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Curating, cultural capital and symbolic power: representations of Irish art in London, 1950-2010

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Conclusion

Over the past five chapters, we have seen examples of the multiple ways in which the norms of professional curation interweave, problematise and fundamentally clash with the cultural and political functions of representation. In the first chapter, we witnessed a curatorial attempt to increase the value of William Orpen's oeuvre, which threatened to rob the artist of his subversive identity and with it, some of his most important artistic innovations. We saw the recalcitrance of Orpen's work to the demands of seamless identity inherent to the retrospective as an exhibition genre; a recalcitrance that recurred in different ways in monographic representations of the work of Le Brocqy and Bacon. We saw how certain (erroneous) readings of all three artists became fixed, thanks to their role in maintaining critical and art market value for the artists. I have proposed that many (historical) artists are locked into stories and myths which prevent us from really seeing their work. Following in the tracks of representation's failures, I have outlined some tentative strategies to open up a more nuanced ground for the articulation of the complexity and internal diversity of individual and collective artistic production.

Not all curatorial presentations are as openly narrative as the Orpen retrospective, in the sense of telling a definable story. In fact the exhibitions that require no discursive justification for their aesthetic choices are in the majority. Yet they are able to forgo external justification because they are indirectly justified by the exhibitions and art works that are openly legitimated. They "stand on the shoulders of countless earlier, now obsolete legitimating discourses" (Diederichsen 2008: 29). It is the absence or scarcity of these shoulders to stand on that cause artists from emerging or postcolonial nations to be so symbolically dependent on dominant discourses. This makes it necessary to create more space for symbolic conflict within curatorial discourse.

In order to create this space, I have suggested that curators should be encouraged to inhabit the contingency of their own representative positions more self-reflexively and more explicitly; to show their critical locatedness vis-à-vis the subject matter in question without claiming the position as definitive or neutral. This self-reflexive inhabitation would mark a shift from an ontological, philosophically based presentation of things (reality, art works, cultures) "as they are" to an epistemologically based presentation that acknowledges the construction of meaning by the curator. The curatorial act might thus become both a container that assumes responsibility for the

proliferation of meanings the exhibition generates, as well as being just one of them.²¹⁶ By more readily engaging with the representative component of the curatorial act, curators might find themselves in a position to actively interrogate and embrace the fractures within their own exhibition narratives; to make more space for their inevitably multiple and conflicting meanings. This creation of space for a proliferation of meanings might offer the possibility of openly acknowledging symbolic conflict between different readings, values and paradigms within individual works and, by extension, between (conflicting) national and cultural paradigms.

I have suggested that, following in the tracks of representation's failures, we might best develop curatorial strategies to open up a more nuanced ground for the articulation of complexity per se. The multiplicity of relations of belonging, in terms of place and artistic field, demands such a development. So too it is through the subtle interweavings of cultural and social discourses in one's sense of self that the term *habitus* can lend itself more readily to the situatedness of artists' practices in wider cultural, social and historical discourses than the notion of identity. There is also the multiplicity of relations of subordination and power among nations and individuals, as the Irish-British case study highlighted. I have demonstrated the relevance of questioning a binary conception of art as mainstream or other and the associated division of the world into what Edward Said once referred to as "two unequal halves" (1978: 873). The outcome of my case studies strongly concurs with Chantal Mouffe's proposition that we need to discard the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of any subject's positions – or for that matter, the supposed coherency of any nation or culture's position (2006: 77).

My study insists on the importance of history to the understanding of the present. Yet, the notion of history itself must be articulated in its complex form. We have seen in chapter three how the standard curatorial presentation of cultures and identities as transcendentally sanctioned might be transformed by a transition to understandings of identity as historically produced and contingent. In the final chapter, we witnessed the

²¹⁶ I draw here on Asja Szafraniec's discussion of Derrida's analysis of Kafka. She writes: "It is through such self-reflective series of iterations (and as one of them) that the author's signature inserts itself into the work. From then on, the signature is both, and undecidably, a 'receptacle' assuming responsibility for the (hyper-)totality of textual effects produced by the work, as well as just one of the infinity of the gatherable singular items. It attempts to embrace the textual event of the work as a whole but is at the same time itself embraced, put *en abyme*, by the latter" (2008: 54).

uneasy transition from the national to the transnational, which brought about not so much the disappearance of macropolitical identitarian problems but their “passage underground” within curatorial discourse (Jameson 1984: xi). These issues continue to operate unconsciously as a way of thinking about and acting in our current situation; a fact made evident by the slowness with which the agency of global artists increases.

I have tried to imagine what it might mean to explicitly approach curating as a mirror that necessarily reflects unfaithfully; as a representation of a whole series of further representations, which may or may not be faithful to the artist’s own image. I have identified the tension between the multiply located position of art works in particular social, cultural, political and artistic discourses and the professional demand for a unifying curatorial concept. I have suggested the relevance of “inhabit[ing] the very cracks that open up between the promise of representation and its contingency” through deconstructive approaches to curatorial concepts and exhibition space (Laclau 2007: 87-88). Curating can and, I propose, should follow in the footsteps of art itself by shifting its focus from the represented to the process of representing and to the relationship between the subject of representation and the act of representation. More radically, these deconstructive strategies could productively lend themselves to supporting an alternative ethos in curating, designed to bring about a redistribution of cultural and symbolic capital and a greater autonomy from market forces.

In his recent book, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, Diedrich Diederichsen points out that rather than providing an exception to the commodity market, the singularity of the art work is “precisely the desired quality of a specific commodity type” – “its universal attribute” (2008: 38). As the competitiveness of the global art world becomes more aggressive, art is purged of its history and politics in order to become an ideal object for reinvestment through financial speculation or cultural-political instrumentalization (25). This situation results in an increasingly reductive association of art works with “mythified artist subjects,” while the autonomy of economic markets from state and national cultural formations allows obligations towards cultural values to simply disappear (43, 49). This process is not only taking place in the traditional market place – the art fair or the commercial gallery – but in the museum as well. We are witnessing a rapid institutional passage from educational and civic remits to market niches (Witcomb 2003: 48). The nuances of identities and their associated values and histories are also

flattened in the well-branded exhibition products, produced by museums under the pressure of commercial competitiveness.

We can conceive of mainstream curation today as predominantly “major curating” in the sense that it typically asserts its social and cultural autonomy and overlooks the complexity of how socio-cultural origins inform the paradigms of art. In light of the globalization and rationalization of the art market, it is relevant now, more than before, to establish a kind of curating that protects the ways in which art functions as a social and cultural container. From such a perspective we can challenge curation’s normative complicity with the drive towards prestige and marketability, which exacerbates cultural inequality by privileging dominant discourses. To that effect I have put forward the concept of “minor curating,” which sets out to deterritorialize the norms of the curatorial field from within.

It seems important at this point to acknowledge that the space for minor literature to be “revolutionary” – that is, immanently political rather than engaged in existing politics – was carved out by Deleuze and Guattari at the cost of acknowledging Kafka’s nationalist engagement in Czech literature striving to assert itself vis-à-vis the dominant German literature. Literary critic Pascale Casanova, who made this observation, argues that by hailing Kafka as a prophet or seer of politics to come, rather than addressing his political engagement in the present, Deleuze and Guattari “retrieve the most archaic of political mythologies” and “impose a modern opinion upon a writer from the past who did not share it” (2004: 204). From my perspective, it is necessary to acknowledge the value of both Deleuze and Guattari’s isolation of wider creative possibilities for the deterritorialization of language and Casanova’s insistence on the significance of the original locatedness of Kafka’s deconstructive strategies in national politics. Casanova makes this argument in *The World Republic of Letters* and the necessity of the political and ethical functions of representation for a redistribution of cultural and symbolic capital in the literary world informs her argument. However, it is only when seen together that the two readings provide ways to think forward both the breakdown of representation and its necessity for political and ethical functions. Following Spivak, I have argued that this double strategy is a necessary response to the complexity of the current situation.

Rather than representing the unique artistic subject that art history produces for works of art, or the simplified version thereof preferred by the market, minor curating would aim to address what traditional art history and the market prevent us from thinking.²¹⁷ I find it crucial that curators challenge the norm of seeking to contain and restructure aspects of artists' characters and works that act as threats to the equilibrium of established discourses. Going against normative curatorial discourse's drive towards seamless identity and a seamless exhibition narrative, minor curating would be interruptive. Minor curating would also be located in the sense of considering the relative status of overshadowed readings. Elements in an artist's work which have been underplayed to secure the investments of one national canon would be highlighted in relation to other national perspectives. Rather than providing only an alternative framing, minor curating would openly communicate the symbolic conflict that opens up in the process. It would aim to undo the exclusionary effects of trying to present coherent identity; whether national identity, artistic identity or any other.

It is because of the immanent refusal of this autonomous ethical identity that Deleuze and Guattari find all minor writing inherently collective and political and never individual. Kafka is not minor because of his minority identity as a German-speaking Czech Jew, but because he produces artistic narratives that do not culminate in national, racial, sexual or social identifications that stabilize identity. This writing strategy prevents Kafka from becoming representative in the sense of a major writer (Lloyd 1987: 22). As we have seen with Coleman's *The Ploughman's Party*, the radical interrogation of seamless identity does not necessarily deny the possibility of representation, however, but can insist on simultaneously maintaining political representation and a full awareness of the limits of representation itself. Identity can be represented disjunctively.

If minor curating has a political function, it is firstly to insist on space for the cultural and social value of curating – which is not the same as its market value – and secondly to hold open space for cultural diversity in its full sense of potentially competing hegemonic paradigms. These two elements are almost two sides of the one coin, because it is through the devaluing of the socio-cultural locatedness of art

²¹⁷ I borrow my formulation of the problematic that the artistic subject is produced by art history for works of art from Griselda Pollock from a paper given the National Identity and Visual Culture conference, held at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam on June 10-11 2010.

discourse that symbolic conflict between competing hegemonic paradigms is typically repressed and market incentives secured. Offering an alternative to a globalized curatorial discourse that conceives of a streamlining of art discourse worldwide, minor curating might maintain space for the nuances and contradictions of artistic, cultural, and national identities. It might insist on the relevance of multiple histories in a knowledge-based economy with a package-based approach to the past and on the politics of culture amid the neo-liberal culturalisation of politics.

Dorothea von Hantelmann recalls that the fact that the norms of exhibition-making affirm, enact and cultivate some of the most basic categories of a democratic capitalist society does not imply that the public sphere which exhibitions participate in producing does not exist (2010: 14). It does not mean that the political bias of art is already completely determined in advance by these institutional factors. Rather, it is within these conditions that art has significance. “The artwork does not *gain* a societal impact by rupturing these conventions; it is via these conventions that there already *is* a societal impact” (14). I see the exhibition functioning in similar terms to the art work in this respect. The political bias of curating is not entirely determined in advance by institutional factors. Rather, the silence surrounding the norms of curating enables the repressive and culturally hegemonic aspects of curation to be reproduced without question.

As with art works, the perception of exhibitions, which owe their formal properties and their value only to the structure of the field and thus to its history, is a differential, diacritical perception (Bourdieu 2008: 266). It is attentive to deviations from other exhibitions, both contemporary and past. These exhibitions are a product of a long history of breaks with tradition in Western art discourse and tend to become historical through and through. Yet they are more and more dehistoricized in social and cultural terms in recent curatorial discourse. I wonder about the current level of consensus on *the* important art exhibitions of the past 50 years, visible in conferences and publications that start to set down a history for curating. As my case studies substantiate, the absence of questions about how to define the value of curating is in itself problematic for such consensual judgements. The foreclosure of currently devalued parameters of cultural identity and national cultural discourses will have an impact on emerging generations of curators; one which is likely to allow their practices

to lend themselves too easily to the market-driven purging of complex histories and subjectivities.

Clearly, the curator is in a highly contingent position today; caught between the conflicting demands of various funding bodies, politicians, art discourses, artists and publics. Yet, as Irit Rogoff argues, we always seem to be operating out of a contingent position in today's world. One can never "do the right thing" as such. The crucial point is to ask how the contingency of this ongoing condition might be inhabited differently to create new knowledge:

One is after all always operating out of a contingent position, always seemingly at fault, this is a permanent and ongoing condition ... Criticality is therefore connected in my mind with risk, with a cultural inhabitation that acknowledges what it is risking without yet fully being able to articulate it ... "Criticality" as I perceive it is precisely in the operations of recognising the limitations of one's thought for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure. (2004, unpaginated)

Rogoff's observations on criticality apply not only to the practice of the individual curator, but, I contend, to curatorial discourse more generally. It is precisely in the operations of recognizing the limitations of curatorial practice's historical thought, and actively unlearning them, that new curatorial strategies can be something other than a mere addition to what has been.