Thinking About Curatorial Education
by Dorothee Richter

Undoubtedly CURATING is a new discursive formation, as defined by Michel Foucault, which has rapidly developed since the 1970s. We are aware that we are also part of this instituting process, with the developing of an Archive, with the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at ZHdK, and with the PhD platform, a cooperation between the University of Reading and our publications. This formation is instituted in hierarchical formations and power relations. Therefore we strive to open up processes, to question what instituting and de-instituting means, and to make our thoughts, struggles, and research accessible. As in all forms of cultural production, content and form are interrelated (but not the same), and it matters, as an ideological production, what one does, what one brings into existence. To mirror our approach of teaching as practice with its impact of curatorial projects and possibilities, this article discusses a specific “pedagogical” attitude which is fundamental for the programme. I try to show how this works as a practice that is intensely informed by theory which influences and reflects actual projects and attitudes. So curatorial knowledge production, which means in my understanding a complex offering of visual, spatial, theoretical, context-related and historically situated meaning production, is therefore based on concepts of theory as a practice—a deeply politically motivated construct. In this article I try to formulate this based on the example of Gasthaus zum Bären / Museum Bärengasse in Zurich—one of our curatorial experiments.

When I was asked to deliver a concept for Museum Baerengasse / Gasthaus zum Baeren, I saw the opportunity to work in a very experimental way with students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating in conjunction with the web-journal www.on-curating.org. As we later found out, we also manoeuvred ourselves into a trap in the sense that the university did not see any means of funding this undertaking, and on the other hand we were practically banned from all other funding bodies precisely because we are a part of the university, a dilemma that stayed with us. For extremely experimental endeavours of the kind we developed into, there simply are no funding bodies.

On the other hand we were very grateful for the wonderful space, despite this drawback, we were quite sure that the endeavour could create something new, something important for the Zurich scene, challenging for students, and also important for an international outreach. The drive, the urgency I felt was related to what Jacques Derrida once formulated for a “university without conditions”, a model he positioned against contemporary universities that work hand in hand with industries, be it in connection with technical innovations or, I take the liberty to add, anything that might be called creative industries. Derrida demands: “Consequence of this thesis: such an unconditional resistance could oppose the university to a great number of powers, for example to state powers (and thus to the power of the nation-state and to its phantasm of indivisible sovereignty, which indicates how the university might be in advance not just cosmopolitan, but universal,
A “democracy to come” is a promising horizon for any programme. To explain the concept, I would like to lay out different trajectories: on the one hand a short description of the formats I had in mind, and on the other hand a reflection on pedagogical elements as understood from the perspective of the theory on ideological state apparatuses developed by Louis Althusser, which in my understanding could be re-interpreted in a differentiated way with Lacanian concepts of the screen/tableau. Both of these trajectories are intrinsically intertwined with a specific attitude in actual encounters. This attitude can be seen in the light of Derrida’s demand for a “university without conditions”, which also demands a very specific attitude on the part of the professor. For Derrida the word ‘profess’, with its Latin origin, means to declare openly, to declare publicly: “The declaration of the one who professes is a performative declaration in some way. It pledges like an act of sworn faith, an oath, a testimony, a manifestation, an attestation, or a promise, a commitment. To profess is to make a pledge while committing to one’s responsibility. To make profession is to declare out loud what one is, what one believes, what one wants to be, while asking another to take one’s word and believe this declaration.” In this sense I wanted to make my own deep interest in arts and democracy become part of the undertakings at Museum Baerengasse / Gasthaus zum Baeren, but also my deep interest in the potentials of all students as a group, and of each student as an individual entity with his or her knowledge, history, and abilities.

In my own curatorial projects I have long been interested in experimenting with new formats, formats that exhibit a strange tendency to shift from being an office to being a studio, an exhibition space, a project space, a gathering space or a bar. The modern basement of Museum Baerengasse / Gasthaus zum Baeren, with its relatively large spaces, could be used as a walk-in cinema where short films would be shown in a loop, so visitors could just drop in for a while and leave again. It would also work as a dance floor, as we later discovered. But to explain this, I must introduce the situation at Museum Baerengasse / Gasthaus zum Baeren. When we moved in, it was a strange postmodern building which actually consisted of two buildings that had been moved there from across the street, a distance of about seventy metres. The two medieval buildings were moved because the UBS had undertaken to erect a huge administrative ensemble. They were placed side by side and connected with a modern staircase and a lift—a strange conglomerate of modern and old spaces, or, in short: absolutely postmodern. So the rooms were actually relatively small and also had an intense language of their own, with wood, and with mouldings on the ceiling. There were also huge old ovens still installed in it, left over from a time when the building served as a museum of medieval living conditions, a branch of the Landesmuseum. Not at all a white cube—and, it must be confessed, extremely difficult to work with from a curatorial perspective.

The rooms were narrow and also often too small for our growing public, when we had discussions, talks, or screenings. Before we used the space, the Museum Baerengasse had presented contemporary art exhibitions, and for about two years it has also hosted the Kunsthalle Zurich.

So some of the features of the space did bring with them typical exclusion scenarios of a museum, which invites mainly the white middle class, but without the typical interpellation of a subject that is in a central perspective overview situation extending beyond worldwide citizenship and the nation-state in general, to economic powers (to cooperations and to national and international capital), to the powers of the media, ideological, religious, and cultural powers, and so forth – in short, to all the powers that limit democracy to come.”

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and also always on display, which, as Tony Bennett has argued in detail, creates a subject that installs the perspective of being seen inside and develops all the habitual self-control of a bourgeois citizen. Actually, the Museum Baerengasse’s spaces had a tendency to hide people; one always had difficulties meeting in the labyrinthine spaces. But the exclusion was a precondition, to which were added, in our case, the preconditions of a university setting (which is unquestionably another scenario of exclusion).

To explain the specific pedagogical understanding that informs our programme, I have always thought that notions of radical democratic pedagogy are interesting and in many ways valuable. Here I refer to Mary Drinkwater’s discerning research on pedagogical approaches to which I can relate because I have my background in an academy that offers a wide range of courses in humanistic psychology and political science. Drinkwater based her research on radical educational policy argumentation on John Dewey and Paolo Freire, and she is moreover interested in the agency that could be achieved in a political sense. She explains what radical educational policy could be and what methods should be used: “Traditional, rational or managerial policy development approaches are generally linear, staged and state controlled or state centred. A radical policy approach, in contrast, recognizes both the complexity and the value of having a broad and diverse group of stakeholders or policy actors acting at many different levels. The use of the metaphor of a policy web (Goldberg, 2006; Joshee, 2008) helps to understand how the policy process is shaped by circulating discourses. Using this metaphor, policy is designed as an ensemble of multiple discourses that interact in a complex web of relationships that enables or constrains social relations. It is a fluid arrangement of discourses existing at a given moment in time, emerging out of the struggle between multiple discourses from multiple voices in a given context.” For the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, the idea of a complex and diverse group corresponded first of all to the actual students’ group, because the students are already working in different fields of art and culture. The programme resides in the department of further education, which means that we have gallerists, a film festival director, a performance festival director, a literature festival director, people who work in art institutions as producers or in art education, and sometimes students with a background in film and often in art history, art and design. We have also students with extremely different cultural backgrounds: about one third are Swiss, but the rest come from Italy, France, Austria, Cuba, Brazil, Canada, the US, the UK, Romania, Serbia, South Africa, Lebanon and Israel. On a second level, the students should be able to apply the idea of diverse groups of stakeholders to the actual working situation of the curator. A curator is always involved in negotiations with artists, production groups and stakeholders in the arts, cultural policy, and the broader society. So the actual formulation of a position in the programme should later be transferrable to other challenges. For the programme and our situation in the Museum Baerengasse / Gasthaus zum Baeren, it is important to keep in mind the “metaphor of a policy web” and, as Drinkwater claims, “Using this metaphor, policy is designed as an ensemble of multiple discourses that interact in a complex web of relationships that enables or constrains social relations.”

The concept of a fluid arrangement of discourses existing at a given moment in time appeals to me as a way of sketching our situation as a programme in the Museum Baerengasse. It takes into consideration that ideas and inputs of students as well as of myself and other lecturers in the programme formulated the events we developed. On the other hand, the actual power structures are not ignored. For this reason, for the multiplicity of inputs in the form of screenings, talks and exhibitions, some of the projects were developed on the basis of concepts presented by
myself and other lecturers, sometimes developed for participating students, and others were developed by students (see the names in each project description in our publication in the on-curating book section) and the programme assistant, Mirjam Bayerdörfer. Different stages of professionalization and specific knowledge were thus clearly reflected in the programme. Given the diverse backgrounds and working experiences of the participants, this does not imply a hierarchy of professionalization with lecturers at the top, assistants in the middle, and students at the bottom, but that a multiplicity of abilities and professional qualifications were at stake: there were a lot of people with very different skills and experience involved, whether in exhibition production, short film, working with young students, collecting, programming music events, programming performance, philosophy, etc. In any case, the different sets of knowledge were something I accepted wholeheartedly because I believe that a university setting must allow experiments, failures, fissures, even confusion, and should provide a setting for long-term engagement and project work, and that the latter should emerge out of the struggle between multiple discourses from multiple voices in a given context. So my goal was not to have a perfect programme, but to have an imperfect platform for experiments, but with a specific direction. Taking into consideration that a space such as a university is structured hierarchically, quite in keeping with Johan Galtung’s concept of "structural violence", a multiplicity of concepts of subjectivity and creativity were at stake and acknowledged.7

To return to the concept of ideological state apparatuses: Louis Althusser argues that every cultural production situates and, in a sense, produces a subject through interpellations.8 As some may recall, we made this claim also for the subject of an exhibition, which is also the addressee of interpellations—the subject is, in a sense, produced by the exhibition, as Wolfgang Kemp diagnosed for some paintings in the space of the political.9 Some contemporary theoreticians consider the notion of interpellation too reductionist. Especially cultural studies have taken into consideration the possibilities of accepting a proposed ideological layout, refusing it or challenging it. However, I think this may work on a much deeper level of address and intersubjectivity. Jacques Lacan developed the metaphor of a screen or tableau on which a subject projects multiple “answers” or reactions to the interpellations reaching it from the outside. In the Lacanian conception, a subject is on the one hand already spoken, which means it is placed in a signifying or symbolic chain. A subject is inscribed into this line of descendance before its birth and after its death, and this unconsciously influences its development and positioning.10 In this sense a subject is not at all autonomous.

The ideal of an autonomous subjectivity is based on an illusion, which is developed during the mirror stage. In the mirror stage an imaginary whole subject is constructed, but this subjectivity must be acknowledged from the outside. The small child sees itself as a whole image and reacts jubilantly. For Lacan this is the fundamental structure of subjectivity, which is obviously based on a misconception, because the moment of validation is eluded as well as the actual extreme dependency on other human beings. This is the basis of the imaginary register. To see oneself as the central point of central perspective is illusionary in the sense that that the other—or, more specifically, an imagined perspective of the other—is sketched by Lacan as another triangle, reversing and overlapping the imaginary triangle of the central perspective. In this construction the subject starts to project itself onto the imagined position in favour of the person who sees the subject. It multiplies different projections of its image (illusionary subjectivity) onto this screen/tableau. To connect this scheme to the more rigid model of Althusser, a subject permanently projects its own subjectivity in relation to an imagined other
onto a tableau, where it is seen by the other. In this model, subjectivity is produced in an ongoing process of interpellations and projections, and is in no way fixed and in no way autonomous. This is also why a teacher–student relationship is extremely important, taking into consideration the power relationship Althusser implied in his example of someone being addressed by a policeman.

From my perspective, the fact that the actual hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship permits a moment of equality and acknowledgement in the event of interaction is highly contradictory. Jacques Rancière defines equality as being in fundamental opposition to the police order, the limiting power structure of a society. The police order is unable to "respond to the moment of equality of speaking bodies." For Rancière, equality is produced in a process, in an open set of practices. He thus draws two conclusions: “First, equality is not a state, not a goal that an action may seek to achieve. It is a premise that an action sets out to verify. Second, this set of practices has no particular name. Equality has no visibility of its own. Its premise must be understood in the practices that articulate it, and extricated from its implicitness.”

Rancière’s important deliberations on the ignorant schoolmaster argue in favour of equal intelligence as a precondition for education. Nevertheless, already the term "schoolmaster" alone implies a hierarchy. In these processes the contradiction is preconditioned. So from my perspective a teacher has to be aware of his or her responsibility; she or he should sense the need to become acquainted with the specific subjective entity, the cultural backgrounds, the skills and abilities, the trajectories and goals of each student. As described by Derrida, a teacher has to do this on the basis of his or her own positioning and own sense of its urgent necessity. What is more, a teacher has to risk an uncontrollable moment of encounter, an encounter in which equality in the sense of being equally valuable is the precondition. This moment could be described as re-cognition, which I strongly believe holds the potential for change. At the same time, curating (and other forms of cultural production) offers the potential to transform an urgency or, in the Lacanian sense, the wish for the “object petit a”, which is best described as a lack, a wanting, a longing. To transfer this longing into some sort of a signifying chain would be what could happen through the “talking cure” as well as by producing culture and art. Naturally, different sign systems as language or art offer different possibilities and trajectories. I hope this short excursus is not understood in a reductive way.

I would like to continue by discussing the promising and inspiring talk entitled “The Subject of Curating”, given by Felix Ensslin at the symposium Curating: Glittering Myth, Revolutionary Force, Social Symptom?, in which he set forth in detail pre-figurative structures of curatorial practice and, more specifically, of curating in the university context. The notion “subject” is associated in English on the one hand with subjectivity, and on the other hand with the notion of a specific topic. Thus the word “subject” in Ensslin’s title is left to shift ambiguously back and forth. We are left to consider the influence a subject has on a subject in both directions, without falling into the trap of an actor-network theory, which projects the capacity to act onto things.

In Ensslin’s concept, all empirical tools of curating as specific activities—installing exhibitions, art-historical knowledge, institutional management, organization of networks, connoisseurship, tools of mediation, judging, fundraising and so on—i.e., all the activities with which curating is usually associated, are considered something that comes along with the job. A show is produced because you feel the
urgency to make something materialize, to put something on view, to implement a
discourse (as a subject, not as a “thing”).

The art academy of the present is based on different models which are all to
an extent also present in the contemporary situation. To quote Therry de Duve,
these models could be categorized as the academy model, the Bauhaus model and
the contemporary model. All of them have different preconceptions of the sub-
ject and of creativity. Very briefly, the academy upholds the idea of the artist as a
genius who is supposed to be an inspiration for his students; they are supposed to
follow his example and learn his techniques through imitation. The students are
organized as a group of followers, but they can also compete, initially for his recog-
nition and later for public recognition; on the other hand, the alumni of this specific
group would also later on promote each other. (The gender aspect is very clear and
does not require further discussion here). The concept of the Bauhaus, which was
the leading model only very briefly between the two world wars but still has a lot of
influence today, changed the ideology of the genius at work. The new ideology was
that of creativity and of intensive work based on industrial production and an
interest in new materials. The idea was of a twofold education combining aspects
of art and aspects of engineering. In many respects this concept bore resemblance
to industrial production and to an intense ideology of work.

The concept referred to by Bailey as contemporary is based on the idea of
developing an attitude, which makes it necessary to engage in reading and discuss-
ing viewpoints. This practice is based on working together and not on developing
singular authorship, and in this context to deconstruct means to question many
existing paradigms and formats. What is also important here is the necessity of
developing an idea about one’s own situation, one’s own position, as part of a
specific situation at the university, in the arts, and in society as a whole. Students
should come out of their training self-empowered; thus the teachers can do no
more than serve as examples; they cannot prescribe courses of action or give
orders. Our exhibition projects could be assigned to this category. Is it (Y)ours?,
curated by Damian Jurt and myself, asks who owns the public space and extends
this question to a multitude of different contexts, pointing out similarities and
differences. “Who owns the public space? How can we formulate in it claims and
contradictions? How do alternative utopias develop? And how to transform com-
'unities, strategic alliances and movements? How do artists formulate claims to
participation? And how do artists intervene in Cape Town, Hong Kong, Bern,
Zurich, Berlin, Cairo?”

For the exhibition we collaborated with Christian Falsnaes to produce a video
on site at the Museum Baerengasse. In the first part we acted with him as a choir to
a strange musical, and in the second part we interacted in a performance in which
we cut all of his clothes off his body while talking about art, re-enactment, gender,
and vulnerability. The second shared exhibition Unsettling the Setting. Playing, Plying,
Squatting // Operating, Owning, Occupying ---- or rather? was curated by Mirjam
Bayerdörfer and myself. We asked artists, theorists, and curators to provide a con-
cept for our somehow uncanny situation at Gasthaus zum Baeren / Museum Bae-
rengasse. “Around the Paradeplatz in Zurich, money does not grow on trees but
instead is buried in the ground. What for? What does it do there? The Museum
Bärengasse is located 200 m from Paradeplatz. For whom? What does it do there?”
to quote parts of the concept. Our aim was to explore the situation of our project
at that location, and we understood this as a starting point for discussions with the
students and the public. The last shared project, Involvement Requires Perception,
invited eleven artist-run spaces to present one work (which could also be a social
sculpture) and one manifesto each. Here, two students worked with each art space. This project handed over the actual curatorial tasks and negotiations to the students, and as a result was extremely productive. It showed very divergent approaches to art and social space, and provided a scope for negotiations and discussions. These three programmatic exhibitions can be understood as the backbone of the project, a form of self-reflection and a means of asking questions about the social, architectural, and political situation and how to deal with it. Within this context we provided space and opportunities (although very little money) to realize projects with or without advice. The loose framework for the projects was “Curate Your Context”, the request to think about your context and to initiate a programme that would reflect aspects of specific contexts. As you can see from the intense and diverse programme, students of all backgrounds took advantage of the opportunity and realized shows, performances, discussions, music, book launches, etc. The programme was moreover accompanied by a series of talks reflecting on curating and cultural practices.

I am convinced that today one has also to take into consideration all aspects of digitalization, which works as an acceleration tool and as a public space. This is why we have the webjournal www.on-curating.org as a partner for the programme on some issues. Derrida describes this aspect as follows: “One of the mutations that affect the place and nature of university travail is today a certain delocalizing virtualization of space of communication, discussion, publication, archivization. It is not the virtualization that is absolutely novel in its structure, for as soon as there is a trace, there is also some virtualization; it is the ‘abc’ of deconstruction. What is new, quantitatively, is the acceleration of the rhythm, the extent and powers of capitalization of such virtuality. Hence the necessity to rethink the concepts of the possible and the impossible. This new technical ‘stage’ of virtualization (computerization, digitalization, virtually immediate worldwide-ization of readability, telework, and so forth) destabilizes, as we well know, the university habitat. It upsets the university’s topology, disturbs everything that organizes the places defining it, namely, the territory of its fields and its disciplinary frontiers as well as its places of discussion, its field of battle, its Kampfplatz, its theoretical battlefield – and the communitary structure of its ‘campus’.18 We are interested in this new topology of the university, in knowledge production as a will to know changes. At this stage we would like to make our endeavours and shared efforts available to a larger public, a public space which is, as stated by Derrida, a field of competition, a struggle for visibility, but on the other hand also a democratic tool, which opens up to people from far away. As stated by Peter Weibel,19 the digital media change any notion of distance. They also change our senses, our human condition as such. For us, the students and lecturers of the programme, the webjournal www.on-curating.org holds the promise to be not just a second-rate consumer of thoughts, but of producing knowledge about curating alongside temporary projects in space. Again, this is another opportunity of self-empowerment for students and alumni to materialize their urgencies.

See all projects of Gasthaus zum Bären /Museum Bärenagasse, publication in the book section of OnCurating.org.

Dorothee Richter, curator, since 2005 head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating (MAS/CAS) www.curating.org at the University of the Arts Zurich ZHdK (Co-founder and concept), she also co-founded with Susanne Clausen the “Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Cultural Studies, Practice-Based Doctoral Programme” a cooperation of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and the Department of Fine Arts,
Manoni’s pedagogical concepts, which she derived from Lacanian theory.


Ibid., p. 5.


Drinkingwater 2015 (see footnote 5).


Drinkingwater 2015 (see footnote 5).

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Captions
1 Video Production with Christian Falsnaes and students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, for the exhibition Is it (Y)ours?
2 Exhibition view, Is it (Y)ours?, 13 March 2014
3,4 Exhibition view, Involvement Requires Perception. 11 project spaces – 11 artworks – 11 ways, 6 March 2015
5,6,7 Exhibition view, Unsettling the Setting, 24 October 2014