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# Jean-Paul Martinon, "Curating as Ethics."

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**Jean-Paul Martinon.** *Curating as Ethics*. University of Minnesota Press 2020. 322 pp. \$108.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781517908645); \$27.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781517908652).

Jean-Paul Martinon considers his table of contents for *Curating as Ethics* on par with an exhibition map. Divided into three sections, ‘Gods and Mortals,’ ‘Earths and Skies,’ and ‘Deeds and Ends;’ each of these three contains ten chapters. At first glance, many of this book’s brief chapter titles such as ‘Dark Matter,’ ‘Law,’ ‘Beckoning,’ ‘Gnoses,’ ‘Irritating,’ and ‘Midwifing,’ bear little obvious relationship to curatorial practice, thus alerting readers to this author’s unique, even peculiar approach to curatorial practice, if not contemporary philosophy. Even so, I actually found myself agreeing with almost every point, however literary the delivery.

Loosely modeled on Martin Heidegger’s ‘world-as-fourfold’ (mortals dwelling amongst mortals on earth and before divinities under the sky), *Curating as Ethics* captures a rather complicated, though coherent ontology (some might even call it a cosmology). The event at the core of both artworks and curatorial practice is ‘reexpression,’ described by Martinon as ‘an unfolding of matter mattering away from dark matter, an unfolding without an original fold’ (13). Although reexpression suggests some governing law, he deems such notions a misunderstanding that is routinely attributed despite the differences between things (19). Martinon characterizes the exhibition as an ‘always visible expression of a set of destinal trajectories, surges of self-secluding earths—including artworks, curators, artists, museums, or income, for example—in and against the skies’ (78). Temporarily exposed to half-light, matter lures aspirational mortals into the skies (80), while earths pull back in order to shield objects (self-seclusion) from the killing light (71). The author employs the term ‘skies’ to convey ‘whatever allows itself to be scrutinized in and by light,’ (74) since skies are intrinsically related to mortals who need light to see themselves and their world (75). Moreover, ‘[e]verything that is therefore perceivable, everything that offers itself to the ever-dissatisfied light of skies, stands as a testament to earth’s self-seclusion’ (72). Finally, ‘[w]ithout the self-seclusions of earths, nothing that matters would rise up as an event worth scrutinizing with ever more light’ (69).

Since curatorial practices stimulate and avail various strifes, most notably ‘the violence of matter tearing itself away from dark matter’ (9), this book addresses the way mortal curators behave like beckoning gods, ensuring our continued awareness of strife on earth (39). According to Martinon, the gods ‘beckon from an immemorial Past—that is, from an un hoped-for Future’ (47). This beckoning exposes the ‘possibility of the impossibility’ (44). He credits curatorial projects with ‘reassur[ing] ourselves culturally that the strife maintains itself as strife’ (155). Strife is indeed the most succinct way to characterize art’s impact, as every reexpression, whether exhibitions or articles, unwittingly pierces the world with unforeseen ideas, views, approaches, and values. It’s thus hardly surprising that he concludes that the only thing curators do is irritate their enemies (168).

As a result of this strife, mortals are provoked to ‘think more than they can’ (227), triggering ‘unhealthy obsessions to the point of passion’ (41). Because mortals ‘gather together’ to deliberate, they involve themselves in logos (language), what Martinon latter specifies as ‘dialectics.’ Building upon Heidegger’s ‘jug-meditation,’ Martinon frames the way mortals hold the situation (hear, deliberate, and consider) as an ‘outpouring’ (24), engendering what Heidegger characterized as ‘the poured gift of the pouring out.’

For Martinon, understanding accompanies reexpression ‘even if there is no comprehension whatsoever’ (14). Problem is, the gods disrupt understanding (14). Moreover, understanding either comes too late or is never achievable. Furthermore, nothing is ever complete: sketches and poems require completion. ‘Their works are always in a half-light always in want of (more) light’ (80).

More importantly, the author views ‘the curatorial as a mode of confession’ (117). ‘In the context of the curatorial, a confession is simply the deliberate act of admitting having put forward knowledge (about artifacts, artworks, artists, images, art movements, and financial, environmental, or socio-political and cultural concerns, among others), and in the same gesture of having also put forward a lack of knowledge (what has been omitted, ignored, evaded, etc.)’ (117). For Martinon, gnosis embraces sense perception, memory, experience, and scientific knowledge, including *agnostos* (the unknowable) (122). Tomorrow’s curators will no doubt have access to more scholarship, but they simultaneously risk forgetting or misunderstanding what yesteryear’s scholars knew so well.

It would be a mistake to construe *Curating as Ethics* as a book regarding either the ethics of curating or curatorial ethics. This book will not boost one’s understanding of the various ethical problems that curators routinely face. Despite its very different claim, this book is perhaps more useful, and certainly more profound than a handbook for curators faced with ethical dilemmas. ‘Always flanked by discourse, visual ethics effectively edges with speech, exploiting the driftwork, this wanton abandonment between discourse and the sensory’ (116-117). For Martinon, ‘[e]thics indeed starts with and plays itself out through voice and ear, listening and voicing. For all intents and purposes, ethics is therefore in most cases dialogical ethics’ (111). It thus seems that most *decision makers* in the cultural sector are engaged in ‘curating as ethics,’ which Martinon considers an intuitive practice rife with life and death consequences. No doubt, every society’s future, in particular its values, is indelibly intertwined with its citizens’ awareness of local cultural treasures. Moreover, the saving of treasures maintains, ‘the strife between earth and skies while holding up to the divinities what is un hoped for, what can know no economic return’ (149). *Curating as Ethics*’ is thus an imperative for those charged with shedding light on dark matter.

Martinon develops his ethical framework in the chapter titled ‘Angels,’ where he analyzes Caravaggio’s depiction of the Biblical moment when Abraham says ‘Here I am.’ He considers Abraham’s response to his acknowledgement of his relationship to the Other (Isaac (the future)), ‘which is nothing other than a questioning of his self as an ethical subject’ (90) and is prior to both his faith in God and ethical generalities (89-90). He concludes this chapter, ‘[r]ecognizing that there are Isaacs and Angels, and recognizing that the curatorial can raise itself above the fray of practices by engaging others to think more than they can, can only allow curators to better work the moral and ethical predicaments they face every day’ (95). The ethical thus envelops curatorial practice in the lives of mortals still to come.

Given that people who upload images to Pinterest or Instagram, select a dinner’s menu or courses, or organize film festival often self-identify as curators, this book explores the societal ramifications, historical import, and serious nature of curatorial decisions. Martinon’s best ‘advice’ is to curate ‘as if lives are at stake’ (207). In fact, ‘my death’ (47) (as in the curator’s death) and ‘timelessness’ (having neither beginning nor end) (61) resonate throughout the book as the curator’s primary ethical constraints. Martinon’s notion of time ‘strangely knows no temporality properly speaking and yet can still somehow be identified as such’ (47).

Just as Socrates found parallels between his work with men’s souls and midwives’ work with women’s bodies, Martinon compares curatorial practice to midwifery. He finds three aspects of midwifery relevant for curatorial work: 1) dialectics 2) intuition and 3) work that is ‘free of all disciplinary apparatuses’ (205). For him, dialectics is ‘a way of thinking that surprisingly values conjecture, intermediary positions, and discernment without aiming at bringing anything to a close’ (205). ‘[I]ntuition is a way of acting or thinking that supposedly evades the artifices of reason and keeps people –and curators specifically –in touch with their natural selves’ (209). ‘To intuit, means to

rationality is never enough' (216). No doubt, curatorial work is rarely precedential and typically ephemeral.

Martinon construes curating rather broadly to include the activities of both exhibition makers and Internet content organizers. The three types of content organizers he identifies (performed as a job, created for pleasure, or done algorithmically) extends to exhibition makers as well. To my lights, almost everything he writes applies to all professions engaged with performing artworks (also re-expressions), whether conductors, directors, showrunners, or editors. His characterization of 'visual ethics' could easily capture 'sensorial ethics.' He advises, '[c]urating can be more than just encouraging or exacerbating relationality, and it can be more than just giving audiences yet another info-taining experience' (239). Moreover, 'I curate' not to show, relate, or convince (aesthetically, socially, politically, culturally, etc.), but to divinize together with the fourfold, thus fostering a time without time, a new life over and beyond today's pressing needs' (239). One of this book's greatest insights is its characterization of curatorial projects begetting curatorial projects, resulting in an endless chain of reexpressions, each one prompting mortals to think like never before.

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