

Reviews

Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media, by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 2010, £25.95. ISBN: 978-0-262-01388-8. Language: English.

Is new media art anything like contemporary art and can it be curated with the same strategies? Yes...and no. At least that appears to be where the authors of *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* lead their readers by first attempting to define what is “new” in that form of practice and how it constitutes art of a certain type through the very characteristics



that might make it problematic from the perspective of curators: considerations about the ephemeral nature of the works, the dematerialisation of the outcome and the participative systems they put in place for their audiences. By deconstructing the concept of new media art, the authors are also calling for a deconstructive, and hopefully, more flexible definition of curating. A noble enough mandate, considering the multiplying graduate curating programmes on offer worldwide and the growing authority attributed to curators only equalled by the growing confusion as to the very definition of curating as a practice. Where the curator once was the custodian in charge of acquisitions, care and display of a museum's collection, this shadowy figure is now a producer of meaning, a task best accomplished by juxtaposing artworks, artists and contexts.

Unsurprisingly, the role of the curator is one that has historically evolved hand in hand with the definition of art. As the canon of modernity gave way to the games and rhetoric of post-modernity, curators found themselves faced with the responsibility of having to acquire, care and display found objects, installations and performances, a departure from the paintings and sculptures to which modern audiences had become accustomed. For better or for worse, the curators found themselves having to mediate and contextualise the work from the early twentieth century onwards. As a practice, curating is dependent on art's changing nature and it rests on the premise that it should change to accommodate new media developments. Contemporary art has not stopped evolving since Duchamp signed the Fountain in 1917 and the technology that is often instrumental to new media art has also been developing faster than

the human mind can grasp, so how does one define art that engages with these new forms of media? In flux, resisting categories and labels, with a boundary defying character, new media art is especially challenging for curators to work with and especially problematic for theorists to conceptualise. Of course, that does not mean that a theoretical reflection should not be attempted, as long as academic efforts to provide the last word on the matter of new media art are done in light of its fluid nature.

That is the case of *Rethinking Curating*. Written as two distinct parts that deal respectively with the nature of new media art and with curating, it can be read like two books, the form of which has been adapted so they could be bound into one, physically and conceptually. Indeed, the first part of the book entitled “Art After New Media – Histories, Theories, and Behaviors”, already hints at the post-modern perspective adopted by the authors who while recognising a diversity of perspectives as valid prioritise one over all others. In this lengthy introduction the authors attempt to define new media art, discussing the many theories formed on its origins and finally opting for Jean-Francois Lyotard’s ground breaking exhibition *Les Immatériaux* which took place at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1984. *Les Immatériaux* allied art and technology as a means to shed light on the cultural changes brought about by the mass access to technology, thus creating the first widely known instance of an exhibition serving as a discursive and experiential space. Indeed, the audience was invited to engage with the art on the same level they could interact with the technology, levelling disciplinary boundaries.

This choice of grounding for new media is not random as it underlines the authors' multidisciplinary background as curators/academics/artists. Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook co-founded CRUMB (the Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss Web site), an online resource for curators of new media, while teaching and maintaining their own practice as curators and, respectively, artist and writer. This of course leads the authors to consider new media art's current status as an avant-garde form within a culture of postmodernism, thus outlining how the changes in technology have contributed to a redefinition of our understanding of space, time and participative systems, and how, in turn, these have changed art that engages with technology. Temporality in new media art has been particularly problematic since its beginnings in the sense that a lot of new media art conceived before 2000 has now been lost through changes of platforms and navigation tools, thus leaving certain works to exist only in discursive practice. Later works that have been more carefully archived so as to avoid oblivion often had a focus on the ephemeral or the immediate time of either the creation of the work or the engagement with it. The first part of *Rethinking Curating*, while admitting to the difficulty of trying to pin down new media as it is in constant flux, cannot avoid labels altogether as it endeavours to position new media art as avant-garde and post-modern. After all, it is the remit of curating to create categories by circumscribing areas of artistic practice and by ascribing to them labels and contexts that contribute to interpretation.

Woven between sections of the first part of the book, the analysis of new media art, are small subsections entitled *Rethinking Curating* which refer to the ways in which the second part will address the issues raised. Although this appears to be an editor's strategy to highlight the ways in which the two parts speak to one another, they are useful in creating an overall coherence for the reader. Each chapter closes on an “exhibition example”, in the form of a brief case study and a summary, which contribute to making the authors' point clear and

more concrete. This advances the second part of the book entitled “Rethinking Curating – Contexts, Practices and Processes”, in which the authors discuss how the elements of new media art and its current context that have been outlined in the first part ought to contribute to a shift in curating practices.

What is particularly interesting about this section of the book is the fact that the authors bring their experience as curators, artists and educators to bear on their discussion. That is reflected in their discussion of curating with simple yet fruitful considerations about the status of new media artists and their relationship to the museum, the confusion often surrounding new media art which can be mistakenly perceived as an aid to interpretation rather than an artwork in its own right and the ways in which other modes of curating might provide alternative platforms better suited to this specific genre. Indeed, if new media art has been developed mostly outside of the traditional art institutions, why display it in such a context? Perhaps because that is where the audiences expect to see art, therefore the institution could be said to partially define what art is by what it includes. But what has been established in the first part of the book is that this status is less likely to matter for new media artists than for other contemporary artists who require the support of the institution for lack of other structures that new media artists might have, such as networks, labs, etc.

For those who consider that institutional approval is not a priority, the authors outline numerous alternative modes of curating that exist with more or less tenuous links to traditional art institutions. The mobility of festivals, for instance, echoes the often transitory nature of new media art. Art agencies and public art allow for stronger community affiliations and politically engaged grass-roots initiatives. Publishing and broadcasting are likely to yield more control for the artist who wishes to reach a wider audience. Labs which allow for greater experimentation and collaborative practices are more flexible and allow for negotiation between artists and curators that annihilate the old disciplinary boundaries. These initiatives appear to be especially suited to new media art as their cross-disciplinary leanings are in sync with the cross-disciplinary origins of the genre, yet these curating modes had been in existence before new media art became an object of interest for curators. What Graham and Cook bring to the discussion is a specific set of considerations that can be learned from curating new media art via these alternative modes: for instance, public agencies are likely to work more quickly than museums when it comes to engaging with new audiences, and labs offer the kind of knowledge and facilities that are likely to suit new media projects, yet their focus on process and experimentation does not necessarily lead to the production of an artwork.

As the authors conclude, “New media art presents the opportunity for a complete rethink of curatorial practice, from how art is legitimated and how museum departments are founded to how curators engage with the production of artwork and how they set about the many tasks within the process of showing that art to an audience” (p.283). The same could have been said of photography over a hundred years ago, but Graham and Cook avoid the pitfall of using the peak in the development and popularity of a new form of art as a pretext to discuss curating and they manage this by writing this double treatise that demonstrates a thorough reflection on both new media art and curating. Their effort is laudable in terms of intellectual rigour, documentation, clarity and structure. Yet there remains a sense that, rather than writing the definitive volume on the future of curating and the possibilities offered by new media

art, they are merely casting a fresh look at lasting matters that have not changed in any radical manner since the Curating New Media international seminar organised by the Baltic gallery in 2001, a pioneering symposium in which the authors and other theorists, curators and artists shed light on the same issues almost a decade ago.

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