

The Subject of Curating – Notes on the Path towards a Cultural Clinic of the Present¹

by Felix Ensslin

Introduction

The first question regards the locution itself: who writes or “speaks” here. While I have curated art shows, both collaboratively and on my own, I am not speaking from the perspective of a practitioner; rather, I want to approach the question from a philosophical and psychoanalytic perspective or, more pointedly, from the perspective where this necessary but uneasy partnership is conjoined. The question I have posed for investigation is the question concerning the subject of curating. Now, this is not a search for a full empirical description of what is entailed in curating, e.g. a knowledge of displays, a view of what art history has been, is or might be, knowledge of materials, cultures, and networks of people and institutions, the search for the new or a new perspective on the old, tools for mediation between a possibly enthusiastic but unschooled public and professional standards of judgement, mediation between what might be pressing issues of the day and the long view, institutional management and fundraising—to list only a few of the abilities and activities that might be entailed in actual curating. Curating is not a kind of Fregean name to which we then find a finite or possibly dynamically finite, i.e. changing with the times, list of propositions that define the content of that name. When I ask what the subject of curating is or could be, I ask in a certain philosophical tradition or, more accurately, in a tradition of questioning, redefining, shifting, and deconstructing this tradition. This also means that I still think posing such a question can lead to meaningful results. This would be contrary, for example, to the stated judgement (and claimed practice) of the curator of a recent show in Kassel called *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, Susanne Pfeffer, who wrote in her curatorial statement: “The element of individual creation takes a back seat and the transfer of images and objects into the world of art becomes irrelevant as such.” She claims that, “Over the last two decades, the relationships between image and text, language and body, body and space, subject and object have changed rapidly,” and that we organize art and thought no longer along the paradigm of identity and difference but as elements of an infinite network.² The cognitive side of this network, she goes on, can engage only in a kind of varying speculation, which, I suppose, is meant to say that it can no longer identify, conceptualize, ascribe, or produce something like a subject position.

The search in which I am engaging, as will hopefully become clear, while not being deaf to the reasons that make speculative realism such a hot property in the ideas market, particularly in the cultural field and the art world, assumes that something like a subject necessarily is involved when we speak not only about art in

general but also more specifically about curating. If only, in order to present a moment, such a subject immediately calls for or even produces its own “working through”, its own deconstruction and a shift in its very condition, it will in one way or another be involved with identifying, categorizing, naming, that is, in opening a field that stretches a subject from and to an object, that defines image through space and space through image and that needs to answer the question regarding the relation between image and language, even if any such answer is followed by something like its own dismantling or reconfiguration.

Again: Restarting with Post-structuralism

Sigrud Schade and Dorothee Richter have argued for transferring Wolfgang Kemp's conception that the “viewer is in the image” to the idea that the “viewer is in the exhibition.”³ However they also want to recognize what they call a “post-structuralist displacement” of this notion, namely by recognizing that the subject of the viewer is produced (or as they add: excluded) in part by the very interpellation of the experience of the exhibition itself. They call on Althusser and Lacan to justify this idea, implying a kind of *après coup* temporality or *Nachträglichkeit* which depends on an efficacy, a *Wirksamkeit*, of discourse rather than on a kind of expressive or self-creative ontology of “anonymous materials” to which both the discourse and the objects it circles around are only insignificant matters or secondary phenomena. My search for the subject of curating is more akin to this later search for the subject of the exhibition or the viewer than to a discourse that assumes that an ontology of networking and materialist realism, and be it the speculative kind, already has answered once and for all the question of the subject as irrelevant. However, the stakes between these two positions are not trivial and it is not simply a question of having the right theory or being on this or that theoretical bandwagon.

Material Networking and the Subject

Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, in their book *Rethinking Curating: Art after new Media*, have argued that approaches that are traditionally more in tune with the art world—and post-structuralism can be said to belong to this category—have failed to adequately include phenomena such as new media art.⁴ They claim that network-based work organized around behaviour they, along with Steve Dietz, call “interactivity, connectivity and computability”⁵ and descriptions such as “centralized”, “decentralized”, or “distributed”⁶ have had difficulty entering into the theoretical and practical considerations of institutions and curators. While they at the same time argue that distinctions along the lines of media are perhaps becoming obsolete, because “it would seem that no matter the form of the artwork, the medium never matters as much as the context,”⁷ and even state that “some theorists have declared that we are now post-media,”⁸ they seek refuge by shifting from substantives to verbs, by calling on a focus on what is done rather than what is made or represented. While this is, like the speculative realist position, also a call to consider networks of activity rather than a subject of discourse as the relevant reference for the question of curating, here the subject still does not disappear by a kind of theoretical fiat as happened in the self-explication of the exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*. While the latter, if philosophically stringent, would finally need to argue for some kind of self-selection process of anonymous materials—if that is not simply meant to be a metaphor—Cook and Graham argue that even within network-based new media art a kind of power rests with a gate-keeper function, and be it only as that of the administrator of a mailing list or audience-produced file sharing site.⁹ Thus, I want to look first at the issue of power and its relation to our search for the subject of curating with reference to Foucault.

Foucault

The fact that curating can be studied at universities shows that—if possibly only by institutional pragmatism—curating is inscribed into a field of science, albeit an interdisciplinary field. Thus, any search for the question of where the subject of curating could be situated might well be located either within the Discourse of the University and/or within a power/knowledge regime of what Foucault has termed the “will to know.”¹⁰ The will to know produces a kind of selection process among utterances, where those that are deemed “serious speech acts”, as Rabinow and Dreyfus have termed them, are spoken by and within a context of somebody who is qualified by other actions to speak this utterance.¹¹ The main gateway to this qualification is science, which by producing what is possible to be said, what is serious and what isn’t, what counts and what doesn’t, exercises a will to knowledge. This will to knowledge has two sides that correspond to the two sides of what it means to be a subject: “There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.”¹² With Foucault I would argue that where there is power there is a subject. In his postscript to Dreyfus’ and Rabinow’s book that introduced Foucault to a larger English-speaking audience in the 1980s, Foucault writes that he is interested in how “in our culture, human beings are made subjects.” He differentiates three ways in which this happens:

Objectification through scientific discourse—e.g. the speaking human being becomes objectified through linguistic discourse, the active or working human being through the discourse of economics, or the very living human being through the discourse of biology or natural history.

“Practices of separation or division” that function both internally and externally, such as those produced by medical or criminological or sociological discourse with divisions such as “healthy – crazy”, “good guys – tough guys”, “employed – non-employed”.

Self-subjectification through discourses such as sexuality where a subject is produced that at the same time it is forced to relate to itself as “having” a sexuality and as being the subject of a necessary and complex objectification.¹³

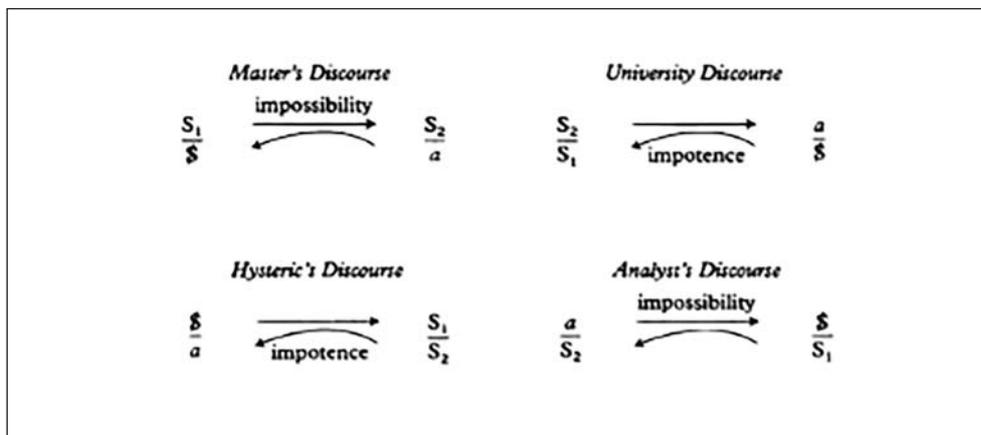
This is not the place to go into the many problems and debates that have sprung up around these positions of Foucault. The only reason I mention Foucault at all is the realization that the prominence of the “networking paradigm”—supposedly a signpost for the de-subjectification of productive processes in society in general and in the art field in particular—proves no such thing. Power emerges beyond either violence as a means of coercion or an already established consensus—institutional or otherwise. Power, as Foucault notes, presupposes a “free subject” on which it can work not in order to force directly—like violence—, or assume identification—like consensus—but to open a field of possibility, of producing options and choices which, of course, at the same time exclude others, prohibit, make ridiculous or impossible, or mark as non-serious any utterance or production outside that field opened by power. Clearly the subject of curating, whatever it is, can be found within this range of activities. Power, Foucault argues, engages by “a mode of action upon the actions of others,”¹⁴ not by coercion or force.

The subject of curating appears on both sides of what Foucault tells us a subject is. In order to speak from a position that would make an utterance or an action part of a curating process, subjections and dependencies have to be realized. These can be those involved in the institutional frame of exhibiting, publishing, selecting, or those involved in gaining credentials, organizing the scientificity or legitimacy of such utterances or actions. At the same time the subject of curating

him- or herself, however willing to renegotiate and put into question any such stance, will come to speak from a position of conscious self-identification—of identity. Even Susanne Pfeffer signed the curatorial statement on “anonymous matter” with her own name. Thus, before we move to the four discourses of Lacan we can hold fast that whatever the subject of curating might be, it is a subject of the will to knowledge that organizes the regime in which we live. One might even go so far as to say that the expansion of curating beyond the confines of the caretaking of museum collections is the pathway along which the will to knowledge has extended its network of subject-production within the process of a globalizing world. The very democratizing elements—the free spaces, the explosion of new media, the predominance of post-colonial discourses—are both testimony and effect of this will to knowledge.

Lacan’s Four Discourses

With this determination of the subject of curating as a subject of the will to knowledge, I want to turn to Lacan and his four discourses in order to explore how they might help in answering our question. I want to argue that we can attempt to see with the four discourses that the subject of curating is caught in two paradoxical or schizophrenic positions, namely between the Discourse of the Master and the Discourse of the Hysteric on the one hand, and between the Discourse of the University and the Discourse of the Analyst on the other. In my final section, I want to begin to discern if the idea of what I would like to call a cultural clinic of the present could be made to work as means to operationalize and think the second position, between the University Discourse and the Analytic Discourse, as a proper place for the subject of curating.



The Four Discourses of Lacan¹⁵

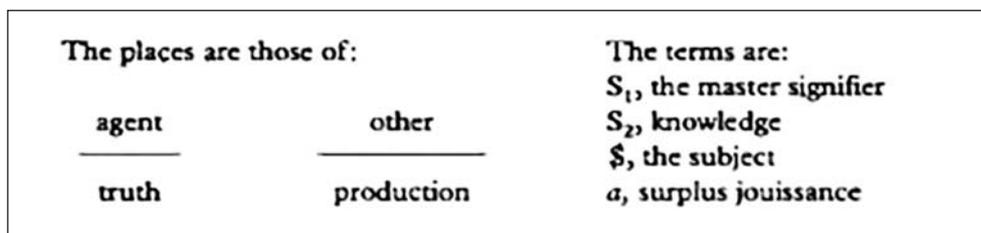


Fig. 2: Places and Terms in Lacan’s Discourses¹⁶

Lacan’s discourses are a complex instrument of analysis, and I will not be able to unfold it here in full. However, let me give a short introduction how he intro-

duces them in Seminar XVII "The Other Side of Psychoanalysis".¹⁷ He thinks of the discourses, which show the relationship between agent, object, truth, and what Lacan calls "surplus jouissance", as "lien social", i.e. as social bond determining inter- and intrasubjective relationships. While he disclaims any reading that would determine a historical series, it is equally clear that the Master Discourse represents the social bond of traditional Western, i.e. patriarchal, societies. It hides the fact that the bearer of power is itself a "castrated" subject (\$), i.e. one not fully present either to himself or in the signifier that represents him or her. Nevertheless, its command as one brings all others, the knowledge and skill, to work (S_2) thus producing surplus jouissance for the prestige of the master. The Hysteric's Discourse is in a sense the one most closely connected to the master both because it permanently questions the identity between the subject of the master and his or her representation, thus foreseeing the master to legitimate him- or herself through the production of reasons for his or her position and commands (i. e. knowledge) but also because the truth of the hysteric's desire, namely the jouissance derived from such delegitimizing questioning, would run empty if the master failed or vanished. The University Discourse serves the master as its truth while claiming to speak only from a position of knowledge. Everything without exception becomes the object of research and analysis and nothing that cannot claim the status of such knowledge is allowed to stand as valid. Through such a practice, the product of this discourse becomes castrated subjects who are unable to claim subjective truth for themselves outside of the products of the "will to knowledge." In the Analyst's Discourse, the agent is precisely the drive object that cannot be fully contained either by the master and his social representations or by knowledge in its legitimizing function. Its truth is that there is other knowledge, knowledge of the unconscious (savoir) opposed to and different from the knowledge of the will to power (connaissance). The split in knowledge itself sustains the split in the subject which thus can find its bearing only through a kind of proper name for its desire, a new S_1 in the place of the product.

If we return to the question of the discourse of the curator and my claim that this discourse can be shown to be caught in two conflictual positions "in between" two of Lacan's Discourses, the first such conflict is easy enough to see. Regarding the institutional framework of curating, the subject of curating is a subject of the Discourse of the Master. What is at work here is repression and power, whether in the agent position as S_1 or in the object position as S_2 . S_2 , the artists, the writers, even to an extent the audience, works for S_1 , the institution, and its representative, the curator. The product is a surplus value, symbolic or even real capital for the institution and the curator. A freelance curator might find herself in the position of S_2 herself, her knowledge used to produce prestige for the master—the institution to which she was given temporary access. However, the nature of the art field dictates that this is countered by the position of the curator as "hysteric", representing and enabling institutional critique, the inclusion of hitherto excluded media or artists or geographical regions in the process of questioning the master, the traditional collecting principles of a museum, etc. The product will be new knowledge S_2 , which while unable to exert change on the level of "truth", i.e. the motive for the process of such questioning between "hysteric and master", will then be included into the functioning of the institution, the sponsor, the art-historical set-up etc. The actual effect of this double existence of the subject of curating in the Discourse of the Master and the Discourse of the Hysteric is to legitimate the very institution and power-structure that supposedly is questioned by processes of institutional critique by the expansion of the canon or by the inclusion of different media or geographical areas. As Hans Belting has argued in a somewhat different context both the exhibition *Primitivism in the 20th Century* at MoMA in the middle of the 1980s or even the much more radical *Magicians of the Earth* at the Centre

Pompidou in 1989, recently restaged at the same place, are good examples of this.¹⁸ But of course this double inclusion goes much further into the nook and cranny of the everyday process of confrontation with the institutional framework of curating and is not preserved for the powerful institutions just mentioned. Structurally, this happens even when a curator is asked to work in an off-space temporarily funded by a state agency or a sponsor.

Between the University Discourse and the Analyst's Discourse

Much more interesting, and relating back to the point I was trying to make with Foucault, is the second paradox or juxtaposition between the University Discourse and the Analyst's Discourse. The legitimating function of knowledge, which holds the place of agent in the University Discourse, has not been weakened by the process of multiplication and diversification of curatorial practice that we have witnessed in the last decades (and that have had historical precursors in many ways, but that is another issue). What legitimates the subject of curating is knowledge, even if it might be knowledge of the new or new knowledge up to now excluded from the purview of what counts within the arts and the art world. In fact, this very process of expansion, of exercising curatorial practice to include what has been excluded—also a process set in motion by the hysterical position that produces new knowledge—strengthens both what is in the position of truth and what is in the position of product in the University Discourse. It does not change the role of the master whom the University Discourse serves, nor does it avoid producing “castrated subjects”, i.e. subjects that are forced to express themselves in the ways that this process has legitimated and brought about. Categorization, cataloguing, archiving—all of these are processes that bring objects, people, and practices under the purview of the University Discourse. Professionalism—here we find the link to the will to knowledge—can only be verified through the castration of expressing and through operating within the terminology and categories given the status of “serious speech acts”. To be clear, this is not to say that nothing happens in this process. Just like the Hysteric's Discourse allows for the expansion of existing logics to a wider category of phenomena, the University Discourse allows for the inclusion of ever more objects of consideration. But, and here we return to the question of the subject of curating, what the University Discourse must exclude is the idiosyncratic, the subjective proper, intuition, style, and the impossibility to say it or say what “it” is.

I want to now begin a detour towards the Discourse of the Analyst. These first thoughts on the subject of curating are part of a larger project on which I have been working off and on, in spurts, for a few years now, namely the idea of developing a concept of a cultural clinic of the present as a kind of antidote towards the logic of the University Discourse. My final aim in this article would be to develop an idea of how the subject of curating while not being able to avoid its inclusion (and therefore castration) by the University Discourse also has a place in the interstices between the Analyst's Discourse and the University Discourse. But in order to sketch this idea, I will first have to outline what I would like to call the cultural clinic of the present.

The Cultural Clinic of the Present

The reference here to the clinic is less to the institution that Michel Foucault described in its development in the nineteenth century—though no usage of the term can avoid this connotation—but rather serves to point towards something like a “praxis”, a practice. This use of the clinic refers back to the recliner into which an outpatient settled rather than to the hospital bed to which he was tied. It also

implies the *clinamen*, the little swerve of the smallest atomistic particles with which Epicurus and Lucretius saved nature and thus man from total determination by natural law. As a first approach, we can juxtapose the clinic as implying practice of something like “theory” or “contemplation”, drawing on the distinction between the theoretical life and the life of praxis that we can already find in Aristotle. Since for Aristotle these two are joined by a third kind of activity closer to practice or *praxis*, but not identical with it, namely to *poiesis* or making, my claim for the cultural clinic as *praxis* means for it to be distinguished from this side as well. Thus, clinic refers preliminarily to a practice that is neither purely theoretical nor engaged in *poiesis*.

When we think of the psychoanalytic field and the usage of the term clinic therein, another specification can be made: clinic is neither simply diagnosis nor simply cure, neither simply aetiology nor simply nosology or symptomology. Rather, in psychoanalysis all these epistemic spheres are connected within the clinic—separable for epistemic reasons only at the cost of a separation from the practice that the clinic itself is. It is for this reason that in the end, while engaging with the teaching and writing of others, each practicing psychoanalyst has to develop his own theoretical framework, his own theory as it were, intrinsic to his or her practice and beyond what he or she either learned from others or will transmit to others as knowledge. Maybe the practice of the subject of curating or the practice that makes curating a subject position is similarly a practice that only finds its place fully, when each practitioner develops his or her own theory intrinsic to his practice, a kind of interdependent double that is not separable on the empirical or ontic level.

With this observation we can begin to travel down the road of another association conjured up by this inseparability—which, I would like to point out, is not necessarily the same as “unity”. This association leads us to the field of aesthetics and the question of critique. Starting with the Romantics—for example Friedrich Schlegel’s “universal poetry”¹⁹—critique became an operation that could no longer be fit easily into a pre-given subject-object-relation. The critique of an artwork came to be understood not simply as the subjective apprehension—cognitive or affective—of a given work. Rather, critique became an element within what Walter Benjamin—referring to the early Romantics—called a “medium of reflection.”²⁰ Thus critique became a process by which the artwork itself was completed—never once and for all, but over and over again. Starting from this point of view but against its tendency to dissolve in the medium of an “eternal conversation”, from the real of both the artwork and the truth which critique could develop from within, Benjamin later developed a paradigmatic understanding of “critique” as a practice which laid bare the “truth content” of a work without dissolving it completely within the reflection that accomplished this task. Rather, the truth content is a kind of object-cause propelling forward the critique and transcending the historical confines of *poiesis*—the making of the art-work. *Poiesis* would be related to what Benjamin called the “Sachgehalt”, that is “material content” or “subject matter” of an artwork, while its “truth content” or, more literally, its “truth matter” was the object-cause of critique.²¹ Science would be what could objectify the first but maybe not the second. The second, the truth content, might appear only in the practice of critique—or curating—or not appear at all.

Thus, the cultural clinic of the present towards which this article wants to make a small contribution is both a tautology and a leap. It is a tautology to the degree that we consider art a cultural phenomenon and its presence—or presenting—through critique a practice. Thus, cultural clinic refers to practice twice if we

remember that “clinic” also refers to a domain of practice or *praxis*. But in the repetition, the two elements become conjoined by a leap over historical and disciplinary boundaries: namely precisely critique and clinic. Mediated through the *tertium comparationis* of the term *praxis* we have thus joined aesthetics and psychoanalysis. At the same time, however, the question of how to understand practice becomes even more urgent and pressing.

Realism, Constructivism and the Space of Truth

Alain Badiou has made the observation that today there are two options within philosophy and within the wider cultural field. One he calls “democratic materialism” and defines its axioms with the statement: “There are only bodies and languages.”²² Embodied within this axiom, one could argue, are two possibilities that in some ways define the trajectory of European philosophy. On the one hand there is the tradition of realism, embodied in the epistemological mantra that knowledge is achieved through the “*adequatio rei et intellectus*”, i.e. the adequate alignment of the thing known and its linguistic or symbolic representation in the mind. On the other hand there is the tradition of constructivism, which holds that the linguistic or symbolic element produces the object known and it is thus a process of construction—be it transcendental as with Kant, dialectically ideal as with Hegel, or confined to the systematic elaboration of a specific medium as in much of sociology, system-theory or theories of performativity. Realism understood in this way holds sway today over fields of inquiry such as evolutionary genetic biology or hard-core cognitivism of the Daniel Dennet kind. Constructivism can be found in neo-Kantian approaches to symbolic structures as much as in theories of performativity of the Judith Butler kind.

Against this, Badiou sets another path of philosophy, namely the path that is based on the axiom that “there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths.”²³ This approach, set against the “democratic materialism” which I have just described, he somewhat polemically names “materialist dialectic”.²⁴ Now, I want to set aside for the present purposes Badiou’s own mathematical ontology by which he means to oppose the supposed determinacy of the real, which is thought by the realism and constructivism of the democratic materialist approach, with the real indeterminacy that opens up the space for truth. Instead, I want to use Badiou’s differentiation in order to take a step back to Lacan. From Badiou’s perspective, and from the perspective of the speculative realists I spoke about in the beginning, this may be rather a step backwards—in the wrong direction, as it were. However, it is also Badiou who coined the saying that after Jacques Lacan no philosophy is possible that has not passed through the eye of a needle that is Lacan’s psychoanalysis. And my step back returns to this eye of a needle, in order to look for the conjunction of cultural critique and the clinic. For Lacan, the truth is a surplus of language that acts in the body. It is not grounded in a mathematical ontology but in the very process of adequation between *rei*, the things, and *intellectus* understood as knowledge or proper understanding. The process of producing categories is an indispensable element of any form of critique and practice. It is what marks the appearance of a subject—also in the practice of curating, I would argue.

Psychoanalysis Places this Object in the Body/Body-Event

I want to make this clearer by approaching a passage in Lacan’s *Seminar XI* that implicitly refers to the philosophical problem of the relation of bodies and language. The implicit background of Lacan’s elaboration about the problem of an “adequation between things and intellect” is this: from Parmenides through to Plato, philosophy sought to ground knowledge of things in knowledge of the origin,

the *arche*. Being is *one* and being is what is available through *logos* for thought. This was Parmenides' answer. Plato sought to place the *arche* in the Ideas. But Aristotle opened up another dimension for philosophy, by no longer wanting to clarify the origin but rather the conceptual framework by which things are apprehended or known. "Being is said in many ways" is his famous dictum and his endeavour was to clarify the ways in which that happened, how language is able to produce epistemically guaranteed statements about things that are, about being.²⁵ Famously, one cornerstone of those clarifications was what became known as the "categories".²⁶ On the basis of this categorical clarification both realist and constructivist or nominalist traditions were built, but this is not my point here. Rather, with the help of Lacan I want to return the categories to the place from which they sprang. "*Kate-gorein*" means to accuse or rather to indict or to charge someone. Aristotle takes this term from the courthouse, because for him it is clear that the courthouse (as an institution, if not in all its dealings) is a place of justice and truth. It is before this background that Lacan takes up the scholastic adage of truth or true knowledge being "*adequatio rei et intellectus*" by pointing out that *rei* is not just a case of *res*, things, but also of *reus*, which is the term for the accused before the law.²⁷ The conformity of knowledge (of the accused) with the charge that indicts him and the indictment that charges him: this is the dimension of truth that Lacan wants to point out in his transformation of the epistemological ground rule of *adequatio rei et intellectus*. We can lay aside all the connotations of *fatum*, or fate, that are conjured up by this return to the categories as the process of indictment and look at it in a more technical, i.e. clinical sense. To conform one's knowledge—*connaissance*, i.e. imaginary knowledge under the synthetic function of the ego—with the signifier under which the subject must assume its place is, of course, impossible. It is this very impossibility that produces a remainder, an object-cause in what Lacan calls the real. This object-cause is never neutral or simply put aside; rather, it is what insists and what cannot be integrated in the imaginary unity of *connaissance*. To be under indictment—under the categories of the symbolic—is what produces an impossibility, namely the impossibility of being unified within the proper representations effected by the imaginary, the Ego. What carries this impossibility is the object-cause, the remainder that insists.

Thus, if we return to the beginning of this section we can summarize this position as follows: there are languages and bodies, yet the bodies as represented entities in knowledge (*connaissance*) carry within them a lack, something that is not embodied in/by them, but rather covered up by the specular image of the body, the imaginary. There is thus also a third term beyond language and body, just as with Badiou there was the third, namely truth. But is the object-cause, the remainder, itself truth? This concept of truth does not simply mean knowledge, if knowledge is predicated on the complete adequation between things and language. But truth is also not simply this remainder that makes it impossible to produce closure between language and things so as to produce knowledge. Rather, this remainder is a kind of cause, an object-cause, which can be the cause of a praxis which is the elaboration of truth as a different kind of knowledge, *savoir*, symbolic knowledge or in psychoanalysis: unconscious knowledge. Praxis "is the broadest term to designate a concerted human action to treat the real by the symbolic"²⁸—this is the way Lacan in *Seminar XI* sums up what for him the originally Aristotelian term *praxis* means. Lacan speaks of the clinic, of course. It seems to me that what Lacan is referring to is the Freudian term of *Durcharbeiten*, working-through.²⁹

If the clinic is a practice in this sense, then we now can say: *the clinic is the symbolic working through, the elaboration of a truth*. If we also remember the short mention of Benjamin's elaboration of the romantic notion of critique, where it is no

longer simply embodied in the “reflexive medium”, but rather itself both lays bare and takes up an object-cause beyond the “subject matter”, the “material content” of an artwork, we can see how this practice of critique can well be described by the same structure. Since critique produces the “truth content” rather than simply adequately describing or representing it, this kind of critique can also be thought of as a *symbolic working through of something real*.

How to Think this Working-Through?

The answer to this question lies with the later Lacan and his rewriting of the modalities of thought and action: the contingent, the necessary, and the impossible. Democratic materialism deals with the imaginary duality of necessity and possibility: the laws of nature and the structure of the fantasies that govern our social space are experienced in the register of necessity. Lacan re-writes *necessity* as that which does not cease, as *that which does not stop writing itself*.³⁰ We can find in this the law of bodies as the laws of nature, but also the law of the fantasy: it is that which does not stop writing itself, producing in every change the same result, governed by an imaginary elision of its own object-cause. In the realm of politics, it appears as the language that speaks of causes of action with “no alternative”. Reforms are organized around this paradigm: necessity is that which does not stop writing itself. At the same time—and contradictorily—what is upheld is the language of possibility within the register of optionalism and liberal choice. The society of control, as Deleuze has called it, makes everyone an entrepreneur of his own existence, the ego driving a ceaseless arrangement and rearrangement of its objects. Be all that you can be and never miss anything while you’re at it: the gadgets of our information age are only so many symptoms of this culture of possibility that is governed by its neighbour, necessity without alternative.

However, Lacan introduces another way of thinking about possibility by rewriting *contingency* as *that which stops not writing itself*. This contingency is not the product of available options that are at the same time governed by a social and natural necessity that knows no alternative, but is related, rather, to impossibility, i.e. to that which does not stop not writing itself. Contingency is realized, when a piece of the impossible—of that which does *not* stop *not* writing itself—turns into an elaboration of something that stops not writing itself.

We can recognize in this new formulation what we have earlier called a *practice*. The practice of the clinic is easily recognized in this: what happens in psychoanalysis is that something impossible stops in some way being impossible. But this does not imply a sudden full realization of the impossible—as in the *passage à l’acte*. Rather it is *something of the impossible* that is realized, that “stops not writing itself.” The object-cause, the partial drive is picked up and elaborated in a different symbolic mode offering just a partial, but real, satisfaction.

We can also recognize in this what we have said of *critique*. If critique is the realization—or completion—of the art-work, as the Romantic tradition has it, then it is so only in this mode: something partial of it—let’s call it with Benjamin its “truth content”—is elaborated into the contingent mode of the present. But never as a totality—and never as the realization of the aesthetic illusion—but rather as the *Schein* or illusion that moves from the imaginary to the symbolic. This is what Zupančič has called the “real of an illusion.”³¹ I can’t go through her entire argument here, but it can be summarized as follows: the condition of subjectively assuming the position of a practice is an illusion, namely the illusion of the totality of the symbolic practice itself. This illusion does not mean—as it would in the imaginary register—the promise that the fantasy finally gets realized. But rather, that in

order to subjectively relate to the practice, the subject has to choose it without exception, and that means without basing it on the fantasy of exception. Without exception: this is the term for the universality embedded in every practice. Yet this universality is precisely embedded in a *practice*: it is not a representable universal nor a regulative ideal, but a practical universalizability, a becoming universal. It ties the object-cause to a symbolic dimension, knotting together as it were the body and language, by registering a subjective position in relation to the symbolic dimension that falls outside the given world of democratic materialism and its offers of necessity and optionalistic liberal possibilities. It is a subjective position not on the level of conscious knowledge, imaginary *connaissance*, but on the level of *savoir*, unconscious symbolic knowledge, precisely because it has to be chosen against the evidence of necessity and the promise of possibility within the culture of democratic materialism. Practice thus is related to a fundamental shift in the subjective position that can be mediated by the knowledge of the Ego but only through opening to the register of impossibility as real, the very register the culture of democratic materialism forecloses.

If we return from this to the question of the clinic and critique, to the question of the cultural clinic of the present, we need to ask what follows for the conceptualization of these terms. First it is of particular importance to mark the distance this approach has from all hermeneutic practices, but also from all forms of discourse analysis that simply aim at the historicization of the objects of inquiry. They both, too, have their roots in the Romantic tradition but they either develop on the basis of a kind of Hegelian spirit, *Geist*, which provides an ideal horizon of unification of particular practices and acts of interpretation or, in discourse analysis, completely separate them from what Benjamin called the "truth content" by way of reducing objects of interpretation simply to their "material content" relating them to a particular historical *episteme*. Against this, each action within a practice we have developed on the model of the clinic and critique is singular. It has no horizon of unification—for it excludes the imaginary function of unity—but stands in a relation to truth that is never completely presented and presentable. This is the subjective side of a practice: it relates to its symbolic dimension as a totality that is not representable, not present. Conversely, it aims to interpret or better to take up, develop, envelop, produce from the truth content, precisely the lack of the totality that appears in different cultural phenomena within the present scope of democratic materialism. It picks up that which "does not stop not writing itself" in an act in order to produce from it that which "stops not writing itself." It transfers the impossible to the possible, but by adhering to the split within possibility itself. The possible thus produced and developed is never inscribed within a horizon of full realization or, more psychoanalytically speaking, full satisfaction. Its object is partial just as its object-cause is partial. This means first, that—as I have stated earlier—this transfer from the impossible to the possible is not a *passage à l'acte*, a blaze of truth and glory, unifying being and language in a momentary realization of totality. Secondly, it means that a cultural clinic is not concerned with meaning, but with truth. Certainly, the register of meaning—the imaginary unity of experience—is never absent from any act that is a practice; but practice works through meaning to realize a measure of what is, within meaning, signified as impossible.

The Subject of Curating Considered in the Light of the Cultural Clinic of the Present

What follows from this sketch of the cultural clinic for the subject of curating? Well, certainly that it is not one. But, just as importantly, that it is not many, either. Catchwords like "interdisciplinarity", the shifting costumes of scientific and cultural identifications, the simple presence of multiplicity, difference, geographical

inclusion, ironic repetition, or a posture of openness against closure and plurality over and against dogmatism does not yet mark this subject. It is neither one, nor many, for it appears in the specific ways in which it knots together the experience of an impossibility with the registers of the University Discourse, with the questioning of the master that is the lot of the hysteric and with the institutional realpolitik of the master discourse itself. This impossibility is not simply an identification of something left out: women, post-colonial subjectivities, new media art, etc. It is quite possible to engage any of these exclusions on the level of science or in the *pas de deux* of the master and the hysteric. This impossibility appears e.g. when an attempted categorization does not fit the practice or object one has selected. It appears when the need to legitimize within the Discourse of the University silences a language and a thought, a project or a doubt that permeates any attempt to symbolize an experience that has not had yet its time. It appears wherever something resists the many ways in which bodies and languages circulate within materialist democratic consumerism. It appears as resistance to the demand for mediation, *Vermittlung*, recognisability. It appears in a need to show something that does not fit any given narration, neither political, nor scientific, nor biographical. Making the space for this contingent necessity is the mark of this subject. But this is not a call for authenticity. The real of truth is realized only in pieces, part-objects, breaks, sentences that are non-sequiturs, never fully, and never as a whole. Certainly it appears in a kind of resistance to the narcissistic recognition of being recognized rather than answered.

The subject of curating is not, as tempting as this may often be, a subject of the master, but neither is it a subject of the university. It is, like the artist him- or herself, or like the analyst, a subject of a *praxis*. This has far-reaching consequences for the issue of legitimation. The point is not to resist "professionalization" or the Discourse of the University: the point is to not use it as a legitimating force but in order to sharpen one's eye and one's ear, one's skin, and one's body to what is impossible within the discourse of science and its place in materialist democratic culture. This is not an easy task: the entire history of aesthetics has been a history of illusions created by the attempt to integrate the other of reason into the purview of reason itself, the other of universality into universality itself, the other of finite materiality into infinite thought itself—or, more recently, vice versa. Inclusion fails to keep open the difference between science and practice. Practice articulates, and does so in the end without justification. In order for this not to lead to obscurantism, a celebration of irrationality or simply back into a kind of humanism of meaning and culture, every subject of curating has to organize itself around not only the doing but the thinking. The subject of curating can be located where its actions are: i.e. selecting, processing, documenting, localizing, contextualizing, and re-contextualizing, etc. Its actions are at the same time paralleled by an attempt to develop a theory of those very actions and within those activities. A subject of curating appears not only in the locations, connections, and presentations, not only in institutions or anti-institutions, not only in the realm of appearance itself, but in the discourse he or she produces. The difference will be how and to what extent this work is "true", i.e. works out a subjective impossibility in relating what is being said to the Discourse of the Master and, more importantly, the Discourse of the University. There might be silent artists, though less and less so it seems, for their silence will be heard or seen or felt or brought to experience in some manner. But a silent curator refuses or denies the subject position that he or she is in. Thus, the issue is, what can break this silence. You will laugh, no one has ever heard of a silent curator! But chattering [in/about] the new mode, the newest trend, the newest discovery, the hip stuff, the counter-hip hip stuff: that is not breaking a silence. Thus, to the question what will break it, there will not be one answer but only as

many answers as there are subjects of curating. But for this to be heard, maybe one needs to leave the university. This implies that the subject of curating needs its own place of speech. Not only the university, not only the institutions of art, not only the venues of publication or the net. But, like psychoanalysts, a place where one can listen to oneself in the ears of other subjects of curating, not in order to gain anything but simply to register in oneself and the other if something of the truth that is impossible appears. If the university is to be made a place for curating, its disciplines and registers, then it can succeed only if it is doubled, countered, by what I want to call anti-institutions, little sects of curator subjects. This does happen. But it is important to realize that what is at stake is not networking, ideas exchange, or alliances. But a space where something can be heard that only those can hear that have no need to understand or to mediate it. Thus, while those anti-institutional groupings of subjects of curating exist, it might be useful to realize the conditions of its necessity—and impossibility.

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Notes

1 A version of this article was presented as the keynote address of *CURATING: Glittering Myth, Social Symptom, Revolutionary Force? A Conference on Curatorial Knowledge Production* on November 15, 2014 at the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste.

2 cf. Susanne Pfeffer, *Speculations on Anonymous Materials. Exhibition Booklet*, 3, accessed December 2, 2014, <http://www.fridericianum.org/files/pdfs/733/booklet-speculations-on-anonymous-materials-en.pdf>.

3 Sigrid Schade and Dorothee Richter, "Ausstellungs-Displays," in *Ausstellungen als Kulturpraktiken des Zeigens*, Das Neue Ausstellen (Ruppichterth: Kunstforum-Verl., 2007), 59.

4 Beryl. Graham and Sarah Cook, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

5 Ibid., 6.

6 Here the authors cite Alex Galloway. Ibid., 57.

7 Ibid., 83.

8 Ibid., 5.

9 cf. Ibid., 82f.

10 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1 The Will to Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

11 Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 1. publ. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 48–58.

12 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 1. publ. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 212.

13 cf. Ibid., 208.

14 Ibid., 221.

15 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan : On Feminine Sexuality : The Limits of Love and Knowledge : Book XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1998), 16.

16 Ibid., 17.

17 cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (New York ; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007).

18 Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., "Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age," in *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz : [Distributed in the] U.S.A./North America, D.A.P., Distributed Art Publishers, 2007), 27f.

19 Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1991), 31.

20 Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," in *Selected Writings. Vol. 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock and Michael W. (Michael William) Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap, 2004), 132ff.

21 Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in *Selected Writings. Vol. 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock and Michael W. (Michael William) Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap, 2004), 297–360.

22 Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: The Sequel to Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2008), 1ff.

23 Ibid., 4.

24 cf. Ibid., 1–9.

25 cf. Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

26 cf. Aristotle, "Categories," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 1*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

27 Jacques Lacan, "The Freudian Thing," in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, 1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company,

2007), 361.

28 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1981), 6.

29 cf. Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 12* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1958), 144–56.

30 For Lacan's rewriting of necessity, contingency and impossibility see for example Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, 94.

31 Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2011).