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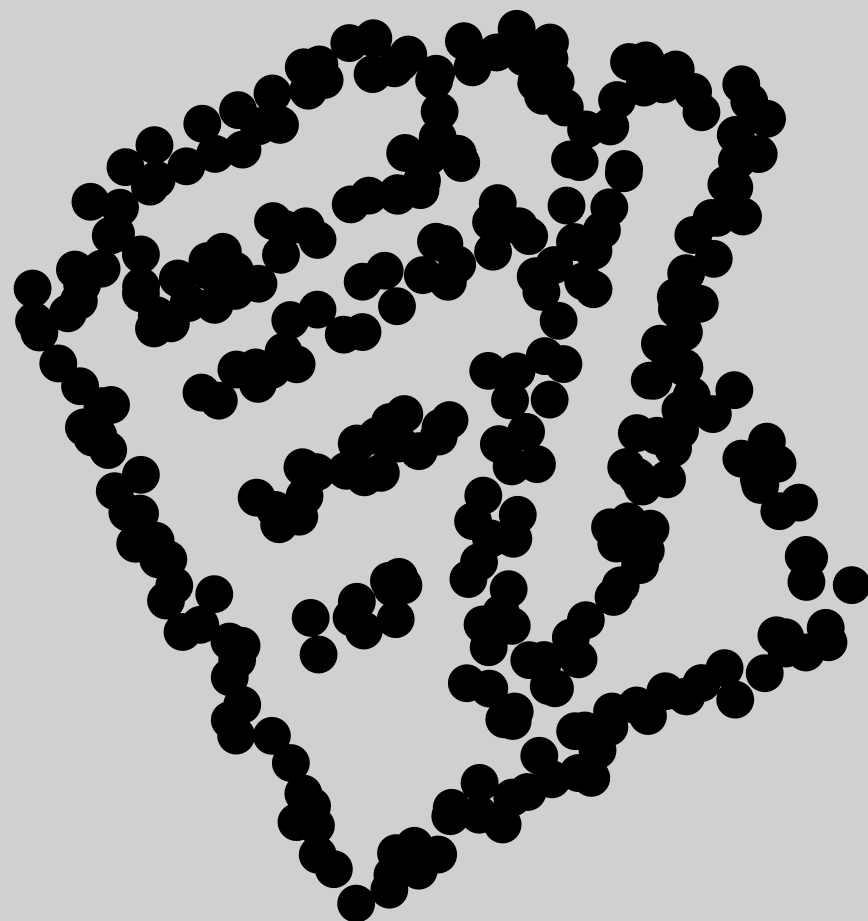
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Zuzana Jakalová
Jan Zálešák



1 Translated by Phil Jones.

The idea of this thematic issue of *Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones* first occurred to us about two years ago during conversations about curating. As we talked about what particularly interested us about the field we ourselves were pursuing in various capacities, the theme of research kept returning in many guises, from the exploration of curating as part of exhibition studies⁽²⁾ or exhibition histories,⁽³⁾ to the research conducted via exhibition-making, where it increasingly intersects with artistic research. We looked at the various methods or methodologies that contemporary curating employs: engaged curatorial research aimed at transforming our understanding of the institution of the gallery and exhibition; histories of curatorial figures and the results of their work with the aim of creating new canons and hierarchies; and the tension between the need to share experiences with others working in the field and the academic tendency to frame curatorship within an ever more complex and nuanced language.

Our private debate, often prompted by what we might call “curatorial gossip,” is of course only a tiny fraction of the burgeoning critical and academic discourse on curating. A number of themes come to the fore, many of which have already been discussed in *Notebook*: curating as institutional practice and the making of institutions (new institutionalism);⁽⁴⁾ curating as critique (critical curating);⁽⁵⁾ the trans-

- 2 Over the last decade, we have seen the emergence of newly established, usually Master degree programs with this title (or variations thereon), e.g., at Central Saint Martins in London, the Liverpool School of Art and Design, and the University of the Arts Helsinki.
- 3 In addition to being the general name given to a specific sphere of art history research focusing on the history (of the creation) of exhibitions, the term “exhibition histories” is also the name of a series published by Afterall, the outcome of a collaboration with Asia Art Archive, the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, documenta Institut, and the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts of the University of Gothenburg, <https://www.afterall.org/projects/exhibition-histories/#About> (accessed 1 November 2024).
- 4 Karína PFEIFFER KOTTOVÁ, “Institucionální avantgarda,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, Vol. 7, 2013, No. 15, pp. 58–85.
- 5 Jan ZÁLEŠÁK, “Kritické umění a kurátorství v nejisté době,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, Vol. 4, 2010, No. 8, pp. 22–38.

formation of the medium and formats of an exhibition, and theoretical and historical reflections upon the theme of exhibition-making;⁽⁶⁾ authorship and the relationship between the artistic and curatorial understanding of this concept; feminist curating (curating within feminist institutions); curating and care; curating and globalization; and curating and decolonization.⁽⁷⁾

In thinking about how a thematic issue of *Notebook* focused on curatorial research might look and what texts it might contain, we repeatedly returned to the related zone of artistic research, a topic we are confronted with on a daily basis in our work as supervisors of the doctoral program at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Brno University of Technology. As far as artistic research is concerned, enormous efforts have been invested in its institutionalization over the last decade, through the organization of conferences and the publication of thematic essays and books, the founding of new journals and special publication formats, and the opening of new departments and study programs. However, the same cannot be said of curatorial research. While artistic research, at least in the European context, has been taken up and used as a key tool for the presentation of artistic practice as an activity to which epistemological relevance should be attached, and should thus receive financial and institutional support within the infrastructures of science and research, curating was perhaps not in such great need of the kind of “tricks” linked with a shift to a higher level of epistemological importance. This is not so much

- 6 The medium of the exhibition was dealt with in connection with the culmination of a project carried out by the Academic Research Centre of the Academy of Fine Arts (VVP AVU) titled *The Exhibition as Medium: Czech Art 1957–1999*, by two thematic issues of *Notebook*: 25/2018 and 26/2019. Exhibition histories was also the subject of issue 35/2023, which took into consideration a broader Central European perspective in its selection of texts.
- 7 A more intensive debate regarding the topics referred to above has not yet taken place in Czechia. Whenever attempts have been made to rectify matters, they have been too fragmented. Nevertheless, we are able to identify important agents in this discourse, especially tranzit.cz and the Jindřich Chalupecký Society.

because curating somehow “naturally” implied an element of research, but more due to the fact that, in the past, most of its actors were already furnished with a qualification in disciplines ranging from art history, via aesthetics and philosophy, to film studies or anthropology, in which their competence for research work was not questioned.

With the gradual establishment and expansion of curatorial degree programs over the last two decades, the fundamental interdisciplinarity of curating has been more firmly anchored, while a need has gradually arisen to create an autonomous sphere of research conducted directly within the framework of curatorial studies or the actual practice of curating. Curatorial research today is in a sense “catching up” with artistic research in its strenuous efforts to establish itself as an independent, specific area of knowledge production, and the current issue of *Notebook* is proof of that. The fact that curatorial research has up till now lagged behind artistic research in the sphere of academic self-legitimization is illustrated by the status accorded it in the Register of Information on Results (RIV) and the Register of Artistic Outputs (RUV) of the Research and Development and Innovation Information System. While an exhibition by an artist is deemed in the RUV to be a completely relevant academic output, the register remains blind to curatorial activities, with the exception of “research exhibition accompanied by a critical catalog,” a category that covers only a small part of the practice that we might term curatorial research. Most curators who wish to report their research within an academic setting therefore have to resort to transcribing their outputs into RIV-recognizable texts, effectively articulating the results of their work a second time within a different linguistic and methodological register.

During the course of planning this issue of *Notebook*, we repeatedly encountered questions and problems to which we were not fully able to put a name. One of these involves how to translate the new terminology emerging as a product of contemporary curatorial theory, which we

encounter in texts published in the lingua franca of the art world: English. In addition to curating, the terms curatorship, curatorial or, more recently, curatoriality are commonly used. In the search for appropriate translations of curatorial neologisms, nuances and connotations, problems arise relating not only to the capacity of Czech or Slovak, but also to semantic issues involving our ability to capture the subtle and often political motivations that have led to the expansion of standard terminology. We believe that one of the great challenges facing us in the near future will be to find a language of curatorial theory that corresponds to site-specific conditions and experiences (determined by history and geopolitics). We think of this issue of *Notebook* as a contribution to this discussion.

The question of terminology in the sense of a certain obsession with the ability to “do something with words,” evident amongst some curatorial theorists, raises the question of the gap that exists between academic and practical conceptions of curating. Again, as in the context of art, we observe a growing tension between curatorial practice and the increasingly sophisticated and complex world of theory, which often seems to bear little relationship to real-world conditions. When planning this issue, we made every effort to contact authors who we assumed would be able to relate to the issue of curatorial research from the perspective of lived curatorial praxis. How problematic this assumption was soon became apparent when many individuals whose curatorial practice we regard as an exemplary manifestation of curatorial research were unable to find the time or motivation to write a scholarly text. This makes us appreciate all the more the contributions that have been written from within the process and thus offer a unique perspective not otherwise encountered even in typical curatorial formats (catalog texts and essays), nor in the texts published in scholarly journals, which are usually more detached in outlook.

This issue opens with Zuzana Jakalová’s “O čom hovoríme, keď hovoríme o kurátorskom výskume? Parciálna

správa o stave jednej debaty” (What We Talk About When We Talk About Curatorial Research: A Partial Report on the State of One Debate). As an expository overview, it outlines the terrain within which the other texts will operate. Jakalová recalls the rise of curating as a practice and the development of critical reflection and theoretical discourse often associated with O’Neill’s “curatorial turn.” She also conducts a basic discursive analysis and looks at the possibilities of engaging with the very term “curating” and the ambitions associated with introducing its new modalities and forms. In the final part of her text, Jakalová reflects upon how to actually localize curatorial research, i.e., how broadly and specifically we should interpret the term “research” so that we do not end up either speaking of virtually all curating or focusing upon so narrow a niche that it would not make sense to deal with it seriously. Against the backdrop of the structure thus outlined, the essay lists the texts that have been published on this topic in English, and can therefore be viewed, inter alia, as a critically annotated bibliography of curatorial research.

Jana Písaříková’s study is a methodologically bold contribution to the discussion on how to write theory from essentially personal positions. Attributes such as “embodied” or “situated” are perfectly suited to the knowledge and understanding the text aims to promote. In the 25/2018 issue of *Notebook* mentioned above, Písaříková published a study dedicated to the curatorial activities of Jiří Valoch in the 1960s and 1970s.⁽⁸⁾ The study was framed as a contribution to the history of curating, especially of research focused on important figures in the field. The pretext of her study was her institutional position as curator of the Moravian Gallery in Brno, where she focused on the classification and presentation of a significant part of

the collection and archive of Jiří Valoch, which had been donated to the Moravian Gallery. The current text works with a fundamentally different experience and perspective. Following Písaříková’s decision in 2018 to look after the artist and curator, whose health had deteriorated considerably over the course of a decade, the aspect of care, which tends to become something of a cliché in etymological introductions to the problem of curating, moves to center stage. Her essay, “Umění nepečuje, pečuj o umění” (Art Doesn’t Care: Take Care of Art), leads us not only biographically, but also methodologically, through a narrative in which we move from institutional curating as the performance of a certain type of primarily art-historical expertise, to an auto-ethnographic perspective that reflects upon radically different ways of conceiving of curating and curatorial research.

Care, which is the central theme of Jana Písaříková’s contribution, also occupies an important place in the study by the collective comprising Martina Johnová, Anna Remešová and Karolína Žižková titled “Kurátorský výzkum jako nedisciplinovaná a znepokojivá forma poznání” (Curatorial Research as an Undisciplined and Unsettling Form of Knowledge). This involves caring for a specific region and its human and non-human inhabitants, as well as caring for the planet, in stark contrast to the abstract logic of capital. This case study looks at the exhibition *Symptoms of the Future* (Ústí n. L.: Galerie Hraničář, 2024). It is written from literally inside the process of planning the exhibition, which will still be open to visitors when this issue of *Notebook* appears on bookshelves. The text describes the complex process of the behind-the-scenes research that was undertaken, the origins of which go back several years. It describes specific methods and forms of curatorial work – amongst which the format of a symposium allowing for a long-term and mutually enriching dialogue with the exhibition organizers stands out – and places them within the discursive framework of thinking about the exhibition as a form of research. It also provides a space for reflections

8 Jana PÍSAŘÍKOVÁ, “Neviditelná socha, transcendentní výstava i programované umění. Kurátorské aktivity Jiřího Valocha šedesátých a sedmdesátých let,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, Vol. 12, 2018, No. 25, pp. 48–71.

on the relationship between curatorial and artistic research, which are developed in parallel and work towards a common goal.

A fundamental aspect of the curatorial research carried out as part of the project *Symptoms of the Future* is interdisciplinary and international collaboration, and this is characteristic of outstanding research projects in other spheres too. The ongoing interrogation of the relationship between the local dimension of the exhibition's central motif, to wit, the plan to mine lithium in the region around Cínovec, and its global context, forms not only a basic methodological premise, but ultimately a key element of the content articulated in the exhibition and in the present study. Elemental solidarity plays a crucial role here, allowing us to transcend the boundaries of particularistic interests and concerns and opening up the possibility of imagining futures other than those anticipated by the extractivist nature of capitalism.

The two case studies commissioned by us for this issue of *Notebook* are followed by a translation of the essay "Compensatory Postures: Natural History, Necroaesthetics, and Humiliation" by Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin. The text was written in 2019 in connection with the trio of exhibitions titled "Verschwindende Vermächtnisse: Die Welt als Wald" (Disappearing Legacies: The World as Forest), which Springer and Turpin conceived in collaboration with natural history museums in Berlin, Hamburg and Halle as part of the project "Reassembling the Natural."⁹ When including this text, which was first published in the anthology *Theater, Garden, Bestiary: A Materialist History of Exhibitions*,¹⁰ we were particularly impressed by the way that the authors approach the medium of the exhibition. For them, the exhibition is a locus

that allows them to materialize and make visible the outcomes of their long-term research into the historical construction of nature at the intersection of colonialism, capitalism, modern science and the institution of the museum. At the same time, they understand the exhibition (and more generally the modes, formats and media of display, and the epistemological and aesthetic claims and assumptions of its creation) as a site where distinct knowledges unattainable in other ways can emerge. Anselm Franke's approach, associated with the creation of complex "exhibition-essays," to which Johnová, Remešová and Žižková also refer in their study, is undoubtedly a precursor of the curatorial research as conceived by Springer and Turpin.

The issue ends with a review essay by Jan Zálešák, which focuses on a trio of publications from the Sternberg Press series titled "Thoughts on Curating." These slim volumes by Terry Smith, Zdenka Badovinač and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung each focus on a different aspect of what we might call the limits of contemporary curating. Through such themes as the "open strike" (Smith), "unannounced voices" (Badovinač) and the "pidginization of the language of curating" (Ndikung), all of the books touch upon an increasingly evident tension within the art world system as a whole, in which a more general crisis of the system of liberal democracy as the hegemony behind the global expansion of contemporary art and its institutions is manifest. The essay looks at each book and its implications for thinking about contemporary art and curating, and teases out the points of intersection between them. Although the topic of curatorial research does not figure explicitly here, the trio of books mentioned above offer many suggestions for "thinking about curating" within a broader, political context in which individual curatorial practices, including those of research, are embedded.

9 For more information regarding this project, which has been running for more than ten years, visit: <https://reassemblingnature.org/> (accessed 20 October 2024).

10 Tristan GARCIA – Vincent NORMAND (eds.), *Compensatory Postures: Natural History, Necroaesthetics, and Humiliation*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2019.