

PAUL O'NEILL The Curatorial-as-Research and the post-participation conundrum

Certain definitions of Research have aligned themselves with emergent concepts of 'the Curatorial.' Instead of conforming to the logic of inside and outside (in terms of the distribution of labour), a constellation of activities exists in which the exhibition (whichever form it takes) can be one of many component parts. Rather than forcing syntheses, 'the Curatorial' is rather a constellation (as an always-emergent praxis) brings together incommensurable social objects, ideas and subject relations in order to demonstrate the structural faults and falsities inherent in the notion of the alienated autonomous work/ research/ exhibition/ art.

This is evident from the briefest of glances at a number of recent attempts at describing the curatorial. For example, Irit Rogoff articulates the curatorial as critical thought that does not rush to embody itself, instead raising questions that are to be unravelled over time; Maria Lind's notion of the curatorial involves practising forms of political agency that try to go beyond the already known; Beatrice von Bismark's understanding of the curatorial is as a continuous space of negotiation, contributing to other processes of becoming; and Emily Pethick's proposition of the curatorial presupposes an unbounded framework, allowing for things, ideas and outcomes to emerge in the process of being realised.ⁱ Illustrative of the contested territory around the expanded field of curatorship, these definitions support forms of research-based, dialogical practice in which the processual and the serendipitous overlap with speculative actions and open-ended forms of production.

If we are to think participation as more than a closed, one-off, relational, or social interaction with art, we must take account of a temporal process that is immeasurable, unquantifiable, and unknowable from the outset. In this sense, we might think of the duration of a participatory process as having its own extrinsic values, such as mobility, agency, change or affect.ⁱⁱ In this case, Durational/ Processual research offers a multiplicity of modes of interaction between people – one that is difficult to capture or represent. In this context, time behaves as a destabilizing effect, because there is no longer a fixed unitary place in which to qualify 'the fully discloseable experience', or how much we participated in the art, or research-as-event. This is most evident in the fact that a number of people contributing to many durational research projects are often unaware exactly what they are taking part in and what the outcome is intended to be; their participation – what has been done, who took part and what was achieved – is not something that can clearly be measured or evaluated. Time surpasses itself in a manner that makes duration the very material of cooperative creative action. For Bergson, for example, duration is always evolving by our actions 'in time,' allowing for the unknown to be brought to the fore in a manner that does not anticipate its own formation during or within the course of action. Duration cannot 'run out' because, by definition, it is something that endures – its substance being change, materialized through a transitional process that is taking place in time and where/ when nothing will occur in the same way again.ⁱⁱⁱ

Extrinsic values of openness, duration, transformation, and 'the curatorial' as a key part of research have also opened up a space for rethinking what might be meant by the publicness of 'post-participation' in research and in art. Most recent thinking on 'participation' in art and its public contexts has been configured through the experience of art's reception, its objecthood and its active potential to engage with others and transform them in some evaluative way – in other words, the ethics of art. A lot of durational practice/ research work appears to argue for is a kind

of post-participation that involves being together for a period of time without fully knowing what one is participating in or producing, while nevertheless having some common objective.

By taking account of post-participation with artistic research, and in art's research as curatorial work, as an unfolding and accumulation of multiple positions, engagements and moments registered in what we account for as the artwork, then we may be able to move beyond the individual participatory encounter of an exhibition moment.

In order for post-participation to be understood from the perspective of the producer (who participates through artistic processes) rather than the received (who participates in art), we might begin to distinguish between different forms of relationality and to move beyond the relational as merely another social encounter with art, with its exhibition, or with its object-hood. We might also understand post-participation not as a relation or social encounter with artistic production, but as a socialized process necessary for art's co-production. Such a shift in the perception of participation must initially consider the different duration-specific qualities of art as something driven by ideas of extending *public* time, rather than space. We can begin to understand the complexities of artistic co-production in terms of the logic of continuity - in a non-situated time and non-regulated place – and not as a quantifiable event or the measure of impact of experience or the regulation of bodies and intellectual labor – a little like life itself.

ⁱ See Irit Rogoff, 'Smuggling – A Curatorial Model' in Vanessa Joan Müller and Nicolaus Schafhausen (Eds.), *Under Construction: Perspectives on Institutional Practice* (Cologne, Walther König, 2006), pp. 132–133; Maria Lind, 'The Curatorial', *Artforum*, October, 2009, pp. 103-105; Beatrice von Bismarck, 'Curatorial Criticality: On the Role of Freelance Curators in the Field of Contemporary Art' in Marianne Eigenheer (Ed.), *Curating Critique* (Frankfurt, Revolver, 2007), pp. 62–69; and Emily Pethick, 'The Dog that Barked at the Elephant in the Room', *The Exhibitionist*, issue 4, pp. 81–82.

ⁱⁱ For an introductory analysis on Bergsonisms, see Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York, Cornell University, 2006), pp. 1–13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.