



Working collectively as curatorial critics

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Even though the (working) life of the critic can feel rather powerless at times – being directed by other people or institution's choices – the work or praxis of the critic is still the result of a number of choices being made, including those by the critic her-/himself. Much like a curator, the critic chooses (at least to some degree) what to see and then how to write about this. Together with the editor, the critic or critics choose performances for reviewing – and thus also what is important enough to be part of a public conversation.

“It's quite lonely this job”, a colleague of mine recently confided to me. Both the critic and the curator are often thought to be lone wolves, individuals who work alone, but how to work collectively as curatorial critics? By giving up the ‘I’ in the text, what other possibilities arises?

With the project Critics in Conversation (consisting of myself as well as critic colleague Diana Damian Martin) as my main example, I will discuss how critics can work collectively and curatorial by choosing artists, approaches and ways of writing and editing.

As most critics, my way of earning a living is by what I like to call a patchwork (or even a hat rack). I teach, I edit books, I host conversations and seminars, I curate performances – and I write texts.

During my nearly fifteen years as a critic, the objectivity of the critic seems to be a returning issue – especially in discussions with a general theatre audience or even with artists. As if nothing is at stake for the critic, as if she/he is merely someone observing and then, working as some sort of medium, delivers the ‘truth’, or the facts, of the event to the readers.

A couple of years ago, I started a performance series in Kristiansand – a rather small town in the south of Norway – together with a dancer and choreographer. theisen/pettersen, a combination of our last names, is the title of our curating duo. And with this work came a new anxiety in relation to my position or, actually; identity as a critic. How to be a critic AND a curator, and what are the limits within which I can then work as a critic?

As a critic I find the limitations keep popping up, whereas as a curator I have barely none. But, from the inside, these two positions to me feels quite similar. As a critic I very rarely feel like a person in power, but I do know that by just choosing to write about something or someone, I'm using my power. I'm choosing who is worth talking about and not, seeing as there are a whole lot more artists and performances than critiques. As a curator, I also choose what to present to the audience in Kristiansand.

The position I write from, the local and somewhat peripheral, might also be one of the reasons for my lack of power-lady-feel.

But, stepping into the role of the curator seemed to me to be more of a public change of hats than an internal one. The curator, much like the critic, work on contextualising art and documenting it. And the critic as curator, or curator as critic, is a position well explored already, especially within the visual arts field. In an interview with (maybe the most famous curator of them all) Hans Ulrich Obrist, critic, artist, theorist and curator Lucy Lippard recalled the reception her work as a curator received back in 1966:

A lot of fuss was made about that show [Eccentric Abstraction at the Marily Fischbach Gallery, atp], partly because I was a critic and critics at that point didn't really curate shows. Eugene Gossen and Lawrence Alloway had, but for a young woman critic to pop up caused a certain amount of attention. Hilton Kramer, or somebody, actually said writers should write and leave curating to curators.ⁱ

Less has changed since 1966 than one would have assumed. But this might also partly depend on the context, in this case; writing and curating in a small country with a tendency to frown upon elitism at large, and within the arts in particular. Still, I find huge inspiration in another quote from that Obrist-conversation with Lippard: "If the artists could do whatever they wanted and call it art, I could do what I wanted and call it criticism."ⁱⁱⁱ

As a critic I'm very aware of who I write about, I follow artists and venues and topics and styles I find interesting, that fit into the project that is also mine. I apply for travel funding in order to see the performances I want to, to write about them. Sometimes I spend all I earn on traveling to see something. Being a critic is in my experience a praxis, quite similar to the ones the artist and the curator have.

What I find most interesting in working as a curator, is the possibility to work in a team. To discuss art and contexts with my co-curator, Irene Theisen. And at the same time as I started to work as a curator with Theisen, I also started to work more collectively as a critic. With the project Critics in Conversation (CiC), Diana Damian Martin and I set out to explore ways in which criticism could be a public process of debate and discussion. Taking place through three festival partnerships, different approaches to criticism were tested. Criticism in conversation as one, co-writing texts as a second approach, and workshops in criticism (with youth) as a third way of exploring this.

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Working collectively, both as a curator and a critic, generate questions on democracy and power. By moving away from the solitary; the individual who works alone, into the small pack, the power statement becomes less dominant. Within curating, this is not at all new – plenty of museums and institutions hire curatorial teams for exhibitions and festivals – but critics have usually worked solitary. This might have to do with the judging, the element of meaning and quality statements that usually come from one specific place, from the individual that is also the person to be confronted with these opinions.

When writing collectively, this gets muddled. Who wrote what? Sometimes it's even unclear to me afterwards, but this is also the great potential of this line of work, as I see it. The possibility to think, to invite people into a process of thinking, along the performances and artists that the text is either about or has as its starting point.

The curatorial approach to criticism might also have to do with allowing the mind, or – in Critics in Conversation; the minds, stray. To wander off the path, to allow the personal some space as well as the context and the place surrounding the art piece.

Perhaps it would be as correct to call this an essayistic approach – which again leads us into the same individual field. The essayist sitting at her/his desk, writing away in the middle of the night.

Collective criticism allows for thoughts to appear, not the mind of the thought as much as the thought. For thinking without claiming the thought. For the text to be present, with its writers, but still appearing as text.

As a critic the opinion and the medium that delivers it to the world, is usually mostly and most vividly present. The market department within the theatre institutions uses quotes from critiques as part of their advertisement in order to sell tickets to performances. Most critics are not employed by the medias they write for, and usually also get badly payed (if at all). And, to really add irony to this; seeing as the critic usually haven't even got a contract with the paper, the critic is the one to own the text and its rights. And still: quotes from the texts close to never appear with a signature in the public.

This, however, allows for the critic to work collectively. To explore this non-name or no-body position as a way of thinking together and discussing in public and invite the reader into this conversation.

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These selections, the chain of choice, so to speak, also takes place within the media the critic publishes her/his texts. With a growing number of performances taking place, at the same time as the conventional medias has less space and/or money to write about the same performances, the editor and the critic also becomes curators who chooses what and who will be worthy of the public space, what will be let into the public conversation. Whether a director, actor, company, playwright etc. will receive one, none or several texts about their works.

In a text called “Nothing is hidden”, Toril Moi, writes about the responsibility of the critic:

We are responsible for our words, for our own practice. Our readers will always be justified in asking, as Sartre did: “What aspects of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Surprisingly many editors have over the years used the market as a way of choosing by way of non-choosing. The argument is that the performances that will most likely reach the biggest

groups of audiences, for the longest period of time, are the ones most worthy of space in the columns. Someone else has already made the choice. But that does not make the editor and/or critic less responsible – they are merely bad curators, in my opinion. They are curators or programmers who refuses to make their stand, the position from which their choices are being made, visible. A bit like artistic directors who claim to program ‘the most well-known’ or widely performed artists or performances. Well-known or high quality according to who?

By actively and visibly choosing artists and performances, the critic becomes visible as a player. And my claim is that, to a certain degree, the critic is not really doing something different. We could call it a curatorial turn, but it is more an optical turn than a performative one. The choice is always a part of the critical praxis, this curatorial turn is merely revealing something that might have been hidden in the past.

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By making the choice visible, being active curators so to speak, the critics falls under scrutiny. Where has the objectivity gone? What about the duty to the public?

As I see it, the collective way of working opens up for a more performative way of writing, of thinking in the text, with someone other than oneself. As a quality of text, the co-authorship doesn’t really change much. The critic who writes in solitude still has a conversation going, with her-/his-self. The collective consists then in allowing other thinkers, from books and seminars etc., to enter into the conversation.

The curatorial critic collective that *Critics in Conversation* explores is a way of thinking together. With simple tools such as Google documents, we work both in actual co-present as well as apart in time and geography. The aim is to build on each other’s thoughts and ideas, to try to let go of the individuality and ownership, and lose track of where ones one thoughts and memories begin and where it merge with the other. In September 2017, Damian Martin and I went together to Brixton to see the work *Diorama for Shoalstone Pool*, by the Norwegian choreographer Ingri Fiksdal. Two months later, our text about the piece was finished and published.

So far, my experiences in writing criticism collectively have always been with signatures. Nobody, including Damian Martin and I, know exactly who wrote what in our text on *Diorama*

– but we have both signed it, and can vouch for it. The next step might be to discard the name altogether – to write anonymously.

In 2007, a group calling themselves The Invisible Committee co-wrote and published the small book *The Coming Insurrection* (*L'insurrection Qui Vient*, 2007). In this, an unidentified group of people wrote about society. Could a group of critics write a similar book on the topic of critical thinking? On the media?

Of course, one of the reasons for always signing a text has to do with responsibility. The reader needs to know who made a statement, who raised their opinion on something, in order to decide whether or not this is valid. But this also has to do with our time and the extreme amount of so-called 'strong opinions' on art that are to be found all over the internet, anonymously and often also as part of some hidden agenda. This is where the role of the editor becomes crucial. Allowing anonymous writers would have to be a choice made by the editor, who would then vouch for the content and the writers of the text.

The curatorial collective praxis of criticism might also open up for what the Swedish critic Axel Andersson calls 'medborgarkritik' – criticism of the civic. A next step could be to invite others into a collectively written text, to discuss with it, in it, not just about it.

Whether or not this then can pass for a review, or critique, is something to explore. But, with Lippard in mind: I can do whatever I want and call it criticism.^{iv}

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ⁱ Ubrist, Hans Ulrich: A Brief History of Curating, JRP|Ringier Kustverlag AG, 2008, p. 199

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 209

ⁱⁱⁱ Moi, Toril: «Nothing is hidden», in Anker, E and Felski, R (ed.): Critique and Postcritique, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017, p. 47

^{iv} Ubrist, Hans Ulrich: A Brief History of Curating, JRP|Ringier Kustverlag AG, 2008, p. 209