In defence of the curatorial

There was an interesting proposition by Con in the precedent volume of Traffic, about situating the artworld public within a membership akin to qualifications of citizenship in a society.¹ She wraps up her thinking with inquiries on the ways one’s membership can effectively and proactively participate in the wider circuits of what we define as our community. By suggesting the scope of association between artworld members through Danto and Diokno’s distinct frameworks, Cabrera cuts through the habits of epistemological fluff whether or not one is “truly” an artist or curator and grounds our self-identification.

The curatorial has been fraught with theoretical persecution. Often it is because of the hospitality extended to the curatorial’s own anxieties, brought forward by its chimeric posture. It perpetuates an exciting re-evaluation on whether one is more of a certain kind of animal or is less of one. What are the “defining traits” and “relevant predicates” of a curator?² Where are we exercising solidarity in?³ For the purpose of establishing the set of critique on the curatorial, I’ve begin with Con’s text and will now proceed with other curators’ texts as a means to reflect on my own “society”.

The spheres of community here of which I speak are a modest illumination of my gravitations. While my administrative scope in NUS Museum is facilitating the South and Southeast Collection through exhibitions and artefactual-related tasks, I am prompted with the way the university museum utilizes its collection history as the genesis of curatorial inquiry and work. The ambition that is gently exercised as tacit or implicit critique often curries no favours within a technocratic society that celebrates itself as a regional hub. I mumble over my introductions “I am a curator…” and mumble an octave down when I get to “Southeast Asia”. However, there is another kind of “community” to which I turn to as more eloquent interlocutors. The curators that I will mention here have texts and talks that bare their suspicions about this frame of Asia⁴, Southeast Asia⁵, and The International⁶. While this bit recognises

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² ibid. Cabrera quotes Danto: “The defining traits were identified through the person’s history and context... The relevant predicates were classified through the person's display of knowledge...”
³ ibid. Cabrera quotes Diokno: “In the society described by Diokno, two sub-levels co-exist: “the immediate community with which one readily identifies one’s self; and the larger, intimate grouping of which one is member, however inactive or detached.”
⁴ In “Southeast Asia in a Crawl Space: Tempering Curatorial Hubris”, Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez perceives the circumstances wherein art historians, curators, and artist stake their self-projections within larger consortiums through several case events. Under Case 2: documenta 12, Asia Speaks Up, Kassel (2007) she recognizes how, in undertakings from Europe, “Asia still comes across as a tabula rasa...” where tokenistic representation is primed over vigorous engagement.
⁵ A question was presented to Grace Samboh in her lecture at the Global Academy 2017 – Salzburg regarding her “elegant” evasion towards the prompt of Southeast Asia. She addresses it as an imposed framework – that while she works within the framework the best she can, there is difficulty in “[synchronizing] the positions to acknowledge what is politically happening here and there and how it is imposed to everyone individually.”
⁶ Simon Soon’s “Rethinking Curatorial Colonialism” positions the onset of the curatorial phenomenon that “is a thinking process that has emerged specifically in the era of late capitalism”. Vera Mey likewise woes over the “increasing professionalization of the curatorial through foreign and often expensive programmes” that Simon gives examples of such as Bard College, Goldsmiths, and de Appel.
the sympathies that we potentially share, these individuals are ultimately my peers, sources of inspiration and the first public I would like to address as I test my discomfort. Sometimes I am lucky when different international art apparatus are smart or obtuse enough to fund us somewhere together for some “new” transnational network that they are peddling.

How conscious are the projections of what we think we should represent in gatherings of this artworld public? In Eileen’s text, she mentions a movement that she frames not as a performance of “sheer pretence or superfluous staging, but rather our defensive subjectification, or at least a contingent mode of self-identification”. Do we recognize it whenever we become complicit to certain mechanisms that flatten the complexity of circumstances that besiege one another for the sake of a ceremonial, utopic front? Beyond the “rituals of introductions”, have there been instances when we address anything that could be too polarizing for trendy discursive prompts? In these sources of ambivalence, networks like “curatoriums” are also flagged for the immanent danger of mercenary tactics to the advantage of a certain kind mobility facilitated concurrently with zealous gatekeeping of finite resources.

It is difficult to project self-reflexivity when negotiating an antagonistic terrain, particularly if we find the curatorial mode as fundamentally limited in exercising agency within activistic terms. Simon treats the curatorial as tied to contemporaneity, and that it falls into an “unintended colonizing framework” wherein knowledge and action are reduced into an archive that fulfils “within a specific reflexive, promotional and pedagogical mechanism”. Given that these expositions by Simon and Eileen may have come from experiencing the short-circuited channels that are often promoted as regional or international networking, where then can we find or carve avenues that can nourish us as we participate as an artworld public? After all the term “network” has been felt to have been complicit to structures that impress upon “diversity” while posturing themselves as benign, uncritically diplomatic or, worse, as heroic as a colonial spectre bequeathing facetime to the subaltern’s heirs.


[8] ibid. There beckons a seductive image with Eileen’s words: “... a scent of the culturati cloaking and uncloaking themselves in the robes of nation and/or region whenever needed and however inconsistently with their publicly rhetorical sympathies.” p. 249

[9] ibid. Talk of “an overclass of exemplar curator-critic-historian that rein within the narrow confines of the artworld that no matter how it may present itself as transnational, it still often lapses into tropes of nation and pseudo-territory often as a ruse for guarding professional terrain.” p. 247-248.

[10] Contemporaneity here is framed as such: “not seen simply as a historical period but a multiple set of shifting “urgencies” whereby the relationship of contemporary art with the past is defined by its use value for the present political/ideological struggles and critique.” Simon Soon, “Rethinking Curatorial Colonialism,” first published in Southeast Asia Spaces of the Curatorial but accessed through Obieg online magazine issue no. 2, 2016. http://obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/en/nurnery/azja/rethinking-curatorial-colonialism

[11] ibid. I could imagine Simon sneering when he writes this passage: “Who really cares about the sweat and tears, meat and grit of context when one is removed from the grinding reality of conflicts and negotiations, the actual pedagogical process that goes into shaping specific engagement, when this can be theorised in London?”
The big picture of how contemporaneity is often hijacked by a privileged and powerful structures is not so grim if we turn to recognize sub-levels of the artworld public that hold individual fractals of transformative resistance.

I sound off Lian’s “I’ve got stuff to do…”12 as she vacillates between explaining her fatigue and convincing herself that there must be found moments of urgency within what she calls as the pseudo-democratic state of California. She mentions a toil to a the kind of nurturing that a network of sharing information can do, and in that fatigue “we turn to each other for support.”13 There is a sense of candor, perhaps a sense of emancipation too, in relating to immediate proximities. “I’ve got stuff to do….” is no longer about being held captive to “5 year-planning-contemporary-postmodern-spatial-architect of geographies”. It means she is responding now, collapsing time for the justice and innovation that can take place when people connect.

What happens when that connection enables us to work together? Even the terms “collaboration” and “collective” have been framed into a monoculture where the conditions of power are levelled “equally”. There must be space to talk about circumstances that are incidental and contingent to relationships that are uneven and untidy. Do we count the number of individual members that should represent a collective, without looking at the indeterminate contours of an evolving value system? Do we constantly inquire about the genesis of a collaboration without witnessing its transformation?

In a question directed to Grace at her lecture in Global Academy Salzburg last year14, she talks about how the term collective is imposed on these work groups. Ultimately they are all friends, and that “because we can’t afford it alone, we need to share.” Her lecture, as with most of her talks, weigh on her ongoing endeavours. Often she describes these projects as working with friends, experimenting with blindspots in the generational relay within the artworld public she inhabits. There has been ongoing inquiry about successfully not utilizing history the way contemporaneity co-opts it to justify present moments as purely “inventive” or original. In different parts of her q&a, Grace talks about not having a public history, and how, perhaps, can we relate to people, practices and movements that are mythologised in hearsay? The agency we shape in recognising urgencies is compelled by curiosity to societies15 we inhabit but may have taken for granted at the

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14 Grace Samboh @Global Academy ’17 – Salzburg. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHRQKVeMKcM
15 ibid. “We have so many questions towards Indonesia. It’s so big. And it’s technically cheaper to fly back and forth to Singapore then for me to fly to Borneo, for example. [That’s why] it’s much more intriguing and interesting in that sense... And what people generally know about Indonesia is Java, it’s not really the archipelago... That’s why I try to enforce in my biography that I live in both Medan and Yogyakarta. It’s important to be at this point because [these places] are very different... You speak the national language with different dialects, with different intonation, and you completely don’t understand each other. How does that work?” (Transcription mine)
onset. Function\textsuperscript{16} becomes about traversing urgencies together, hit-and-miss as part of it. As Grace puts it: “You need to work it out with other people.”\textsuperscript{17}

Another beautiful mode of working together comes from Vera, wherein the basis of gravitation comes from a shared unknown. And the curatorial stance that can extend hospitality to this is one that is sensitive to time and places that knowledge can be hosted and transmitted.\textsuperscript{18} Her rhetoric in speaking back to the “encroaching colonising apparatus of international projects” is understood through the inquiry of knowledge sharing that happens in friendship. I propose friendship here as the antipode of “network” as well as an alternative to formal and capital-conscious infrastructure. Friendship relies heavily here as a mode of being together, whether or not the inception of this relationship came out of places rife with structural and ideological fissures.\textsuperscript{19} Our affiliation to these systems responsible for perpetuating non-punitive, but damaging, processes of appropriation makes us self-conscious and defensive. And I think that friendship is the transformative space that activates the splits within these systems that we navigate in. Recognizing that these systems and networks are not monolithic unities, friendship exposes the potential of working with the multiplicities discovered in their mechanisms. While information is commodified in these so-called networks, knowledge is what friendship holds space for. Knowledge is not traded, but manifests with friendship that pursues the unknown, together.\textsuperscript{20}

In artworld publics that deal with infrastructural lack, the term “friendship” can host a violent side.\textsuperscript{21} This is not something I am going to pull apart in this article, but rather insist on friendship as an interdependence that essentially carries complexity. I want to think that friendship can create variety of ways to meet our inconsistent, untidy needs and is a space where we need not check whether our relationship is transactional in ways that we think friendship must be mutually beneficial. I am

\textsuperscript{16} ibid. “That is why I titled it Function over Passion: what is needed now – that is what we do. Which is why it is very difficult to map. What we figured that now this is what is need. Some of us [will] agree and then we do it. Maybe after it’s done, we realise that ahhh maybe that’s wrong…” (Transcription mine)

\textsuperscript{17} ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Vera Mey. “We’re in this together,” in A Year of Conscious Practice. 2016, http://ayearofconsciouspractice.com/ In Vera’s exposition, she locates where she encountered her education on Southeast Asia. She gives value and recognition to the intimate proximities of being with artists as Curator to Residencies in NTU CCA, where she worked from 2014-2016. She also elucidates the methods of learning in other spaces - art organisations or otherwise.

\textsuperscript{19} ibid. “Within these different spaces were also different stakes.”

\textsuperscript{20} ibid. “From travelling through material as embedded as the fibre-optic cables of Skype to plan with colleagues, to the ecologically dependent waves of a boat on a village which flooded for half the year in provincial Cambodia on the month-long nomadic residency FIELDS (2013), this project simply changed my life. This nomadic residency saw a group of artists, curators and researchers travel to the highlands along the Vietnamese border to a floating village on the world’s only river to annually reverse its course… At the residency’s culmination we also let go of the desire to produce, let alone respond through the lens of contemporary art. Even though the curatorial eye can panoptically encompass anything and everything and the demands of funding wanted a tangible output, it was necessary to learn and leave things alone.”

\textsuperscript{21} Zoe Butt. “Practicing Friendship: Respecting Time As A Curator”: Of course the instrumentalisation of such a ‘begging bowl’ can be dark, intelligibly limiting, and hauntingly violent (corruption in business; cronyism in politics), but that is where the agency of such networks has been foiled by ego, and where reciprocity has lost its mindfulness.” https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/programme_documents/04-15invitations-zoebutt-1.pdf
hesitant to use the word “healing” but I feel that is what the curatorial should offer. I write this as tribute to the friendships with people I’ve mentioned here, and the ways we continue to inspire each other. The curatorial began as a space of healing for me. And as a prompt, let me pull out, non-verbatim, how Yason addressed aspiring curators and artists\textsuperscript{22}, and as a reminder the rest of us practicing as an artworld public: “We have to remember that we are here because we were moved by a film, a painting, a book.” In defence of the curatorial, we are here because we are moved by our friendship with artists, curators, and other artworld publics who toil for a future where everyone doesn’t have to be the same kind of person.

\textsuperscript{22} Curatorial & Art Management Workshop In Bacolod City, Negros Occidental for VIVA ExCon 2014 (Visayas Biennale) Philippines, 30 – 31 July 2014.