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Curating the City

Annalisa Trentin — University of Bologna (Italy) — Contact: annalisa.trentin@unibo.it
Anna Rosellini — University of Bologna (Italy) — Contact: anna.rosellini@unibo.it
Amir Djalali — Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (China) — Contact: amir.djalali@xjtlu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT
Since the 1970s, exhibitions, museums and artistic events have gained a central role in shaping the transformation of the city. Art, culture and knowledge have become the instruments through which cities have faced the crisis of industrial economy and the rise of new paradigms and values of urban development, often hand-in-hand with processes of financial speculation and the intensification of social inequalities. Today, artistic practices, with their immediacy of means, their capacity to mobilize images and affects and their organisational structure, seem to have transformed the way in which cities are planned and built. What is the relation between art, artists and the city? How are artistic events transforming cities? Are curators the new architects and urban planners? Beyond the unmet promises of the "creative city," can curatorial practices become forms of care for our cities?

KEYWORDS
Curation; Care; Architecture; Platform Urbanism; Exhibitions

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> If Shakespeare argued that the world is a stage and Rem Koolhaas argued that the world is a mall, today we must add that the world is an exhibition, and specifically, an architectural exhibition.
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> — Sylvia Lavin[1]

The curator has been described either as a care worker, or as a vampiric and despotic figure building their career on someone else's work. This dual nature can be illustrated in two episodes that marked the history of art in the postwar period.

The first is a three-page typewritten document written by New York artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. The document is the *Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969! Proposal for an exhibition "CARE"*, in which Ukeles invented the role that she would maintain for the rest of her career: that of the maintenance artist. Maintenance is an activity dealing with what was left behind by the artistic avant-gardes and their obsession with constant innovation and development. Ukeles sees the necessity to constitute an aesthetic of maintenance and care as key elements for life, which should be inseparable from the destructive character of contemporary art: "after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"[2] Ukeles, who would later become the New York City Department of Sanitation's artist in residence, saw the work of taking care of the home and the city as a performative work of art, one which should be given visibility in the city's museum institutions.

Conversely, Harald Szeemannn's catalogue for Documenta 5 (1972) was a 700-page folder, an ever-expanding archive of documents and traces accompanying what was considered the first example of a city-wide thematic artistic event.[3] Szeemann, previously known for his controversial exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, embodied the figure of modern curator as a powerful creative impresario, one able to capitalize upon artists' work, even by using their work beyond the artists' original intentions. This exhibition, in fact, was the first to feature the work of well-known artists not because of the intrinsic value of their artworks but because of their correspondence to the general topic of the exhibition. Furthermore, artworks were displayed alongside found objects such as comic books, political and commercial advertisements as well as artworks by mentally ill patients. Artists such as Richard Serra and Sol Lewitt, who took part in the exhibition, complained about their loss of artistic agency while working under Szeemann's supervision. In an open letter to *Artforum*, Robert Smithson famously compared the

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1 Sylvia Lavin, "Showing Work," *Log*, no. 20 (2010): 5–10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41765360.

2 Patricia C Phillips et al., *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2016).

3 Harald Szeemann and Documenta, *Documenta 5: Befragung der Realität. Bildwelten heute* (Kassel: Documenta, 1972).

role of the museum to an artistic confinement asylum, and that of the curator to a warden.[4] Ironically, Smithson's text was eventually swallowed up by Szeemann's catalogue-folder, further enriching the prestige of the institution and its curator.[5]

Despite the differences, in these examples the work of the artist-curator emerges, more or less literally, as a caretaker and manager of someone else's artistic work, regardless of its authorship status. As we saw, the already established artists did not welcome this "curatorial turn," as they were reluctant to accept limitations to their artistic freedom and autonomy, and the changing role of the artist in society. The curator, in Surrealist fashion, brings previously non-valued existing work into the museum space. At the same time, the exhibition emerges as a key element in the city, bringing the city's life into the museum, and at the same time diffusing the museum throughout the whole city.

According to the etymology, the curator is someone who takes care of something, traditionally a museum collection, caring of its preservation, its modes of display, and its dissemination. Progressively, with the birth of conceptual, performative, and relational art, curating had to deal more with the arrangement of site-specific events, spaces, artists, and institutions. The focus of the curator was not exclusively that of caring for physical artifacts, but caring for human, relational and affective material. As in the case exemplified by Ukeles's work, the role of the curator becomes that of an art institution's domestic and affective laborer. In this sense, the work of curating can literally be seen as a work of reproduction, insofar as we see reproduction as a peculiar form of production. Unlike what Marx believed, feminist critique in the 1970s showed that reproductive work, which was and still is performed mainly by women at home, is indeed a form of production, but it produces a very peculiar commodity—the labor force that was needed to be employed in the factories.[6] But what does curating as a form of reproductive labor produce in today's forms of production?

Today, curatorial work has become an activity which—consciously or not—pervades our whole productive life. Curating is the affective practice that allows us to ward off the anxiety caused by our over-exposition to sensory stimuli and information. Curating allows us to produce temporary horizons of sense by organizing contents upon which our shrinking attention spans might focus. In this sense, we perform curatorial tasks at all times: we decide how to get dressed for the day, what to eat and which products to buy—even reviewing them on online shopping *platforms*; we

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4 Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," *Artforum* 11, no. 2 (October 1972).

5 Philip Ursprung, "The Indispensable Catalogue," *Log*, no. 20 (2010): 99–103, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41765377.

6 Charlie Ponzio, "Performing Care Work: Maintenance/Reproduction Vs Development/Production and the 'Phantom' Caring Body," NERO, September 2020, https://www.neroeditions.com/performing-care-work/.

delete unwanted emails and "star" important ones; we take care of our digital personas and we point out what we "like" on social media; we edit our CVs by deciding which of our experiences should be in and which ones should stay out. Our capacity to select, categorize, sort, and connect content is a key element in the construction of artificial intelligence and machine learning, which feeds upon human's own curatorial faculties. However, while everyone curates, only a few of us are getting paid to do so. In any case, becoming one's own curator is a key element not only to becoming an Instagram influencer or an "entrepreneur of the self," but simply to getting a job.[7]

At the same time, curating is act of management and an act of value extraction. Curators produce value from artworks and immaterial assets which they did not produce. By organizing and giving new visibility to artifacts and other immaterial assets, the curator is able to boost the reputation of an artist and their artworks. In this sense, the first modern curator is Marcel Duchamp. By placing a urinal in an art gallery, Duchamp was able to automate the production of artistic value, finally achieving the long-awaited liberation of the modern artist from craftsmanship and work.[8] But this process, initially viewed as a form of liberation of humans from their labor duties through direct self-valorization, was turned into a form of artistic mediation which often alienates the value of artistic creation from those who have produced it. The curator has been conceptualized as a parasitic figure, a vampire whose practice does not necessarily re-distribute the value produced by its original makers. This is often the case when the objects of curation are collectively produced cultural assets, such as underground art, traditional cultures, and immaterial cultural heritage. In this sense, the curator is a parasite who *extracts* value rather than producing it. For this reason, curatorial institutions such as museums and temporary events such as biennials and triennials can be seen as *platforms* for value extraction.[9] Can curating be seen as the paradigm of *platform urbanism*?[10]

As far back as 2009, Sarah Chaplin and Alexandra Stara saw the importance of curating not only as the specific activity of a professional specialized in the arts, but as a tool that could be employed by architects—as

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7 David Balzer, Curationism: How Curating Took over the Art World and Everything Else (London: Pluto Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586x.2017.1320103.

8 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Marcel Duchamp and the Refusal of Work* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014).

9 On platforms, see Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley; Sons, 2017). For a theory of value extraction as a form of accumulation, see Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra, "A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism," *Rethinking Marxism* 29, no. 4 (October 2017): 574–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2017.1417087.

10 On the recent debate around platform urbanism, see Sarah Barns, *Platform Urbanism: Negotiating Platform Ecosystems in Connected Cities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), and Mike Hodson et al., *Urban Platforms and the Future City Transformations in Infrastructure, Governance, Knowledge and Everyday Life*. (Abingdon-on-Thames: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9725-8.

well as by all those figures responsible for shaping the built environment. "Approaching the city as a collection to be curated, whether through representations or *in situ*, opens up new possibilities for exploring and enriching the urban fabric and the urban condition as a whole." On the city tour guide, at architectural exhibitions, and through heritage-based urban regeneration, they saw three examples in which curatorial practices can become tools not only to represent the city but also to actively transform it.[11] In the light of this intuition, this issue of CPCL explores the ambiguous nature of curatorial practices as both tools to care for the city in its physical and affective consistency, and as tools to extract value from history, local cultures, heritage, and labor. Contributions explore different ways through which curating becomes an effective way to produce the city and its space.

Tracing the development of a specific genre of inquiry on the city of Tokyo since the 1920s—the *fieldwork* and the *guidebooks*—Anastasia Gkoliomyti and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto explore the "collection of the present" as an agent of urban transformation. In these works, the city itself is seen from the estranged eye of the urban ethnographer documenting the demise and birth of new urban aesthetics and lifeforms within Japan's modernization process. At the same time, these works have an implicitly prescriptive role in determining what artifacts and behaviors are to be maintained as elements in the construction of Tokyo's new public spaces. The ethnographical study and the guidebook are curatorial acts which seek to develop a grammar of urban intervention from reality as found, coming across tools and languages in everyday life that provide alternatives to those of traditional urban planning.

Against the current practices of "urban regeneration," in which the city's memory is captured in the form of cultural heritage, Alessandro Mosetti proposes bringing back the age-old idea of architecture as a mnemonic device. Mosetti re-evaluates the work of architect Gian Carlo Leoncilli Massi in the context of the 1980 Venice Biennale, and in particular, within the exhibition *Venezia e lo spazio scenico* [Venice and the Scenic Space] (1979). The exhibition, staged as a series of temporary installations for the city of Venice as part of the Venice Biennale, was not an attempt to regenerate the city through an instrumental use of its heritage, but is interpreted here as a device deployed as an active tool for both the regeneration and the original construction of its collective memory. By bringing site-specific temporary uses and ephemeral architecture to the city, the exhibition constitutes a strategy that sets an example of how the architectural project could counter-act the impending musealization of the city of Venice.

Ke Sun approaches the construction of city through the production of dream images—"visual fantasies, corporeal kinesthesia, and alternative

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11 Sarah Chaplin and Alexandra Stara, *Curating Architecture and the City* (London: Routledge, 2009).

narratives of reveries." These are the product of the techniques that Sun calls the "Surrealist curation" of urban space, drawing on the construction of urban experiences based on assemblage and analogies, which transcend the physical datum of the city. The examples of Surrealist curation presented here—Le Corbusier Beistegui apartment in Paris (1929–1931) and Francis Alÿs's The Modern Procession in New York City (2002)—constitute two examples where urban experience may be curated at the threshold between the public and the domestic sphere, the individual and the collective, the perceived and the imagined, countering the technocratic nature of data-driven urbanism.

Leila Haghighat explores the slippery role of artists and artistic institutions in lower-income neighborhoods. Artistic practices can be double-edged swords, in the sense that art can act as a tool to represent communities and make their inhabitants' voices heard, but at the same time, their role as Trojan horses for urban regeneration and gentrification processes is well documented. Haghighat suggests politicizing the role of the urban community artist following Antonio Gramsci's definition of the organic intellectual. In this way, the artist can become an active agent to transform the city into a battlefield against cultural hegemony, in which galleries and artistic institutions might serve as a tactical strongholds.

Museum institutions can indeed play a central role in neighborhoods, in particular with migrant and diasporic communities. This is the case of Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art, as Guillermo Ruiz claims. Through a first-hand participant observation from with the community, interviews and visual analysis, Ruiz shows how the museum became a reference point for the Mexican community in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, providing an institutional voice to support their spatial justice claims through a "transnational practice of care." According to the author, this example could become a replicable example showing a viable alternative to the abstractions exploited by policy makers.

In the final article, Susan Holden and Ashley Paine expose the urban pavilion as one of the central devices through which curatorial practices are being deployed today. Starting in London in 2000 under the initiative of curator Julia Peyton-Jones at the Serpentine Gallery, the modern cult of pavilions became global, and more galleries started adopting the Serpentine model for their own local programs. By analyzing the recent emergence of this phenomenon in Australia, the authors address the question of the politics of display and the current relation between curatorial practices, architecture, and the city.

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Annalisa Trentin is Full Professor in Architectural Design at the Department of Architecture, Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna (Italy), Coordinator of the PhD program in Architecture and Design Cultures and Deputy Director of the Department of Architecture—University of Bologna, where she carries out research and teaching activities always looking at an innovative and interdisciplinary way of thinking pedagogy and university teaching. She is author of several articles and essays on architectural design, criticism and theory of architecture. Among her latest publications: Bologna – Bogotà: research and action for public space (2019); Architettura e costruzione, la declinazione strutturale da Gustave Eiffel a OMA (2016).

Anna Rosellini is Associate Professor at the University of Bologna since 2018, she carries out her research in the field of history of contemporary architecture. Her research interests are directed to architecture, from post-war period until today; to the relationship between architecture and art, and between form and matter. She has participated in national and international research projects and she collaborates with the École d'Architecture de la Ville & des Territoires of Paris-Est. Author of publications devoted to architecture and art of the post-war period, she has received a scholarship from the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris.

Amir Djalali is Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China. He received his Master's in Architecture and Engineering from the University of Bologna, and his PhD at TU Delft. Previously, he taught theory seminars and design studios at the Berlage Institute, TU Delft, the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture and the University of Bologna and his essays appeared on international journals such as *Footprint, Volume* and the *Journal of Architecture*. Together with Hamed Khosravi and Francesco Marullo he published *Tehran: Life within walls* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2017), a project on the politics of domestic space in the Iranian metropolis.

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