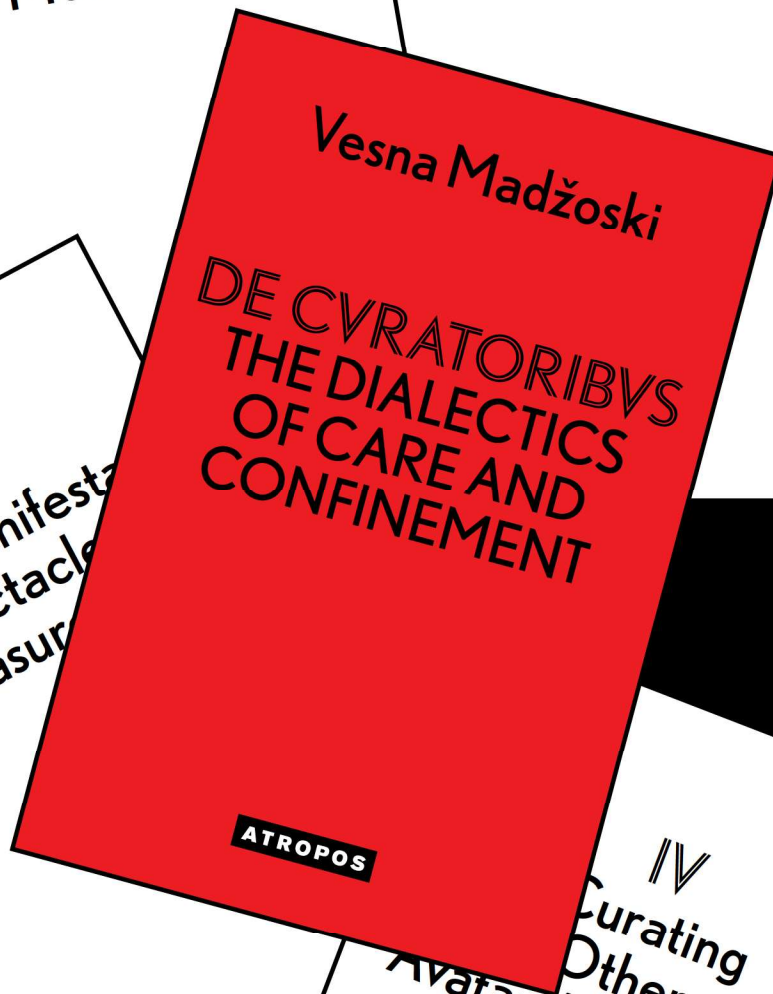


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Curating documenta:
The Spectacle
of Modernism

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The Invention
of Curators

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Curating Manifesta
The Spectacle
of Erasure



IV
Curating
Otherness:
Avatar Anthropology



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Vesna Madžoski

DE CVRATORIBVS
THE DIALECTICS
OF CARE AND
CONFINEMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

6	Acknowledgments
9	Introduction
17	I THE INVENTION OF CURATORS
18	1 On Firemen and Art
28	2 DE CVRATORIBVS. From Ancient Romans to Modern Times
34	3 Curator—Function
40	4 Curating—Procedure
45	II CURATING DOCUMENTA: THE SPECTACLE OF MODERNISM
46	1 Memory and Spectacle
50	2 Accidental Images
55	3 Filming the Shift: Jef Cornelis' documentaries of documenta
57	<i>DOCUMENTA 4</i>
60	<i>DOCUMENTA 5</i>
64	4 Back to the Photographs: Where is the punctum?
66	5 The Woman Without a Shadow
72	6 Back to the Shift: Generation Change at <i>documenta 5</i>
78	7 <i>documenta 12</i> : The Photo Book of Modernism
83	III CURATING MANIFESTA: THE SPECTACLE OF ERASURE
84	1 European Biennial of Contemporary Art that Never Happened
86	2 Crimes in the Manifesta Archive
89	3 Deleted Subjects
97	4 Aborted Objects
104	5 Manifesta Democracy Revised

110	6	The European Logic of Negation
115	IV	CURATING THE OTHERNESS: AVATAR ANTHROPOLOGY
119	1	From Navy to Na'vi
124	2	(In) The Other Body
130	3	From Blue Screen to Blue Skin, and <i>vice-versa</i>
133	4	The Seduction of the Cat People
137	5	Anthropology in a Cage
143		CONCLUDING REMARKS: UNPINNING THE BUTTERFLIES
152		Bibliography
162		Filmography

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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 PSWARriors, 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.

