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Curating documenta:
The Spectacle
of Modernism

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The Invention
of Curators

Vesna Madžoski

DE CVRATORIBVS
THE DIALECTICS
OF CARE AND
CONFINEMENT

ATROPOS

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Curating Manifesta:
The Spectacle
of Erasure

IV

Curating
Otherness:
Avatar Anthropology



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The process of earning a doctoral degree might be the most peculiar invention of the educational system created in the past that we still follow, and anyone who has taken this road knows it is not an easy one. The candidates mistakenly expect to find in their supervisors a helpful hand that will guide them through all the bumps along the way, and a generous intellect that will devote all of their time to their new apprentices. Of course, this is almost never the case. During this process, the candidate will have to fight many battles, the most important ones being the fights with oneself. In all its strangeness, a doctoral degree might not mean mastering a discipline, but rather learning how to be mastered by it. And the past several years I have spent on this manuscript will hopefully testify to this. In many ways, the following analysis might seem to be a product of an *undisciplined* science. It is neither art-historical, anthropological, nor philosophical; at the same time, it is all of these together. It stems from the idea of searching for the ways to approach three different objects of study, and to take them to the same level of analysis.

The freedom to follow the traces and details of my objects of study in this way would not be possible without the framework in which this research has been finalized – that of another “undisciplined” child, the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. I began my research at another institution, the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (ASCA), but due to its undisciplined nature, it was “expelled” after a few years for, I was told, technical reasons. The traces of this unusual trajectory, from one academic context to another, will probably be visible in the writing that follows. Nevertheless, the hope remains that the refusal to be disciplined will bring this study closer to the minds outside of traditional academia.

My survival during the past several years of this process of discovery would not have been possible without the many dear

friends I have encountered along the way. First of all, this study would never have been possible without the support and inspiration I received from my two fellow PSWARiors, Adi Hollander and Tamuna Chabashvili; our collaboration during all those years gave an unimaginable force to both my thinking and writing, as well as to the lessons on stubbornness that materialized in making the impossible possible. The first years of my research were marked by the struggle with authorities whom I will not name here, but who made my determination to continue even stronger. Those difficult moments would have been impossible to survive without true friendship: Astrid Van Weyenberg, who had the patience to discipline my English whenever it was needed, spending numerous hours on deciphering my thoughts, and who was there as a friend whenever I needed her; Jan Hein Hoogstad, for showing me the value of laughter at one's own expense as a way to defeat the weaknesses; Paulina Aroch Fugellie and Maria Boletsi for limitless intellectual inspiration; and Lucy Cotter for origami dragons that can save one's life.

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INTRODUCTION

In the domain we call art, there seems to be a permanent dialectical struggle between two poles: *poiesis* (production, composition, magical procedure) and *oikonomia* (handling, disposition, management, housekeeping). While artists are the ones assumed to be preoccupied with *poiesis*, there is an empty seat for the profession to take care of the other pole of this pair. In the following pages, you will find an attempt to elaborate on a profession that has become one of the main “agents” in the art field in the past fifty years – the curators. As we shall see, they have become an active part in both of these poles, or, in other words, their duty has become to curate both domains. With a help of a historical perspective, we shall try to formulate the domain of curating before landing in the field of arts in the last century. Numerous symposiums about and publications in contemporary arts have already been dedicated to demystifying the figure of the curator, but what they have mainly succeeded in doing was to describe field of the activities without putting it in relation to other fields where curators work. That is why the following analysis has the ambition to strip curating down to its essence, by comparing three main domains in which we find this profession active: the Roman Empire, contemporary arts, and contemporary zoos.

What is clear from the beginning is that this profession seems to be a solution that is employed whenever there is a need to control something but also be accompanied by a pedagogical lesson. Curators are not mere policemen, as they still operate in the field where mistakes are allowed, even expected, and not-yet criminalized, and where the subjects (and objects) in question need pedagogical guidance rather than severe punishment. It is exactly in this space of tolerated excess where we also find contemporary art, a domain that seems to have become obsessed by (imitating) poetic creation for economic gain.

The spotlight was suddenly turned on curators in the mid-1990s, at the moment of neo-liberal expansion, or of the capitalist need to expand the field from which it collects its fetishist objects. The fear of demand exceeding production has been prevented by producing new armies of educated curators, experts who will give a stamp of approval to what is to be included in this global fetishist collection. Nevertheless, it would be too easy to simply dismiss this as part of the global frenzy of tourist pilgrimages to new and renovated temples of object fetishism; the following analysis attempts to underline the problem of the internalized need of present-day democratic subjects to be guided, to be permanently pedagogically instructed, curated, or, to use a pun based on a German word for exhibition guides, to be *fürrered*. Both life and art are perceived to be chaotic, and there seems to be nothing more frightening. Hence, we shall devote all our attention to these “housekeepers” of art, and their historical transformation from being in charge of the preservation of valuable objects to becoming an active part in art production. As it seems, when the chaos threatened to destroy the “house” in the late 1960s, a sudden need for curators was reintroduced.

In one of the earliest attempts to see exhibitions in all their complexity and as objects for theoretical reflection and analysis, in the study entitled *The Story of Exhibitions* written half a century ago, Kenneth Luckhurst constructed a historical framework in order to examine different modes of using exhibitions as cultural forms since their birth in the late XVII century. Luckhurst’s analysis offers a wide scope of potential functions that exhibitions were created to perform, from aesthetic to economic, social, cultural, political, ideological, and educational ones. The most important point of his analysis is summarized in the statement that the purposes and functions of exhibitions are constantly being transformed and negotiated according to specific circumstances, hence a need for a critical eye to keep a close look on this cultural form in order to examine ongoing processes of shifts and modi-

fications. These shifts are culturally and historically embedded, which makes it possible to get a specific insight into the context that produces exhibitions in the first place. Exhibitions of (contemporary) art are specific sites that are permanently “under-construction”, where new narratives and meanings are produced with every next show, every next exposure. Or at least that is what we are made to believe.

The Western art world is still embedded in the modernist construction of a “white cube” as a guarantee of its separation and independence from the outside world(s). This white and sterile form of exposure also came to be considered a guarantee for an objective gaze in a neutral space out of time, and, as Brian O’ Doherty argues in his influential essay from 1976, a space that functions as a “stabilizing social construct” and a guarantee of social stability (O’ Doherty 1999:74)¹. Nevertheless, this notion

¹ For a detailed analysis of the survival of the paradigm of the “white cube” please see: Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube” (2005).

of independence and neutrality becomes complicated with the entrance of the main agents of the relationship that is constructed within the exhibition space: of art objects, on one hand, and the viewers on the other. Through them, the outside world enters: art objects are not part of some Immaculate Conception, but rather are products of specific circumstances, loaded with different meanings through the act of exhibiting; from their side, the viewers bring into this space the complex networks of relations and visual regimes of perceiving the exposed objects. Therefore, the aim of the following analysis is to show how the “neutral” space of exhibitions comes to be influenced by the surrounding social, economic and political system, an influence that is performed by various and dispersed agents and means.

This investigation started from the need to analyze power relations in the system of contemporary art today, or the presumably non-existing censorship in this free and democratic domain. As we have been trained to think, censorship is something that

does not exist in Europe, and instead is only to be found under totalitarian regimes. On another level, contemporary art as a genre and as a discourse has become a sign of progress, freedom, democracy, and a “healthy” economy. If a certain country does not have museums of contemporary art, it is to be considered backward, uneducated, and outside of this world. Bearing this in mind, it becomes nearly impossible to investigate the procedure of censorship in this “open” space, where everything is allowed; just like with capitalism itself, it is hard to pinpoint the responsibility for actions to a single agent. As it seems this skillful creature always finds a way to escape whenever we try to perform criticism. How, then, can we even begin to grasp the processes that we are confronted with?

The important event that struck the system of contemporary art in the last century was the appearance of a new agent on the scene of art production: that of a curator, and this is also the main focus of this study. Two large-scale manifestations served as platforms for the promotion and recognition of this profession, interestingly enough, both with a clear political mandate as well: *documenta* in Kassel, Germany, and Manifesta—European Biennial of Contemporary Art, which travels to a different host city every time. In the case of *documenta*, the task was to bring Germany back to the international scene after its demise in World War II, while Manifesta was a Western European response to the political shifts after the fall of Berlin wall. As we shall see, *documenta* instituted curators as authors, while Manifesta promoted a new type that has more in common with traditional anthropologists than with art historians, as used to be the case. In my investigation, I was interested in the “skeletons” of those art manifestations, and in the logic sustaining their powerful rhetorical apparatuses, which is why I focused on the elements usually considered peripheral: the visual traces in the archives, catalogues, films, and books. The choice of the third case-study, the Hollywood blockbuster film AVATAR, might seem unusual at first

glance, following the presumption that this was to be a research on exhibitions and curators only. Nevertheless, the idea was to continue with the discussion where the analysis of Manifesta brought us and, as we shall see, following the unusual details of this perfect 3D cinematic image will bring us back to curators.

On another level, these case studies all reflect on processes in two dominant visual domains where our senses are being disciplined today: exhibitions as the domain of the presumed elite, and Hollywood blockbusters as the domain of the masses. Both being the invention of what we call Western culture, they are supposed to manifest the principles of democracy and individual freedoms. Nevertheless, we will pose the question of whether this was really the case. Our aim will be to look behind representations, behind those perfect images to which we are supposed to give the status of truth. What we find behind each of them is the same sensory training: division, exclusion and mastery, or a clear attempt to preserve the dominant discourses of the Western procedures of the visual.

More and more, curating has become a concept used to describe different activities in various professions and disciplines. Recently, we could even hear that our perception and the use of the digital world were being “curated” by the large search engines. Therefore, with this in mind, I have chosen to focus my research on understanding what curating actually means today. In other words, why do we suddenly need to have reality curated for us?

In the first part, my main aim was to look for the origins of curating as a profession and, through a historical overview, to define the role it has been given since its beginnings. We had to go back to the Roman Empire, when curators were instituted for the first time, and served as the guardians of particular human beings, objects, and institutions. Through a short Medieval ecclesiastical modification as caretakers of human souls, we were taken to their

modern revival in the guise of museum professionals. In their last manifestation, we will meet curators as co-producers of contemporary art, at the same historical moment that they are being employed in zoos as guardians of wild animals. What this historical overview ultimately made clear was, that what all those various agents have in common is a duty to protect those considered to be in need of protection, which further opened up the questions of who decides this, and how and when they decide this, as well as where the threshold is when care becomes confinement.

The second part introduces the first case-study, the analysis of *documenta* as one of the main platforms where the most recent transformation in curatorship took place, namely that of turning curators into exhibition authors. Our investigation tries to cut through the dominant discourse that celebrates this event, problematizing the politics and aesthetics influenced by this turn. We will take a closer look at the particular interpretation of modernism as well, as a part of post-war cultural memorization in Germany, the exclusion of women, and the spectacularization of capitalism, which are all part of *documenta's* unwritten history.

The third part examines the Manifesta biennial, and looks through the processes of deletion that took place in its archive as a way of defining the logic behind its creation and assumed function. Being created with a clear political agenda to “welcome” the Others from the former Eastern Europe, those processes can be further interpreted not as isolated practices of the art world, but rather as manifestations of the logic sustaining the European project as well. Thanks to the visual traces left by the photographs produced by Manifesta, we are given a particular insight into what happens behind the level of official representation.

Being part of what can be called the anthropologization of curating, Manifesta has opened questions that are not only related to the visual representation of Others today, but also to the use of rejected anthropological methodologies by other disciplines. Therefore, in order to better understand this problematic

dark area, our last study brings us to the analysis of the cloning of anthropological “dead” bodies in one of the most popular movies of all times, James Cameron’s AVATAR (2009). By examining the cracks in the official narrative of this cultural object, we will encounter a particular practice of procedures that “official” anthropology had rejected due to their problematic effects on our political and social reality. In an interesting turn, the examination of these details will bring us back to the discussion on curators, this time through their embodiment in modern zoos.

Somehow, whichever path I decided to take, I ultimately arrived at the discussions on Otherness, its control, and the economy. As it turned out, what these case studies all have in common is the problematizing of the basic procedure whereby curators are trained to perform on the threshold between care and confinement. As we shall see, the existence of curating shows us, in Foucauldian terms, the persistent survival of the fear of proliferation: in this case, it is the fear of the proliferation of experience, of the multiplicity of the sensual, and the ideas evoked by it. According to the way this logic works, our modern man is defined as a creature that cannot survive the horrors of reality without protection by his (or her) curators.

||

The Invention of Curators

“And so when houses were finally fire-proofed completely, (...) there was no longer need of firemen for the old purposes. They were given the new job, as custodians of our peace of mind, the focus of our understandable and rightful dread of being inferior; official censors, judges, and executors. That’s you, Montag, and that’s me.”

– Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)

1 ON FIREMEN AND ART

In a letter addressed to Willem Sandberg, explaining a decision to cancel their participation in the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1960, the three members of the Situationist International, Constant Nieuwenhuys, Guy Debord, and Asger Jorn, wrote the following:

Dear Sir,

We wish to thank you for the interest that you have shown in us, and for your offer to open the Stedelijk Museum to an experiment by the SI.

Unfortunately, it is impossible for us to consider any kind of restriction on the projected show. We know of the obstacles that you are encountering right now. But our role, as you certainly understand, is to safeguard the totality of our approach; not to substitute us for specialists in economic and social developments.

Consequently, we are informing you that you can assign room 36 and 37 to a different purpose as of May 30th. The Situationists will not be in a position to make use of them on that date, or later.

*Our regards to you, Constant, Debord, Jorn
(Debord 2009: 338)²*

2 The letter is dated March 7, 1960.

What this preceded was a year of correspondence and negotiations between the Situationists and Willem Sandberg³,

3 "We met Sandberg. He agrees to a large exhibition from the situationist movement (show, construction of an ambiance, conference, *dérives*) that will start 15 May 1960" (emphasis in the original) Debord 2009: 256.

ending with a letter in which he informed them that the labyrinth they intended to build in the exhibition spaces depended on the approval of the fire department.⁴ The museum was not able

⁴ See more in: the letter addressed to Asger Jorn of July 29, 1960. Folder "Situationists," the archive of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

to finance the production of the work, hence they would have to apply to Prince Bernhard Foundation for financial support.⁵

⁵ "We had to write directly to certain organizations outside the Stedelijk Museum, each of which would have had the power to remove something from our experiment" (Debord 2009: 353).

Understanding that there was a chance that their work would be compromised due to external influences, the Situationists declined the invitation. From today's perspective, we are almost unable to detect what seems problematic in those restrictions; as is known, the production of exhibitions in all major (Western) museums today must be firstly approved by a local fire department. On the other hand, the requirement of the artists to apply for external funding outside the inviting institution has become a widely accepted norm.

Prior to issuing this statement, the Situationists had held a meeting in Amsterdam, from which we have a record of Asger Jorn's elaboration of their position:

Sandberg precisely represented that cultural reformism which, linked to politics, has come to power everywhere in Europe since 1945. These people have been the ideal managers of culture within the existing framework. To this end they have favored, to the hilt, minor modernists and the enfeebled young followers of the modernism of 1920-1930. They have been able to do nothing for true innovators. Currently, threatened on all sides by a counter-offensive of avowed reactionaries (...), they were trying to radicalize themselves at the precise moment they were caving in (International Situationniste #4 1960: 5).

As a conclusion, Jorn diagnosed the following:

Sandberg in the labyrinth, along with us, would have been able to find himself or to lose himself. But the ineffectual search for compromises to safeguard his past efforts prevented him from falling in with good company. Sandberg dared not break with the avant-garde, but neither dared he assure the conditions which were the only ones acceptable to a real avant-garde (6).

Reading Guy Debord's correspondence with other members of the Situationist International, it becomes clear that they were fully aware of the fact that their project manifested an "anti-museum idea" (Debord 2009: 354).⁶ Debord believed

6 A letter to Zimmer, Prem, Sturm, Fischer dated May 17, 1960.

Sandberg was "looking for a big scandal" hence the invitation for the exhibition, but still thought they "will be in a position to go *beyond his desires*" (256).⁷ Those desires were Sandberg's

7 Emphasis in the original. A letter to Jorn dated June 7, 1959.

"maneuvers to establish his Dutch artists (...) as leaders of modern art," representatives of art practices that SI considered outdated (283).⁸ In practice, this meant that they agreed to do a project in

8 A letter to Constant dated September 22, 1959.

Amsterdam only with complete freedom and according to their plans, "*with Sandberg's help, but against his ideas* (283)."⁹ This

9 Emphasis in the original.

decision to adhere strictly to the concept of the show resulted from the importance it had for the SI and for their practice of art in general:

Because this show will decide the fate of the movement as a whole – and, in the worst case scenario, in a definitive manner! In fact, this isn't about a show, it's about a new construction. (...) What technical means are available to

us? In themselves, they are nothing: a new art is required for their arrangement, not as works of art obviously, but as practices (279).¹⁰

10 A letter to Constant dated September 7, 1959.

In tactical sense, we can recognize in this example the practice of diversion, of *dérive*, defined in later years by Debord as a way to fight against the production of spectacle.¹¹ Using the

11 “‘I am not a philosopher, I’m a strategist.’ Debord saw his time as an incessant war that engaged his entire life in a strategy” (Agamben 2002: 313).

tactics from the occupied zones, they believed in the possibility of turning museum directors in a different direction: “The *dérive* was a tactic in the classic military sense of the term, (...) an ‘art of the weak.’ (...) It must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. (...) It is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision,’ (...) and within enemy territory” (Michel de Certeau in Tom McDonough 2002: 259). The Situationists saw the cancellation of the show as a sign that there was no willingness by the director to truly engage in changing the paradigm of exhibition practices, a refusal to produce a work for the first time whose main idea was the erasure of borders between the protected inside of a museum and the outside city.¹² On the

12 “The installation (...) would have turned a wing of the museum into a two-mile long obstacle course culminating in a tunnel of industrial painting. At the same time, a series of real operational *dérives* were to take place in downtown Amsterdam, where teams of situationists would have drifted for three days communicating with each other and the museum space with radio transmitters” (Andreotti 2002: 226). For more details, see Debord’s letter to Constant, February 12, 1960 in Debord 2009: 326-327.

other hand, their labyrinth challenged the economy behind the museum production of art, erased authorship through collective practice, and as a result refused to produce an object that would be later included in the capitalistic circulation of art. They understood Sandberg’s explanation that their work depend-

ed on the decision of the fire department and additional funding as an excuse, not a true reason. Nevertheless, those two requirements illustrate a new situation in the production of art – its opening to a multiple set of agents and influences. At the moment that the artistic practices started to shift from the production of objects to the exhibition of gestures, the system of control (or, in Foucauldian terms, the administration of constraints) changed as well.

It is unclear how and when fire departments became such a powerful agent in the production of art. It is true that no major fire has broken out in any major museum during the past few decades, either due to those measures or to the simple fact that artworks can hardly start a fire on their own. What we can conclude from their inclusion is the increasing number of external factors in art production, particularly in art created as site-specific and interventionist. Suddenly, in this seemingly neutral space of the white cube, we encounter a set of agents and actors that directly shape works of art. As security agents, the activities of firemen are never questioned; they are quietly accepted as necessary elements to take care of societal security, and are never considered to be repressive or policing agents of the state apparatus.

When we think about firemen and art, the first image that comes to mind is the one created by Ray Bradbury in the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, which follows the transformation of the main character, a fireman named Guy Montag. In this dystopian vision of the future, firemen are specialists whose task is to burn all books, together with the houses in which they are kept hidden. This is a world of a society that considers itself to be democratic, but also a world of short memory where Hamlet is summarized in a single sentence, where husbands and wives can no longer remember the moment when they first met, and poetry is considered dangerous.¹³

¹³ “School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally

almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?"

According to this version of history, humankind has decided by itself to exterminate any form that might stimulate philosophical reflection or long-term engagement.

Fahrenheit 451 is usually interpreted as Bradbury's take on the question of state censorship. Nevertheless, as stated in several interviews and as read in the novel itself, it is also a story about the use of television as a narcotic, as an opiate that has the power to destroy interest in reading literature.¹⁴

¹⁴ "It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade journals."

Offering only facts and brainwashing by its fast flow of information, an overdose of TV also led to the erasure of memory. Following the weakness of the majority that stopped reading, addicted as they were to a new sensory stimulus, the government instituted the employment of firemen as agents to make books extinct. Nevertheless, the responsibility for this repression toward anyone who dares to read is equally in the hands of the citizens who had chosen to be governed that way, believing that order in a society can only be achieved without books.

What matters here is the motivation that drove people to turn against books – the idea that with their erasure, all cultural differences and conflicts would be erased too:

You must understand that our civilization is so vast that we can't have our minorities upset and stirred... Coloured people don't like *Little Black Sambo*. Burn it. White people

don't feel good about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book. (...) Funerals are unhappy and pagan? Eliminate them, too. (...) Let's not quibble over individuals with memoriams. Forget them. Burn them all, burn everything. Fire is bright and fire is clean.

Too complicated to be managed, the differences are to be erased; with them, all traces or evidence from the past. Although the origin of the idea for this book came from "Hitler, of course" (National Endowment for the Arts official website), we are able to sketch a fundamental difference between the acts of 1933 and the ones described here. The Nazi regime burned the books of the Others as disturbing sources that might destroy the myth of national unity and a collective origin, i.e. as a threat with the potential to destroy this artificially created oneness. On the other hand, the futuristic reason to burn the books is to preserve the diversity of a society, or as a fundamental expression of political correctness. As it seems, this society can proceed to exist in a blissful joy of human automatons only if all cultural differences were erased, if the crimes from the past were forgotten, and if the present is never questioned. There is no need to wonder about the meaning of life, but only to wake up every morning afresh, ready to comply to the reality script that has been written by somebody else.

The final transformation of the heroic fireman has him running from the police due to his disobedience. Montag leaves the controlled urban setting, which is under permanent surveillance, and runs off to the countryside. There, he finds hidden hobo camps of former professors, scientists, librarians, etc., who had memorized one book each, preserving this knowledge from being burned along with the books. Nevertheless, the key to reading this

novel seems to be in the dialectical nature of memory – although it has the potential to become a source of perpetual violence, memory can also be a way out of it:

There was a silly damn bird called a Phoenix before Christ: every few hundred years he built a pyre and burnt himself up. He must have been first cousin to Man. But every time he burnt himself up he sprang out of the ashes, he got himself born all over again. And it looks like we're doing the same thing, over and over, but we've got one damn thing the Phoenix never had. We know the damn silly thing we just did. We know all the damn silly things we've done for a thousand years, and as long as we know that and always have it around where we can see it, some day we'll stop making the goddam funeral pyres and jumping into the middle of them. We pick up a few more people that remember, every generation.

In this seemingly perfect, ordered world, it is not that the violence toward the others had disappeared; it just happens so quickly that nobody takes responsibility anymore, leaving it up to external memories to remember all that there is to forget, cleansing oneself in fire before the new cycle begins.

An important element to remember in this novel, in terms of our future investigation, is the evident transformation of the job description of a firemen: from protector of human lives, with the appearance of fire-proof homes, they gradually shift to protectors of the social order; from servicing to policing. Perhaps due to the benevolent image that they evoked in people's minds, they were the ones to whom this sensitive repressive duty was delegated. Although the firemen of today are still firefighters, *Fahrenheit 451* prompts us to stay sensitive to transformations of security professions, and the scope of the activities that they are autho-

alized to perform. The line between service and repression is thinner than usually thought.

What we encounter today is that everything in museums has become fireproof – from the artworks and artists to the showrooms and audiences. Everything is safe and dry, ready for silent admiration from peddlers to pensioners. Political correctness had shifted the potential of art to its availability to the disabled, producing works that in the end will all look alike. On the other hand, “in Foucauldian terms, governmentality uses aesthetics to penetrate the subject more deeply, to tap into our capacity for self-government” (Slater and Iles 2010: 40). The artists had become “the ultimate capitalist subject” (52) complicit with the rules and regulations: the rejection of participating in an exhibition due to the restrictions posed by the fire department or other external factors is almost never heard of. Today, to be an artist means to participate in exhibitions and show in galleries without any questioning; in other words, being an artist has become a profession just like any other profession on the market. Clearly, this is a position completely at odds with Debord’s proclamation to “never work,” and with his refusal to participate in the global trade of the capitalist market; instead of diversion, we find a general capitulation – a total participation in the production of art as spectacle.¹⁵

15 “Central to the *dérive* was the awareness of exploring forms of life radically beyond the capitalist work ethic, as seen in the famous graffiti incitement, ‘Ne travaillez jamais’ (Never work), made by Debord in 1953 and reproduced in the SI’s journal with the caption ‘minimum program of the situationist movement’” (Andreotti 2002: 215).

This investigation began as an attempt to trace the invisible hands of censorship in contemporary art in Europe, censorship that is rarely publicly acknowledged. The story about the Situationists’ attempt to reoccupy one of the most important western museums introduced the character of Willem Sandberg, a director whose originality brings him closer to present-day curators

than simple managers of cultural institutions. Famous for his 1938 gesture of painting museum walls white for the first time, he simultaneously introduced the “white cube,” a predominant model of modernist exhibiting and perception of art.¹⁶ With this simple

¹⁶ For more see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stedelijk_Museum.

gesture, the illusion of neutrality was created as well – of the white walls that would from then on hide the different hands behind the creation of the new fetishist objects.¹⁷

¹⁷ For more on the concept of the white cube see: O’Doherty 1999 [1976].

The example of the cancellation of the Situationists’ only exhibition attempt also raised the question of the influence of funding in art, an issue that would become an important point when discussing external influences on aesthetics in subsequent decades. Although not being able to mark the moment when the firemen entered the art scene as co-producers, we nevertheless know the exact event when corporative capitalism did. Before we proceed with the analysis of this particular historic event and the transformation in curatorship that influenced the production of Western art in the second part of the twentieth century, it might be helpful to first go back in history. We will look for the origins of curators in order to define the initial role given to them by society. The main question here is how much this differs from their present-day role, or, in other words, what makes us still name this particular profession in the arts the same way?

2 DE CVRATORIBVS. FROM ANCIENT ROMANS TO MODERN TIMES

The initial moment of instituting curators as a profession happened in the Roman Empire. In the system of highly developed administration and legal codes, which was used as a foundation for most of today's European legal systems, curators were public servants with a particular role.¹⁸ He (it was

¹⁸ "The Roman law as codified by Gaius during the Flavian emperors is today the basis for most European legal systems and laws. In this system, all laws are listed by crimes in one or more books. In England and the United States a variation of the Roman law called Common Law, is used." The Roman Legal System, <http://www.dl.ket.org/latin2/mores/legallatin/legal01.htm> <accessed 12 April 2011>

always a man) was appointed to a person who was unfit to manage his or her affairs in the following cases:

- I. Minors: Males above the age of puberty, and marriageable females, receive curators till they complete their twenty-fifth year.
- II. Madmen (*Furiosi*). The curatorship of their agnates.
- III. Lunatics, too, the deaf, the dumb, the incurably diseased, must have curators given them, for they cannot direct their own affairs. This did not apply to the blind, who, being able to speak, could appoint a procurator.
- IV. Spendthrifts (*prodigi*). A curator was appointed to one who, in consequence of wasting his property, was interdicted by the Praetor from the management of it. The effect of such an interdict was to disable the spendthrift from alienating or encumbering his property. Women could be declared spendthrifts (Hunter 1803:732).

Nevertheless, "the cura of lunatics and prodigals is, indeed, older than that of minors" (Gaius 1904). Among the legal

explanations for the need to appoint a curator to the “mentally alienated persons” we find the following:

Mental alienation (*furiosi, mente capti*). A madman can transact no business, because, he does not understand what he is doing. The incapacity of the insane is absolute. They are incapable of either judging prudently of their own affairs, or of understanding the effect of their own acts (606).

An additional clarification under the description of curators is to be found in Encyclopedia Britannica:

Curators are given, not only to minors, but in general to every one who, either through defect of judgment, or unfitness of disposition, is incapable of rightly managing his own affairs. Of the first sort, are idiots and furious persons. Idiots, or *fatui*, are entirely deprived of the faculty of reason. The distemper of the furious person does not consist in the defect of reason, but in an overheated imagination, which obstructs the application of reason to the purposes of life. Curators may be also granted to lunatics; and even to persons dumb and deaf, though they are of sound judgment, where it appears that they cannot exert it in the management of business (1823: 637).

To this list, we should add several other categories. The first is women: all women were obliged to be “under the authority of a guardian” except for the vestal virgins (Hunter 1803: 19),¹⁹

¹⁹ Also, “the women’s weakness of sex (see: *infirmitas sexus*), light-mindedness, and ignorance of business and court-affairs are given as grounds for their protection through tutelage” (Berger 1953: 748).

while the husband automatically became by marriage a “perpetual curator of the wife” (Encyclopedia Britannica 633).

Nevertheless, in Roman times, it was not only that curators were charged with the care of people of; they were also the officials in charge of different departments of public work:

Sanitation, transportation, policing. The *curatores annonae* were in charge of the public supplies of oil and corn. The *curatores regionum* were responsible for maintaining order in the fourteen regions of Rome. And the *curatores aquarum* took the care of the aqueducts (Levi Strauss 2008).

Curatores viarum. Surveyors of the highways (Berger 1953: 421).

The slaves were considered part of the movable possession of Roman citizens, hence they inhabited the zone between subjects and objects,²⁰ and were considered similar to infants

20 "Immoveable things are such as land, and whatever is fixed in or to it; moveable things cannot be more clearly explained than by their name. They are such things as may be moved from place to place, as furniture, horses, cattle, slaves, garments, wine, corn, etc." (Hunter 1803: 232).

and lunatics who were not able to make reasonable decisions: "In this respect they resemble infants and lunatics; and as infants and lunatics must be represented by their guardians and curators, so juristic persons must be represented by the agents designated and defined by their constitution" (Gaius 1904: 119). Just like other juristic persons (corporations, institutions, roads, bridges, etc.) they had to be represented by a curator since "every juristic person was originally incapable of being instituted heir as *personae incertae* (uncertain persons)" (120).²¹

21 Today, we define a juristic person as "entity (...) other than a natural person (human being) created by law and recognized as a legal entity. (...) Also called artificial person." See more in: Business Dictionary. <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/juristic-person.html> <accessed 10 May 2011>

From those definitions, we can conclude that in the case of humans, a curator was a representative, a guardian, or a care-

taker of an entity considered to be a non-person, an almost-human, or not-yet human, someone in the mutable, transitional state. In the case of institutions and judicial persons, the curators took care of valuable objects, objects that had a status of more-than-objects, almost-human, whose existence was still of importance for the functioning of the system. Nevertheless, the care of humans was not a medical or humanitarian one, but was rather the care of material possessions and inheritance. The Roman Empire had regulated the obligations that those individuals were to contribute through their taxes, but also took care they were not left without any possessions, hence becoming the trouble and obligation of the state. By protecting them, the Empire protected itself. By instituting curators, the Romans created a system governing all of those bodies and objects that were still valuable and that were kept alive to give their contribution while existing in the dark area between true subjects and “uncertain” or artificial ones. As it seems, curators were instituted as guardians of properties and not of persons, in places and positions whenever there was a valuable thing to be guarded. The curator was the one responsible for keeping the guarded object/subject in the most desirable state, protecting it from any kind of damage. He served as a mediator between the system who needed it to be guarded, and was a guarantor that made sure the communication between the government and the governed was uninterrupted.

In later times, most probably in the Middle Ages, the role of the curator shifted to the ecclesiastical one: in the hierarchy of Christian Catholic Church, a curate was used to designate a clergyman “in charge of a parish; a cleric who assists a rector or vicar” (The Free Dictionary) or “a person who is invested with the *care* or *cure* (*cura*) of souls of a parish” (Wikipedia). Following previous discussion, this can be interpreted as a sign that what had now become a property that the state considered to be par-

ticularly important to be governed were the souls of the parish members, a property that came under the care of the church.

In modern times, most of the discussions on the history of curatorship in the arts begins with the neutral descriptions of curators as those who are in charge of museum collections. Nevertheless, if we were to take a closer look into the content of those collections, we would find traces of conquests, wars, robberies, and similar horrors that brought those precious objects to the centers of power. The acquisition of the majority of those objects is anything but innocent; they were brought from somewhere, taken from someone, dead or alive. For a better understanding of this process, it is important to recall the words of Walter Benjamin, who considered those precious objects to essentially be a representation of history written by the victors, the objects that contain hidden barbarism through their representation of the highest developments of civilization:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. (2003: 391-392).

Hence, curators as specialists who were to take a good care of the newly acquired objects were also being trained to hide the particularity of their history, of their origin. In modernism, their barbarian origin will be erased and replaced by a general narrative of importance that they have for the discourse of the history of an abstract entity called humankind. According to this belief, we are to read the highest achievements of human nature in those centers of power, learning through the observation of highly civilized objects. Nevertheless, according to Benjamin, the other side of human nature is secretly contained in those “documents” as well, the one the creators of discourses did not intend for us to read: greed, arrogance, theft, and the desire to identify with the victors, with the conquerors.

In recent years, we have been witnessing an increasing number of texts and books on curatorship as a young discipline, which try to define the field and expertise of the profession. Numerous discussions, educational programs, and publications were created in an attempt to decipher it. Nevertheless, the key to understanding its present and future might be in its past, the past that was briefly addressed in our previous discussion. Being trained in erasing the origins of art objects, curatorship seems to have been blind to its own origins as well. At this moment, in order to try to verbalize the complexity of the issues we are dealing with here, we will take a look at two aspects of curatorship: curator-function and curating-procedure.

3 CURATOR-FUNCTION

|| In the short history of curating as a profession in the arts, it is possible to define two major developments: the period before and the period after World War II:

Before World War II, the organization of exhibitions was the task of what was called the “museum curator,” with the title’s implications of attachment to a stable institution and attention to building up and caring for a permanent collection. That role, as the etymological roots of *curare* or “taking care” imply, was mainly related to the interpretation of art and the preservation of artworks. In the decades after World War II, there was a shift from this type of “museum curator” toward what would eventually be called an “exhibition *auteur*,” which is to say, the role of the “curator” as we understand it today. (...) This shift and the debate about what a “curator” is and does only really began in the nineteen-sixties. (...) Over time, curator’s work thus proved to be less about “caring for” in the sense of preserving art than about “discovering” lesser-known artists, movements, and scenes, a veritable profession shaped by master courses, thematic symposia, and conferences (Martini and Martini 2010: 262-262).

In other words, the anonymity of the museum curators slowly faded away, introducing a new actor on the scene who would from then on have a name, authorship over an exhibition, a recognizable style and serve as a guarantee of quality; he will be considered an author in his own right. In the essay “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault defines the author function as a historical result of particular needs of the economy of the law – linked to the legal system, it serves to punish those responsible for transgressions:

Historically, this type of ownership has always been subsequent to what one might call penal appropriation. Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical, sacralized and sacralizing figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive. In our culture (and doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act – an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. (...) We are accustomed (...) to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations. We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely (1998: 211).

Without realizing it, the art world had begun to host an “ideological product,” the “ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (222). Being part of the system of constraints that our society cannot escape, his role as “the regulator of the fictive” (222) seems to be in agreement with the function that the curators performed in Roman times, as protectors of reason. As we recall, the “distemper of the furious person does not consist in the defect of reason, but in an overheated imagination, which obstructs the application of reason to the purposes of life” (Encyclopedia Britannica 637). *Furiosi*, therefore, needed a curator, a guardian that would in later centuries make sure the discourse was kept intact, but also signify the continuity of the fear of the proliferation of meaning.

Instead of proliferation of meaning, when discussing curatorship, we encounter the proliferation of responsibilities:

curator means a “multiple activity of being mediator, producer, interface and neo-critic” (Liam Gillick in O’Neil 2010: 241). The verb “to curate... may also suggest a shift in the conception of what curators do, from a person who works at some remove from the processes of artistic production, to one actively ‘in the thick of it’” (Farquharson 2003: 7-10). Even more significant, in its last manifestations, curators became predominantly female, becoming an almost caricature, mythological power-driven creature:

I envisioned “the curator” as follows: a woman, attractive, with the genes of a prototypical white male subject, a powerhouse that could make things happen, someone that took artists places and placed their work on a global map, both in theory and in practice, a polyglot with an endless collection of hats (both actual and symbolic), a hybrid between an artist, academic and politician that has the complete power to represent, frame, articulate facts and fictions about artists and their work (eloquently above all), and someone who generated a certain amount of commotion amongst artists who either loved her or loved to hate her all together (Rifky 2011).

Nevertheless, this army of young women being driven by this particularly powerful position of influencing and controlling the production of contemporary art seems unaware of the extreme position of their own exploitation. They are supposed to be able to perform the following list of tasks:

Curators research, write, teach, educate, facilitate, fund-raise, plan, direct, produce, make and take care of artists, artist work and exhibitions from their inception as idea to long after they happen. They document, promote, present and represent past projects, all the while pitching new ones. They network, garner ideas and build publics; they

work fluidly and independently, in, across, in relation to and outside institutions. They articulate concepts, brand and sell projects, and they mediate between the poles and players of the art field. They are a pendulum between practice and theory, between art and its history. Curators also fill in for critics, when the latter are absent (Rifky 2011).

In comparison to museum curators, their male predecessors, who were aligned to a particular institution where each of these tasks was done by a series of other co-workers, present-day she-curators are considered to be curators only if they are able to perform this exact list of duties. Their independence means not belonging to any institution, being in a precarious state of being employed for temporary projects, and being a “girl-for-all” who can perform these tasks by herself. Seduced by the new position given in the post-Fordist capitalist mode of production, the she-curators are given the enjoyment in the illusion of holding the power in their hands, while at the same time being fully exploited. Nevertheless, this position of the “independent” exhibition author was first established by Harald Szeemann, considered the first exhibition maker and the founder of the new discursivity in the arts in the early 1970s.²² Going back to the Situationists, at the

²² “Harald Szeemann – one of the two ‘principal architects of the present approach to curating contemporary art’” (Levi Strauss 2006).

moment that the artistic practices attempted to shift to exhibiting gestures, an exhibition author was instituted, whose famous statement was that it was impossible to exhibit gestures.²³

²³ During his preparation for the exhibition, Szeemann visited Amsterdam and, during his studio visits, he found the artist Jan Dibbets watering a lawn on the table. He then concluded, “But you cannot exhibit gestures” (Harald Szeemann 2010: 173). Instead, he included this work in his exhibition as an “attitude”. In philosophical terms, the further analysis of the difference between gestures and attitudes could shed more light on directions that art production had taken after the 1960s, through this process of petrifying gestures as movements based on tactility and giving, into monumental poses of fashionable attitudes.

Szeemann's first independent exhibition in 1969, *When Attitude Becomes Form*, marked the first case in history when a corporation supported experimental contemporary art: "Sponsorship (...) by US tobacco corporation Philip Morris is a landmark in the history of what is today known as "art-based marketing" (Di Lecce 2010:220). At the moment that medical research first identified the health risks of tobacco consumption: "Philip Morris emerged as a sponsor of touring exhibitions of contemporary art" (221).²⁴

²⁴ For a more detailed account on the exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" please see: Christian Rattemeyer et al., *Exhibiting the New Art* (2010).

Hence, Szeemann's proclaimed independence from museums as cultural institutions meant a creation of a new dependence – on the corporative capital.

This new development of curator-authorship was not accepted without resistance. The artists, fighting to save the authorship of their own work, had a problem of handing it over to the authorship of a curator. Instead of having their art becoming a part of a multitude of works exhibited together in one shared space, their works now had to be stripped of their origins and remade as part of another man's discourse. Nevertheless, after showing resistance in the 1970s, the artists had become predominantly pacified and passive, a situation perhaps best formulated by the artist Daniel Buren:

We have come full circle and the generalized passivity of artists in the face of this situation is even more serious than it was thirty years ago. Since if in 1972 they could still turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the ways in which they were being used, the straightforwardness of our epoch (which others might call cynicism) makes it entirely improbable that artists today do not know what is being plotted and what is being declared and the kinds of discourses surrounding them! (2004: 214)

Paradoxically, instead of freedom, the artists today seem to be asking for even more care from the curators:

We may extend this notion of responsibility to the care and concern for the well-being of artists – the obligation to ensure that artists are not ripped off or treated unfairly, that they encounter a context of conviviality, and that their work is presented as well as it can be (Raqs Media Collective 2004: 280).

As it seems, the artists are no longer able to represent themselves in front of or within institutions, they are not able to defend their own rights, and they suddenly need curators-as-guardians of not only their works, but of their lives as well. Sadly enough, this fact brings us back to the origins of curatorship in the Roman Empire, when their duty was exactly this, being appointed to a person who was unfit to manage his or her affairs. At the same time, this statement reveals the acknowledgment of the inherent system of exploitation in the art system, hence the need to be protected, but the artists have lost their power to speak against it. Instead, they prefer to ask the already over-exploited curators to take upon themselves one more responsibility. Nevertheless, on the other side of this conflict, the only one profiting from this vicious circle is the system that employs both of them.

4 CURATING-PROCEDURE

From its origins in the Roman Empire to our modern times, curatorship has been characterized by two essential procedures: the governing of subjects and the guardianship of objects. The curators can, therefore, be defined as agents operating in the zone between subjects and objects, or in the realm when one becomes the other. In this realm, objects will be treated as subjects, and subjects are transformed into objects; the curators are indeed mediators, but mediators of a process many that have spoken about but have never clearly defined. This mediating position means the power to transform one into the other; subjects into objects and *vice versa*, with the agency of transformation entailing ethical problems as well.

The procedure of something we might call the subjectification of objects, or the transformation of objects into something more-than-objects, was already recognized by the critics of capitalism, and is commonly referred to as fetishism. The main spaces where fetishization was instituted were world exhibitions, fairs, and, later on, museums. The main gesture to be performed here is one of separation: when talking about art objects, they are subjected to the procedure of separation from their authors; when it comes to “common” objects acquired as spoils, they are to be separated from their origin. In both cases, newly created more-than-objects are introduced to a new universe of commodities where they are to be given an exchange value. Hence, the job of a curator is to make sure the object is perfectly cleaned of its background, whatever it was, as well as to formulate a new narrative following the supremacy of the reason. The objects will now be given a name, date, and place of birth, a story to tell, but will simultaneously be reduced to the state of orphanage. They are now to be taken care of, as their value is considered larger than that of ordinary human lives. Any disturbance or removal from

the guardian institution will be a threat to their survival: if returned to the uncivilized places from which they have been stolen, they might be forced to participate in a system of a different economy, or of no economy at all; they risk of becoming objects again, of being turned into dust.

The procedure of the objectification of subjects seems, from a human perspective, even more problematic. Seemingly departed from the old empires and their open classification of certain human beings as movable property, the new regime hides its true nature behind the practice of fetishization of human beings. The Others are brought to this sacred place, where they will be celebrated as “more-than-human,” from women to minorities. They will be petrified in visual representations, disciplined in their difference, entering the world of phantasms. Traded and reproduced just like their images, immortalized in the art system, their true bodily sacrifice on the altars of global capitalism will stay forever hidden. As we are all aware today, nothing and no one escapes commodification any more.

When discussing the care of objects and curating-procedures in the new discourse of contemporary art, the words of Robert Smithson inevitably come to mind. Known as one of the first land artists, he is less known as an artist who resisted the inclusion of his work in this new system of restraints created through the institutionalization of curatorship:

Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories. Some artists imagine they’ve got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control. Artists themselves are not confined, but

their output is. (...) The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. (...) Confined process is no process at all. It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom (1996 [1972]).

Smithson sent this statement in place of an artwork to Harald Szeemann's *documenta 5* in 1972. Nevertheless, his text was included in the catalog, perhaps manifesting the new strategy of capitalism to include its own opposition, and hence to destroy any possible threat of destruction. Smithson's statement is also important as a diagnosis of the procedure that the new type of curators would be performing, that of separating works of art from the outside world, and their reintegration after everything is made safe for consumption. The main role of curators, nevertheless, will be to present confinement as the highest achievement of freedom. Therefore, we shall address the history of *documenta* in the following chapters, hopefully shedding more light on the development of potentially critical exhibitions into yet another good to be consumed.

On the other hand, when talking about the procedure of transforming subjects into objects, it is important to bear in mind the inherently Eurocentric nature of contemporary arts as a discourse. As Gerardo Mosquera has noticed:

Western metaculture established itself through colonization, domination, and even the need to articulate this in order to confront the new situation within itself. (...) Modernity, full of good intentions, contributed not a little to this planetary cultural revolution, although Adorno, Horkheimer, and Huyssen have connected its negative aspect with

imperialism. Eurocentrism is the only ethnocentrism universalized through actual worldwide domination by a metaculture, and based on a traumatic transformation of the world through economic, social, and political processes centered in one small part of it. (...) The “contemporary artistic scene” is a very centralized system of apartheid (emphasis in the original, 2010: 418-423).

Or, in words of Paul O’Neil, “the periphery still has to follow the discourse of the center” while “a globally configured exhibition market has persisted with a curator-centered discourse. (...) A new kind of international curator was identified by Ralph Rugoff as a “jet-set *flâneur*” who appears to know no geographical boundaries and for whom a type of global-internationalism is the central issue” (O’Neil 247). An agent not knowing geographical boundaries, just like capitalism itself, and the manifestation of global tourist behavior that “facilitated the error that the traveler understands whatever he can visit” (Belting 2003: 66). On the other hand, the curators can be seen as the embodiment of the processes and procedures of the modern state itself. As Giorgio Agamben stated:

The modern state functions (...) as a kind of desubjectivation machine: it’s a machine that both scrambles all the classical identities and, as Foucault shows quite well, a machine (for the most part juridical) that recodes these very same dissolved identities. There is always a resubjectivation, a reidentification of these destroyed subjects, voided as they are of all identity. Today, it seems to me that the political terrain is a kind of battlefield in which two processes unfold: the destruction of all that traditional identity was (I say this, of course, with no nostalgia) and, at the same time, its immediate resubjectivation by the State—and not only by the State, but also by the subjects themselves (2004).

The problem of the machine that recodes the dissolves identities through a new kind of spectacle will be further addressed in the analysis of Manifesta, one of the most important new biennials of contemporary art in Europe. Nevertheless, the third domain of the activities of curators today, namely that of curating the animals in the zoo, usually remains excluded from the discussion in the humanities. Hence, in our last study, we will address this domain through the analysis of one of the recent Hollywood spectacles of dominating otherness. This procedure of taming the animals by separating them from their natural habitat seems to be no different than the procedure we just described, and which is performed on both objects and subjects, as a way for modern humans to demonstrate their mastery of reason. The question that remains open will be whether there is still a way to go beyond this procedure or, in other words, whether there is still a way to break away from the dialectical trap of care and confinement.