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Book review: Curating and the Educational Turn and Raising Frankenstein

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Book Review: *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., London/Amsterdam: Open Editions and De Appel Arts Centre, 2010 and *Raising Frankenstein: Curatorial Education and Its Discontents*, Kitty Scott, ed., Banff, AB/London: The Banff Centre Press and Koenig Books, 2011.

Art-as-education, education-as-art, the art of educating artists: these are only a few of the permutations and turns of phrase employed by the contributors to these two volumes to describe the recent confluence of art and pedagogy in contemporary curatorial practice. Published in the last two years, *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010), edited by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, and *Raising Frankenstein: Curatorial Education and Its Discontents* (2011), edited by Kitty Scott, cover a wide range of case studies—including artists projects that take on a pedagogical function, the role of education and public programming in the museum and the recent proliferation of graduate-level curatorial programs—in an effort to analyze why artists and curators have turned to education as a mode of cultural production and, more self-reflexively, what it means to try to integrate art- and exhibition-making into existing systems of education. Uniting both volumes is a concern for how we, as artists, curators and art intellectuals, might maintain the sense of urgency and radicality that incited a turn to pedagogy as a model for curating and art making in an environment that is increasingly standardized and regularized through commercial, government and institutional forces. While O'Neill and Wilson's edited compilation of texts is broad and self-reflexive, encouraging contributors to contest the very terms of the debate, it is sometimes overly democratic in its range of subject matter, making it difficult to see how individual author's observations might relate to curatorial practice in a tangible, day-to-day way. Scott's smaller, more tightly focused book, on the other hand, demonstrates how the issues surrounding curating and pedagogy might be harnessed into a more practical handbook format that makes some sensible assertions about how curators should be

educated: not in a hypothetical, idealized future, but in the limited and contingent conditions of the present.

Framed as a companion volume to *Curating Subjects* (2007), O'Neill's previous edited volume on recent curatorial practice, *Curating and the Educational Turn* comprises commissioned and previously published papers that respond to the proposition that "curating, and art production more broadly, have produced, undergone or manifested an educational turn."[1] Opening with a series of twenty essays and moving gradually towards a collection of eight conversations, dialogues and email exchanges, the volume brings together artists, curators and cultural critics who reflect on curatorial work in its widest sense, as a strategy of presenting artistic practices to the public. In *Curating and the Educational Turn*, curating is posited not as a discrete set of tasks, responsibilities or subject positions, but as a series of discursive gestures and presentational strategies in the field of contemporary art, reflecting the editors' hypothesis that the turn to pedagogy has involved the "'curatorialisation' of education whereby the educative process often becomes the object of curatorial production."[2] Following the editors' lead, several authors address the educative process in contemporary art more broadly, such as Jan Verwoert's connection of curatorial work to the communications industry, Simon Sheikh's analysis of the role of the museum as public pedagogue, Ute Meta Bauer's account of the effects of the market on art and education, and Sally Tallant's report on the histories of pedagogy in the gallery through the more traditional forums of public programming.

The most compelling texts in the book are those that critically address the current social, political and economic conditions of curatorial practice, however, emphasizing the open-ended, processual nature of both education and curating and the radical possibilities these practices

[1] Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, "Introduction," *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds. (London/Amsterdam: Open Editions and De Appel Arts Centre, 2010) 11-22.
[2] O'Neill and Wilson 13.

might offer for new forms of pedagogy to emerge in the contemporary art context. In an expanded version of her now-famous essay, "Turning," originally published in a 2008 issue of *e-flux Journal*, Irit Rogoff carefully unpicks the etymology of "the turn," speculating that the language of turning might function as an important model for understanding pedagogy's use in the arts: "In a turn, we turn *away* from something or *towards* or *around* something and it is *we* who are in movement, rather than *it*. Something in us is activated, perhaps even actualised, as we turn."[3] By emphasizing our own activity and movement, Rogoff hopes to maintain the sense of urgency that informed the inception and production of pedagogical art projects, concerned that education initiatives in curating "are in danger of being cut off from their original impetus and may be hardening into a recognisable style" (a criticism that has been leveled at similar "turns" in artistic practice, such as "the linguistic turn" of the 1960s and, more recently, the "turn to relational aesthetics" in the 1990s).[4] Janna Graham's text, "Between a Pedagogical Turn and a Hard Place," is similarly concerned with addressing the urgencies raised by the material conditions of where and how art is produced and presented, encouraging curators and artists to "think with conditions," a strategy of analysis "where thinking is understood as a practice that is inseparable from action and from a commitment to living and working otherwise. Autonomy, here, is not a place outside of situations of complexity, but a collective refusal of pre-established terms."[5] For Graham and Rogoff, education and curatorial practices cannot be conceived as reactionary to or separate from the rest of social and cultural production, but need to be thought

[3] Irit Rogoff, "Turning," *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds. (London/Amsterdam: Open Editions and De Appel Arts Centre, 2010) 32-46, 42.
[4] Rogoff 34.
[5] Janna Graham, "Between a Pedagogical Turn and a Hard Place: Thinking with Conditions," *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds. (London/Amsterdam: Open Editions and De Appel Arts Centre, 2010) 124-139, 139.

as "part of its ongoing complexities, producing realities, not reacting to them" if they are to maintain their critical possibilities.[6]

Where O'Neill and Wilson's volume is ambitiously all encompassing in its analysis of art and education, Kitty Scott's *Raising Frankenstein: Curatorial Education and Its Discontents* is a cogently organized "handbook for curating students" which restricts its purview to the issues at stake in educating curators.[7] Compiled from five papers and one panel discussion originally delivered at the conference "Trade Secrets: Education/Collection/History," held at the Banff International Curatorial Institute in 2008, the title is taken from Cuauhtémoc Medina's essay, which describes the curator "as some kind of Frankenstein who exists in a confusion of identities and disciplinary constructs."[8] The issue that Scott's contributors respond to is how to guide, or "raise," future Frankensteins through curatorial education.

Unlike *Curating and the Educational Turn*, whose authors use pedagogy and education interchangeably, *Raising Frankenstein* makes a clear delineation between training (the standardization and instruction of a particular set of skills or tasks) and educating (an experiential process that might aim at destabilizing notions of standardization). As Theresa Gleadowe suggests in her essay "What Does a Curator Need to Know?", because curatorial work responds to a set of conditions or possibilities, curatorial education needs to be inquisitive, open and dynamic, asking what a curator needs to know in the given context: "Like the biennial, the curating course needs to be a permanently *unstable institution*, always prepared to question its own premises."[9] In his text, "Raising Frankenstein," Medina puts forth a similar distinction, arguing that "you may not be able to *teach curating*, but it is perfectly viable (and increasingly

[6] Rogoff 39.
[7] Kitty Scott, "Introduction," *Raising Frankenstein: Curatorial Education and Its Discontents*, Kitty Scott, ed. (Banff, AB/London: The Banff Centre Press and Koenig Books, 2011) 8-13, 10.
[8] Scott 11.
[9] Teresa Gleadowe, "What Does a Curator Need to Know?", *Raising Frankenstein: Curatorial Education and Its Discontents*, Kitty Scott, ed. (Banff, AB/London: The Banff Centre Press and Koenig Books, 2011) 16-27, 26.

productive) to *educate curators*" by providing them with the space and time for "speculative and inter-subjective" study that allows students to develop their practice.[10] Scott Watson, the director of a graduate curatorial program at the University of British Columbia, likewise remarks in the panel discussion that no one really "teaches" in graduate school, but rather uses it as a space for research and investigation, "a space to ask questions" that the public gallery and commercial art market cannot always accommodate.[11]

These essays make clear that flux and instability characterize contemporary curatorial practice and that, in order to be effective, the systems and programs put in place to educate curators need to critically reflect on these contingencies, even in the face of the standardizing pressures of academic institutions, such as the university. It is perhaps for this reason that so many of the writers in Scott's handbook turn to metaphors of biological mutation to describe curatorial practice and its education strategies, including Frankensteinian assemblage (Medina) and cancerous growth (Lourdes Morales): bodily afflictions that trouble the boundaries between matter and destabilize assumptions about the autonomous human subject. By presenting curatorial and pedagogical practices as messy, volatile forces, both O'Neill and Wilson's volume and Scott's handbook invest curating with a critical agenda that seeks to turn away from convention and seek unrealized possibilities in the complex, everyday conditions of the field of contemporary art.

[10] Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Raising Frankenstein," *Raising Frankenstein: Curatorial Education and Its Discontents*, Kitty Scott, ed. (Banff, AB/London: The Banff Centre Press and Koenig Books, 2011) 28-37, 32-33.
[11] Scott Watson in "Curatorial Education and Its Discontents," *Raising Frankenstein: Curatorial Education and Its Discontents*, Kitty Scott, ed. (Banff, AB/London: The Banff Centre Press and Koenig Books, 2011) 94-106, 102.