Closing the Gap: Writing a Curatorial PhD to Practise Differently

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My decision to do a PhD focused on publications in relation to art and curatorial projects was initially born of a sense of frustration around several issues. I had a long-standing career in producing such publications and made constant use of them in my work as a lecturer, yet it had started to bother me that these publications tended to be seen as simply containers of content related to specific kinds of work that manifested in other ways elsewhere.
While there is significant diversity in the exploration of the book as artistic medium, which is mirrored in an ever-growing body of literature and has expanded to the embrace of publishing as artistic practice, such recognition is yet to fully emerge in the field of curating.[1] My growing dissatisfaction with this apparent lack of interest in the potential of publishing as an arena of curatorial practice was also informed by notable shifts in focus in curatorial discourse, the evolution of which I had followed closely since the early 1990s, when the first dedicated curating courses were established.[2] Although ideas of what contemporary curating might entail have expanded and are now understood to also encompass more discursive activities beyond the exhibition, publishing is still rarely acknowledged as being part of the wider spectrum of curatorial practice.

I have worked in different editorial capacities—from commissioning to managing editor, and as a copy editor, proofreader, and sometime translator—on magazines and journals, artists' books, catalogues, critical anthologies, and, in recent years, also digital projects, with these experiences giving me an in-depth understanding of the complex interactions involved in contemporary publishing. Over time, I have, therefore, been struck by how little attention is generally paid to the highly collaborative networks of conceptualization, production, dissemination, and reception that publishing relies on. Even though the recognition of the importance of process and collaboration in the art world has become widespread and they have become key concerns in my own teaching, in much critical reflection on contemporary artistic and curatorial work the focus remains largely on individual achievements that sometimes seem to contradict what the projects discussed purportedly aim to do.

Despite this widespread embrace of collaboration and process in both artistic and curatorial projects, in critical reflections they are still generally described by way of temporally linear trajectories, in which primacy tends to be attributed to the artist, followed by the curator, and then the participant-audience, highlighting who collaborated with whom. What actually happens when different kinds of practitioners start working together in curatorial projects is rarely subjected to further scrutiny; as such, curatorial discourse, by and large, still holds on to singular notions of authorship. While authors such as Maria Lind and Irit Rogoff have outlined 'the curatorial' as a mode of practice rooted in collaborative ways of working that may go beyond the exhibition as form or medium and that can, therefore, be understood to

[1] The most explicit demonstration of this embrace and its reflection in literature is Annette Gilbert, ed., *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, Berlin, 2016. Since the time of my PhD submission, several examples that consider publishing as curatorial practice have emerged, but they are still few and far between, certainly when compared to the enduring interests in artists' publishing.
[2] I was involved with the development of de Appel's Curatorial Training Programme in Amsterdam, which launched in 1994, following Le Magasin's programme in Grenoble (1987) and the Royal College of Art's course in London (1992), and prior to Goldsmith's (1996), also in London.

differ from curating, in my view these understandings still shy away from drilling down into what unfolds *in* and *through* curatorial collaboration.[3]

I decided to undertake a PhD to explore how persistent hierarchies of value across various kinds of work and their modalities in the art world might be rethought, and to understand how my own editorial practice could be (re)situated as part of a broader spectrum of contemporary curatorial work. I anticipated that the PhD would force me to engage more long-term and in greater depth with what I had begun to feel were shortcomings in a growing body of literature that I discussed with students. It would mean trying to identify a possible alternative approach that might contribute to filling what I perceived to be a gap in the knowledge base of my field of practice. When I realized it might enable me to establish a clearer connection between my editorial and educational work and help stabilize my prospects in an increasingly precarious higher education sector, it became even more attractive.

Circumstances, Context, and Approach

When I first developed a PhD proposal in 2014, I had, for nearly a decade, been working on annually renewed teaching and rolling support contracts at Birkbeck, University of London. Founded nearly two centuries earlier to provide opportunities for further learning later in life, Birkbeck still has a contingent of students who work full- or part-time during the day and attend under- or postgraduate courses in the evening. They often do so to give their day job—be it in the art world or other fields—a more solid academic footing and to enhance their longer-term career opportunities. Doing a part-time PhD at Birkbeck while continuing to work (that is, teaching and supporting students) at the same institution seemed an obvious choice for me, too, even though practice-based research at UK-based colleges with departments fully focused on curating—such as the Royal College of Art, Goldsmiths, or the University of Reading (in collaboration with Zurich University of the Arts)—was more established. An added benefit was that it would absolve me from having to learn to navigate the intricacies of another university's systems. Being granted a one-off curatorial scholarship at Birkbeck fully cemented the decision to combine working and studying there.

By the time I started my PhD in 2015, I had been invited to be the managing editor of a critical anthology on curating, ironically but also aptly titled *The Curatorial Conundrum: What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?*, and so I launched into both at once.[4] As time went on, I would be managing editor of three further anthologies,[5] invited editor for several artists' publication projects, and would become the copy editor for *PARSE Journal*, an open-access, peer-reviewed journal for artistic research.[6] These circumstances seemed ideal for an active exploration of the concerns I wanted to address *through* practice, and I initially

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[3] Key early texts demonstrating their respective understandings of 'the curatorial' are: Maria Lind, 'The Curatorial', *Artforum*, October 2009, reprinted in *Maria Lind: Selected Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood, Berlin, 2010, pp. 57–66; and Irit Rogoff, 'Smuggling: An Embodied Criticality', 2006, available at https://eipcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling/attachment_download/rogoff-smuggling.pdf (last accessed 20 February 2025). NB: I use 'the curatorial' with quotation marks, and usually with the addition of 'the', to avoid confusion with the use of curatorial as simply an adjective.

[4] Paul O'Neill, Lucy Steeds, and Mick Wilson, eds., *The Curatorial Conundrum: What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?*, Cambridge, MA, 2016.

[5] These were: Paul O'Neill, Lucy Steeds, and Mick Wilson, eds., *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse,* Cambridge, MA, 2017; Paul O'Neill, Simon Sheikh, Lucy Steeds, and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating after the Global: Roadmaps for the Present*, Cambridge, MA, 2019; and Bassam El Baroni, ed., *Between the Material and the Possible: Infrastructural Re-examination and Speculation in Art*, London, 2022.

[6] See www.parsejournal.com/journal/ (last accessed 31 August 2024).

embraced an Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) approach, as outlined by Bruno Latour and others, to explore the interactions at work in my practice. Using ANT, the researcher traces who and what interacts in the object of study, where 'a good account will *perform* the social […] through the controversial agency of the author'.[7] The networks embedded in the focus of my enquiry—publications—were to emerge through my writing, which was to 'connect the actors together' through 'thick' descriptions.[8]

One concern was how to start and another how to find the critical distance for scrutiny of my own editorial/curatorial practice, to address the questions around agency and value that had spawned my enquiry. Latour suggests that projects that change something or stand out from tradition in one way or another help reveal the various actors and agents that may be at play in what we consider to be 'the social'. Trying to get to grips with ANT and working towards the transition from MPhil to PhD, I landed on a historical case study that wasn't one of my own projects, but which directly spoke to what I wanted to explore.[9] The book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) qualified as exactly the kind of change-maker that could be useful for me in an ANT approach: it was an outlier in art-related publishing because it wasn't about a specific artist, movement, or exhibition, and it used small black-and-white images embedded in the text—its layout was, for its time, most unusual. Published following the eponymous BBC television series, the different ways in which images and text in the book are combined and offered to be read built on Walter Benjamin's influential essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility' (1935–1939).[10] Although being widely known as written *by* John Berger, and only his name appearing on the cover, the book is explicitly situated as a collaborative endeavour.[11] Meanwhile, its content explores the fact that how we encounter images is never neutral and highly influences how we interpret them; it does so through seven chapters in which images and text are juxtaposed and interact in different ways, and where content and form are closely intertwined.

Tracing the network of actors and agents embedded in this iconic example helped me to identify the key areas in need of exploration in my own work and thereby to develop the chapter structure for the full PhD thesis. These chapters ended up addressing: (a) publications as environments of practice; (b) notions of mediation and translation in publications; and (c) ideas of collaboration and authorship in curating through the lens of publication projects. To

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[7] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, p. 138. NB: italics mine.
[8] Ibid., p. 179.
[9] This transition from MPhil to PhD candidate status is common at UK universities, and usually involves an oral exam, not unlike the actual viva at the end of the PhD. At most institutions, the 'upgrade', or 'confirmation', exam is adjudicated by someone internal to the institution, but not the supervisor(s) and tends to happen more or less halfway through the full PhD timeline (i.e. after three to four years when doing it part-time, like I did, or one to two years when studying full-time).
[10] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (1935–1939), trans. Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room*, No. 39, spring 2010, pp. 11–37, which is the translation I prefer; the more commonly referenced version is Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935–1939), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, 2007 (1968), pp. 217–51.
[11] The credit page lists the names of all five collaborators/contributors without qualifying who did what, thereby underlining that the book was the outcome of their collaborative efforts. In addition, the 'Note to the reader', which opens the book, starts with the following statement: 'This book has been made by five of us. Our starting point was some of the ideas contained in the television series *Ways of Seeing*. We have tried to extend and elaborate these ideas'. The attribution to 'five of us' and the persistent use of 'we' and 'our' in this paragraph and the entire note emphasizes the book was the outcome of a complex set of interactions but also acknowledges the different affordances of television and book. See John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing,* London, 1972. NB: the full listing of names is intentional.

consider publications as environments of practice, I chose to reflect on one of my curatorial projects, *Black Sun* (2013)—a mixture of artist's book, catalogue, and stand-alone publication. Reflection on this case study would allow me to trace the different genealogies of art-related publishing that have informed contemporary approaches.[12] And although Benjamin's and Berger et al.'s explorations are still relevant references when considering the dissemination of information about art through reproduction, very little attention has been paid to what is being translated or carried over and mediated from curatorial projects into publications and how, and what that does to notions of 'original' and 'translation'. To explore this aspect in greater depth, I selected *Feature Film: A Book by Douglas Gordon* (1992) as another case study from my own practice; this publication was produced in relation to a moving-image work that has been presented in different iterations and circuits of dissemination.[13] As a point of comparison, I referred to Chris Marker's books in relation to his film works, as they explicitly consider how the possibilities of the printed page differ from those of the moving image. To explore notions of collaboration and authorship, I discussed two digital projects I had more recently been involved in: the first was a text developed with an artist using the affordances of a blog platform since it allowed me to reflect on how the navigating elements of this environment helped the structural development of the text.[14] The second was the website of artist Olivia Plender, which represents their entire practice, in which similar concerns were part of the process of development.[15] While neither were used to 'test things out', they were perhaps the most 'live' examples at play in my practice-informed research journey, in the sense that I produced them while doing the PhD. Two areas central to my exploration—translation and authorship—have been widely debated topics in a variety of fields, including literature and translation studies, and, therefore, offered rich sources of information, beyond art and curating, that I could reference in relation to my own publishing projects. Although my anchoring points would eventually shift away from ANT, I did do a lot of 'thick', descriptive, analytical writing. This writing traced the networks of actors and agents at play in five case studies from my practice as an editor and reflected on the experiences of working on the four critical anthologies, artists' projects, and the journal I worked on while doing the PhD. Despite all the creative activity involved in my research, my final submission did not include a 'folio' of this work; rather, my thesis was just shy of the maximum word count (100,000) for a fully written submission.

Questions of Practice

When I applied to do a PhD at Birkbeck, my proposal was met with interest from not two but three supervisors: one with a solid grounding in curating and its discourse, another in art history and its various modes of publishing, and the third in English literature, with a specific interest in book history. What I hadn't fully anticipated was that, although they each brought highly useful insights and points of reference to my enquiry, they came with entirely different expectations as to what my practice was and how it might manifest itself and be used as part of my doctoral research.

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[12] Shezad Dawood, Gerrie van Noord, and Camilla Palestra, eds., *Black Sun: Alchemy, Diaspora and Heterotopia*, London, 2013.

[13] Gerrie van Noord and Jane Rolo, eds., *Feature Film: A Book by Douglas Gordon*, London, 1999.

[14] This was a text developed with Anthony Schrag, titled 'The Failure of Participation', originally published in 2018. The blog is no longer accessible in that iteration but has resulted in related texts published in more conventional platforms and modes.

[15] After having worked on a book with Plender (*Rise Early, Be Industrious*, 2015), I was invited to work on a website about their entire practice. See https://oliviaplender.org/ (last accessed 31 August 2024).

One of the assumptions that I ran into was that my work was indeed 'creative', something I'd never identified as its main characteristic, although there are certainly creative aspects to it, as there are to other modes of curatorial practice. What for me weighed much more heavily was the notion of collaboration. In my engagement with the development of the curatorial field and its discourse, I had become increasingly interested in 'the curatorial'. Lind proposes it 'as a way of thinking in terms of interconnections: linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space', a description that resonates with the ANT approach I had started to apply when writing the first two chapters of my PhD.[16] For Rogoff, in turn, 'the curatorial' is an 'epistemic structure' that occurs when 'a series of knowledges come together momentarily to produce [… an] event of knowledge', which underlines the ongoing fluidity of the emergence of something new through interaction between different people and practices.[17] This idea chimed with my concerns around the persistent focus on singular positions—of the artist, the curator, the author—in both artistic and curatorial discourse. Situating 'the curatorial' as something that relies on thinking and doing *with* others was at the core of my thinking about publications as an environment of 'curatorial' work.

At Birkbeck, it was the Corkscrew network, initiated in 2013 as a hub to consider the role or use of practice in/as research across the School of Art, that proved to be beneficial for getting my head around the particularities of what practice meant to me and how that might offer insights for the curatorial field.[18] A Corkscrew workshop with Anne Boddington—then member of a practice-based art and design committee of the UK's first Research Excellence Framework (REF)[19]—highlighted that the knowledge generated through what are considered artistic or creative practices might find its greatest relevance in other fields. Boddington suggested that an awareness of this relevance beyond one's own field of practice was an important but often overlooked aspect of doing practice-informed research.
It was the Corkscrew show-and-tell sessions, during which PhD researchers from across disciplines presented work in progress, that I found especially productive; they helped me figure out how my practice could be deployed in such a way that it might resonate beyond my field. These presentations also highlighted that understandings of practice vary greatly between disciplines; often the researcher's discussion of their intended submission of practice would reveal that they had drawn upon methods and skill sets from other disciplines to produce their creative work, or, conversely, used artistic work to develop new knowledges which are highly relevant to other fields. While participating in these discussions, I started calling myself a 'curator of publications', initially as a provocation to come to greater clarity about what I perceived to be the nature of my work, but also as a statement of intent for wanting to situate my editorial activities as firmly part of an expanded understanding of 'curatorial' practice.

Writing to Practise Differently

[16] Maria Lind, 'The Curatorial'.
[17] Irit Rogoff, 'Curating/Curatorial: A Conversation between Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck', in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, Thomas Weski, Berlin, 2012, pp. 22–23.
[18] The Corkscrew network was (co-)founded by my former Birkbeck colleague Dr Sophie Hope, precisely because there wasn't a well-established, practice-based research culture at the college at the time. The range of events organized over the years has been archived on her own website. See https://corkscrew.sophiehope.org.uk/ (last accessed 15 July 2024).
[19] The REF is a framework through which UK universities are ranked on the basis of their affiliated researchers' output. The 2014 REF was the first iteration of this assessment, which has seen two more iterations since, with the next one due in 2029. See https://2014.ref.ac.uk/ (last accessed 16 January 2025).

A key reason for my shift from a practice-based approach to a fully written submission, using past projects for critical analysis rather than 'testing' things out and submitting a portfolio of work, was that I felt that the demands of me *doing* the practice were difficult to square with the critical reflective distance and the 'symmetry' required for an ANT approach. This 'symmetry' requires researchers to pay equal attention to human and non-human agencies, which Latour calls 'actants', including those that have no 'figuration' yet, such as conventions and traditions.[20] To get to this 'symmetry', distance in time and place are prerequisites, neither of which I felt I could achieve while actively engaged in my curatorial projects.

The other key reason for my shift to a written submission was that it seemed important to articulate the issues that I perceived to be at stake in the discrepancy between the reality of my own and others' practices and what I encountered in the literature. And while a significant aspect of my work is concerned with articulating ideas in writing, most of the time my practice attends to the writing of others, rather than my own. By adopting an approach that relies on writing through critically reflective tracing, I hoped to develop a more sustained writing practice through which the insights I gained—the 'new knowledge' I was to produce—might more easily filter into the very discourse that I took issue with. While I focused on writing about my practice, I also realized that my thinking evolves most clearly through the iterative nature of writing—texts are drafted and redrafted, edited and re-edited, configured and reconfigured—meaning that writing became even more crucial than other modes of practising.

After my PhD upgrade and having traced the networks around the examples of my own practice, I eventually realized that ANT didn't quite get me where I had hoped it would. Despite the resonances of this approach with understandings of 'the curatorial' as a social undertaking, I felt there was more to be explored and articulated about the nature of curatorial collaboration beyond attempting to achieve symmetry in the tracing of actors and agents that converged in my objects of study. I was familiar with Isabelle Stengers' work as someone affiliated with ANT, and reading her 'Notes towards an ecology of practices', from 2005, offered a new angle for thinking about practice and collaboration.[21] Stengers refers to an 'ecology of practices', which 'aims at the construction of new "practical identities"', and the 'new possibilities' for those practical identities to be present or to connect with one another, which crucially 'does not approach practices as they are […] but as they may become'.[22] Stengers posits that it is about the 'minor key', smaller gestures, in which senses of belonging, possibilities, potentials, and agencies can manifest themselves in an approach to one's practice.[23] These ideas resonated with how my seemingly modest work on publications could constitute a fully-fledged mode of practice, but they also underlined the value of the iterative thinking process through writing that I had espoused.

Meanwhile, I had also become attracted to Karen Barad's notion of 'intra-action', which had started to gain traction in the art world and entered students' readings lists. In Barad's understanding of 'intra-action', humans and non-humans are no longer seen as separate entities with or without intentions and distinct forms of agency, because 'existence is not an individual affair […] rather individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-

[20] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, p. 7.
[21] Isabelle Stengers, 'Introductory Notes to an Ecology of Practices', *Cultural Studies Review* 11: 1, March 2005, pp. 183–196.
[22] Ibid., p. 186.
[23] Ibid.

relating'.[24] For me this seemed to speak to the importance of the collaborative in 'curatorial' work, but in a way that differed from Stengers' thinking. However, pairing Stengers' notion of an 'ecology of practices' with Barad's proposition of 'intra-action' finally offered the possibility of homing in on what happens when people come together, be together, and work together in a collaborative situation, to paraphrase Lind.[25]

Working with these combined propositions allowed me to zoom in and out on the issue of who or what can be considered to have agency where and when during curatorial collaborations. Considering my publishing practice as part of an 'intra-active ecology of practices', I revisited the examples from that practice that I had 're-assembled' in my earlier analysis, and this led me to insights that went beyond those provided by the 'thick' descriptions inspired by ANT.[26] Doing so was what, in the end, helped me to argue how this provided new understandings of 'the curatorial' and to position my editorial practice as part of a wider spectrum of contemporary curatorial work. What I set out to do through my PhD has resulted in a variety of outcomes. Most concretely, it has enabled me to gain a permanent position as a lecturer in the MA Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art, London, after previously having been employed as an associate lecturer. In addition, I now confidently situate myself as someone with a curatorial practice that manifests itself in publication projects, which more explicitly filters into my pedagogical practice. I continue to call myself a 'curator of publications', and rather than talking about *publications* in relation to others' practices, I have started using the term *publishing*, which I situate as an ecology in which my own practice and that of others converge and intra-act. This has changed the way in which I position myself and my work as a teacher within the MA, where I have noticed that students now more frequently develop proposals for publishing projects, either as part of a spectrum of collaborative 'curatorial' work, or as their sole focus.

Perhaps speaking from my own area of curatorial practice with greater confidence has spurred their explorations. In the past, I might have done much if not most of the work towards the realization of certain projects, but I would only be credited as editor or managing editor in the colophon. The insights gained through the PhD, however, and the validation of the qualification have given me the confidence to step into editorial projects in a more self-reflexive manner that prompts me to negotiate greater recognition, with my name now appearing as co-editor of several publications. Developing my thinking through critical writing has also given me the confidence and the opportunity to publish several essays that have come from or build on my PhD research.[27] An example of my thinking through Stengers' and Barad's ideas is presented in my chapter 'Beyond Hierarchy: Articulating Collaboration', which is included in the curatorial anthology *Not Going It Alone: Collective Curatorial Curating*, which I co-edited.[28] This text appears on students' readings lists and is

[24] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Durham, NC, 2007, p. ix.
[25] Maria Lind, 'The Collaborative Turn', in *Taking the Matter in Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, ed. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, Lars Nilsson, London, 2007, pp. 15–31.
[26] 'Reassembling' is what Latour argues 'thick' descriptions enable. See Latour, *Reassembling.*
[27] These include a text about the process of editing other people's words as an epilogue for *Curating after the Global: Roadmaps for the Present*, the third in the series of curatorial anthologies I worked on while doing the PhD. And in addition to being recognized as co-editor of *Kathrin Böhm: Art on the Scale of Life*, I published a short reflective text on the process of collectively considering three decades of the artist's practice in the same volume.
[28] Gerrie van Noord, 'Beyond Hierarchy: Articulating Collaboration', in *Not Going It Alone: Collective Curatorial Curating*, eds. Paul O'Neill, with Gerrie van Noord, and Elizabeth Larison, New York, 2024. The addition of 'with' is a conscious nod to the collaborative nature of the production of the book.

frequently referenced in student assignments, while my involvement with the book has led to several invitations for talks at other universities and arts venues.

Despite starting from a set of niggles and irritations, undertaking the PhD has led to a clearer understanding of and confidence in my position within the curatorial field. I now also see a much greater connection between my editorial/curatorial work and my teaching, where what I do as a curator of publications feeds into what I teach and how, and vice versa. The doctoral process has enabled me to not only more fully perform ‘the curatorial’ in my freelance practice, but also in my work in higher education, where I relish close collaborations with others in both domains.