

WHY THE CURATORIAL

An externalist view of art

Allen Alain Viguier

Plasti City Press

WHY THE CURATORIAL

An externalist view of art

Allen Alain Viguiet

Plasti City Press

PlastiCity Press
8 Bogan Street - Greystanes
2145 NSW - Australia

First published 2015
© Allen Alain Viguier 2015
All rights reserved.

Printed and bound in France by Les Ateliers Demaille - 94140 Alfortville

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry
Viguier, Alain, author.

Why the curatorial : an externalist point of view / Allen Alain Viguier.

ISBN: 9780646942087 (paperback)

Art, Modern--21st century.

Aesthetics--History.

700.1

WHY THE CURATORIAL. Process thinking in art and the curatorial context . . . 1

PROCESS INVARIANCE OBJECT. On 70 Prints Edition 2008 20

ROUTES OF BEING / DANCING 24

WHY THE CURATORIAL

An externalist view of art

The curatorial (curatorial practices and theory) as it is generally conceived today developed jointly with the emergence of the post-object and “dematerialised” art that inaugurated “contemporary art” around the mid-1960s. A decade later “curatorial studies” programs started emerging, reaching their peak in the first decade of the century with countless programs attended by artists, art critics and curators. But behind the different trends, the congruence between the artistic and the curatorial has made us aware of the more elementary fact that an artwork is inseparable from the practices through which it is produced and kept in existence.

I will begin by adding to this overview a two-fold observation: first, non-object art not only sabotaged the physical object’s static substance ontology and geometric boundary but was also the redefinition of what an object in art is. But unlike philosophy and science it never really ventured into theorizing what this object is.

Second, because non-object art was never theorized as a new type of object the gap between the artwork and the curatorial practices relating to it was never properly resolved. Despite artists and curators often swapping roles and blurring the division between the artwork and the curatorial, this division has never been overcome, nor has it for the same reason been overcome between art theory and curatorial (or institutional) theory. However invasive of its curatorial frame a work can be, the frame always remains (at least in part) a supplement to it, just as it had been for more traditional works. This text will examine this problem and present an alternative to the prevalent non-object guiding paradigm for the curatorial.

Before going further I have to explain non-object's redefinition of what an object in art is and relocate non-object's objectness. As Whitehead put it: "Objects are the elements in nature which can 'be again'". An object is what can be abstracted as the "same" (invariant) through the flow of events. It can be defined as a physically stable visual invariant limited by an outline, but it can also be defined as a "dematerialised" processual invariant operating as a pattern within physical variations, existing virtually rather than visually and having no observable border.

In defining processual invariants I will further examine a few artworks, but without entering into full case studies (which I have done more thoroughly in other papers).

Process philosophy puts into question the assumption that an entity preexists its external relations. Its refusal to give primacy to entities over their relations cannot be sustained if the artwork's boundaries are negated. By reestablishing the object at the level of processual invariance beyond non-object's physical instability and geometrical non-limitation, it can then be observed in the context of its external relations and hence as having no ontological primacy over them.

By bracketing the object and suspending its internality, both the object and the curatorial frame can be seen as working synchronically, correlated at a boundary or interface. The processual invariant of the "dematerialised" object depends on its iterative pattern, but its public existence also depends on the recursive-ness (periodicity) of each curatorial practice applied to it. Both sides partake through their iterations in the process through which sameness constitutes itself as sameness.

I will examine correlations between artworks and their curatorial frames but here again I will not enter full case studies.

As Whitehead, who sees the object's "presentational immediacy" and the external field of "causal efficacy" as correlated, we see the object and its curatorial frame as two separate and complementary dimensions of the same work.

Non-object's object and the topological object of process invariance

Non-object sabotaged the physical object's static substance ontology and geometric boundary but was also the redefinition of what an object in art is. Moreover, through this sabotage it has made us more aware and sensitive to the curatorial than ever.

But before discussing what object non-object is, I will speak of the object it is not. The object non-object broke away from has remained elusive in art theory, although assumed as being invariant on the basis of physical stability and geometrical limitation. Such objects caught in modernist self-referentiality (solipsism) had ended as being premised on naturalist and essentialist grounds (presumed in the reproof of Stella's famous statement: What you see is what you see). The consequence of this binary opposition underlying contemporary art since its beginning was on one hand the salutary sabotaging of the substantial object but, on the other hand, its lack of definition of what the object non-object is when considered from another level. Besides, non-object artworks have kept being treated as objects in the economy and in law, and are designated and catalogued as such under a title, but they do not reflect upon themselves as objects. It is as if their objectness was a fatality, a side issue not worth speaking of.

Artworks such as Lawrence Weiner's statements ¹, Daniel Buren's *Jamais Deux Fois la Même* ², Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Stacks* ³, Martin Creed's installations ⁴ and Michel Blazy's carrot paste wall coverings ⁵ are non-object and so-called "dematerialized" works.

They are non-object in the sense that they can be defined through their differences with the naturalist physical and still object: they are impermanent and endlessly variable (whereas an object is permanent and invariable), bound to the particular place and circumstances in which they appear (whereas an object is independent from them) and immersive (whereas an object is frontal), etc.

They are said to be "dematerialised" when between exhibitions they continue to exist although not physically (only subsisting in contracts and protocols).

These works are physically variable, unstable, etc. But does this mean that they are not objects? From the point of view of non-object art they are not. They are not objects because they are tied to concepts of immersion, interaction, process, experience, real-time time, and so on. But this does not prevent us from speaking of them as objects on another level.

"Objects are the elements in nature which can 'be again'" ⁶. An object is an abstraction that has sufficient permanence to be apprehended as the "same" from one time to another, one place to another (when detachable) and one person to another. Permanence also means that objects exist even when not being observed.

In defining an object as an abstracted invariant we do not necessarily need to assimilate its invariance with physical stability or its boundary with an outline. A statement by Lawrence Weiner written in French or Greek, in red, green or another colour, on a t-shirt or a gallery wall is, according to the artist, the same work. A Stack of sweets or papers by Gonzalez-Torres is variable in size but it expands beyond a physical contour because visitors can take units from it and eat them or keep them. It can disappear physically and be remade, yet nevertheless subsists as the same work whatever its state at the time we are referring to it. A carrot wall by Blazy is alternatively dematerialised and rematerialised as the previous works are, the medium is unstable and evolutive, variable in size, but is nevertheless referred to as the same work throughout the cycle.

By enacting the destruction of the substantial and geometrical object, non-object art is tremendously rich in providing models for redefining entities and boundaries and in redefining them beyond the binary object/non-object opposition. It provides wonderful examples of objects that are topological assemblages from elements that together evade any outline. The cohesion of these elements depends on a perspective not a contour, on an abstract line passing through them and making them work together.

A work is something made with a perspective, but as Deleuze explained, a perspective is not a thing upon which you add a point of view. The point of view has

to also belong to the thing itself. When, in their famous debate, the Modernists (Greenberg and Fried) and the Minimalists (Morris, Andre and Judd) were arguing about Stella's early paintings (around 1960-1965) they were not bringing different points of view of a same object but talking of altogether different objects⁷.

The dematerialised works mentioned above are unstable and cycle through different physical states (constructed, exhibited, destroyed, virtual in a contract or protocol, constructed again, etc.). The object (the invariant) is processual, abstracted from its own recursiveness (mathematicians could maybe formulate attractors to them). The border is no longer identified as an outline but is induced, in that evidently an object is distinct from things it is not. It is the work's processual invariance that allows it to be an object, something that can be repeated in different places and times but which when only subsisting as a certificate exists virtually as if it were there while not being observed.

There is no clear separation between the invariance of the recursive patterns I have just described and the work's compositional spatial invariance because the work as topological assemblage has often integrated curatorial procedures into its composition, as do the works mentioned above. But it is necessary to define the spatial coexistence of terms in compositional invariance somehow separately. I will illustrate this by discussing Robert Morris' 3 Ls (*Untitled (L-Beams)*, 8x8x2 feet, 1965).

When the 3 Ls piece appeared it was seen as operating a paradigm shift in which the work was going from timeless to time-based, from siteless to site-specific, from frontal to immersive, from physically stable to impermanent, from a contemplative viewer to an active one, and so on. So for Morris the work is defined as entirely variable, the only constant being in his view the abstract configuration (mental gestalt) of the 3 L-shaped objects. The overall working of the piece is described by Morris as composed of the Ls (which are not the artwork but only a part of it), the site, the lighting and the viewer's position in space⁸. It is completely variable since the work is identified with the experience of the viewer and because there is no sameness from one experience to another. The work's invariant is not the rigid disembodied gestalt as Morris had it, but the rule under which the set of terms he just described operates. The invariant is not a substance but a dynamic pattern. The timeless "same" is a set of terms and the way they work together recursively: it is in the way in which the work works, or, to put it in Nelson Goodman's terms, the way it has worked and will work again.

Objects do not exist prior to their external relations

Whitehead and process philosophy put into question the assumption that an entity preexists its external relations, but this cannot be sustained if the artwork's boundaries are negated. It is only by reestablishing the object at the level of processual invariance beyond non-object's physical instability and geometrical non-limitation that it can be observed in the context of its external relations and thus as having no ontological primacy over them.

A work can be absorptive or immersive in being decomposed and experienced in its own terms, as is the case for example in Morris' 3 Ls, but it can also be bracketed as an object and seen interacting with other things than itself. We can apprehend it from within but we can also apprehend it from without. We constantly alternate these two ways of apprehending an object in ordinary life. Unthinkable together, each level is virtually contained in the other. These two modes of observation will be kept separate because accounting for the boundary is a methodological necessity for observing external relations.

Stating that the object does not preexist its external relations implies that this object exists in a holistic environment, an ensemble or a field (what I call a frame or a context in art) coexisting with it: an external ensemble

with which it is interconnected through reciprocal causality. These "other things" the entity relates to are not "everything else" but what is selected through interrelations distributing a field, a context from all directions. This selectivity is more obvious in a living creature but it also applies to non-organic objects. This is in part how Whitehead could say that even non-organic objects can "feel."

Artworks have the advantage over other types of artefacts of offering fringe relatedness to be observed in the curatorial. But theorizing the curatorial necessarily induces a discontinuity between the work and a scattered and heterogeneous context of external curatorial operations. Both the internal and the external can then be seen as working synchronically, correlated at a boundary or interface.

The processual approach, by introducing reciprocal circularity between causes and effects, puts into question the assumed preeminence of the chronological order in which a work is first made then *is* and is finally exhibited and administrated. But before we enter into a spatialisation of time through the examination of simultaneous correlations between individual works and their curatorial contexts I will first discuss the correlations between the artworks and the curatorial over the history of the curatorial since the mid-1960s. We know artworks do not exist prior to receivership, that they emerge with their publics, thus it is also possible to monitor the simultaneous emergence of contemporary art and the

contemporary art museum progressively across the whole of the western world and more recently beyond. Works emerge in public space with their publics and the complex curatorial contexts their public existences depend on.

Where innovative works (mixed media, dematerialised, ephemeral, and so on) have been critical was by partaking in changing practices which are distributed across the whole spectrum of the curatorial and its ready-to-hand technical apparatuses (in implementing display, illumination, restoration, conservation, reproduction, legislation, etc.). Contrarily to its own belief, the "new art" was not critical by resisting "institutional confinement" but through the changes its integration into the institutional machinery called for. Its conception of resistance presupposes a paradigm of succession in which the work is the origin and the museum a supplement. It seems obvious with the hindsight we now have that both the art and the art museum have been synchronically changing together⁹. What I am pointing out is the circular causal relationship between the two that historical hindsight now allows us to see.

Process philosophy's refusal to give primacy to entities over their relations cannot be sustained if the split between work and environment is not accounted for. Hence from the point of view of process philosophy the solution to the problem is not found in merging the art and the curatorial further together in a single process, but in theorising the way in which both of them work

together from boundaries.

A processual invariant's (a topological object's) boundary is not observable, it is only deduced from observing that it is distinguishable from things it is not. However, what can be better observed are the interactions, point by point, between the object and its context: an interface at which neither object nor context can be seen as preexisting the other. Such a boundary is no longer conceived in terms of a spatial configuration (or Parergon, *ni dedans ni dehors*) but as broken up, multifaceted and placeless.

As an introduction to the work's curatorial context or frame I will start by commenting further on Morris' 3 Ls. The Ls are made of permanent materials, originally plywood (1965) and fibreglass and stainless steel in later versions. They need to be conserved as traditional works, stored in a safe and climate-stable place, are handled with gloves when displayed and are insured. Such operations are so habitual that they appear to be quite insignificant but other operations were much less habitual. The collector had to understand that the 3 Ls once packed are not the artwork but only part of it. The lawyer had to understand that the work's originality (the legal basis for intellectual property) did not rest in the artist's hand (the autographic). The curator had to understand that the sculpture cannot be presented on a plinth, and so on. What was new was the implication of the curator as a sort of coproducer when the work was exhibited, the necessity to reconstruct the

work in its own terms and from its own point of view and relate to it aesthetically through this process. This meant placing the 3 Ls in a sort of dialogue with the architectural environment, leaving adequate space for circulation and regulating the lighting in a sort of dialog with the shapes and their reflective surfaces (steel or white) as well as with the architectural space – a very different situation to hanging pictures within fixed conventions of height, spacing and illumination. Now the curator has to operate largely as if he/she were making the work. This is also the case of the works by Weiner, Gonzalez-Torres, Blazy and other artists mentioned earlier, and for most of prevalent contemporary art, each case requiring a particular way of being shown and administrated.

From this we can see that another aspect of the curatorial since the emergence of the contemporary art museum is to have become a casuistry.

Imagine if the 3 Ls were placed in a row on a plinth along a wall. They would just not be Morris' work. The work's sameness (to itself) would be lost and the 3 Ls would be altogether something else. No serious curator would think of showing a painting by Robert Ryman on an easel, illuminating Brancusi's *Bird in Space* with a heavy cast shadow, photographing a sculpture by Giacometti from above or Duchamp's *Fountain* in the round, showing a painting by Ad Reinhardt under changing lighting or Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* under an unchanging lighting. Curatorial routine

makes us forget about the frame, but we cannot help noticing it when it is inadequate.

In finding the adequacy between a work and curatorial practices applied to it, the work somehow becomes a regulator, an agent that needs to be considered in terms of what it “does” and makes us do through causal inference. The terms constructing the work and the point of view with which they get their cohesion, the way it is fabricated, its sameness in “presentational immediacy”, the way it is shown, handled and administrated, are all interdependent operations. This sort of situation seems to completely blur any boundary between the work and the curatorial context, yet the structural split is at the heart of it because curatorial procedures are usually not considered as partaking in the work’s terms (topological assemblage). There has to be a discreet split between the active spectator immersed in an always unfinished work and the actor reconstructing from the outside a work that is somehow always already made. In the joint and split internal and external operations between the work and its frame both sides partake in the process through which sameness constitutes itself as sameness. The object’s processual invariance is relayed at the interface by the recursive (iterative) operations of the frame. From the point of view of the curatorial, objects are also events because to each particular object belongs a particular collective performance through distributed roles that are coordinated by the work (as in Distributed Cognition).

In articulating the work and the curatorial as two modes of apprehension, from within and from without, in first-order or second-order observation, they are articulated as two dimensions of the same work. Whitehead’s distinction between presentational immediacy and causal efficacy and Deleuze’s distinction between the actual and the virtual can in some way be transposed into these two dimensions.

While the object is abstracted in presentational immediacy it co-exists with a virtual field in which sequential time is spatialised, a field which is for consciousness a peripheral vagueness or subconsciousness without which the actual object would have no depth and consistence. Causal efficacy is the omnipresent unactuality within the actual. As Whitehead said, presentational immediacy must be correlated with causal efficacy in order to have meaning.

Prevalent assumptions in art and life as in classical philosophy give too large a place to “presentational immediacy,” which is far less important than the entity’s “vague” (nonrepresentational) external field of causal efficacy. Our environmental mind should not be concealed by the fallacy of the ontological priority of the presentational. The object’s causal connection with its context is also that of the observer’s mind, it is the field of a shared virtual (nonetheless real as Deleuze insists) subconscious. Although vague in their coexistence, these relations can be cognitively tracked and unfolded (or explicated using David Bohm’s term) sequentially

one after the other in all directions. Our thinking is in things rather than on things or about things.

The joint and split internal and external operations observed between the work and its frame put into question the primacy of visuality and phenomenology over art's two-side plasticity and allows nothing of the curatorial context to be left as a supplement.

NOTES

1- Lawrence Weiner considers statements as pieces that can be materialized in various ways or just imagined, as formulated in his "Declaration of Intent" (1968): 1. *The artist may construct the piece.* 2. *The piece may be fabricated.* 3. *The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*

2- Daniel Buren's *Jamais Deux Fois la Même*, in the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, is, when exhibited, made from the artist's famous striped wallpaper. Instructions attached to its certificate state that the piece can be presented with any other work in the space but it must entirely cover one or several walls, which can be any size. The colour of the stripes must change in each exhibition and the piece must be dated 1968- followed by the date of the actual exhibition.

3- On Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Stack of sweets *Public Opinion*, see the case study introduced by Nancy Spector in "Preserving the Immaterial: A Conference on Variable Media," at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on March 30–31, 2001.

4- For example Martin Creed's *Work No. 227 (The lights going on and off)*, 2000, which won the Turner Prize in 2001.

5- Michel Blazy's carrot paste wall coverings can, like Buren's wallpaper, cover one or several walls. They need several days in a warm and damp atmosphere for mould to start growing before it is left to evolve and decay in a normal atmosphere once the exhibition is open to the public.

6- Alfred North Whitehead. *The concept of nature. Tarrner lectures delivered in Trinity College, November, 1919* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1920). See also: *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology. Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh During the Session 1927-1928* (Macmillan, New York, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK).

7- See Michael Fried's article "Art and Objecthood" published in *Artforum* in 1967.

8- "/.../ The major aesthetic terms are not in but dependent upon this autonomous object and exist as unfixed variables that find their definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator." Robert Morris. "Notes on Sculpture," *Artforum*, 1/Feb. 1966, 2/Oct. 1966.

9- These points are better developed in my essay: Aav et A.Viguier. *Logique du Cadre, précédents et conséquences de la néo avant-garde* (Hôtel des Bains Éditions, 2005).

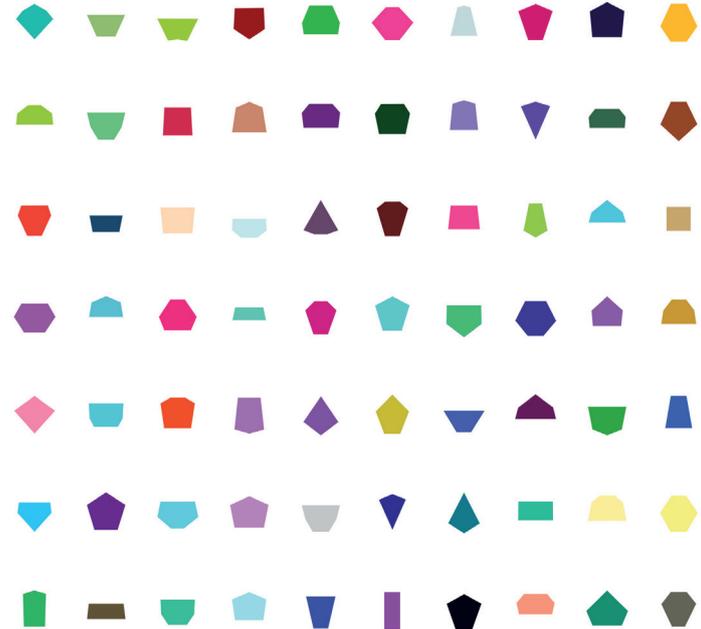
PROCESS INVARIANCE OBJECT. ON 70 PRINTS, EDITION 2008

Aav, One Shapeless and Colourless painting, 2008

This is a limited edition of prints numbered from 0 to 70. But why is it called a multiple if the prints' form (shape and colour) are all different? Because what makes them the same as one another (invariant) is not a fixed form but the dynamic pattern (algorithm) producing the variable forms. The template is not rigid but fluctuating within a space of possibilities. That is where their sameness is.

The prints represent The Object I make and which can be produced from a similar algorithm. Moreover, an Object, after Ad Reinhardt's paintings, is always the same Object whatever shape or colour it is. This method allows for freedom and beauty in the tradition of abstraction but it only leads to a hollow core.

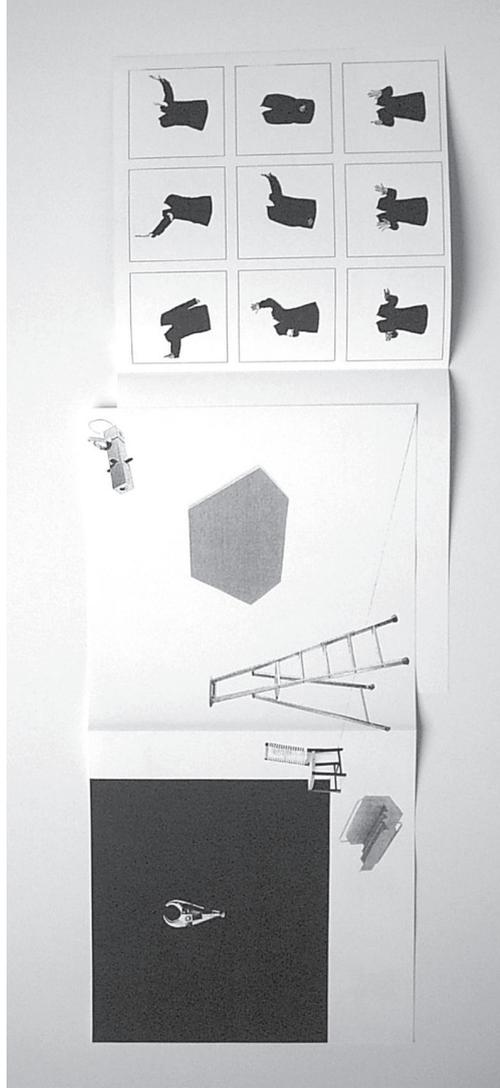
This edition was not the first of the kind, Bernard Cache had developed a similar concept of seriality in design.



ROUTES OF BEING / DANCING THE CURATORIAL

In contemporary art each artwork is a case and curatorial practices are a casuistry. Each work is correlated with a particular (distributed and coordinated) curatorial performance where the spirit and the letter dance together.

Memo 2015



WHY THE CURATORIAL. An externalist view of art

From the book's point of view post-object art did twice a better job than generally acknowledged. It not only sabotaged the physical object's static substance ontology but also reformulated what an object is. A new object to start again with.

ISBN 978-0-646-94208-7



9 780646 942087