

PHILIP MONK

Thinking Through Curating

What I have to say today is in reaction to what I heard at the York Conference on curating (*The Contemporary Curator: New Attitudes and Criteria*, at which I heard only attitude from the floor and very little criteria from the professional panel.) I want to title my presentation here *Thinking Through Curating*, with the emphasis on the preposition: thinking right to the end, to the ends of curating. I would like to think of curating as an activity, as a discipline in its own right, with ends proper to it. At the same time, this title is doubly inflected: *thinking* through curating. This minor emphasis on thinking treats curating as a means of demonstrating whose character is still to be determined but which is consequent upon that thinking through to its end. What kind of thinking curating is and what its knowledge consists of, if it is a type of knowledge at all, is something I hope to indicate. Although the third word of the title “curating” is not emphasized, it is not to be effaced in another activity or another demand outside it—far from it.

I believe curating to be neither a disappearing behind the immediacy of the work of art nor a means to another end, whether critique or social commitment. Each of these two positions takes curating as a wrong, either a wrong to the artist, or his or her intention, or a wrong to another value which finds its expression in the attribution of an ideological condition: for or against; and which claims that there can be an assertion of correct value of an ideological nature in art or curatorial practice to the exclusion of other concerns and a language to discuss them; and that this attribution can be

precisely controlled in its effects. It is this latter attribution, and its miscalculation, that has opened art to a political agenda from the right. As a means to an end other than curating (one subverting from within and the other from outside), the curator is called to efface himself, once again as a withdrawal behind the immediacy of the work of art, as a pure vehicle for the artist, or as an anonymous agency for a social commitment. As either agency or vehicle there is nothing self-directed or self-articulated, the curator is a faceless bureaucrat, a pure functionary delivering the value of the work or political aim as its merest representative.

Each of these positions consequently has a model of representation. One follows the notion of transparency: curating must effect the work of art without the least remainder, with no curatorial noise contaminating or interrupting the communicative process. In curating, the curator must disappear letting the work of art shine forth in its immediacy, the curatorial act transparent to this end. And as it is a work, the work of art's intention can only be purely signalled by the restitution of the gallery to the conditions of the studio. The instituted context for the curator, then, is doubly detached—as a practice and as a place.

The other model of representation follows a notion of adequation, where a representation is measured against the real and found commensurate or lacking in depicting or projecting real or ideal social conditions. A representation, therefore, can be verified against the real (or ideal), found correct or not. Passing from what is

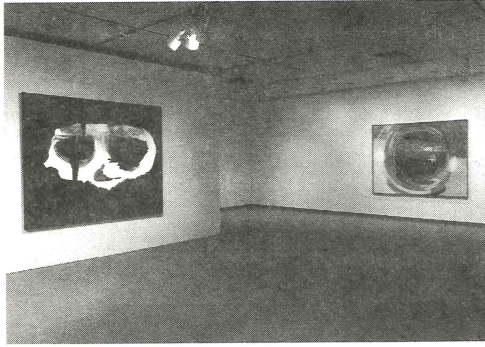
really an epistemological condition to a political sense, representation takes on a structurally related meaning as representative. One represents another, one acts as a litigant for another—for *the other*, speaks for the other, makes demands or represents demands on his or her part. Slipping from the language of science or cognition to the language of ethics, from adequation to demand, from the field of cognition to that of justice, we might ask what contradictory criteria curating is being asked to fulfil? And are these contradictory criteria perhaps not a result of two languages which are incommensurable and that find their site of contradiction in the notion of representation itself?

It comes as no surprise that transparency and adequation derive from the same notion of representation. And both call for the effacement of the curator in this representation, on the one hand, as a saintly humility in bringing the work of art to its presence (one definition of representation is “bringing into presence.”) in standing behind the expression of another: the artist; on the other hand, as a dutiful stepping aside, once again bringing into view (or presence) the expression of an other or the representation of a new set of “facts”: race, class, gender.

Either of these two positions in curating freely may be chosen; who am I to say what other curators can or cannot do. I quarrel only when they are (empirically) claimed as grounds for curating in general or are (dogmatically) imposed from outside as demands curating must fulfil. As a curator, I have to find some positive

value in curating—otherwise why be a curator, a curator alone, which I am, and not a critic or historian, as well. That value has to be defined by curating itself and not be imposed from outside. Thus, we have to enquire as to the ends proper to curating. These ends will not necessarily be shared by artists, necessarily so since we pursue two practices, although, in the best circumstances, artists and curators work to the same purpose when they work together. Neither will these ends be shared by criticism or art history (and those curating from these fields usually will be fulfilling other ends); nor will they be shared by the aims of political activity which also is a language of ends. It takes a practitioner in the field, one who has understood the practice, its objects and institution, to *declare* what the ends of curating might be, to say what its discourse consists of, demonstratively. This is no more than saying that the practice of curating is in curating. This declaration is positive in a double sense: firstly, being valued; and, secondly, consisting of objects and events from which we may read off an intention or end. But as we are *talking* of curating and not actually curating here—the distinction is important—the declaration now will take on its verbal function.

The two questions I ask curating are, firstly, is curating a discipline in its own right? That is, is it a means to another end or is it an end in itself? That it may seem to subsume itself to the ends of works of art does not mean that it does not have an end in itself. Secondly, if curating is an end in itself, what authorizes



Shirley Wiitasalo

Installation view, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987-88

Left: *Black and White*, 1986; *Panorama*, 1986.

Photograph courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

its statements? Can they be at all self-legitimizing?

Demand and *declaration* will be the two poles around which I examine the role of curating. These terms are not so much opposites, although the positions from which they originate seem to be, coming from inside and outside curating; they are initially not so much opposites as they belong verbally to the same category of *prescriptives*. A prescription is a demand, a command or a rule; it is perhaps simplest for my purpose here to think of it as an order that enforces its correspondent, the addressee, to bring something about. What could prescriptives have to do with curating? Well, for one, we ask of both types of statements what legitimates them. It is always a question—especially in circumstances such as these panels—by what authority curating makes its statements, by what authority it legitimates one set of objects, one line of history or one group of artists over another, why it speaks with its voice and not that of another, why it does not let another speak. We ask for “proof” of authority, in effect, for another statement, which for prescriptives is the normative.

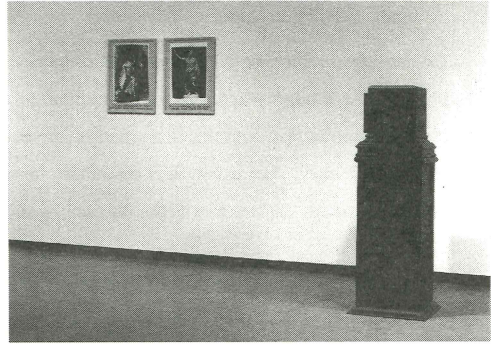
The question of authority is played out in the normative phrase. The norm is what turns a prescription into a law. *You ought to carry out such and such an action* formulates the prescription. The normative adds: *It is a norm decreed by x or y*. It puts the prescriptive phrase in quotation marks. One may wonder whence *x* and *y* hold their authority. They hold

it from this phrase, which situates them on the addressor instance in the universe authorizing the prescription. The referent for this universe is the prescriptive phrase, which is found to be authorized by that very fact.

This quotation is from Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Differend*, a book which examines irresolvable conflicts and which is subtitled *Phrases in Dispute*, and whose thesis is that different phrase regimens—the cognitive, the prescriptive, for instance—cannot be translated into one another nor derived one from the other. I do not want to rehearse the technical arguments here, one of whose importance is that authority cannot be deduced.¹

Source of authority is asked from curating, but not of the demand made on curating, the “you ought to” of demand’s prescription. But does not curating’s *declaration* differ from demand’s “ought” by belonging more to the order of the meta-prescriptive, to the normative itself? Can it, thus, claim a self-legitimizing authority? How can a group of objects be prescriptive or curating be *meta-prescriptive*? Any grouping or any installation is not necessarily prescriptive. It takes an *end* to make it so. The ends proper to curating are prescriptive, but not all prescriptives are ends. If authority cannot be deduced, then we must find the mechanisms of justification within prescription itself, that is, within the curatorial act, in the question how curating prescribes.

What would it mean to negotiate a change of



Ian Carr-Harris 1971-1977

Installation view, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1988-89

Left: *Nancy Higginson, 1949-, 1971;*

right: *Two Men Confirming, 1973.*

Photograph courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

terminology from representation to prescription? What would change if we gave up the concept of representation for curating, because if curating is prescriptive prescription does not follow a representational model? (Representation belongs to the cognitive regime, curating to the prescriptive: the two are incommensurable.) With representation would go the whole issue of authority, because the question of authority arises with representation and is bound to it, whereas with prescriptives it is left irresolvable and hence the problem dissipates in other possibilities made available. Such as, and more importantly for me and our circumstances here, prescription would reorient our sense of history. History is not something that represents a past; it does not picture a past as it was; history is in the future—a result of prescriptives; it is not something passively received but actively created by us through these prescriptive acts. We do not say, pointing to something in place, “this has been our history,” but “this *will be* our history,” declaring something is to be done. “It is proper to prescriptives,” writes Lyotard in *Just Gaming*, “not to make commensurate their discourse with a reality, since the ‘reality’ they speak of is still to be.”

If prescription replaces the model of representation, it follows that new positions or functions must be thought for the poles of addressor and addressee, sender and receiver, curator and viewer. Prescription presents a new relation between addressor and addressee: that of obligation. As prescription replaces representation, so

obligation supplants authority. The terminology “prescription” and “obligation” does not clothe authority in a new vocabulary. A representation stands to somebody for something, but the authority of the representation is occulted in the absence of the addressor (the sender); the representation is present to the addressee only (the viewer). In the case of prescriptions, the pole of sender is empty: we receive the obligation alone and cannot answer the question of authority; but we must answer to the obligation. If authority cannot be deduced, and if we cannot even say who occupies that position, *what*, rather than *who*, obligates us? What we know in receiving the prescription is carried out in the act that follows it. We are left with the effects of the prescriptive act. A prescription has an effect that carries on. In this the obligation is confirmed.

Lyotard differentiates the norm from the prescription:

It is sufficient that the norm be formulated for it to be the norm and for the obligation it norms to be legitimated. Instantly, its addressor is the legislator. Instantly, the addressee of the obligation is beholden to respect the prescription. The performative effectuates the legitimation of the obligation by formulating it. There is no need to link onto the norm in order for its legitimacy to be averred.

This is not the case for the prescriptive. It entails the requirement of a subsequent phrase, wherein it will be averred that the prescription has or has not been obeyed, that

the new phrase universe it commands its addressee to present has or has not taken place. For, in the obligation, it is up to the addressee to link onto the chain, and he or she can do so in so many ways. That is why it is customary to say that the obligation entails the freedom of the one who is obligated.

A curatorial arrangement of objects is a nascent narrative. Prescriptives take place in narratives. Curating proposes narratives in which these prescriptives are situated. While the ends of curating are prescriptive, the ensuing statements are not final. They are provisional. As curators, we expect others to link onto these provisional statements: critics to criticize, curators to propose other statements, a public to take up the value expressed in the prescriptive as its own. Unfortunately, that chain usually is broken right from the first curatorial enunciation. Obligation lies in linking onto the chain. This linking, however, is often refused in disallowing the curatorial statement as the opening of a dialogue that demands response, instead returning curating to a position of authority and abstractly contesting its power and not actual practice.

A provisional statement is proposed and it is proposed within and as a configuration of objects. That statement is not necessarily authoritative at that moment, dogmatically standing outside the works with its a priori view inscribed into the presentation. Nor is the statement essentially and inherently present within the authenticity of the works naturally given to empirical view and ordering. The statement will become part of the universe to which it refers—objects configuring a history—in time, that is, in the future that the prescriptive act brings about. It does not synthesize (or authorize) what is on view when it *takes place* as this display, but if its provisional statement is successful, it will become part of the series of statements synthesized in the future: statements consisting of future displays, commentaries and histories. A proposal is carried on in the future as part of history if it is accepted by linking on. Another linking may be a rejection or a counter-proposal, in which case the first statement may not live on in the documents we call the institutional display of art or in another's history.

This dialogue within a temporal complexity, too

often, unfortunately, is reduced to the personal, the arbitrary occupant of the so-called position of authority, to the voice and its place of enunciation as an abstract site of authority and not to the *phrase* and its rules of formation within this historical conditionality. One act is taken as blocking another, one voice as preventing another. Granted, only one statement may happen at one time, in one space, but it calls for linkages. Instead, a demand is made once again, a call for the multiplicity of voices to emerge from one site, even at one time, in one voice. Either a voice has to be multi-representative or it has to step aside in order to let others voices speak. In either case, it is now impossible for its own enunciation to be heard.

The position from which the curator speaks in his or her curatorial practice is not one of authority. The normative is embedded in the curatorial proposition as the condition of address. The prescription a curator proposes through curating is carried within the presentation. The position of the addressor of the prescriptive is always empty: we all receive prescriptives. In fact, the first one who is obligated is the curator and he or she must obligate others in turn through his or her curating practice. To quote Lyotard a final time:

A phrase is obligatory if its addressee is obligated. Why he or she is obligated is something he or she can perhaps think to explain. In any case, the explanation requires further phrases, in which he or she is no longer situated as addressee but as the addressor, and whose stakes are no longer those of obeying, but those of convincing a third party of the reasons one has for obeying.

Every discourse is a received discourse. In art, we receive these discourses through what is written or what is displayed. We are obligated to accept or reject these discourses: accept as a value passively or as a vocal adherent; reject by proposing new genealogical series (i.e., new values.) The curator's function primarily is to be addressed by a demand, that of works seen and unseen, which, through his or her own curatorial activity, become the referents of future phrases rather than past discourses. The curator is obligated to be attentive to these demands and then to act on them,

actualize them as referents. In so doing, he or she passes on that obligation as a prescription to others, which may also take the form of language: a history. Those who are addressed, however, always judge these prescriptions through the works of art presented beyond any authority, that is, they judge them in this singular case of presentation.

The knowledge that curating delivers—be it critical, epistemological or historical, if it delivers knowledge at all—must take into account the *presentational* rather than representational nature of curating. The thinking that curating is for me is neither cognitive nor critical; the end for curating that I choose is historical, but a history that is declarative not descriptive. It is a history that works back from the present in order to let the past justify the present. What I am saying, however, is no more than my old theme of constituting value for what is here, even if ten years ago it was spoken in the language of representation; I refer to my 1982 catalogue text to *Language and Representation*. We are responsible, here and now, for creating our own history. A history we value cannot take place without an idea in mind: an end. An end implies a finality. A finality does not necessarily imply, however, that we are given means to that end (an a priori definition or concept); or that we will have means by which to judge: there are no criteria and consensus comes only after the fact (and after the act of prescription.) A finality is something we give ourselves. It is an idea. But it is an idea that has to be imagined. If so much of prescription is phrased in the language of “ought,” then, in every sense, we get the history we deserve.

Note

1. My dependency on Lyotard's technical arguments threads through my presentation from here on.