

Stop Making Sense

Julian Stallabrass

Published as 'Rhetoric of the Image' [review of Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012/ Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, New York: Independent Curators International, 2012], *Artforum*, March 2013, pp. 71-2.

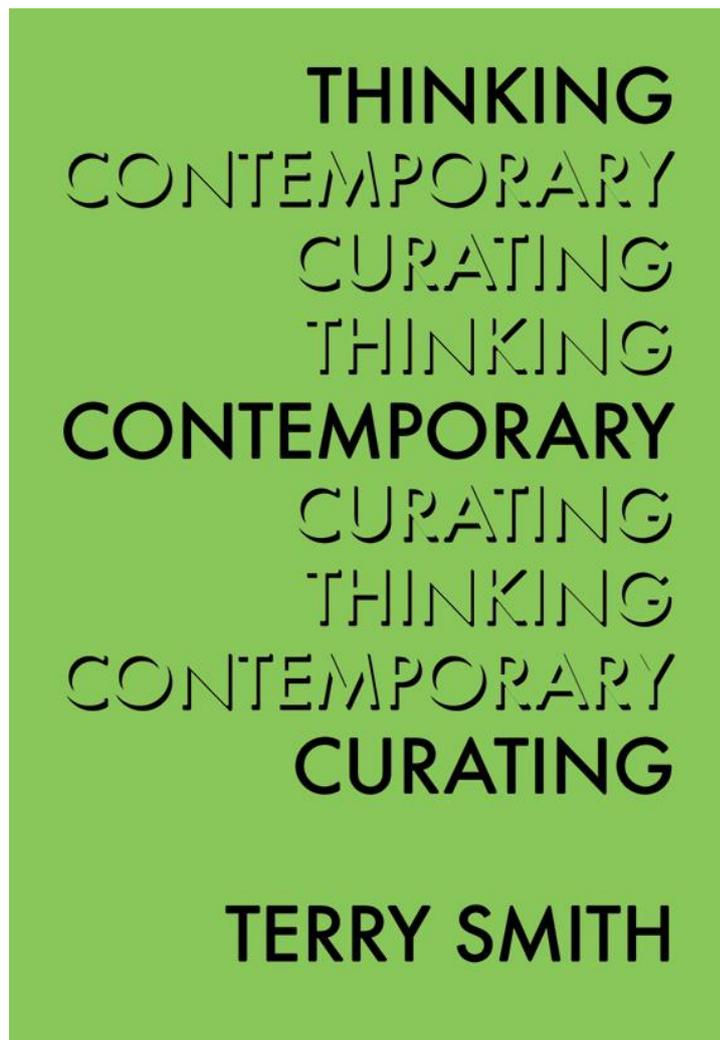


Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, MIT Press, Boston, MA 2012
Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, Independent Curators International, New York 2012

Two recent books about curating carry remarkably similar covers: capital letters in alternating black and white against a plain ground, in related fonts, repeating the main terms of the title. The large black lettering on Paul O'Neil's book reads: Culture Curating Curating Culture(s); while Terry Smith's cover repeats his title words—Thinking Contemporary Curating—three times. Smith writes that the three words comprise three separate ideas which could flash off and on to yield different combinations, like one of Bruce Nauman's neon works. The recursion and multiplicity of meanings implied in the titles immediately tell the reader that the authors have adopted the language and ethos of their subject matter.

This closeness to the subject has its advantages. O'Neill's detailed study is based on extensive reading of the voluminous literature produced by curators during the rise of their profession to an extreme form of self-consciousness, and on interviews with many of the main figures. It provides a careful account of the creation of a distinct curatorial discourse, the impact of biennial

culture and the way in which art practice and curating have moved closer together. Smith's book covers much of the same ground, and also considers the issue of what it means to curate the 'contemporary'. It draws on his very wide knowledge and lengthy experience in the field to produce an account that is global in scope and which considers a remarkable range of exhibitions, institutions and practices. Both tellingly describe the increasingly professional, institutional, academic, theorised and historically aware character of curating, all of which is welcome on many levels, though it also tends to produce events and interpretations that are increasingly recursive, inward-looking and specialist. Both suggest, though O'Neill more explicitly than Smith, that the mega-event and the star curator are gradually yielding to the long-term series of diverse artistic manifestations and the networked collective.



Any analysis that too readily adopts the technical language of its subject may stand accused of drawing into itself not just a vocabulary but an ideology. A study of the military that too freely used such euphemisms as 'ordnance' and 'collateral damage' might face that charge. In both these books, the authors reproduce texts with apparent approval that do little more than display a competence in the prolix use of theoretical language. Quite frequently, they adopt it themselves. For instance, here is O'Neill in his concluding section:

Exhibitions are a coproductive, spatial medium, resulting from various forms of negotiation, relationality, adaptation and collaboration between subjects and objects, across space and time. [p. 129]

Rough translation:

People work together to make exhibitions using objects. They exist in space and time.

This abuse of language is familiar to all those who spend any time reading curatorial statements on walls or in catalogues; some of these statements remain opaque even to my postgraduate students, who bring considerable intelligence and knowledge to their reading. The statements that turn out to be decipherable often yield vacuous generalisations. In darker moments, one may end up wondering whether ‘Contemporary Curating Thinking’, to take one of Smith’s combinations, really exists. So why is this opacity and vacuity so prevalent?

One obvious answer is that, as in so many fields, the linguistic posture is defensive, a specialist language that protects the elite schooled in its thought from too much interference from outsiders. It’s equally obvious, in a profession that purportedly produces events for a public, that this defence comes at a considerable cost.

There are other deeper causes. Smith points out that while curatorial thinking may be usually experienced after viewing a show or event (in a catalogue, for instance) it is usually written well in advance. Its vagueness and complexity may be a register of uncertainty: that it tries to lay out the effects of grouping objects and activities together without the benefit of actually having done so. Also, the kinds of meaning made by such associations may not easily translate into traditional sentences. Hence the insistent feeling, in reading curatorial prose, that meanings are being groped towards rather than grasped, and in that groping, that showers of familiar and closely related terms are released, each hard on the heels of the other.

Most fundamentally, the strand of contemporary curating supported by both O’Neill and Smith has a horror of fixity and the ‘reductive’ statement. Smith argues that curators deal with works in a stage of gestation between the privacy of the studio and their exposure to a public at which they will eventually find meaning at the hands of, among others, art critics and art historians. If curators are shy about assigning meanings to works, this is in modest awareness of their role as the midwives of public interpretation.

Smith quotes theorist and curator Irit Rogoff:

Moving to ‘the curatorial’, then, is an opportunity to ‘unbound’ the work from all of those categories and practices that limit its ability to explore that which we do not yet know or that which is not yet a subject in the world. [52]

This is a usefully typical and idealist statement, in which the absolute freedom that supposedly inheres in art works is freed of all bonds. Contemporary curating for Smith, like art itself, has to be ‘multitemporal, multidirectional and inherently multiplicitous’ and must resist any form of ‘reduction’. [238]

Or similarly, O’Neill writes about the curatorial as:

...a durational, transformative and speculative activity, a way of keeping things in flow, mobile, in between, indeterminate, crossing over and between people, identities and things, encouraging certain ideas to come to the fore in an emergent communicative process... [89]

So the inability to say anything specific is structural. Yet it remains a problem, and not just for the confused viewer of curated events. Both authors dwell on the rise of an academic discourse of curating, and their books are destined to be used on courses that purport to offer curatorial training. While the poststructuralist contents of many humanities courses run up uncomfortably against the closely audited culture of their delivery, in this case the paradox of a profession founded on the indeterminate must be acutely felt.

There are particular tics prevalent in curatorial language. The word 'articulates', for example, usually refers to something that will not be articulated, and 'interrogates' something of which no particular questions will be asked; likewise, 'specific' is almost always used to refer to something that will go unspecified. Smith describes the words of his title flashing on and off to create 'almost sentences', into which language is often broken 'these days'. [24] It is true that curatorial prose is often written in 'almost statements' that gesture at but fail to achieve meaning. One extravagant display of such quasi-statements accompanied Documenta 13. Since it was a mega-event, equipped with a star curator who was happy to flaunt her credentials as an über-artist, one may think that the more modest, collaborative and networked events that O'Neill and Smith recommend complement rather than displace the spectacular engines of the art industry.

Even the recommended virtues of the new model have an eerie familiarity: among them, mobility, flexibility, multiplicity, portability. Not only were they also laid out as virtues of older curatorial ideals, and indeed of art itself since the conceptual turn, but they are also found in business writing as it mutated in the light of the revolts of 1968. In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello analysed how these business practices brought management and art closer together in the celebration of mandatory creativity and non-conformity. Thomas Frank explored some of the same territory in his book, *The Conquest of Cool*. An apparently liberated managerialism provides a specious solution to the opposition laid out above in a mash-up of poststructuralism and audit culture.

Smith notes that general viewers remain a systematic omission in curatorial thinking. Smith's audience, in what he admits is an ideal description, has novel works placed before it, and is 'disinterested'. [41] This Kantian description allows them to be seen as placeholders for autonomous bourgeois individuals, free to think and feel without restraint before the unbound work of art. In another passage, Smith writes that institutions tend to judge the public on the 'rule of the dollar, which reduces museum visitors to sheer numbers'. [137] It is true that the first has been close to the assumed ideal horizon of much art-world theory, and the second has been close to the reality. Yet the urge to explore networks, collaboration and participation is founded on the ethos of the digital which continues to revolutionise the broadcast culture of which curating has been a part: firstly by putting a vast amount of artistic material online, making it available to be seen and 'curated' by anyone with online access, and secondly by providing the opportunity for people to say in detail what they think about an art event, and to develop those views through discussion. This is 'feedback' that goes far beyond the mere on/off of whether a

ticket or a catalogue is bought or a threshold crossed. Given the definitional morass that surrounds the term 'curation', it may well further erode the barriers between creation, curation and reception. Perhaps it is this erosion that curatorial language hopes to slow.