

What is Critical Curating?

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The term “critical curating” came into use with the emergence of the independent exhibition-maker in the late 1960s. Since then, what constitutes curating both as a critical practice and a discourse has been in constant flux. Discussions have focused as much on critical curating within contemporary exhibition formats and institutions as they have on creating resistance outside traditional sites of cultural production. This has been accompanied by a shift in the role of the curator from a caretaker of privately owned collections to an individual author of public exhibitions, and, more recently, a mediator of more wide-ranging, interdisciplinary, and regionally diverse forms of artistic expression. The latter have been presented in alternative or artist-run spaces, as well as networks outside institutions. Suffice it to say that the role of curators and the objects to which they attend have changed radically since the 1960s. These developments reached their zenith in the 1990s—the “era of the curator,”¹ as art critic Michael Brenson characterized it in 1998—with the increase of international biennials and triennials organized by influential, celebrity curators.

By the 2000s, the concomitant consolidation of curatorial discourse surrounding the global phenomena of biennialism and of expanded forms of curating fostered the emergence of a new field of study: the history of curatorial practice. Art historian Paul O’Neil dubbed this development the “curatorial turn,” a reference to the transition from practice to theory, and from a notion of the exhibition as discourse on the work of art to a reflexive approach to curating in which the space of the exhibition takes precedence as the object of knowledge.² Despite the vitality and relevance

of this discursive turn, two problems persist. First, discussions have remained centred on exemplary exhibitions and high-profile curators. The result has been to reiterate more often than not art history’s Eurocentric canonicity rather than focusing on ideas or concepts. Second, the curatoriate—the small group of elite curators often in charge of biennials—could hardly refuse the rapid ascendancy of the global biennial art system or the dictates of the market and of the cultural industry in general. Along with the rapid proliferation of large-scale, curator-led international art exhibitions worldwide came the art dealers, art fairs, and auction houses.

Yet, if curating constitutes itself as a discourse, it is because it implies a consciousness of its own conditions of possibility and of the artistic, theoretical, social, and institutional issues at play. What are these issues? And what are the debates taking place today in curatorial discourse? Canadian and Indigenous scholars have been crucial in shaping the emergent field of curatorial studies, leading discussions that work towards the project of decolonizing world-making practices and challenge the disciplines of art history and museum studies—long bastions of the dominant colonial knowledge.

This special issue of *RACAR* explores discourses and practices of curating, particularly critical curating, to probe the ethical, social, and political issues currently driving, or continuing to impinge on, current scholarship and exhibition-making. In response to the celebrity curator-as-auteur³ or curator-as-*artiste* so often lauded uncritically, we appeal to the curator-as-producer⁴—that is, the curator as a cultural agent of social change. The