

Finding A Voice Within A Cacophony

Gerrie van Noord

Where to start and what to say? And, maybe more importantly, how to say it? Simple questions that are not so easy to answer succinctly when writing about an exhibition. Especially when the task is approached in a particular framework, alongside others in a similar, though not the same, position. What can one say about an artist's body of work that is so vocal – literally because of the sounds that emanate from it, and metaphorically, in terms of its social-political content? What can one say when the context (geographical, institutional) in which it is encountered is one that possibly, to a large extent, directs what we experience and what we see? And beyond the question of what to say, what do we feel we are able or allowed to say, and on what grounds? How does what we do in our day-to-day work, our practice in practice, feed into what we think we should or should not say? And how does what we think we want to say translate into a coherent piece of writing that makes sense in relation to all of this? These are among the concerns that came to the fore in the process of developing the contributions to this volume – some consciously present and others quietly simmering below the surface.

Being involved in this project, I have had the privilege of looking at the process of its unfolding largely from the sidelines; I didn't visit the iteration of the exhibition that is the focus of the essays included here, and I didn't participate in any of the discussions among the authors. Nor am I part of the programme in the context of which these pieces were produced. However, as an editor of publications on art and curatorial projects, and as a lecturer affiliated with a course similar to the one from which all this emerged, the questions I grapple with in my own work are not that different from those outlined above. This was a key reason to say 'yes' when Anne invited me to be a critical reader and to respond to drafts of the texts that were to be written. Before I expand on the interactions with their authors, I will reflect on some of my own queries around the knotty relationships between publishing, curatorial practice, and discourse.

Despite much of what we know about art and curatorial projects coming to us via a wide variety of publishing formats and platforms – from press releases to catalogues, from peer-reviewed journals to posts on various digital platforms and feeds – publications tend to be perceived as operating on the fringes of the fields of art and curating. Working with artists, curators, writers, graphic designers, and many others, as well as with organizations and less visible or identifiable (f)actors, I, as an editor, experience that the projects I produce or contribute to are often treated as something after something else – a group or thematic exhibition, an artist's entire practice, a single work – which is considered the 'main thing' that has primacy in people's attention, perception, and sense of value.

Meanwhile, my work as a lecturer is heavily informed by and dependent on published material as the basis for discussions with those who want to become or already are practising artists and curators, who often use all that material as a means for knowledge gathering before launching into what they think of as practice. If publications are so important for how we encounter and learn about art and curatorial projects, why is there a persistent perception of them being merely derivative means of dissemination? Especially when ideas of 'expanded practice' and notions of 'the curatorial' have apparently embraced modalities of curatorial work that manifest themselves beyond the exhibition as form, and step away from traditional hierarchies of value and agency? Despite the expansion of what curatorial work may entail and an embracing of discursive processes as modes of 'the curatorial', publications continue to be perceived as 'afterlives' rather than as part of a spectrum of closely interconnected forms of practice.

A concept that can help us think a way out of or beyond this conundrum is that of an 'ecology of practices', outlined by Isabelle Stengers as a fluid, ongoing chain of interactions between different modes of thinking and working that con-

stitute an ecology.¹ Although Stengers developed the idea of what an 'ecology of practices' may comprise in a particular field – philosophy – what she describes can also be applied to other areas of practice, including curating. In trying to consider the development of a field, Stengers argues that rather than looking for grand gestures that are so closely tied to narratives of singular authorship and individual agency, value, and voice, it is through what she calls the 'minor key' that senses of belonging, possibilities, potentials, and effects can manifest themselves. These aspirational descriptions may seem generic, but when linked to curating, they may help us think beyond the traditional hierarchical and temporal trajectories of origin and destination, of intention and outcome, and other dichotomies and distinctions that prevail.

Stengers's urge to think of an 'ecology of practices' rather than of an expanding range of individual practices coming together momentarily – as certain interpretations of 'the curatorial' foreground – suggests we could consider curatorial practice in a way that may help us circumvent the persistent habit of assessing which modes and positions have greater sway, expressed in who and what we value most. Instead, her ideas point towards a thinking *around* individual contributions and contributors – while not negating their individual relevance and agency per se – by allowing us to embrace what happens in their interactions and being part of an ecology. Applying Stengers's ideas to publishing in relation to art and curating – with writing among a range of practices that converge within publications – can also offer us a different way of thinking about curatorial practice at large. But particularly when approaching writing, there is no denying we often feel a nagging pressure to come up with grand, overarching statements, fully resolved arguments, comprehensive explorations, and definitive assessments. It is precisely attempts towards such achievements that Stengers's ideas try to steer us clear of. By deliberately not aiming for the 'major key', she argues, it may be possible to 'create a

different practical landscape', underlining that there is no 'identity of a practice independent of its landscape'.² This brings me back to the questions of what to say, how to say it, and the essays in this publication.

Reading the drafts sent to me, followed by individual conversations, I found some authors had gone for a very personal approach but were worried their text might be read as 'biased', as if their views were somehow not as valid as those of others. Some came with a particular agenda but were not entirely sure how to go about articulating it, wondering where and how their views might land – among those of the artist, the curator and the institution, or the wider field and its discourse. Many were trying to tackle undercurrents of power dynamics – and possible imbalances – within the work discussed, with the presentation of the work in its context, with the voice of the institution/curator in relation to their own. Assumptions of what one was or was not 'supposed to' do seemed to weigh heavily – albeit with different inflections, given that each author practises in their own geographical, political, social, and institutional frameworks, in different roles that have their own genealogies and written and unwritten conventions.

On reflection, my input towards this publication was not just that of a critical external reader, but also that of someone embedded in overlapping and interconnected areas of practice – of publishing as a form of curating, of writing, of teaching – seemingly tasked with giving each author licence to articulate their ideas and find their voice within this sprawling ecology. This also highlighted that writing is indeed not a solitary, authorial act but can be conceived as a process of conversation and collaboration with existing discourse and with others holding slightly different positions within its ecologies. The essays here are therefore not only part of this publication, of the course within which it was conceived, and the wider ecology of the artist's and the institution's work, but also of the writers' own ecology of

practice(s) within which they operate and already have a voice. All the individual voices speaking at the same time may sound like a cacophony, but only if we do not take time to listen to each voice and consider how it resonates among all the others.

¹ Isabelle Stengers, 'Introductory Notes to an Ecology of Practices', *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (March 2005): 183–96.

² *Ibid.*