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## The Invention of Curators

“And so when houses were finally fireproofed 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 at the exhibition in 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 30<sup>th</sup>. 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)<sup>1</sup>

What preceded was a year of correspondence and negotiations between the Situationists and Willem Sandberg,<sup>2</sup> ending with a letter in which he informs them that the labyrinth they intended to build in the exhibition spaces depends on the approval of the fire department.<sup>3</sup> The museum was not able to finance the production of the work, hence they would have to apply to Prince Bernhard Foundation for financial support.<sup>4</sup> Understanding that there was a danger 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 it 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 to the artists to apply for external funding outside the inviting institution, became a widely accepted norm.

Prior to the issuing of this statement, the Situationists had held a meeting in Amsterdam

<sup>1</sup> The letter is dated March 7, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> “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.

<sup>3</sup> See more in: the letter addressed to Asger Jorn from July 29, 1960. Folder 'Situationists,' the archive of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

<sup>4</sup> “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).

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).<sup>5</sup> Debord believed 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).<sup>6</sup> Those desires were Sandberg's "maneuvers to establish his Dutch artists (...) as leaders of modern art," representatives of art practices SI considered outdated (283).<sup>7</sup> In practice, this meant that they agreed to do a project in Amsterdam only with complete freedom and according to their plans, "*with Sandberg's help, but against his ideas* (283)."<sup>8</sup> This decision to stay strict about the concept of the show came from the importance it had for the SI and 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).<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> Using the tactics from the occupied zones, they believed in the possibility of turning museum directors to 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 understood the cancellation of the show as a sign that there was no readiness by the director to engage truly in changing the paradigm of exhibition practices, a refusal to produce for the first time a work whose main idea was the erasure of borders between the protected inside of a museum and the outside

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<sup>5</sup> A letter to Zimmer, Prem, Sturm, Fischer dated May 17, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis in the original. A letter to Jorn dated June 7, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> A letter to Constant dated September 22, 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>9</sup> A letter to Constant dated September 7, 1959.

<sup>10</sup> "“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).

city.<sup>11</sup> On the other side, their labyrinth challenged the economy behind the museum production of art, erased authorship through collective practice and refused to produce, as a result, an object that would be later included in the capitalistic circulation of art. They understood Sandberg's explanation that their work depends on the decision of the fire department and additional funding as an excuse, not a true reason. Nevertheless, those two requirements show upon a new situation in the production of art – its opening to a multiple set of agents and influences. In the moment when the artistic practices started to shift from the production of objects to exhibiting 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 in any big museum in the last decades, due to those measures or to the simple fact that artworks can hardly start the fire on their own. What we can conclude from their inclusion is the raising number of external factors in the art production, particularly in the 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 directly shaping works of art. As security agents, the activities of firemen are never been questioned, they are quietly accepted as necessary elements taking care of societal security, 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 named Guy Montag, a fireman. In this dystopic 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 a democratic one, but also a world of short memory where *Hamlet* is summarized in one single sentence, husbands and wives cannot remember anymore the moment when they first met, and poetry is considered dangerous.<sup>12</sup> According to this version of history, the 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 a story about the use of television as a narcotic, as an opiate that has the power to destroy interest in reading literature.<sup>13</sup> Offering only facts and brainwashing by fast flow of information, TV overdose led to the erasure of memory as well. Following the weakness of majority which stopped reading, addicted 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 on the side of citizens who had chosen to be governed that way, believing that order in a society can be achieved without books only.

What matters here is the motivation that made people 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

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<sup>11</sup> “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, please see Debord's letter to Constant, February 12, 1960 in Debord 2009: 326-327.

<sup>12</sup> “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?”

<sup>13</sup> “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.”

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 evidences 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 collective origin, 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 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. No need to wonder about the meaning of life, but wake up every morning afresh, ready to comply to the reality script written by somebody else.

The final transformation of the hero fireman makes him run from the police chase due to his disobedience. Montag leaves the controlled urban setting 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 the knowledge from being burned together with the books. Nevertheless, the key to read this novel seems to be in the dialectical nature of memory – although with 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 up to external memories to remember all there is to forget, cleansing oneself in fire before the new cycle begins.

An important element to remember in this novel for our future investigation is the evident transformation of firemen job description: from protectors of human lives, with the appearance of fire-proof homes, they gradually shifted to protectors of social order. From servicing to policing. Perhaps due to the benevolent image they were evoking in people's minds, they were the ones to whom this sensitive repressive duty was delegated to. Although the firemen of today are still firefighters, *Fahrenheit 451* prompts us to stay sensitive to transformations of security professions and the scope of activities they are authorized to perform. The line between service and repression is thinner than usually thought.

What we encounter today is that everything in museums had become fireproof – from the

artworks, 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 ones, producing works that in the end will all look alike. From the other side, “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 participating in exhibitions and showing in galleries without any questioning; in other words, being an artist has become a profession just as any other profession on the market. Clearly a position completely opposite to Debord's proclamation to “never work,” to 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.<sup>14</sup>

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 situationist 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 gesture from 1938 when he painted museum walls white for the first time, he simultaneously introduced the 'white cube,' a predominant model of modernist exhibiting and perception of art.<sup>15</sup> With this simple gesture, the illusion of neutrality was created as well – of the white walls that will now hide different hands behind the creation of the new fetishist objects.<sup>16</sup>

Before we try to understand the present, it might be stimulative to first go back in history. We will look for the origins of curators in order to define their initial role given by the 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 profession happened in the Roman Empire. In the system of highly developed administration and legal codes, used as a foundation for most of today's European legal systems, curators were public servants with a particular role.<sup>17</sup> He (it was always a man) was appointed to a person unfit to manage his or her affairs in 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

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<sup>14</sup> “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).

<sup>15</sup> For more please see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stedelijk\\_Museum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stedelijk_Museum).

<sup>16</sup> For more on the concept of the white cube please see: O' Doherty 1999 [1976].

<sup>17</sup> “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>

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 judgement, 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 one are the women: all women are obliged to be “under the authority of a guardian” except for the vestal virgins (Hunter 1803: 19),<sup>18</sup> while the husband becomes automatically by marriage a “perpetual curator of the wife” (Encyclopedia Britannica 633).

Nevertheless, in Roman times, it is not only that persons were under the care of curators; 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 *curators 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 movable possession of Roman citizens, hence inhabiting the zone between subjects and objects,<sup>19</sup> considered similar to infants 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

<sup>18</sup> 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).

<sup>19</sup> “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).

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).<sup>20</sup>

From those definitions, we can conclude that in 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 case of institutions and juristic 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, care of humans was not medical or humanitarian one, but care of material possession and inheritance. Roman Empire had regulated the obligations those individuals were to contribute through their taxes, but took care they were not left without any possession, hence becoming the trouble and obligation of the state. Through protecting them, the Empire protected itself. By instituting curators, the Romans created a system governing all those bodies and objects that were still valuable, 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 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, 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: a curate became in the hierarchy of Christian Catholic Church to designate a clergyman “in charge of a parish; a cleric who assists a rector or vicar” (The Free Dictionary) and “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 now became a property particularly important to be governed by the state 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 them as the ones 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 not innocent at all; they were brought from somewhere, taken from someone, dead or alive. For better understanding of this process it is important to recall the words of Walter Benjamin who considered those precious objects to be, essentially, 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,

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<sup>20</sup> 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>

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 they have for the discourse of history of an abstract entity named 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, following Benjamin, the other side of human nature is secretly contained in those 'documents' as well, the one the creators of discourses did not intend us to read: greed, arrogance, theft, and the desire to identify with the victors, with the conquerors.

In the last years, we are witnessing the raising number of texts and books on curatorship as a young discipline, trying 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 for understanding its present and future might be in its past, the past shortly addressed in our previous discussion. Being trained in erasing the origins of art objects, the curatorship seems to have been blind for its own origins as well. At this moment, in order to try to verbalize the complexity of the issues we are dealing here, we will take a look in 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 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 will from now on have a name, authorship over an exhibition, recognizable style and guarantee of quality; he will be considered an author by 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 the ones responsible for transgression:

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, the art world 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 our society cannot escape, his role as “the regulator of the fictive” (222) seems to be in agreement with the function 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 will 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 “multiply 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’” (Farqufarson 2003: 7-10). Even more significant, in its last manifestations, curator 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, the 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, fundraise, 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 that 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' that 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 being fully exploited. Nevertheless, this position of the 'independent' exhibition author was first established by Harald Szeemann, considered a first exhibition maker and the founder of the new discursivity in the arts in the early 1970s.<sup>21</sup> Going back to the Situationists, in the moment when 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.<sup>22</sup> 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). In the moment when the first medical research identified the health risks of tobacco consumption: "Philip Morris emerged as a sponsor of touring exhibitions of contemporary art" (221).<sup>23</sup> Hence, Szeemann's proclaimed independence from museums as cultural institutions meant a creation of a new dependence – from 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 into 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 down of the origin and remade as part of another man's discourse. Nevertheless, after showing resistance in the 1970s, the artists had become predominantly pacified and passive, the situation perhaps formulated the best 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 ask 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

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<sup>21</sup> "Harald Szeemann – one of the two 'principal architects of the present approach to curating contemporary art'" (Levi Strauss 2006).

<sup>22</sup> 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 bring more light on directions art production was taken to after the 1960s, through this process of petrifying gestures as movements based on tactility and giving, into monumental poses of fashionable attitudes.

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed account on the exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form' please see: Christian Rattemeyer et al., *Exhibiting the New Art*" (2010).

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 not able anymore to represent themselves in front nor within institutions, they are not able to defend their own rights, and they suddenly need curators-as-guardians of not only their works but 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, appointed to a person 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 from 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 is characterized by two essential procedures: the governing of subjects and the guardianship of objects. The curators can be, therefore, 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 to be transformed into objects; the curators are indeed mediators, but mediators of a process many have spoken about but never clearly defined. This mediating position means the power to transform one into the other, subjects into objects and *vice versa*, 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 simultaneously brought down 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 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 immovable 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 anymore.

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 hence destroy any possible threat of destruction. Smithson's statement is important also as a diagnosis of the procedure new type of curators will 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 consumption good.

From the other side, 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 Huysen 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 side, the curators can be seen as 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).

This problem of the machine that recodes the dissolved identities through a new kind of spectacle is a proposal for some future research. What we might add at this moment, instead of a conclusion, is that perhaps the practice of curating today cannot be understood without the examination of two fields where this profession operates today: the arts and the zoos. This procedure of taming the animals by separating them from their natural habitat might in the end turn out to be not different from the procedure we just described and which is performed on both objects and subjects, a way for modern humans to demonstrate their mastery of reason. The question remaining open will be if there was still a way to go beyond this procedure or, in other words, if there was still a way to break from the dialectical trap of care and confinement.

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