

3 Performative Curating and Experimental Performance

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 presented a history of curating in the visual arts, and showed how it has transformed into a practice of critical knowledge creation that has become unmoored from the specificity of the history of European visual art and can be applied to a variety of areas of knowledge. The focus of the chapter was the emergence of the professional figure of the curator as unique from, but in a contested relationship to, the artist.

Chapter 3 will examine forms of interdisciplinary exchange in the arts in general, to be able to properly understand the implications of these transfers and to catch the slips of logic that happen when shifting contexts and frames of reference. The chapter begins with a reading of the work of Shannon Jackson, who has produced a body of work related to the study and scholarship of the interdisciplinary arts that serves as a backdrop to an increasing amount of contemporary artistic production. Her approach will be adapted into a method for understanding how to navigate this transdisciplinary field also from the perspective of curatorial practice.

Jackson's approach is furthermore both to acknowledge the importance of discipline-specific knowledge of existing artistic traditions, while also recognising that the contemporary situation of their high amount of hybridization can only be understood through a viewer-centric model, one that is also informed by the contextualization or mediation of artistic work. Her work both acknowledges the existence of the interdisciplinary arts that increasingly defines the wider arts field today, while also qualifying the existence of this space by arguing that its inherent hybridity resists systematization as a field in itself, always co-determined by one's vantage point on it.

The chapter will also focus on curating's various relationship to contemporary artistic practice in the performing arts of dance and theatre. These fields both have a rapidly maturing relationship to the notion of curating, a concept that is still only nascent in the field of music. They furthermore are historical siblings of musical practice, sharing both a common history of immaterial artistic production, and

large areas of overlap such as in ballet and opera. Examining how these two fields have parsed curating as a concept and adapted it in various ways to their various disciplinary exigencies will set up a foundation for talking about what curating could mean in the field of music.

3.2 Reading Shannon Jackson

Performing arts festivals and visual arts biennales alike have begun to present a heterogeneous mix of theatre, performance art, musical concerts, and exhibitions, often organizing themselves instead around various themes, questions, or concepts rather than artistic medium. There has also been a rise in prominence of high-profile festivals that exhibit a strong emphasis on their capacity to mix various kinds of artistic productions, such as the Ruhrtriennale or Steirischer Herbst.

As opposed to more established interdisciplinary festivals like the Salzburger Festspiele, which has since its inception programmed the performing arts of opera, concerts, and theatre, these newer incarnations often seek to program diverse forms of artistic practice that are often more experimental, or that are more “conceptual” in their approach, meaning that their form is subservient to the idea they want to express. They are also more likely to program community art practices, as well as to exhibit a stronger relationship between their programmed performance and a larger curatorial concept for the festival.

With this strong upwards trajectory in the amount of mixing of artistic practice, the challenge is to develop an approach to understanding and describing them that is flexible enough to keep up. These new and highly dynamic modes of artistic production and presentation display a large amount of variability from one festival (or festival edition) to another, from production to production, and in how they engage with or are understood by their audience, making recourse to solely their artistic traditions not viable.

The reality is that these fields of the arts are, as theatre scholar Tom Sellar diagnoses, “blurring forms with unprecedented fluidity, and discourses ... are resolutely, and freely, interdisciplinary,” with the challenge emerging of how best to navigate these new waters (2014, 22). What becomes a problem is how best to characterize these practices, and how to describe them productively. If the frame of reference is itself constantly shifting, how can production and reception of these works be conceived of?

What does not seem to be a productive path forward are attempts at some grand systemization or genealogy of these intricate hybrid forms; any system would arguably only exist as a permanently-insufficient map. Rather, a more contingent and localized approach must be attempted: understanding interdisciplinary arts involves constructing tools adapted to the specificities of the event of their occur-