

The curator in the spotlight

*the case for visibility and social
engagement in the arts*

Lara Staal

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While performing artists are subject to continual critical appraisal and analysis, the role and influence of that intermediary figure known as the ‘programmer’ is often nebulous. Replacing this term with ‘curator’, which is used widely for those holding a comparable position in the visual arts, could increase the visibility of this function and encourage critical discourse pertaining to it.

The role of the modern-day programmer of stage-based arts is inextricably bound up with the emergence of black box theatre practice, whose unruly dynamic – characterised by a resistance to control, protocol, fixed frameworks and hierarchies – enabled individuals to define the artistic identity of theatres and festivals. The approaches taken by those with the job title of Theatre Programmer are many and varied: they each interpret their role in different way. I would argue that despite the significant overlaps of their activities, a distinction can be made in theatre between the curator and the more traditional role of programmer: in very general terms, the programmer facilitates and operates within

¹In the Netherlands the Expanded Curation programme at DAS Theatre explores the role of the curator in the performing arts, and Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam pays attention to curatorship as part of its Master International Dramaturgy programme. In Germany, Munich University launched its brand new post-graduate programme Curation in the Performing Arts in March 2017.

pre-existing structures, while the curator deploys an artistic mindset to create new connections, combinations and contexts. At present there are few established guidelines for curatorship in

theatre and it is only very recently that some pioneering educational structures have emerged.¹ Although the curator and the programmer are quite distinct in their practice, approach and attitude, there are also numerous overlaps: both select artists and artist groups, decide on the number of performances and the venue in which they will take place, develop context programs, and conceived programs for festivals or smaller-scale clustered events.

The thinking that underpins such events – marked by a desire to display a certain type of work and/or expose a particular kind of content – is manifested in context-related activities, audience-targeted information, publications and other components of a communications strategy in which the programmer has an important part to play. Programmers also often manage their own budget independently of the venue or festival for which they are working and are therefore responsible for financial negotiations with performing organisations.

There has been a distinct lack of discourse accompanying the development of the programmer’s role. While the emergence of the curator in the fine arts met with the publication of books detailing the tasks and significance associated with this role, the theatre world remained pretty much silent. So why is it so important to reflect on the organisation of the arts sector and the specific roles of individuals comprising it? Perhaps because a lack of context and historical narrative has emaciated critical thinking; anyone underexposed to public critical awareness can hide behind all manner of conditional arguments. True power requires a discourse that analyses, criticises and questions a given position or activity. While the artist undergoes wide-ranging discussion and criticism from the moment he or she places work in a public context, the programmer often remains in the shadows despite exerting enormous influence from behind the scenes. The programmer, after all, determines whose voices are heard, and which theatre practitioners get the

opportunity to develop. Some artists owe their stature to the faith invested in them by a programmer or artistic director (or by a group of programmers, given that they often operate in concert).

Modesty

In recent times the word 'curator' is being increasingly used in place of 'programmer', following the lead of the visual arts world where the curator (from the Latin *curare*, 'to take care of') is responsible for the care of the collection. However, the responsibilities associated with the position of curator in the theatre are not identical to those in the visual arts, where the curator exerts great power and influence: he or she selects the work, commissions artists to develop new work from a specified perspective, determines sequential order and provides a sometimes theme-based overarching context for the works.

Unlike their counterparts in the visual arts, theatre practitioners often establish the context for their own work through the use of text, flyers and imagery. Moreover, live performances – unlike most visual art works and installations – have a specific duration, limiting the quantity of works that theatre curators can offer audiences. The stage curator is additionally restricted by the simple fact that performance material is immaterial and impossible to preserve and re-present – when making his or her selection the curator is therefore wholly dependent recently made or reprised work. An additional matter worth considering is the prevailing sense of cultural unease surrounding the term 'curator' in the Netherlands. The Dutch are generally averse to 'big' words, and in the theatre world describing oneself as a curator may well be viewed as vain or pretentious. This uncomfortableness is sometimes rooted in a sense of modesty, with programmers seeing themselves as having a supporting role with respect to the work or artist and having no desire to place themselves in the foreground. But unease and fear of responsibility are often two sides of the same coin, and I believe it is precisely

because the programmer is in such an influential position that the title 'curator' is called for (in the case the programmer also creates festival frameworks, after talks and other curated events). The emphasis that the word places on choice-making ensures their actions become more tangible and thereby open for discussion.

As a job title 'programmer' emphasises the placement of performances in a venue.

The programmer 'programmes' a season, meaning, more or less, that he or she makes a selection of works from whatever is on offer and allocates a position to them in the available period and spaces. This is a valuable occupation, one whose primary concern is creating the best possible conditions for a stage production to stand out to its best advantage. But in my opinion the expertise of the programmer is quite distinct from the expertise of the curator, because many theatres and festivals are about much more than the allocation of time and space for performances.

Perhaps as a result of arts funding cuts in recent years – and the attendant, underlying criticism that artists and arts institutions had turned their backs on society at large – there is a growing need for contextualisation for stage work.

Whatever the case, theatres and festivals have for a long time clearly been doing more than simply presenting plays: they have been exploring themes, curating interdisciplinary events by juxtaposing theatre with installations or video art, organising dining events diners that erase the boundary between eating and performance, producing publications, creating spaces for encounter, and holding discussions and debates.

As well as constituting a response to criticism, these developments have also been prompted by a need among theatres to extend their local roots and engage with their audiences in a more sustainable way. Perhaps the intended autonomisation of the arts has missed the mark, because we are now we are suffering from the arts being purely representative and the separation of



life and art. Initially, the decoupling of the arts from private patronage and the accompanying establishment of a funding structure for the arts were a victory, of course, because it engendered a freedom to create that was not dependent on the interests of patrons. But this went hand-in-hand with the risk that the art world would become rather isolated from the rest of society. Contextually embedding art works represents an attempt to re-establish art's place at the centre of society and to connect with other disciplines and aspects of daily life.

The curator has a crucial role to play in this process. Any venue or festival not merely presenting performances in arbitrary sequence, but rather weaving threads between art works and endeavouring to create a 'total space', is creating an overarching dramaturgy for the programme. Achieving this requires maintaining a sense of the power of individual works while creating a greater framework that allows for a deeper understanding of the individual elements, the relationships between them, and the greater whole. Curation shares characteristics with choreography, montage and dramaturgy, but unlike them it relates not only to the microworld of the work itself, but also to the frame in which it is set – the title, the program booklet, the venue, etc – in order to manifest a total concept.

Resistance to 'curator' as a term often arises from a fear that the curator will set him- or herself apart as an 'uber-artist', forcing individual performances to form part of a *gesamtkunstwerk*. But my feeling is that the same applies here as in the case of a good dramaturge or artist: a true understanding of the qualities of the components is sure to lead to an interesting result that will enhance rather than diminish the stature of individual works. After all, context is always being created, even when one is pretending not to do so. Better then, surely, to do so consciously and introduce multiple layers to the programme and thereby also

connections with other domains. Choices can only be properly addressed – not least for the benefit of the participating artists – if contextualisation is a deliberate process.

The unfinished house

The curator's craft lies in his or her ability to create a temporary landscape that encourages reflection and exchange, that moves the spectator and, ideally, continues to provoke him or her long after the event. For me, curation is about the 'porous walls' in the work of dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven. A curator is driven by the desire to connect artworks to life because art – like science, journalism and politics – is an attempt to reflect on the world, to map it and reshape it. Poor curatorship, then, testifies to an inability to see art and reflection as two sides of the same coin. This is not about having the academic interpret the work of the artist. Rather, it is about discovering where the academic's imagination begins, and the artist's theoretisation begins.

To my mind curatorship also constitutes a response to criticism of a capitalist system marked by passive consumption: curation is never about indulging in isolated events; it is always about assembling a



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greater whole. It is crucial in this regard not to construct purpose-built spaces in which all connections are pre-created and pre-defined. Curation is all about making an unfinished house, a skeletal framework, the nails holding it together hammered only halfway in so that new, spontaneous connections can be made. It is about creating a landscape that requires a spectator, that only comes to life through the active interpretation of an audience.

An interesting case in point was the 2016 edition of *Kunstenfestivaldesarts* in Brussels, whose binding theme encouraged to engage in far-reaching personal interpretations and associations. The festival's main guest, the French theatre practitioner Philippe Quesne, introduced the idea of 'the cave' to create a thematic thread that connected all the guest productions but never imposed itself on them. Quesne's design for the festival centre was itself an artistic project comprising a large black balloon in an old church hall one that offered space for around a hundred spectators to participate in various activities each evening. As a subject, the cave touched upon multiple aspects of the human experience, such as the need to withdraw to reconnect with what is most important in life, fear of the outside world with its attendant longing for a protective environment, the potency of darkness and the underground, and the need to leave a legacy. In this way, rather than being a restrictive framework that limited the scope of the performances, the theme invited further reflection and, through its physical manifestation as the festival centre, formed the common space in which artists and audiences could engage in conversation.

Curation can contribute to the creation of an environment in which festivalgoers participate more intensively than they otherwise would. In September 2012 at *Steirischer Herbst* in Graz, for example, Florian Malzacher curated *Truth is Concrete*, a 'marathon festival' bringing together activists and artists who are all rooted in some form of politically engaged activity that eschews mere representation. This 170-hour performative environment for action and reflection ran continuously, day and night, and hosted in the region of 300 lectures, panel discussions, performances, concerts, films and workshops,

A further example is the July 2014 *Kortrijk Congé*, which saw the generation of a 'city in a state of exclusion' (*Kortrijk Congé* was a site-specific festival that took a

highly interactive approach in its efforts to connect art and society. Each annual edition from 2006 to 2016 lasted a day and a night.) Festivalgoers found themselves in a cordoned-off area of the city, where they were required to surrender their passports and cash and donate food on arrival. Participation was essential to keep this temporary city operational: the jacuzzi would only work if sufficient wood was chopped to provide energy; visitors only got to eat if some of them were prepared to cook; knowledge exchange only took place if some of those present volunteered to give a lecture and share their expertise; and so on.

Applied in this way, curating an event or festival has overlaps with organising a protest or movement. The current need for collective activities can best be understood in the context of the loss of alternatives on offer in society, and the prevailing realpolitik mindset that dismisses dreams as naive and utopias as dangerous generated a sense of impotence and stagnation. We encounter new evidence on a daily basis of our declining agency over our living environment: our public spaces are being privatised, demonstrations are only permitted in parks, and we have outsourced our concerns about healthcare, education and food. Small wonder, then, that the arts and cultural institutions are choosing to place issues such as citizenship, community and enablement back on the agenda. The arts in general and, thanks to its live character, theatre in particular, can create the context for a communal re-examination of shared concerns, leading to discussion and collective reflection.

The curator is in an ideal position to further theatre's increased engagement with society as a whole. If curated with this aim in mind, a programme of theatre-based events has the potential to appeal to a diversity of audiences, thereby introducing dispute and opposition into the theatrical space. Given that nurturing the relationship between artworks and



the wider world is central to the curation process, the curator will hone his or her expertise when it comes to combining distinct disciplines and origins within a single programme. The challenge is to ensure the arts regain their position at the public heart of society, through the creation of alliances with related disciplines such as education, media and politics.

Connections

A conscious approach to curatorship as a discipline fosters an active engagement with challenges such as those described above. Operating thematically creates opportunities for establishing connections with individuals who are occupied with comparable concerns from the perspective of other disciplines. And there is broad and substantial interest in this approach, in my experience, as evidenced by the responses I encountered at Amsterdam's Frascati theatre in March 2014 during the ME/WE programme, which reflected on the current state of civil society. For

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example, Imrat Verhoeven, a political scientist at Amsterdam University, noted that a lecture-performance by journalist and theatre practitioner Aniek Nuyens explored precisely the themes that he was touching on in his own work, and was surprised at how Nuyens' use of language evoked a resonance between the subject matter and the imagination. And the reverse is also true, because a performance will gain in meaning and value for spectators if they sense a connection with well-founded research and analysis of topical issues.



The discipline of curatorship also creates a context for the kind of critical engagement with the organisations that have been

associated with the visual arts since the 1960s and 1970s, with artists dissecting, criticising and revealing the power mechanisms operated by art institutions, museums, curators and funders. It is a dynamic that remains detectable in the work of contemporary visual artists to this day. The work of Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke, for example, has paved the way for ongoing initiatives such as the Gulf Labor Coalition, an alliance of international artists who are highly critical of the working conditions for labourers building the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and are putting pressure on Guggenheim New York. Oddly, the theatre world appears to have skipped this opportunity. Except for Tea Tupajic and Petra Zanki's *The Curators' Piece*, there are few examples of performing artists focusing on the conditions in which their work comes into being.

Curatorship makes it possible to place the power dynamics in which a programme comes into being within the context of the festival itself. The way in which the selection of works takes place, the way in which tickets are sold and paid for, the source of the food that is served, and the way in which the works are realised, can all be part of the curation process. An example of this phenomenon is provided by the Swiss theatre maker Christophe Meierhans, who has developed a project for various festivals through which all visitors will automatically donate one Euro for each ticket purchased; the festival will conclude with a discussion to decide what should be done with the donated money. It is also striking that many artists adopt the role of curator or involve curatorial practices in their work. The visual artist Thomas Hirschhorn, for example, organised the 60-day *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* in 2009, and Tino Seghal curated interventions by artists in Palais under the overarching title *Carte Blanche* to Tino Seghal.

Compromises

Although curatorship certainly constitutes an artistic practice, I tend to avoid placing



the curator and artist on fully equivalent terms. The artist determines his or her own starting point, while the curator selects on the basis of the work that presents itself or that is inspired by ongoing events.

The curator's craft lies in an ability to create the best conditions in which the voices of all the artists he or she has invited can be heard, while simultaneously shaping an overarching framework that both stands alone and enriches the individual works. Artworks are by their very nature uncompromising because – in most cases at least – there is less expectation that they should mediate divergent interests.

In short, using the word 'curator' – and, by extension, revealing curatorial choice-making processes – presents the possibility of making curation as a discipline more critical, self-aware and

transparent. Acknowledging the role of the curator in matters relating to the content and artistic influences defining a festival or events programme fosters discussion and appreciation of curatorial practice. Only in this way can the discipline be enriched and connected with the many challenges of our times. The value of an artwork often lies in reflection on its meaning, and precisely the same can be said of the creation of an artistic event programme. Curation is not solely about producing experiences; having the space to contextualise and interpret those experiences is of at least equal importance. Ideally, reflection should be continually embedded in the creation process itself.

The original Dutch version of this article was written in March 2017 for the Flemish-Belgian theatre journal *etcetera*.



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