

URBAN CURATORS AT WORK— A REAL-IMAGINED HISTORIOGRAPHY

[Elke Krasny]

Urban curating is not a new field. However, one is not likely to find many museums, universities, art academies, city administrations, or urban design studios seeking to fill an open position with an urban curator. Therefore, one can only imagine what such a job description would actually entail. However, the goal of my reflections here is not to arrive at a most wanted list of skills for a theoretical employment ad. Rather, it is my aim to describe the position of the urban curator as one that is conceptually open, marked by the politics of dis/continuous self-re/invention.

The fact that this job and its description are either inexistent or, at best, vague works to its advantage. It does not mean that there isn't any work out there in the contemporary global cities. Quite on the contrary, urban curatorial labor is much needed. This need suggests the plethora of work to be done. It is of importance to conceptualize this need for urban curatorial work to remain forever incomplete. By keeping the position open, in both theory and practice, it becomes a programmatic equivalent to urban transformation processes that are permanently ongoing in different scales and different temporalities, as well as to the eternal changes of social evolution. The openness is therefore structural, not temporal. Keeping the position open makes opening, relating, and positioning part of the urban curating job. An urban curator's work is at best never done and dis/continuously incomplete.

The project of a real-imagined historiography of urban curating is programmatic. Central to its writing is the exploration of the relationships between its conceptual openness and its specific position. Analytical precision and associative imagination are indispensable to turning such a historiographical project into an activist practice of urban curatorship. This will allow for growing relationships, both temporally and spatially. Such a historiography is based on the real-imagined mapping of an expanding cartography of practices. These include strong contradictions, conflicting agonies, radical inclusions, and surprising alliances. Urban curatorial labor, the way I understand it, extends across time zones and multiple geographies, aiming to overcome austerity measures and precarious conditions. More often than not, it extends, entering into unusual alliances and mobilizing personal networks.

Urban curatorial labor forges connections between the aesthetic, the economic, the cultural, the social, and the political. In short, it relates to the urban from within. Such a change-making and engaged relationship is a far cry from the relational practices that were celebrated in curator Nicolas Bourriaud's influential book and exhibition. Art historian Amelia Jones has repeatedly pointed out that the celebratory mood of relationality in the 1990s consciously omitted the historical precedents found in performative and feminist practices of the 1960s and 1970s.

While many critics, from Nicolas Bourriaud to Jan Verwoert and Simon O'Sullivan, have noted the rise of this interest in activating the relationality involved in processes of making and viewing art, few have connected

relationality either to these historical precedents (viz., the works of media performative artists such as Allan Kaprow, Carolee Schneemann, Bruce Naumann, Suzanne Lacy, Helio Oiticica, VALIE EXPORT, and many, many others since the 1960s) or to the absolutely essential context of the end of the European political colonization of the so-called third world, the rise of the rights movements, and the impact of identity politics on Euro-American art discourse and practice since 1960. It is not an accident that so many artists activating a relational approach since that time were invested in the rights movements. Not surprisingly, this tendency to ignore these precedents has led to the formation of new micro-canons that, once again, leave out the work that is the most threatening, messy, and uncontainable according to these new models of what curator Nicolas Bourriaud termed “relational aesthetics” in an influential exhibition and book by this title in the late 1990s. {01}

Central to my concept of an expanded and extended urban curatorial labor is Jones’ insistence on the precedents of artistic relationality from the 1960s and 1970s, and artist involvement in the rights movement and struggles of decolonization. I understand urban curating as a radical relational practice, which can take on the form of art, of communication, of building, of discourse, of community organizing, of legal action, of supportive self-organization, of exhibition making, of protest, or of any other form relevant to the case at hand. This radical relationality abounds with the aesthetic and political consciousness of solidarity and its far-reaching alignment with the struggle against urban injustice and social movements striving for urban redistribution. It connects back to anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, and looks forward to the production of an urban citizenship that includes aesthetic, poetic, or even fictional practices. Relationality understood in this way, and again I am turning to Amelia Jones here, is much more in alignment with the relationality of Edouard Glissant. In his *Poetics of Relation*, published in French in 1990 and translated into English in 1997, Glissant writes from a specific place, and I am following Dipesh Chakrabarty here, one that asks “a question about how thought was related to place.” {02} The relation to the place from where one writes is therefore crucial. Glissant wrote in and from the French-Caribbean reality, making understood that identities are always based on relations to their past, present, and toward a self-defined future. Caribbean creolization is thus a result of relationships as opposed to isolation. Relationality functions as the relay between the construction of identity, the production of space, the politics of power, and their respective interrelatedness. In his 1967 lecture *Des Espaces Autres*, Michel Foucault introduced his era as “one in which space takes for us the form of relation among sites. (...) We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.” {03} Conventionally, the historiography of Western philosophy, or theory for that matter, lacks cartography. Neither place nor time are mapped onto historiographies of thought. How thought relates to place is rarely historicized or “provincialized” {04} when it comes to Western thinkers like Foucault, whose “Des Espaces Autres” is distinguished by references to his experiences in Tunis, where he taught from 1966 to 1968. In the 1990s, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti introduced the concept of a nomadic subject, which is of interest here, since it introduces relationality both between subjects and to place and date. Braidotti states, “Mainstream subject positions have to be challenged in relations to and interaction with the marginal subjects.” {05} Feminist strategies and anti-racist politics based on the relations between mainstream

01 Jones, 2012, pp. 235–236.

02 Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 13.

03 Foucault, 1984: http://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault_heterotopia.en.html

04 See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

05 Braidotti, 2011, p. 5.

subject positions and marginal subjects are of importance for my definition of urban curatorial work as one of conceptual openness. Equally important is Braidotti's take on cartography, which I understand to be a suggestion of how to write and conceptualize a historiography. How thought and action relate to place is crucial:

I think that many of the things I write are cartographies, that is to say, maps of positioning: a sort of intellectual landscape gardening that gives me a horizon, a frame of reference within which I can take my bearings, move about, and set up my own theoretical tent. {06}

In referring to her theoretical work, Braidotti chooses activities that are actually spatial practices, such as gardening or setting up a tent. This creates an interesting relation to practices of urban curatorial labor, as well as an interesting tension to the politics of spatial practices and their image regimes. The theoretical tent allows me to take us to very real refugee camps and urban protest sites. In September 2013, Initiative Kunst_Kultur | Stop Deportation! (Initiative Art_Culture | Stop Deportation!) declared its solidarity with the Refugee Camp Vienna. A working group of educators and students at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna established an initiative that I see as being a good example of involved urban curatorial labor. {07} Braidotti's intellectual landscape gardening allows me to take us to urban gardening and localized agriculture:

Here, I am hinting at the inevitable formation of a parallel urban world. What was imagined by cyber-punk novelists more than twenty years ago is now becoming a palpable reality: an urban world with parallel economies, underground solidarities, collective service exchanges, alternative housing models, cooperative factories, localized agriculture, and alternative educational structures. {08}

Intellectual landscape gardening also allows me to take us to my own curatorial work on *Hands-On Urbanism 1850–2012. The Right to Green*, a transnational historiography of urban self-organization looked at through the lens of urban gardening and urban farming. This historiographical mapping traced radical alliance practices between activists, city administrators, architects, artists, marginalized subjects, theorists, urban planners, and many others. {09} Practicing the historiography of urban curating the way I just introduced it here is an activity that lies somewhere between theory and practice and allows for associations both in terms of mental connection and in terms of organized bodies of people. It is an ongoing activity that creates extended relations, forges propositional alliances, and shares associations over time and place.

Let me set out to explain how the conceptually open position and the notion that thought relates to place impact one another. I do want to point out that this openness is not at all seen here as yet another rendering of the "anything goes" mentality, but rather as an, at times, most unbending, conflicting, uncompromising requirement of constant openness to the demands of specificity. Yet, specificity is marked by change. I see the urban public and its spaces to be the new borderlands in which contemporary cityness is both produced and negotiated. Because it should always be locally specific, yet aware of both the global and the local in its ongoing struggles of recontextualization within the new urban borderlands of the public, the

06 Braidotti, 2011, p. 46.

07 In an e-mail dated September 20, 2013, Cathrin See Franz, who is part of *kültür gemma!*, a program for migrant cultural production in Vienna, pointed out *rebelodrom*'s most surprising affective relations and alliances. On the occasion of the opening of *rebelodrom* as part of the *Wienwoche* festival, months of shared political and affective labor lead to the most unexpected and seemingly impossible alliances: Sharo Khan from *Protest-Servitenkloster*, *Super Puta Pradastern*, the *Mindji Panthers*, the delegates of *PPÖ* and many others supported *Mohammad Atef Wazir's* Pakistani art of singing. See also: <http://rebelodrom.blogspot.co.at/p/rebelodrom.html>

08 Miguel Robles-Duran, 2012, p. 56.

09 See Elke Krasny, *Architekturzentrum Wien* (eds.), *Hands-On Urbanism 1850–2012. The Right to Green*, Hongkong mccc creations, 2012.



Respect Favelas,
during Art Basel, June 2013.

commons, and shared issues of spatial justice, the concept of urban curating must be kept open throughout. This openness is therefore, more than anything, understood to be programmatic. Urban curating not only requires an understanding of how thought relates to place, but of how to put thought in relation to place, and of how this relates to spatial practice. A central issue of spatial practice is working out how to relate not only thought in terms of place, but equally thought in relation to time. The urban state of affairs is one of transformation. Consequently, a vigilant altering and changing of one's practice is required in order to deal with the spatial politics and chronopolitics at work in urban transformation processes. Urban curatorial labor expands the production of communality and conviviality amidst conflictive and agonistic struggles.

One most certainly cannot deny that urban curators and their ways of working are always inextricably intertwined with local and temporal specificities. This entanglement with the state of affairs they address makes urban curators, above all, contemporary agents. They are thinking about the present they are about to become deeply involved with and which they aim to change. Why then do I suggest a real-imagined historiography for a practice deeply rooted and firmly entrenched in the urban transformation of the present time? This propositioned historiography attests to my belief that intellectual alignments and friendly alliances can be forged from a radical position of transhistoricity. So, the politics of urban curating become an issue of rehearsing relations and nourishing ideas of how these relationships can transgress the given. Past transgressions can become a resource to be learned from. Real-imagined historiography as a radical method of urban curating then becomes, in turn, part of the present again. It makes the past become part of the present time, in order to enable the imagining of what can be gleaned and learned from past transgressions and alliances. This is where I see historiography entering, as an axis of change. I can easily imagine urban curators at work while I sit at my kitchen table and write this text. I can imagine them at work elsewhere, and at a different time. My text joins in on their work. I can imagine urban curators in the future reading my text while they are sitting at their kitchen tables. From these kitchen tables, the ideas travel on to the cities. Change is brought about through thought, analysis, words, actions, and

manifestations, ultimately becoming part of the production of spaces. The connections that are made will stretch across time and space.

Creating a history of urban curating that is longer than one might ever have anticipated is a way of building affiliations for change and affecting affinities with change. The little hyphen joining the real and the imagined in my real-imagined historiography is a fragile, yet sturdy pathway that crosses back and forth between the possible and the impossible. This crossing strongly represents an overcoming of the restrictions of the present time. It functions as an invitational gesture to imagining alignments with the past. This leads to extended relations with imagined, at times even fictional, companions. The hyphen in my real-imagined historiography becomes the instrument that forms provisional groupings of new urban constellations through curatorial work.

Let me now turn to the sketching of some of the turning points in urban curatorial activity relevant to my historiographical proposition. The first urban curator I will discuss is Jane Addams, a pioneer settlement social reformer, women's rights campaigner, and later Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Together with Ellen Gates Starr, she founded the first settlement house in the U.S. The year of 1889 witnessed the opening of Hull House, with residents moving into the poorest neighborhood of Chicago, at the time the fastest growing city in the world, marked by industrialization, immigration, and social tension. Residents became involved in and actively engaged with their neighborhood, with the city of Chicago, with a wider network of dedicated intellectuals across the U.S., and with a transnational exchange of like-minded intellectuals and activists in London. After having read about a settlement house, Addams went on a study visit to the very first of its kind, Toynbee Hall in London, where residents actively worked to provide relief from poverty and distress.

In 1895, the *Hull House Maps and Papers*, a collection of writings by the residents of Hull House, was first published. The book was reissued in 2007, with an introduction by Rima Lunin Schultz. The collection of documents includes maps delineating the correlation between income and the national origins of immigrants. At that time, Chicago was the most multi-ethnic city in the world. The maps became a tool representing both sociologic research and political change. The team of ten authors—eight women and two men—not only produced maps but also essays on subjects such as exploitation by local employers, child labor, and the role of art in working class neighborhoods. In her contribution to *Hull House Maps and Papers*, titled “The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement”, Addams wrote:

One man or a group of men sometimes reveal to their contemporaries a higher conscience by simply incorporating into the deed what has been before but a philosophic proposition. By this deed the common code of ethics is stretched to a higher point. [...] The settlement is pledged to insist upon the unity of life, to gather to itself the sense of righteousness to be found in its neighborhood, and as far as possible in its city; to work towards the betterment not of one kind of people or class of people, but for the common good. {10}

Jane Addams's work at Hull House was based on the cornerstones of residence, research, reform, activist involvement in spatial and labor issues, and art. These I see as trans-historical elements from which current urban curating can be understood. Urban curating requires local involvement and conceptually driven research in order to make a difference. The positioning of the urban

10 Jane Addams, 1895, p. 184.

curator-in-residence with a research-based practice aimed at forming and re-forming, aligned with issues of spatial justice, labor, and the role of art, emerges as a contemporary proposition from the past.

Nearly a century later, in 1993, feminist artist Suzanne Lacy conceived of a public art project honoring the memory of Jane Addams. Its realization was based on a coalition with a large number of local communities. As Lacy described it, *Full Circle: Monuments to Women* created "instant monuments". A hundred limestone blocks were positioned throughout Chicago's downtown district, the Loop. Each of the blocks had a brass plaque with the name of one of a hundred women chosen by local communities in a two-year collective process. Addams's work had literally "come full circle" to mark public urban space. Lacy aimed to remember "women who first came to service when they needed the support and stayed to assist others". As a second part of her work, Lacy intended to perform a service to the community, such as voluntary work in a hostel for the homeless, using the aesthetic means of performance. This part remained unrealized. The third part of the work was an international dinner party under the name *Dinner at Jane's* in the Hull House Museum, site of the original settlement. In the 1995 catalog *Culture in Action*, Lacy emphasizes that:

"Service", an inadequate word, [...] still seems the best way to describe a quality of supporting, nurturing, correcting injustice, promoting equality [...]. Often service smacks of essentialism. [...] That is dangerous territory, for theoretical reasons as well as because it suggests that women can and, therefore, must serve. Nevertheless, it still seems the best word to describe a sense of freely embraced responsibility for nurturing life [...] and the activism that goes with that responsibility. {11}

Lacy's work as an artist allows me to speak of the strategies, tactics, and practices that I find pertinent to the practice of urban curating. Lacy emphasizes a kind of service that allows for a close link to curating and its Latin root *curare*, to take care of, to look after, to treat, and also to edit. All these activities are pertinent, not only to Lacy's *Full Circle: Monuments to Women*, but in more general terms to what I would like to draw into the historiographical proposition of urban curating.

From the mid-1990s onwards, a number of artists and architects actively working with public space both in Japan and in Europe referred to their emerging practice as urban curating. Together with artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, architect Raoul Bunschoten and CHORA developed a new profile for the professional architect as urban curator, in which it would be a requirement that architects actively seek engagement in the practice of participation and public debate. In 2001, Raoul Bunschoten and CHORA authored a retrospective of this new practice of urban curating and its cultural and political ambitions, entitled *Urban Flotsam: Stirring the City*. The retrospective functioned both as a claim and a proposal. In 2007, Meike Schalk, a practitioner of architecture and art in the public space and specialist in critical studies and urban theory, published her seminal essay "Urban Curating: A Critical Practice Towards Greater Connectedness", in the volume *Altering Practices. Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, edited by Doina Petrescu. My essay "Ma(r)king a Difference: Strategies of Urban Curating", which also included "A Preliminary A-Z of Urban Curating", was part of the 2010 volume *Optrek in Transvaal. On the Role of Public Art in Urban Development. Interventions and Research*, edited by Veronica Hekking,

11 Suzanne Lacy, 1995, p. 69. Quoted in *Culture in Action*.

Sabrina Lindemann, and Annechien Meier. At the same time, the idea of urban curating was also introduced by Japanese architectural studio bow-wow for their investigative urban research into spaces in Tokyo's dense fabric left unplanned by architects, in which various and often apparently diametrically opposed uses—for example a noodle shop and a baseball pitch—became a hybrid combined in a single building. Their research was published in the *Made in Tokyo* city guide. In retrospect, these different practices are distinguished by a favoring of urban space as a space of participation integrating the potential of unexpected and unplanned encounters. The political dimension of participation, conventionally understood as the role of the community in decision-making, is joined with an understanding of spaces and people radically participating in each other's formation, without ever having been invited to do so. It's participation that starts to go far beyond invitation.

Even though never emphasized as a commonly shared theoretical basis, the above-mentioned practices of urban curating, be it the public debate of urban issues, taking a stance against top-down master planning, or the combination of unexpected functions in existing architectures through everyday use, are distinguished by a fair amount of unruly, untamed, and migratory knowledge. These can best be described with the concepts of hybridity, developed by Homi K. Bhabha, and the concept of *mestizaje*, developed by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa. The emergence of post-binary negotiations of urban conditions began to challenge traditional notions of established dichotomies between private and public, formal and informal, planned and unplanned, bottom-up and top-down, DIY and austerity. The theoretical proposition of hybridization and the struggle for post-binarity keeps being profoundly shaken up by the ongoing re-emergence of power structures, as well as economic structures, relying fully on instilling new binaries of threat and neocolonialism.

The present is the most difficult territory to chart. Looking for real-imagined alignments in the past proves simple compared to understanding the actual influence or the lasting impact of reorienting the urban curatorial practices of today. Currently, urban curators are involved in negotiating the war zone between private and public interests, formal and informal strategies, and planned and unplanned urban development. This war zone could also be referred to as the new borderland of emerging political conflicts, social struggles, and citizens' movements. By the same token, this borderland is colonized by neoliberal economy, global capitalism, transnational governmentality, labor extraction, and resource diversion. This brings me to slippages in the history of the present, in a Foucaultian sense. The urban borderlands become the new frontier for participation. This is not a participation based upon a routine invitation and the performance of the commoditized spectacle of decision-making. Rather, it is the radical participation in the given that constitutes our shared present. Participation is therefore not a choice, instead, from a theoretical standpoint, it is understood as inescapably being part of the given, a domain in which agency and making a difference towards change must be carved out and redefined through practice.

The last part of my reflection concerns a few choice present-day situations, in which urban curators are either at work, or they would be much needed to take action in conflicted and contested political and economic territories. Starting in 1980, a group called UX, Urban eXperiment, has been participating in the improvement of neglected sites in Paris, without ever having been invited or authorized to do so. In their practice, preservation



Tadashi Kawamata,
Favela Café at the
Art Basel, June 2013.

meets infiltration, and monuments meet a new use. Not only have they clandestinely managed to restore the Pantheon's clock, they have also showed films beneath the Trocadéro, and staged readings in monuments after dark. They use the networks and tunnels of urban infrastructure to add improvements to parts of Paris' patrimony that would otherwise be abandoned or neglected. The group's members are, for the better part, secret. Crisis, care, and creativity become an explosively entangled mix, in which we understand how urban curating is both radically self-initiated and stretches the boundaries of the urban imagination, transgressing and challenging the borderlines between lawfulness and urban improvement.

In December 2012, the MG3.0_Masterplan Mönchengladbach Association successfully presented citizens with a new master plan for their city. The private association had commissioned Grimshaw Architects to develop this master plan in a one-year-long public, participatory process. In July 2013, the private initiative was adopted as the official guideline for the future urban development of the city of Mönchengladbach. Legally, according to the association's website, a masterplan is "an informal and legally non-binding document".^{12} Yet, the commitment of the local government turned this self-initiated document into a political master plan for the city. In times of austerity, citizens take the master planning into their own hands. Those who had the means to do so hired Grimshaw Architects. This group of men calls their initiative, which will largely impact on the city's future, the third founding. The MG3.0_Masterplan Mönchengladbach Association negotiates the borders between private and public interests, between economic investment and self-initiated master planning for the city's future.

In June 2013, the Basel Art Fair showcased a "Favela Café" by Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata, who had been invited to do one of his site-specific

¹² Available at: <http://www.mg3-0.de/mg3-0-die-dritte-gruendung/>

installations. Herzog & de Meuron's new fair halls stood in stark contrast to Kawamata's makeshift and seemingly fragile composition of walkways and huts made out of wood. A group of local artists and activists appropriated the square and added their own, truly makeshift architectures complete with banners reading, "Respect Favelas". The informal appropriation and its appearance, to use Hannah Arendt's term, on the public square, which is in fact property of the Basel Art Fair, was cleared by the police, who did not hesitate to use tear gas. The borderland between the new fair halls, the commissioned site-specific installation, and local resistance was marked by the ambivalent relationship of contemporary architecture and informality, neo-colonial aspirations and political ethics of identification with an assumed, and thus attributed, position of weakness that demands protection and respect.

For an urban curator today, there is no easy way out; no easy way of taking sides. Urban curators have to invest in their curatorial labor, often in precarious economic conditions and in social and affective relations, and they forge political alliances and strategic alignments. Is he or she identifying with the transgressions of urban repair work and the clandestine underground of aesthetic urban action where the city fails to act? Is he or she found among the initiators of a new master plan the city otherwise could not afford? Or is he or she found among the critics of such a master plan relying on the joined influence of money and power? Is she or he to be found among the protesters at the Basel Art Fair, or as their nuanced critic? How will relating thought to place and time be of use for urban curators today and in the future? How will Jane Addams's residence, research, reform, and activist involvement; how will Suzanne Lacy's service; how will participation beyond invitation, and hybridity or *mestizaje*, which marked the practices of the late 1990s and early 2000s, be of help? It is part of the urban curatorial task to radically extend these relations to tap into this real-imagined historiography as a constantly expanding resource of knowledge migrating towards different urban futures.

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Planning Unplanned—Towards a New Positioning of Art in the Context of Urban Development

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