

Edited by Paula Marincola

CURATING NOW: IMAGINATIV

The
Pew Center
for Arts
& Heritage

QUESTIONS OF PRACTICE

*Curating Now: Imaginative
Practice/Public Responsibility*
**Front Matter, Preface &
Introduction by Paula Marincola**

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CURATING NOW: IMAGINATIVE PRACTICE/PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

Proceedings from a
symposium addressing the
state of current
curatorial practice
organized by
the **Philadelphia**
Exhibitions Initiative

CURATING NOW: IMAGINATIVE PRACTICE/PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

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2000

Paula Marincola

Robert Storr

Symposium Co-organizers

Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative

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CONTENTS

v Preface

Marian Godfrey

vii Introduction and Acknowledgments

Paula Marincola

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2000 AM

3 How We Do What We Do. And How We Don't

Robert Storr

23 Panel Statements and Discussion

Paul Schimmel, Mari-Carmen Ramirez, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Thelma Golden

47 Audience Question and Answer

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2000 PM

67 Inventing New Models for the Museum and Its Audiences

Kathy Halbreich

81 Panel Statements and Discussion

Ned Rifkin, Nicholas Serota, Anne d'Harnoncourt,

103 Audience Question and Answer

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2000 AM

125 Response

Dave Hickey

139 Audience Question and Answer

151 Biographies of the Panelists

155 Symposium Attendees

159 Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative Grantees, 1998–2001

PREFACE

“Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility,” the symposium sponsored by the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative that is documented in this report, forayed into some infrequently occupied territory in the Philadelphia region’s visual arts community. It brought together a large segment of that community, along with gifted national and international arts leaders, to think and talk collectively about matters of deep and, sometimes, problematic importance to their field. Perhaps such encounters ought to be business as usual, but in fact, they are far from standard practice here. Yet, critical and open dialogue is essential to the health of this or any arts discipline.

The Pew Charitable Trusts created the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative in close collaboration with its director, Paula Marincola, based upon an extensive investigation of the needs and priorities of the region’s visual arts organizations. PEI is one of seven regional artistic initiatives established by the Trusts. The others are Dance Advance; the Heritage Investment Program, focusing on historic sites; the Pew Fellowships in the Arts, which provides substantial unrestricted stipends to artists across a broad array of disciplines; the Philadelphia History Exhibitions Initiative; the Philadelphia Music Project; and the Philadelphia Theatre Initiative. All were developed both to respond to the strengths of these specific components of the local cultural landscape and to assist them in addressing the challenges and difficulties they face. Over time, the design of each of these initiatives has been developed and refined to include, in addition to grants for exhibitions, performing arts productions, and other forms of public programming, multiple and flexible means of supporting the professional and artistic development of the individual practitioners involved. Additionally, with increasing frequency, these initiatives have generated collective conversations and experiences (including “field trips” to cities from New York to Toronto to London), with the purposes of supporting peer learning and building intra- and interdisciplinary collaboration. As a consequence, the extraordinary community of artists and arts practitioners who infuse the life of this city and region with such creativity is becoming more self-aware and more knowledgeable about the aesthetic and critical context of its own contributions.

“Curating Now” has upped the ante considerably in this process, and, as such, has set a standard of critical dialogue that will challenge the other disciplines to create similar opportunities for artistic discourse that reaches both into the Philadelphia region and beyond it. We are all deeply indebted to Paula

Marincola for her leadership in convening this symposium as well as her contributions to the arts community.

Robert Storr, in his keynote address for this symposium, included a number of memorable quotes among his remarks. One that struck me strongly was his reference to a statement by Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, that he was “a pessimist of the intellect and an optimist of the will.” As you will see when you read his wonderful speech, Storr parsed this comment as a reaffirmation of all those who, like artists and like curators, may wonder why they keep getting up in the morning to do their job, but somehow keep doing so as an act of faith. Two days later, at a conference in Minneapolis, Garrison Keillor, in *his* keynote address, said, in talking about writing and writers, “If you’re an ‘author,’ you look at books as trophies; if you’re a writer, you get up in the morning and write.”

Those of us who are not artists or arts practitioners, but who work to facilitate the creation and presentation of the arts, stand eternally in awe of the courage it takes for artists simply to get up each morning and make work, when the prospect of that work’s making its way into the world, and being met with engagement and with pleasure, can, sometimes, be remote. I hope that the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative and the other Philadelphia cultural initiatives created by The Pew Charitable Trusts make it easier for artists and curators of all stripes to engage in this daily act of faith. I know that Philadelphia’s community of artists has gained a strengthened sense of shared purpose, and that our region’s audiences have benefited mightily from the remarkable exhibitions and programs that this and our other initiatives have been privileged to support.

MARIAN A. GODFREY

Director

Culture Program

The Pew Charitable Trusts

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative (PEI) is a granting program initiated and funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts—a major philanthropy based in Philadelphia—and administered by The University of the Arts, a multidisciplinary educational institution unique in this country. PEI was founded, in 1997, to support visual arts exhibitions and publications; as one of several different disciplinary artistic development initiatives of the Trusts, it is designed to foster excellence and enhance the cultural life of our region. Similar programs to PEI exist in dance, music, and theater, for instance, and The Pew Charitable Trusts support a fellowships program for individual artists as well. In PEI's first four years, we have invested more than \$3.1 million in twenty-four exhibitions for projects of international scope (see page 159 for a list of PEI grantee exhibitions from 1998 to 2001).

One of The Pew Charitable Trusts' challenges to those of us who direct their artistic development initiatives is to attempt to identify and analyze exemplary standards of practice in the fields we serve, and to do this within the context of offering our community significant professional development opportunities that ultimately benefit our understanding and our work. In response to this challenge, "Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility" was conceptualized and produced as a weekend long event in October 2000. It convened a group of peers to assess the current state of curatorial practice, to articulate our professional values, and to test the assumptions implicit in them. The proceedings were divided thematically into separate but integrally related discussions of curating in both its private ("imaginative practice") and public ("public responsibility") aspects. Underlying both themes were questions regarding curatorial power and authorship as well as inquiries into how external pressures and challenges impact upon and shape exhibition-making in what critic Michael Brenson characterized recently as "the era of the curator."

The response in the field to "Curating Now" was immediate and tremendously gratifying. It was subscribed to capacity (and even necessitated a waiting list), and resulted in a gathering of colleagues from all across the country as well as abroad (see attendees list, page 155). This symposium made apparent an urgent need felt in the field for opportunities for curators to come together to discuss the philosophical and pragmatic aspects of practice; feedback from attendees after the weekend confirmed this assessment. PEI hopes to recognize this need by sponsoring other such conferences in a timely manner, and to work with

colleagues around the country, where appropriate, on similar events.

“Curating Now” was made possible through PEI’s professional development program and also with additional funds provided by the Pew Fellowships in the Arts’ Artists and Scholars Program. I am deeply grateful to my colleague Melissa Franklin, who directs the Fellowships, for her unfailing support throughout the realization of this symposium. At The Pew Charitable Trusts, the inspired leadership and constant encouragement of Marian Godfrey, director of the Culture Program, and Gregory T. Rowe, program officer in Culture, were, as always, enormously sustaining.

Many other talented and dedicated individuals were also instrumental in the success of this event. Alex Baker, the symposium and publication coordinator, was involved in every aspect of producing both the conference and the record of the proceedings. I am extremely grateful for his dedication, excellent ideas, and meticulous work. Gordon Wong, PEI program assistant, worked with his usual capable good humor on most of the key organizational components of the program, as well as serving as a tactful and sympathetic gatekeeper to the attendees. Both Alex and Gordon’s joint efforts ensured the smooth operation of a complicated and interlocking series of events over the course of the weekend. In addition, my thanks go to Michael O’Reilly, our videographer, Doug Smullens, our audio engineer, and Amie Scally, Laurie Switzer, and Yane Calovski, all of whom contributed to the symposium’s successful realization. Gerald Zeigerman served as this publication’s expert editor, Nick Muellner ably shepherded the manuscript through to publication, and Gallini Hemmann, Inc., is responsible for the vibrant graphic design of all the printed materials associated with the symposium.

Robert Storr, senior curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art, New York, was the co-organizer of “Curating Now” and instrumental in the articulation of the event’s focus and the selection of its participants. In addition, he presented a cogent keynote address and moderated both of Saturday’s panels. This yeoman service was delivered with his singular mix of intellectual discernment and agility. It was my great pleasure to work closely with him on this symposium.

My profound gratitude is also extended to the other distinguished participants in both days’ events. Kathy Halbreich, director of the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, offered strong and visionary leadership in her stimulating afternoon address. The panelists—Anne d’Harnoncourt, the George D. Widener Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Thelma Golden, Deputy Director for Exhibitions, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Curator, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Mari-Carmen Ramirez, Curator of Latin American Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (formerly Curator of Latin American Art, Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, University of

Texas, Austin); Ned Rifkin, Director, The Menil Collection and Foundation, Houston; Paul Schimmel, Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Nicholas Serota, Director, Tate, London—responded in kind with candor and consideration. They generated a dialogue among themselves and with an audience of peers that was searching, passionate, and substantive. On Sunday, critic and curator Dave Hickey brilliantly responded to Saturday’s proceedings, calling into question, in a most salutary and often humorous manner, many of curating’s currently espoused orthodoxies. I deeply appreciate the generosity of this extraordinary group to the field and to PEI’s constituencies in particular. It was indeed my privilege to convene and work with them, and to offer this record as evidence of their insight and commitment.

PAULA MARINCOLA

Director

Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative