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INTRODUCTION: OUT OF CURIOSITY

Paul O'Neill & Gerrie van Noord

GERRIE VAN NOORD We're both interested and invested in discourse formation and have in the last decade worked together on a range of publications related to curating. Which brings us to the question: why revisit a series of interviews that you conducted in 2004–06, nearly 20 years ago?

PAUL O'NEILL *Curious* comes out of my own curiosity about others' curiosities and the evolution of curatorial practice as a creative endeavour rooted in thinking with art. In the wake of a growing critique of the idea of the autonomous artist, certain practices evolved that paradoxically led to the emergence of the individual curator in the late 1960s. As artistic production became more collectively organised in the 1980s and 1990s, that approach also shifted into the space of organisation and institution building, of administration, organising and activism, through which the curatorial became more prominent. The interviews selected here cover the period from the late 1960s until the early 2000, when none of the artists and curators interviewed had any curatorial education. I also wanted to interrogate this seeming contradiction between growing professionalisation and the potential of the curatorial as an utterly adaptive mode of practice that these conversations highlighted.

Curious is the fourth book that I have (co-)edited in the Open Editions series. The invitation of the first, *Curating Subjects* (2007), was for curators to write about others' practices, which was a critique of the self-positioning that had become the dominant mode of curatorial narratives. What became apparent through people reflecting on their individual trajectories was that their practices were social, heavily networked and part of very relational histories. Following *Curating Subjects*, *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010) and *Curating Research* (2015), which comprise mainly commissioned contributions, *Curious* makes a case for the interview as a space of criticality and a possible corrective to widespread amnesia.

GVN The conversations we selected for this volume underline that curating has never been a homogeneous area of practice, despite the prevalent linear tracing of a specific range of exhibitionary forms. They demonstrate that individual temporal and geographical circumstances resulted in very different trajectories, nurtured by a range of questions and concerns, and a diverse set of actors and agents.

PON Collectively these interviews situate the curatorial as a social sphere that began very small and then became much more connected and distributed but also centralised through global networks of production. The unruly

co-mingling between the public and private during heightened neo-liberalisation made it much more financialised too. In the early 2000s it was still possible to talk about a global art world. Now it's much more striated and fractured, and our references are much less commonly shared.

GVN Many ideas and developments referenced in *Curious* are less about the exhibition as form, and more about the affordances of the frameworks in which artistic and creative practices are made public. Together these conversations hint at varying approaches in setting up new frameworks leading to other kinds of curatorial punctuation points as part of longer-term enquiries through practice.

PON *Curious* gathers reflections from people who I believe were really agenda-setting – in their ideas, exhibitions, publications or other forms of the curatorial. This includes building institutions, or facilitating the emergence of labels like relational aesthetics, new institutionalism or the social sphere of art. What they emphasise is the importance of critical theory, of being able to disagree with others and of discursive spaces alongside the exhibitionary. The questions I posed didn't focus on the then here and now but on where they came from and on what was important in their personal trajectory. Who were their influences? Why curating and not another kind of discipline or field of enquiry? There's also a sense of being connected beyond the local context within which they were working, whether that was in Norwich, London, Paris or New York.

GVN Although you ask most interviewees similar questions, each conversation takes its own course, adding aspects or concerns that aren't so obvious, visible or easy to trace. Some conversations feel already somewhat academic, others are more colloquial, some seem rather flippant, but at the same time also very astute – each has its own tone. Which is something that only happens through talking; when writing, people are much more conscious about conventions, traditions and expectations, and are often given a specific word count. The freedom of saying, OK, let's see how far we have got by the time the tape runs out, creates a much more open-ended space...

PON Doing the interviews was also a way of testing what I knew, through which something else emerged. That often was a kind of generosity that can only happen when speaking face to face. Which requires the interviewee to occupy that space of conversation in a way that sends something back that is

of value. In our re-edit we've focused on precisely those areas. The dialogue as form tends to break apart the self-representational of the descriptive lecture, the institutional conference paper or the monologue.⁽¹⁾ I originally started with a series of semi-structured questions, which opened up to how people entered the space of the curatorial as one of critique and of collectivity. For some it was also explicitly a space of decolonising, of queering, of feminist practice, of the underrepresented.

GVN In most interviews, there's an articulation of a search for alternatives or the potential of working alongside the already existing, even though labels commonly used in the present like those you referred to just now weren't necessarily used yet.

PON Revisiting these previously edited transcripts has demonstrated that the urgencies of 20 years ago are still here today. You see the significance of some positions in relation to what has happened in subsequent years. But there's also a gap: many of the urgencies these conversations outline still haven't been played out entirely, despite the representational economy they participated in. Meanwhile the interview as form has become more popularised but also shortened; the long-form interview as a mode of research is less visible, particularly through the advent of new technologies. The emergence of podcasts or edited radio is much less a space of vulnerability or generosity, where people can say what they want and at the same time recognise the value in disagreement and contestation. Spaces for this mode of discursive exchange are shrinking, if not disappearing altogether.

GVN Not only shrinking, but also suffering from increasing polarisation...

PON Whether a last-page magazine interview or a 25-minute podcast, they're all shorthand iterations in which the tension between what was said and what is translated into consumable writing or listening is completely erased. For Roland Barthes, the interview or dialogue was a means to philosophise with himself. He claimed to dislike the spoken interview that was recorded and then transcribed, and argued that it loses a certain immediacy, innocence, freshness, which is also dangerous, as it cannot be taken back. He also suggested that speech is always theatrical, stylistic, relying on cultural and oratorical codes. In

1. To stay with the tone and nature of the conversations, footnotes have been kept to a bare minimum; only when specific information was deemed useful have full titles and dates been added.

the process of re-editing spoken word, we are also readers who know how to listen, to delete, to get rid of our own insufficiencies. In shifting from the spoken to the written word we 'keep an eye on ourselves'.⁽²⁾

In *Curious* the interviewees respond to often similar questions from varying positions. The book is about critical dialogues rather than prompted performative monologues. These conversations are not about soliciting conclusive statements, fighting a particular corner or performative presence, but about collective exploration. It was important to also leave room for critique by the interviewees and to not place a timeframe on the conversations. When the tape runs out the tape runs out. In some cases, the original edit took an extended period of back and forth. Re-editing was also navigating previous iterations and arguing why doing it again is important. *Curious* is a counter to the ongoing emphasis on the new and the loss of the kinds of spaces that enabled these curatorial ideas and practices to emerge, in favour of the more self-organised or cooperatively produced.

GVN Re-editing these conversations while also actively engaging with younger generations through teaching, it is striking that after nearly 20 years they touch upon questions and concerns young curators are still interested in now. Enough time has passed to reflect on the impact of the different positions of those you were in conversation with then, and assess how their questions and approaches and trajectories retain their relevance in the present.

PON It's apparent that certain emphases within curatorial discussions have changed, but many issues, questions and concerns remain. Challenging the power dynamics of the established art world, of the local versus the global and the legacies of the colonial is still relevant and necessary, especially as the global art market demonstrates the enduring effects of privilege, access, gender, race, sexuality and class. The preoccupation with artistic and curatorial practices as extended forms of care has unfortunately to some extent replaced a belief in the possibility of cooperative agency, and curatorial processes as potential spaces of transformation, of ethical and structural changes in the politics of art and its publics, and beyond.

2. Although much is lost in this process, for Barthes dialogue is best considered as a divided mode of writing, where 'speech, the written, and writing engage a separate subject each time, and the reader – the listener – must follow this divided subject, different dependent on who speaks, transcribes, or formulates.' Roland Barthes, 'From Speech to Writing' [1974], in *The Grain of the Voice* (London: Vintage, 2010), 7.