

Curating Roles: Some thoughts on the labor value of research in the post-late-Capitalist cultural marketplace, or *A Fire in My Belly*

"I prefer a "collaborative" approach, on conditions of availability of powerful ideas, I hope... First of all, I need to have a general conception. Then a discussion starts out. I am more concerned not with creation of works, but with, I would say, a program, I would compare it with a computer program, with the same degree of flexibility.

.....

When I am interpreting, I just want to show something to somebody. The art critic's task is to show you, what you did not see earlier or show it in a different way, at another angle."

Nicolas Bourriaud in conversation with Miroslav Kulchitsky¹

1.0 Introduction

In addition to—or as an aberration of—the assignment, I have expanded, and contracted, my bibliography and notes toward drawing up an exhibit or curated show. As I began the research under the initial auspices of using the Fales archive, or others similar, to investigate possible leads towards formulating a show having to do with one aspect of the Downtown exhibition I came almost instantly into a series of questions that were not so much about subject matter, but about how one actually does research in an archival sense, trying to make something new, in the present, of the old. Specifically I am interested in the sequence of research and the various degrees of development and revising ideas undergo when one is involved in the research process. I call this labor value because this process is linked to both intellectual and economic realms, and the prestige or power linked to interpretation and presentation of archival material. What assumptions we bring into research effect how we investigate, as do the experiences we have with other researchers, archivists, and curators during this process. The investigation can yield unexpected results which may veer from our original plans based on our assumptions. How are these recouped, how do we deal with creating a new idea or angle of investigation when we hit a brick wall with the research. How do we allow the actual evidence to tell its own stories, and how active a role does the researcher, curator, archivist, or artist play in this interchange with this material.

For me, there were several questions that come out of our basic premise of research as it has been laid out for this class and this assignment. As I have understood them, these questions call attention to the facts that representation of an event (past or present) is difficult, and that several interpretations exist. What is the best way to allow for these multiple interpretations, will simply a plain, display, or laying out of all the contradictions suffice? Since the class is focused on curatorship in a museum or archive, or educational setting, we are conscious

¹ <http://www.boiler.odessa.net/english/raz1/n1r1s02.htm>

of other levels complicating this even further, namely the missions and audiences of the institutions, as well as incentives for fundraising and publicity which not only feed the need for shows, but effect what kinds of shows are produced. All participants, curators, artists, scholars, and archivists need to be aware that the arrangement and presentation of ideas exist in a dual system of intellectual information, and modes of fashion.

The art (if it may be called one) of curatorship is balanced between knowing the subject via research, and presenting an argument that creates a dialogue in the present with different forces from both the present and the past, including those that may not come strictly out of, or be related to the immediate subject matter. The curator plays a similar role to the scholar, the historian, the archeologist, and the archivist in that the curator sifts through pieces of cultural production to make sense of an event or phenomenon. The curator then selects and arranges these pieces to form some semblance of a narrative (even the willed intentional lack of a narrative could be considered a narrative) and presents these to an audience. This selection and presentation process can also be expanded to go beyond making sense or interpreting an event or phenomenon, to making the event or phenomenon itself. In this respect the curator is almost playing the role of the artist in the circuit of cultural production.

I am interested in how these roles of scholar, archivist, curator and artist have been traditionally defined, and how they are changing today specifically in contemporary cultural and memory institutions which deal with artwork and film. It is my argument that, in some of these institutions, these roles are shifting and collapsing into one another voluntarily or not, due to several trends at work both inside and outside the institutions. We are in a time of questioning, when the roles of the scholar, the archivist, the curator and the artist are all in flux. This is due not only to a re-evaluation of their roles in relation to their material they create or represent, but also because of a general re-evaluation of the archival research material itself.

I will define the positions of these four cultural producers or managers as I see them making and/or interpreting cultural and ideological meaning as it takes place in a circuit of commodification. I will briefly outline a trend that has been occurring in the art market since the 1990s but which has various earlier roots. This trend, of relational aesthetics as coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, has helped to effect the roles of artist and curator, but can also be linked to the role of the archivist, as an archive is based on a relational order. Access to the archive for anyone, artist, curator or even another archivist, is based on the meaning that one archive has established within it, in order to best represent its material.

I believe that these roles and trends are also further intensified and complicated by the desire of each of these players to activate and to insert themselves as controlling agents into ideological superstructures where cultural, social, and political meaning are at stake. Perhaps, for the most part, these factions can and

do cooperate in the production and representation of meaning to everyone's benefit. But I argue that the power struggle in this dynamic or triangle is very real when egos, public profiles, reputations and money are involved.

After this has been laid out I will discuss the work I did in investigating the incomplete film of David Wonjorowicz, *A Fire In My Belly*, which Fales Libraries Special Collections holds as part of his papers. I will discuss how the initial research was effected by what I wanted as a student: how I was effected by my own archival, curatorial, and artistic impulses, and how these had to come into some kind of justification or direction with Wonjorowicz's material. I believe that it is the material (what's there, what isn't there), which ultimately controls the interpretations we can make and the stories we can tell about work that is left to us in these collections. It may seem elementary, but archives are rarely complete and air tight in their logic and in their pre-accession design. Even in their post-accession treatment and arrangement they are often, even with the best of work on the part of the archivist, causally and sequentially incomplete. However it is ultimately the archive's power and advantage that they are not, as the archives not only contribute to multiple interpretations and viewpoints (within reason), but they too resist absolute and totalitarian, single theory interpretations.

To my knowledge (and the extent of my research/labor value thus far) I have not found any films which explicitly or implicitly refer to the act of research and/or the comparative importance and prestige of interpretation. This is not to say that these films do not exist but I tried to keep close to the Downtown Show's era and primary political/aesthetic concerns. Therefore in lieu of these possibly existing films, I will use the work of Wojnarowicz and several works y other filmmakers he was creatively involved with to suggest a parallel investigation which takes the artist as shape shifter when it comes to chaning roles as percieved by himself and others. Granted, by taking this route I all but jettison the economic stakes in my earlier overall arguement. Although, Wojanrowicz was an artist of a variety of stripes, one of them being political. With further research, quotes and evidence could be found where Wojnarowicz talks about the economics of making or producing art work in light of the AIDS epidemic, in comparison to the making or producing a cure for the virus.

Lastly and connected to the Wonjorowicz material I will look at the prism of the artist and suggest a possible arrangement or showing of relations between the mutlipe roles that the artist invents for herself and which are used or abused by either scholars or curators or even other artists. In this vein, I would put together a comparison of film work to illustrate just how varied Wojnrarowicz was as an artists and how he has been a site for re-interpretation by other filmmakers as well.

Titles to be possibly shown would include:

Richard Kern's *Stray Dogs* (in which DW plays a rebuffed lover and struggling artist)

Kern's *You Killed Me First* (in which DW plays a very proper republican-esque Father)

Matt Wolf's *Smalltown Boys* (in which DW is conjured up by re-enactments of his some of his public performances)

Postcards from America, Steve McLean, 1994

2.0 Bibliography (tentative and still growing)

Archival theory and roles:

"Chatting Up the Archivist: Social Capital and the Archival Researcher". Catherine A. Johnson and Wendy M. Duff. *The American Archivist*, 68:1 Spring/Summer 2005. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists) pp 113-129.

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Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Fredric Jameson. (London: Verso, 1991)

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“Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, Claire Bishop, *October*, vol. 100. Fall 2004. (Cambridge: MIT Press). pp 51-79

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interviews, edited by Thomas Boutoux. (Milan: Charta) 2003.

“The Archive without Museums”, Hal Foster. *October*, vol 77, Summer 1996. (Cambridge: MIT Press). pp. 97-119

“The Archival Impulse”, Hal Foster. *October*, vol 110 , Fall 2004. (Cambridge: MIT Press). pp. 3-22.

David Wojnarowicz:

“On Fandom and Smalltown Boys: A Dialogue”. Matt Wolf, Marvin J. Taylor. *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2004. (Durham: Duke University Press)

Interviews with DW:

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“Death Mask”, in *Hatred of Capitalism*. ed. Chris Kraus and Sylvere Lotringer. (Semiotexte: Cambridge, 2001). pp 409-421

“The Compression of Time”, in *Tongues of Flame* (D.A.P: New York, 1992). pp 49-63.

David Wojnarowicz : A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side. ed. Sylvere Lotringer, Giancarlo Ambrosino. (Semiotexte: Cambridge, 2006) *Forthcoming*

Biographic Material:

In The Shadow of the American Dream, The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz. ed. Amy Scholder (Grove Press: New York, 1999)

“Biographical Dateline”, in *Tongues of Flame* (D.A.P: New York, 1992). pp 113-118.

Films:

A Fire In My Belly, David Wojnarowicz, 1986

SmallTown Boys, Matt Wolf, 2003

Postcards from America, Steve McLean, 1994

You Killed Me First, Richard Kern, 1984

Stray Dogs, Richard Kern, 1984

**3.0 Some more documentary evidence of intellectual intent and labor:
A letter to Chris Straayer from Brad Campbell included
as primary resource**

March 3, 2006 (*never sent*)

Hi Chris,

I hope I didn't come across as too surly this Thursday in class about the DT project. I don't know if I was clear enough for you, Nelly or the class but I wanted to re-iterate for you as quickly as possible my thoughts.

I appreciate your general belief and pedagogy that the methodologies for the DT project can be set, explored and executed in a variety of ways, possibly differing as evidence changes in research.

I know you want us to follow these varying lines of research and also try to keep the framing as tight as possible. Even as this process is sometimes contradictory, and difficult, I trust it, and find it a refreshing suggestion of approach to equally dense material.

There are a couple of "issues" that I am experiencing and I just wanted to check in. Maybe it's normal to have these different "problems" arise given the intent of the class as you've structured with a mix of soft and hard limits or requirements. I do appreciate you and Nelly allowing us to develop a well thought out proposal and present that as such without having to worry, due to time, with carrying it out fully. But I also thought that some of what is coming up for me might be relevant for presentation.

(A) One has to do with the nature and production of the art work in general, and specifically I'm interested in how the individual operates within a group (artistically and practically, a group that they've chosen to be in, or one in which they were historically or curatorially placed) and how that feeds into or informs the sustainability of the art in the long run. I don't think it is an either/or situation but plumbing and teasing apart the possible relations seems part of what we're doing here. Curatorially, what do we include as pertinent artistic and historic evidence, and what don't we, and why?

(B) Secondly, as a result of going in to do the research, not only for this class but over the course of my studies and work, I am reminded of two things that come up related to "doing the research". (B1) One is that research with the primary resources is slippery and even disorienting. (I think too often we gloss over the particulars and contradictions of research, how it becomes something other than just looking for facts, you are interacting with the residue of a life, and depending on the volume of material that process can in a way be disorienting.) And (B2) two, I sense that there is an unspoken and deep running differentiation--or at least contention about differentiation--between the positions of archivist, curator, scholar, and for that matter artist. Nowadays as boundaries and roles slide in and out and shift, I think it is important that this contention between roles be addressed or investigated.

(A) I originally wanted to look into the Wojnarowicz films at Fales because he created work differently (and different work) than the Cinema of Transgression (CoT) people did, even as he was "in relation" to them. This I wanted to investigate further and saw as a way in. How could DW hang out with, and collaborate with a creative group, and yet produce aesthetically different work, and across media as well? Is this not already an example of these crossing networks or registers or discourses that we are trying to map? Granted it is very "local", very particular to that group, but I feel this ex/interchange between individuals in these groups (and DW and the CoT group in particular) goes to the heart of the larger global issue you're asking us to pursue.

I'm interested in what drives the creation in all of these artists. Their will to create and how that informs their aesthetic and then their modes of production. I think that is something we try to understand as archivists, scholars, curators, now 20 years later. What were the then current (internal and external) forces that led them to make what they did, how they did? As I see it, first there is the creativity, the making of the work, and then there is, later, the gathering, researching, understanding (or not) and then the re-telling(s) or (re)placings of the work. Some times the work is more or less transparent

about its circumstances of making, sometimes one must rely on entirely secondary resources.

This second phase, how a show is arranged to represent, or chart these initial or original activities and their interactions, is as I understand it, one of the main issues of the course. How this present day arrangement (of historic and sometimes still living material) is frustrated or enhanced by current day circumstances, here is where historiography comes into play.

Methodologically, I wanted to test the "history" as I read it in Sargeant's Deathtripping book and in other pieces, and test the notion of DW as a Transgressive cineaste.

Personally I think that DW's work is transgressive as a whole, but that his film work is not exactly as is defined by the Zedd, Kern, et al contingent. I think there is an argument that DW worked differently on film than the others did, and that a film was for him one way of expressing ideas which he would process, work on, execute, discard some, come back to some, throughout a variety of media, in a very organic way. (His subjective aesthetic was different if not more nuanced I felt than some of the CoT group, is that just because of who he was, or is that the result of consciously choosing to represent in one mode over another? Did he at all want to maintain a distance from them, how related in reality to them was he, or was his inclusion under the CoT rubric an act of historiography?)

Keeping aside for a minute DW's motivations and the actual results, this organic, permeable, perhaps incestuous working method was one that a good amount of "Downtown" artists practiced. Of course there are others for whom this is not true, but if we take this assumption are there not some basic results which then inform any further research we undertake? This organic working method is porous, ideas come in and out. The story of just one work by one individual can already be contentious and multivalent, intercepted by other works of that individual or by the influence of other artists, or other artist's works. Multiply that by all the overlapping downtown tribes and interminglers and we get a very complicated problem of unraveling.

Can we suppose that DW's relation to the other CoT people was more or less informal, they were not a collective per se, such were CoLab, Fashion Moda, or later General Idea? If so, can we then go on to suppose that looser relation that DW had with CoT can be said to be the norm for Downtown artistic relations, and does this give us ground on which to generalize, or were the relations much more relative, were there any guiding factors for relating, or can we only say it was just who was sleeping with whom, and what kind of work was derived? From what I understand there were/are a lot of overt and covert allegiances for a variety of reasons. It seems impossible to make any one statement, and even second level categorization is difficult.

That's the first "issue", my example of my original research question or facet of the overall issue we're wrestling with, hopefully linking validly to one of the "requirements" for the final project.

(B) So I thought, methodologically again, to test what we had been reading, and what we had been presented through the show as a version of the overall story, that I could go to the archive and see what I could find. (Again looking to see how DW operated in relation, and how closely, to the CoT group in light of this organic, porous working method.) (B1) In this way, I thought, I could also test the archive as a source of evidence. Would it help to corroborate one story over another, or would it further throw one out into perhaps even another story?

As I was reviewing DW's material (correspondence, journals, and related manuscripts) several other questions hit me.

Is using primary research an end in itself, to find what you're looking for, or is using primary research to find what you're looking for just a node or juncture along a more general investigative line which could allow a reframing of how and why you're researching? This is very subtle, and it points to a soft categorical difference between the scholar, and curator. Does one research to see what comes up, or does one start with an agenda to buttress with archival evidence? What's great about the class is that you are asking us to ask about the nature of research as a process in light of the prevailing (or not) artistic and historiographic politics, trends, and versions of a story. When is there a story, in the beginning even if its not found at a later date by research, or does the story start only after some quantifying evidence is brought into play as proof?

(B2) It may seem obvious, but reviewing DW's material, I was reminded that this research process is labor, and that the division and crediting of labor, between archivist, curator, scholar, is one that I feel deserves further emphasis.

I have previous experience working in archives and trying to piece together the very basic historical order of events in a subject's life, given the clues and evidence you are left with. So I am sensitive to the fact that even though an archivist may have an intimacy with the subject on the evidential level, there can still be gaps and contradictions in understanding motivation and artistic intent.

Depending on the time one has to process, and the volume of the collection, one may or may not be able to tie up loose ends and dot all the I-s. Some institutions believe that it is not their purview to "interpret", and that is the job of an outside specialist, such as a curator or scholar. However, this depends on several factors, what is the mission and structure of the collecting institution, is there an exhibition arm, is it a primary function, like in a museum or theater, or perhaps some libraries, or is exhibition viewed as secondary, perhaps for raising awareness, or funds, like say for an historical society,

or a "accidental archive" that can now draw on some donation for publicity purposes? This is also effected by the content itself, what is being collected, what is its scarcity or uniqueness on the cultural marketplace, how is valued as cultural capital? The type of archive, its contexts, and what content it owns will also effect how the archivist is viewed, or how they view themselves. I know that Fales feels it can interpret its material, and it can also curate it. This is a consolidation of "power" that is not always the case with other collections. I digress on this because I do feel that we have tried to talk about the interplay of scholars, to curators and to archivists (and also to artists), and the "power relations" which can exist in who gets to tell what story in what context about what contentious cultural capital. But I'm not really satisfied in our answers thus far. Just as we agree on a performance factor as it's related to an artist's projection of identity, can we not also (in this post post modern landscape of mutable and shifting representations) agree that the curator, scholar and even archivist are also prone to this proclivity? To me this triangulation can be more or less contentious depending on the stakes of the final product (whether it's a show, a book, or a documentary, etc) and how much prestige, revenue or future opportunities are riding on it. And that's just how it is currently in the present, these power relations could also have been at play in whatever time we're looking back to, although I think the constellation of players was different then minus the archivist, and curator. Maybe then it was just scholar/critic vs. artist. But even the historic development and vying for new roles (curator, archivist) might be helpful in telling us something about our cultural and social environment.

I don't want to be divisive about the definitions and roles of these four players (because I feel they are complimentary in the best cases) but I feel that the issue of division and crediting of labor, or who gets to tell what story, underlies and imbricates all other assumptions and conclusions we try to derive about how curating fits into a larger industry of cultural production. It seems though that a lot of this is relative, to be assessed on a case by case basis, and it's hard to make categorical assumptions even though that's what we're charged with as scholars, curators or archivists. Maybe it's just a matter of vigilance (regardless of one's role) at each local point where all these forces come together to make some meaning or another (be it a show, a book, a documentary, etc.)....

I'm sorry that I've ranted on so. Quite possibly, I'm making mountains out of mole hills, but I wanted to check in, even if informally, and let you know what I've been experiencing. I will probably take the first "issue" as listed above, of DW, his creativity and the relation with the CoT group, try to refine that and map from there. If, in your view, this doesn't fit, is

too narrow, or should take a different tact, let me know and I'll try to adjust.

Best,

Brad