact that a connection is drawn between the luxurious objects of museum collections and the slave trade, but that the simple, factual description of the display as 'metalwork' both describes and so tragically fails to describe what is shown. More affecting still, we are not offered a clear historical narrative regarding the slave trade and its relationship to the wealth accumulation of a minority of white elites that may allow us to comfortably learn that narrative safe in the knowledge that it belongs to a distant past. Instead, the relationship between the display title and its contents, not to mention between the objects on display, remains inadequate and unresolved, implicating us, the viewers, and our own pleasures of looking and history-making in the gap that is opened up: what neat labels, categorizations and object-relations exist on our mantelpieces, cupboards, classrooms and in our minds?

My second critical example is from a different time and place, but I feel explores the same gap between what is present and what can be neatly labelled: the

work of Jade Montserrat displayed as part of the exhibition Futura Free: A sensing (2016), organized by the curatorial team agency for agency, at 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, in Brixton, London. The context for the exhibition was a year-long project enacted by agency for agency at 198, exploring 198's archive, called Possible Futures. To open the project, they hosted a series of live events among a non-history of the organization, consisting of a wall of names of artists who had previously exhibited at 198, a small display of posters from past exhibitions, and a filing cabinet containing artist files and family-style photo-albums containing images from myriad education projects, press cuttings and other documentary material. I say non-history, but perhaps I would be better to say a not-yet-history: the unfolding of the archive was not presented within a particular narrative, or consigned to the past as evidence of the present, but, rather, was laid before us as a part of the present, to ask after a future. It begged the question: what sort of relationship with time do we want?

Into the gap that this question implicitly opened up was projected Futura Free: A sensing:

Taking its title from a song on Frank Ocean's 2016 Blonde album, **Futura Free: A Sensing** is the second exhibition in our **Possible Futures** Programme which reappraises the work of the gallery since 1988 to consider how we might move forward. Curated by agency for agency, the exhibition features work by four emerging artists Thandi Loewenson, Christopher Lutterodt-Quarcoo, Jade Montserrat and Emily Mulenga. Ocean's lyrics present an allegory of defiance. A personal ode to a self-defined possible future. The work in this exhibition reflects a similar desire by the artists to resist the given order of things with actions and propositions to define their selves and their worlds. (agency for agency 2016)

Making a sly reference to Foucault's analysis of the taxonomic episteme, the second exhibition of Possible Futures unfolded in the space of the first—that is, in the space created by the question that an archive poses in the present to the future, when it is not done-up as historical narrative. When I visited, I found myself imbricated in a subversion of the museum's strategies of coincidence. Scattered over the wall were

photographs of a woman partially clothed and naked in a forest—at one moment hair and face against the sky, next blurrily captured approaching a surreally free-standing door. In the middle of the wall, a video monitor played a film of the same woman crouched in a ditch smoothing mud over her bare, light-brown skin. There was very little in the images to locate the woman or the site temporally or geographically. Going instinctively to the display's label, in an attempt to locate and fix the meaning of these images and this woman, I read the following:

Jade Montserrat

Clay, 9'05", 2014, collaboration Webb-Ellis

Peat, 5'53", 2015, collaboration Webb-Ellis

Rainbow Tribe: Affectionate Movement, 2016

Photographs

The Rainbow Tribe shuns spectacle as a vehicle for visibility or voice, favouring the transparent reciprocity of affectionate movement. The Rainbow Tribe is a supportive collective, transforming cultural currency into empowerment.
(Montserrat 2016)

The images pointed to the label and the label pointed to the images, but neither explained each other, nor did they simply obfuscate or confuse. Instead, a gap opened up between the words and the images with which I found myself co-present. How did I look at the woman at once in a ditch and gesturing to the sky? With curiosity, longing, fear, envy? Could I be one of the Rainbow Tribe? Did I want to be? What would that mean? What emerged from the gap was the excess of the curatorial possibility, moving beyond coincidence to a speculative place of resonance and dissonance. Again, as with Wilson's displays, no specific, singular narrative emerged from this place, but rather a potentiality that left me only with the question and problem, not of identity as an essence of being, but of the never-finished process of what Donna Haraway calls 'becoming-with' (2016: loc 505).

While operating in a different context, moment and medium to Wilson's Mining the Museum, Montserrat's piece presented within Futura Free shares with Wilson's an exploitation of the gap inherent in the unfolding of display. In so doing, it unhinges any assumed, evidentiary relationship between image and body, text and image, image and viewer. This is not a process through which the distance of spectatorship

is overcome, or an idealistic instance of connectivity that supposes an equalization of positions in a network of humanity, but a moment of imbrication within the material of display that offers the potential for proximity with others in the opening of the irreducible distance of difference. This is not just the distance in language between sign and signified, but the distance between one materiality and another—their radical togetherness, but non-coincidence—a distance that asks us not just to recognize our co-presence with history, but to re-make our co-presence with the past, in the present, in the name of a future. For some, no doubt, this gap is insufficient—too tentative, too speculative—only offering a potentiality and endless deferment by replacing histories with the mutability of meaning formation. Indeed, the curatorial as an excess to be played with is meagre compensation for the displacement of the curatorial as a space of narrative and identity, or research and solutionism. But I am not sorry for this. We need places for the exploration of uncertainty, and it is from such a parallel space of critical co-presence that the work of organizing can and must emerge.

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