

## 6 Conclusion/Curating Music

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### Curating Music

A myriad of connections between curators and curatorial practice in various other disciplines and music have been drawn over the course of this book. It has tried to approach curating as a practice of undisciplined knowledge production, a way of escaping from established disciplinary forms and commodified modes of presentation, and the enactment of a movement of thought. Instead of being understood as an exclusively visual arts practice, curating has been understood as a more general way of approaching the creation of critical knowledge, knowledge not firstly associated with a particular discipline, but produced out of a constellation of factors in the performance of the event of its enactment.

Festivals for music and perennial arts exhibitions have thus here not been artificially separated from one another on the basis of their different media or communities, but rather been analyzed in terms of their common lineage. This is one that is related both to processes of mass subjectification and nationalist identification, but also to the potential for creating critical mass, and for fostering counter-hegemonic practices. As has been shown, these latter tendencies have been more thoroughly explored in curatorial practice in the visual arts, forming a body of knowledge and experience that can be transferred to festivals for music that are now similarly starting to experiment in similar ways.

How does one start to think curatorially about musical practice? Firstly by carefully fashioning the conceptual tools that will be used: The first two chapters attempted to establish a common framework for thinking about festivals for both music, the performing arts, and visual art. They also sought to present relevant historical and contemporary debates and discussions surrounding curatorial practice.

The goal has been to show that far from being a specific, definable thing, curating is a much slipperier term, understood variously historically, etymologically, or as a cypher for knowledge-based, post-Fordist labour. Curating has been portrayed as a practice that, as its name belies, first emerged in the field of the visual arts, but has over the course of its development become understood as a discipline-agnostic term for describing cultural producers dealing in some way with the mediation of

artistic work. This understanding of curating comes particularly out of a specific more academic approach to the field that began to emerge in the 1990s. The concept of mediation is key in that it describes the process of providing context and framing, connecting an artistic practice with particular histories, audiences, and places. The transdisciplinary and transculturality that define 21<sup>st</sup> century artistic practice require this explicit constitution of connections in order to not be lost in the deluge (of information, of ideas, of entertainment).

Curating has to be more than a simple providing of context however. The practice must also reckon with the transformation of artistic critique under cognitive capitalism and the rise of the creative economy. The traditional values of artistic work—creativity, critical thinking, eliciting affect—have become also highly valued by market forces, which are quick to integrate artistic labour into reassessments of hegemonic power. The practice of curating, as it has developed into a diffuse, hybrid practice, forever unclear in its purview and responsibilities, but nevertheless acting at the nexus of critical artistic expression and managerial reality, manages to place itself directly in the crosshairs of this struggle.

What then makes curating so important as a concept is its ability to work on this fundamental categorical level in order to constitute in new ways the project of artistic critique, understood as a practice of creating genuine, counter-hegemonic alternatives. It is a practice that has the potential to reimagine the relationship between arts and society in a period when this relationship has become strained, less a practice of framing and more one of re-framing.

As sweeping as this description of curatorial practice may be, successful practices are very much rooted in the particularities of *how* it is done in a particular setting. This means that curating is more of an approach to mediation, a certain tendency, rather than a specific set of discourses or references to know and respond to. Relating this back to the field of contemporary classical music (CCM), while it may not share all the same discourses around critical theory, institutional critique, etc., that prevail in other art forms, this does not *per se* preclude a curatorial approach to musical mediation. It was also—indeed in perhaps a curatorial way—an attempt at establishing a point of reference on the topic aimed specifically at practitioners in the field of music, and tailored to fill the particular gaps that have been observed in the discourse about CCM, which is generally reluctant to call its constitutive structures into question.

What was then important to establish was a specific theoretical basis for the transfer of a curatorial approach to outside of the field of the visual arts. This was done through an adaptation of Shannon Jackson's writings on interdisciplinary arts scholarship to develop a theory of curating as a practice of taking partial responsibility for the event of the artistic encounter (in the sense of the performative turn), and attempting to shape them so as to produce an event of critical knowledge production for an audience.

Specific ways in which this taking-responsibility has been realized in the performing arts were then examined, in order to establish a basis for what curatorial practice in the performing arts can look like, setting up several key concepts and ideas that would then help inform the study of the curatorial practices seen in the two musical case studies.

In regards to dance, it has been shown how that field's engagement with its mediation connected with the specificities of its tradition and medium have produced interesting new forms of spectatorship, as seen in the dance exhibition format. Examining theatre also revealed important practices creating new definitions of how theatrical practice can exist as a critical social force. It also allowed for an investigation of the distinctions between dramaturg/dramaturgy and curator/curating, arguing that despite similarities among the two practices, the latter distinguished itself through a history of hypervisibility stretching even into other arts, as well as a transdisciplinary trove of knowledge related to issues of criticality and artistic practice.

### **Munich Biennale for New Music Theater**

Looking at the Munich Biennale for New Music Theater, examining the festival from a curatorial perspective allowed for a more nuanced view of the way Daniel Ott and Manos Tsangaris have directed the festival. Both are originally composers whose artistic practices have shifted to focus on creating structures and processes for music theatre to be created, rather than the works themselves. While their artistic concerns with the festival may be similar to their own artistic practices interrogating these same limits, the method has changed to become more one of nurturing relationships and establishing a foundation or institutional frame for these practices to unfold.

The connection between creating this frame and their artistic work, as well as the relationship between this and the final festival event can best be understood by taking recourse to curatorial discourse. How they work with all stakeholders, mixing artistic and managerial practice, in order to shape both productions and the festival event in a certain way, is what is most interesting about their approach. Looking at DOMTS and their work from this perspective has the advantage of focusing squarely on their leadership strategy and its relationship to both works and audience.

Thinking about DOMTS curatorially also means access to a discourse around arts leadership that can be adapted in order to enrich these discussions: For instance, reading Claire Bishop's analysis of early social practice in the visual arts in the 1990s, the concerns of those curators around finding new ways of working with artists, and the tensions that these different working methods created with audiences, create powerful juxtapositions with DOMTS' processes of experimentation

with method, and how they are presented to the audience by the two leaders. To emphasize this point, what this does not mean is that these two can be compared within the same framework; they are extremely different from each other in important ways. Rather, the point is that curatorial discourse can help tell different stories about DOMTS, and unlock the ability to understand challenges within their practice in new ways. It is thus a transfer on the level of ideas and concepts that can then be refracted through the particularities of a specific artistic discipline, site, institution, audience, or curator.

The case of DOMTS and their biennale can also be understood as a recursive shift among musical practitioners towards the mixing of media and the emphasis on creating a performative event. Recursive because this is a facet of DOMTS' platform system where transdisciplinary teams create music theatre works collectively, as well as a facet of the productions themselves that emerge from this system, which are usually intermedial, site-specific, and unrepeatable experiences.

The way that these kinds of performances intertwine many different strands of various artistic disciplines means that understanding these practices requires a matching transdisciplinary methodology of analysis. Navigating these shifting frames of reference, different disciplinary expectations and traditions, as has been done with the work of Shannon Jackson, is itself ultimately also an enactment of curatorial thinking: understanding performances at the crossroads of so many different discourses, be they about labour relations, relationship to various disciplines, or to a curatorial concept, allows for ideas about performances to themselves also be properly contextualized in ways that are productive and critical, without falling into so many interdisciplinary pitfalls.

Thinking from this background of carefully considering the disciplinary background and the particular resistances that affect a specific practice, the working method of DOMTS at the biennale is arguably both extremely innovative in regards to musical practice, but at the same time also in its earliest stages of development, both in regards to the curators themselves, and the practices that they are supporting. This detailed analysis of their work from a curatorial perspective has been with the intention of opening up a space for debate around the issues at the biennale, and in doing so help to connect it to other similar initiatives and practices, all in the name of furthering its development.

## **Maerzmusik**

While the Munich Biennale has put much emphasis on the process of developing its productions, Maerzmusik has conversely been focused on the *art* of careful programming of musical and other works into evening-length programs that together position themselves in relation to the festival's main thematic ideas, mostly related to important societal debates surrounding post-colonialism and social justice. With

this has come a new relationship to the 20<sup>th</sup> century German New Music tradition that Maerzmusik has historically been a part of. This relationship is marked by a new telling of the history of that tradition from a wider and more global perspective, showing the often-concealed ways in which it has intersected variously with the strategic interests of states, and with a positioning of the West at the centre of global experimental musical production.

Remarkable about this direction is its level of self-reflection by the festival about its own functioning. It stands out as a rare example of a music festival that is actively experimenting with its own framework, and going through a self-reckoning in order to reassert its criticality within the contemporary paradigm.

Despite the festival's high level of sophistication when it comes to its self-identity, there remains a tension between the festival and its community that seems to be widening. The first issue is that, in contrast to the emancipatory values of its programming, Polzer as an individual occupies a highly prominent role as festival *auteur*, its ultimate locus of meaning. He as *Konzertemacher* has become for better or for worse its charismatic centre. Despite the festival's self-awareness in its relationship to history, there does not seem to exist a parallel discussion around the festival's actual organization itself, which would be necessary to call this role into question.

The comparison to Szeemann continues in the director's relationship to artists. In the famous case of Documenta V, that curator experienced resistance from artists who felt they were being subsumed into his larger narrative, losing their artistic voice in the process. While a similarly vocal resistance does not seem to exist at the Maerzmusik festival, the Szeemann model helps to predict a confrontation between on the one hand musical practitioners whose work also cares for its own mediation, as has been shown in the case study on the Munich Biennale, and an artistic director who also sees the mediation of concerts and their framing as instrumental in his curatorial concept.

The two case studies that have been examined in detail here were purposefully chosen for their contrasting approaches to curating contemporary music; while the two composers, DOMTS, have spent the majority of their time and energy focused on the development and care for individual new music theatre productions related to the themes that they have set, Polzer, the career administrator, has in contrast taken the opposite route, and focused his time more on the careful coordination of concerts themselves and their perception by the audience.

Traversing both festivals is, in their respective ways, a new way of dealing with musical practices, one that seems to reflect a broader change in the relationships between both music and its audience, and music and other forms of artistic practice. It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain functional categorizations of where one discipline begins and another ends without these falling into over-codification. Instead, across both festivals, music's relationships seem to be being

defined in the opposite way, namely on the basis of need rather than necessity. What seems to come first in both DOMTS' music theatre productions as well as in Polzer's composed evenings is an artistic question or idea that then, in so many different ways, finds its way to artistic practice. The format of a concert evening is thus determined by how it contributes something specific to the concert experience in the name of a particular goal. The programmed artists are not chosen on the basis of their being musicians or not, but rather based on how what they do relates to a larger composed experience.

What is important to both festivals as well is that they not capitulate the domain of reflection, writing, and criticism. They have both in a short amount of time opened large new domains for musical practice, ones that have until now received only cursory treatment on the part of musical scholarship. There still remains a great deal to be learnt and shared about these festivals and their practical experiences with curating contemporary music.

### Limitations and Future Research

In order to bring this project into a narrow enough scope, several limitations had to be imposed in advance in the interest of being as concise as possible.

The most significant of these is the limitation to only two case studies: had more festivals been given the same level of analysis, a more detailed picture of the current state of curating festivals for contemporary music could have been achieved. Festivals also from outside of Germany could have added another dimension to this project, in that they would have had allowed for comparisons between different subcommunities of CCM. This holds doubly true because of the strong ties between festivals and national identity that have existed also historically, and still inform the format.

Maerzmusik and the Munich Biennale for New Music Theater were decided on in the end because of their centrality to the New Music community that is the focus of this work. While geographical proximity also played a role in their selection, their role in setting the tone and direction in their field helped warrant deep dives meant to be to an extent exemplary of a new approach to festival analysis more generally.

Conversely, festivals perhaps in Germany, but with historically a focus on the wider performing arts more generally could have given additional perspective on the relationship between music and other artforms, as well as between various kinds of musical practice. An analysis of the Ruhrtriennale, with a particular focus on the directorship of Heiner Goebbels between 2012 and 2014 was one such festival that was ultimately cut from the final conception of the work because of size constraints. Integrating this festival would have allowed for a perspective shift outside of only contemporary music, and led to an investigation of the interrelationships

between musical performance, theatre, and dance, as well as the particularities of the Ruhrtriennale's relationship to its site in the Ruhr valley.

Another large limitation has been the focus solely on festivals. While curating's history can hardly be separated from its rise to prominence through international biennales (see O'Neil 2012, 51ff), and CCM seems to increasingly be becoming a history that unfolds primarily at festivals, these formats nevertheless almost by definition do not make up the majority of the cultural life of a city. Their status as short, unique event lends festivals a uniquely symbolic character which makes them much easier to be analyzed as a totality than year-long cultural institutions by both scholars and by the public.

Despite this, more permanent cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, symphony halls, and independent music venues are presented with a different set of challenges, such as being spread out over the much larger scale of programs stretching for most of the year. While this is in itself another interesting avenue of research, limiting the focus to festivals, which feature much smaller, denser programs allowed for a sharpening of the central point being investigated here, namely how curating can be operationalized as a useful term for thinking in new ways about forms of leadership and mediation in contemporary music.

At the core of this book has been a project of attempting to lay out the foundation for something much larger than itself, namely a new way of understanding the mediation of contemporary musical practice. Initiatives such as the two case studies that have been focused on at length here are surely part of a new and re-configured way of approaching this issue, however both of these festivals seem to have resigned themselves to having no adequate scholarly partners when it comes to their curatorial practices.

Not wanting to reinvent the wheel in order to analyze festivals for contemporary music, the many different analysis of similar festivals and curatorial experiments in neighbouring artistic disciplines have become the raw materials to be studied in order to develop a specific understanding of curating in the field of music. While musical practice should be understood in terms of its specific history, this is an acknowledgement that this must also occur in relationship to the many other art forms with which it shares so many connections.

This is for instance what the opening chapter arguing for the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 as a common ancestor of both festivals for music and visual arts attempted to argue. Watching how these two histories have diverged since then can be an opportunity for a productive discussion around the reasons for these different developments, and a way of viewing the specificity of musical developments within their larger historical context. In the same way, the two case studies must also be understood as exemplary of a different kind of methodology for analyzing music festivals. This is one where the festival as a whole is itself evaluated on how it is experienced, and the ways in which it elicits knowledge production.

Be it via this shared history of festivals, or other similarities that have been explored in these pages, the underlying idea has been to sketch a framework for both further research and practice-based experimentation that can be filled in by others in larger teams and in more detail. This new framework has been designed with the intent to sidestep a certain lethargy that seems to be pervasive among music's thought leaders: a conservative and Eurocentric approach to the traditions of musical practice, be they contemporary classical music, New Music, or otherwise, can no longer be a recipe for producing artistic success or relevancy in the globalized, transdisciplinary arts world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In its place must come a dedication to staying with the fraught complexity of the alternatives to these easy-think narratives and linear histories. While perhaps seemingly more modest, this is how musical practice can rediscover its social relevance.♦