

The Deadbeat: A Fantasy of Curatorial Non-Production

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About a year ago I began holding on to my receipts. A timidly impulsive spender, I find myself making many small purchases over the course of the day for things I don't need: snacks, cigarettes, bottled water, plants, etc. The detail of the data recorded on the receipts interested me at first, but over time I have begun to think of them as strange, insignificant documents of my actions. Many of the receipts I hold on to actually list the name of the employee that completed my transaction, making these pieces of paper records not only of our transaction, but our interaction as well. The receipt is a confirmation that what happened really did happen, and acts as proof in case you need to reverse the transaction. Over the course of the past year or so there has been a movement in the practices of artists and curators involved with a somewhat similar attempt at transparency in their communications. Emails, checks, money transfers, receipts, and other documents and records are being presented as artworks or supplementary exhibition materials. Last fall, New York non-profit gallery Artist's Space made available on their website a spreadsheet listing out expenses for the production of Aaron Flint Jamison's exhibition at their Greene Street location, an intentionally lackluster attempt at transparency in an otherwise opaque installation. These attempts at transparency show an effort, albeit a consciously abject effort, from the contemporary art community to expose some of the systems that frame the production of artwork, exhibitions, and value in general. There is an earnest futility in these efforts, as it is perhaps obvious that these complex systems couldn't be represented that simply.

An obvious note is that much of this effort towards transparency is in hopes of exposing the production and exchange of capital, something that comes from an institution growing into an ever-more capitalist structure, while maintaining a tradition of institutional critique. This critique of capitalism is important, especially for artists, but there is not as much of a tradition of institutional critique from curators. Positioned as managers of the subjective immaterial labor systems that allow contemporary exhibitions to come into being, curators occupy an interesting part of the machine.ⁱ As information and social communication become catalysts for the production of value in contemporary art, the middlemen of these information transfers hold a lot of power and are given opportunity to feather their own nests. Soren Andereasen and Lars Bang Larsen write in their essay *The Middleman: Beginning to Talk About Mediation*, "The figure of the middleman is typically seen as a conformist, parasitical agent responsible for short-circuiting authenticity. The middleman has an aura of mediocrity. The middleman is average, and a suspect character."ⁱⁱ Positioned as such a

suspect figure, it seems only natural that a movement away from capitalism would necessarily start with the curator.

Before discussing a model of curating that may exist outside of a capitalist structure, it seems necessary to define the ways in which current models of curating are complicit with the current capitalist structure. The contemporary curator manages and organizes the ways in which cultural value is created, and engages in a capitalist art structure predominantly by standardizing its production. Much of this production comes from immaterial labor, as exhibitions come into being through the collaboration and communication of a number of subjective “laborers”. It is in fact the direct involvement of the curator that makes this immaterial labor operate in a capitalist manner, as excessive management turns the subject-laborer into a relay of codification and a transmitter of messagesⁱⁱⁱ.

One of the most basic ways that the production of exhibitions and, in turn, the cultural and informational value of objects is standardized is through the regular scheduling of exhibitions. The contemporary curator, who works for some gallery, exhibiting physical exhibitions, usually has an expectation that a new exhibition will go up every one, two or three months. This is a model that forces the curator into a constant stream of communication-production. They must communicate with artists and talk exhibitions into being at a steady clip, as looming deadlines and the need to produce override all else. Of course there are many alternative models to this, and much of an effort has been made by self-organized spaces towards a less standardized model of exhibitions. It seems to be, however, that any curatorial project that indeed “exhibits” work in any format ultimately standardizes production to some extent. It begs the question of whether or not production itself is necessarily standardized. A curatorial practice that avoided the standardization of production would need to employ some kind of force that took control away from the curator: some aspect of chance—perhaps an unreliable benefactor or an argumentative co-curator.

Perhaps the most integral aspect of the role of curating is the act of being the middleman in a communicative sense. Social networking and the transfer of information through communication do indeed create cultural value for artworks today, but that seems to be dependant on the necessity of artworks to be exhibited. The linear routes of artworks through artist, curator, gallery, collector, or whatever other paths it may take, are predominantly organized according to profitability. To exist outside of a capitalist structure it seems as if a curator would need to remove all potential profitability for themselves or anyone down the line— that is, remove the need for production from their role. Would a curator that operates outside of a capitalist structure seem like somewhat of a deadbeat? A purely social figure? A lazy curator? They would talk, but never talk something into

being, and never expect anything to materialize from their communications. If, however, all curators followed a model of deadbeat curating, there would be no exhibitions and there would be no art market, so it seems as if the deadbeat curator can only exist as an anomaly, or an outcast- this returns to the notion of earnest futility.

That is not to say, however, that in this case an exercise in futility is not worthwhile. The model of a lazy curator is not necessarily a proposal for change in contemporary art, but rather an analytic tool, or a scope to view the role of the curator through. It shouldn't be overlooked that curators remain managers of production, and in a capitalist society it is important to keep a critical eye on modes of production. The tradition of institutional critique is plagued by an inherent internalization of its own methods, indebted to the very institutions it questions. This problem can be approached from a different direction when discussing the role of the curator, who holds a very different position in regards to the institution when compared to an artist. The curator has the leverage to mold institutions in some way or another, at least more so than the artist does, through less reliance on institutional support and more room for self-organized initiatives. When the critiqued institution becomes capitalism, however, it needs to be assessed whether or not the curator necessarily must rely on these capitalist structures. Private capital accumulation seems difficult to circumvent, unless the production of goods, or goods with any value, was circumvented. Some form of wage labor, however immaterial, seems equally necessary in today's art market. Alternative models of curating undoubtedly are able to circumvent direct capital accumulation (for themselves or anyone down the line), but putting it into practice is another story. Would a critique from curating, then, fall into the same traps as institutional critiques from the 1970's and 80's? A curatorial practice that enacted this critique may be too futile an effort when placed within the overall system of the art market. The curator is positioned as a mediator in the communications that fuel contemporary art production, and we know not to trust the middleman. If the model of a lazy curator is not feasible in practice, it can be an analytic tool through which we view contemporary curators, keeping a critical eye on our contemporary managers of production.

ⁱ Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," from *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006), 134-147. Lazzarato mentions that "Participative management is a technology of power, a technology for creating and controlling the 'subjective processes.'" The collaborative processes through which exhibitions come into being seems to take on a similar form to what he is discussing. If we take the curator to have a predominantly organizational role, it seems fitting that he or she would act as a manager of this process.

ⁱⁱ Soren Andereasen and Lars Bang Larsen, "The Middleman: Beginning to Talk About Mediation," in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (London: Open Editions, 2011).

