
A Collective Introduction

DENA DAVIDA, JANE GABRIELS,
VÉRONIQUE HUDON, AND MARC PRONOVOST

Dear Reader,

To share perspectives as the four co-editors of this large volume of work, here are our distinct pathways towards this project.

THE SCENE

Dena Davida

A movement to professionalize the well-established practice of live arts¹ curatorial surfaced, as if spontaneously, within the second decade of the new millennium. This evolution came to life within various circles of artistic directors of performing arts festivals and venues, and university arts educators in the United States, Canada, Western and Eastern Europe, Australia, parts of the Middle East, and beyond. There appeared to be a collective acknowledgement of a crucial situation: this significant practice had never truly developed characteristics of a professional field of study and practice with its own body of literature and discourse.

During the four years we have been assembling this book, the literature and educational opportunities in this field have been gaining ground. To date, these developments have taken the form of special topic theater journals (Ferdman and Sellar 2014; Malzacher, Tupajić, and Zanki 2010; Sellar 2017), the publication of several key anthologies (Bottiroli, Polenta, and Belfini 2015; Keil 2017; Malzacher 2017; von Bismark, Schaffaff, and Weski 2012), and sporadic articles and chapters in various other journals and books.² Global and local historiographies of this field are yet to be written, and its chronological development is still to be compiled. (Take note graduate students!) Within the last two

decades, live arts (also called performance and performing arts) curation has been the thematic orientation of at least a dozen symposiums, numerous formal and informal conversations among peers, conferences and convenings, and is by now routinely mentioned and occasionally discussed at gatherings of arts-presenting networks.³ University level coursework is currently on offer in four master's level programs,⁴ and several university classes have been established within fine arts and theater departments. We have also taken note of a dozen master's thesis and doctoral dissertations on the subject that have already been completed with more on the way, largely (but not exclusively) from within existing curatorial studies programs in the visual arts.

Until recently, the only professional education opportunities for directors of festivals and theater venues had been located within arts management programs, often housed within the walls of business administration schools. These were specifically designed to hone the skills of administrators and managers, many of whom have claimed the role of general but also artistic direction of theater venues, despite often lacking in-depth knowledge of artistic practice and theory over the course of their education. Over time, these arts management graduates have taken the helm of hundreds of regional theaters, particularly in North America. These business-educated directors have (predictably) fostered the predominance of a profit-making "industry" paradigm for the arts in which, despite working largely within nonprofit and community-oriented models, artistic work has often been characterized as a "commodity" to be promoted through "branding," in which spectators are seen as "consumers" of "cultural products." A few, but not many, risk-taking contemporary performing artists have by-and-large been able to flourish in these environments.

In contrast, there have been practicing artists, dramaturges, and other arts-educated artistic directors—particularly in larger cities—who have founded, and who determine the programming of, arts presenting organizations, and have begun emulating the model of the contemporary visual arts curator. In contrast to the business paradigm of programming, they were largely immersed in the challenges of supporting and presenting transgressive, socially and politically engaged forms of performance work by artists who were committed to resisting commodification and devoted to experimentation, social justice, and community engagement. At the core of these live arts curators' belief systems lies the notion of "care" and the intrinsic value of artistic expression. Quite a few of these curator-artistic directors came to their position with university diplomas from a wide range of arts-related fields such as art history and criticism, cultural studies, aesthetics, performance studies, dramaturgy, and even linguistics. They understand their work as that of moving beyond the selection of artistic projects to include the conception of thematic frameworks and texts, educational and community-oriented activities, and the creation of innovative forms for performance events. They are committed to the articulation of contexts in

which artists might engage in deeper relationships with audiences and the wider community, and so to inscribe artistic creation and public presentation as a vital progressive force within the social and political fabric their societies.

COMPOSING THE BOOK

Véronique Hudon

This book bears witness to this new profession of live arts curation by questioning its contribution and its relationship to traditions, roles, and functions that are specific to performance. The texts in this book embrace the practices of the live arts in all of their current hybrid forms and variations: from performance to performing arts, to events predicated on citizen participation. And so, the live arts incorporate an ensemble of performative practices in which live bodies in action are the thread linking all of these artistic approaches. Live arts curation emerges in correlation with those artistic experimental practices that are engaged in renewing their relationship with the public and even to the field of art itself, all the while distancing themselves from the disciplinary characteristics belonging to the fine arts.

Dena Davida

In 2011, as we reflected on the predicament of live arts curation, Jane Gabriels, Dominique Fontaine, and I founded in Québec the nonprofit International Community of Performing Arts Curators (CICA-ICAC). After creating our website and staging an international symposium, we launched a demanding four-year project: the publication of this collection. Véronique Hudon, Marc Pronovost, Jane Gabriels, and I formed the editorial committee, aiming to balance our diverse experiences, orientations, and skills.

And so it was in 2014 we began gradually assembling an eclectic international, intergenerational group of authors from among institutional and independent curators working within and without museums, galleries, and theaters. We determined to include the voices of artists and artist-curators, and also arts critics and critical and cultural arts educators and researchers. Hoping to enlarge the global scope of our book, we reached out to those whose curatorial practices hailed from beyond our North American-European perspectives and geographies. We sought out and encouraged authors to write about live arts curation as it is manifest in their countries of origin: Nigeria, Singapore, the Caribbean, Egypt, and the Philippines. In the last phase, we conferred the crucial “framing” sections (the prologue and epilogue) to Florian Malzacher (2010) and Tom Sellar (2014 and 2017), who had co-edited those initial special topic issues on performing arts and performance curation in theater journals from Croatia and the United States.

The chapters take various literary forms: personal reflections, essays, critical research essays, letters, interviews, group discussions, and affirmations. In the end, this collection's heterogeneous character is emblematic of the elusive contours of the profession. The result is a multifarious juxtaposition of perspectives that point our field away from the desire to create uniformity and toward crossing boundaries in this developing field of study and practice.

THEMATIC ORGANIZATION

Véronique Hudon

The texts gathered here are a reflection of the current prominence of practices embedded in venues specific to the art world—galleries, festivals, theaters, and museums—but also those that lie outside of the usual circuits of these public spaces, both alternative and virtual. The authors analyze these phenomena within a variety of cultural situations. The social and political resonances of the curatorial practices discussed here are at once a sign of resistance and of conciliation, rejecting oversimplified postures in view of a world in which cultural representations are constantly renewing themselves.

The first section “Historical Framings” clarifies specific historic circumstances and trajectories that trace exchanges between the arts of space and the arts of time, political contexts and performance, institutional and collaborative formats, artistic research and practice, and by situating these transformations within a unifying framework: curation.

The second section “Ethical Proposals” is grounded in the idea of “care” and asks questions that are linked to the constraints of production, presentation, and touring that are specific to working with the body. At the center of the live arts, people variously serve as material, performers, and subjects. They are mobilized from the moment the studio work begins until it is fully embodied in a performance. And that is why these works problematize certain ethical questions that arise when human beings are involved. With the rise of globalization and the growth of the art market, curators are obliged to develop an ethic that insures adequate working conditions for artists as well as access for the public to aesthetically varied works.

Artist-curators, serving as both producers and presenters, are growing in importance. They participate in all the different phases of production, remaining conscious of their influence on the final work, as well as the different possibilities of mediation between the work and the public. The processes presented in the “Artist-Curators” section, support more experimental forms that lie in the margins of traditional production and presentation conditions in the performing arts. The majority of the contributions seek to construct collaborative and

alternative forms on the periphery of habitual circuits, operating in independent networks.

The following section “Exhibitions as Events” presents curators who revisit the format of the exhibition by opening up to temporal and human dimensions. Many working in the live arts question traditional forms of exhibitions through their event-based practices. These authors also pose the question: what kinds of archives, documents, and memory might be developed for productions that are ephemeral, event-based, and embodied? The live arts enter the space of galleries and museums in a critical manner, by advancing living bodies laden with their own histories and understandings, and their own ways of functioning. This section analyzes a strong tendency within museums today, one in which emblematic dance and performance artists (Boris Charmatz, Tino Sehgal, Yvonne Rainer, Xavier le Roy) consider the exhibition as a performative site.

In the “Artivism” section, the work of curators takes the form of social activism where relationships with the community-at-large are the foundation of the curatorial approach, and in which citizens often participate. Multiple contexts are examined, reminding us of the diversity of the struggles, and how it is when art assumes an active role as a social medium. This section also illustrates an educational turn in the field of curation.

Finally, the last section “Institutional Reinventions” discusses institutional mutations, taking into consideration the forms and formats specific to the live arts: event-based, performative, and installation practices in which artwork is no longer objectified. In this context, the live arts can be seen as participating in the “spectacularization” of these institutions, forming a critique in their midst. It is also in this climate that institutional projects are born, as these institutions contradict disciplinary and cultural traditions by placing live arts practices in the center of the development.

THE BOOK IN THE WORLD OR WHAT THE BOOK MIGHT DO

Marc Pronovost

My work in what we call the “cultural mediation” and “social art” community is largely confined to Québec and France where the study and practice has been specifically developed. This concept is a mixture of artistic education, cultural facilitation, and crowdsourcing—that can be found everywhere around the world in a variety of configurations. Most curators today invite spectators to become part of the actual creation of the events, of the artistic objects themselves. They are no longer strictly “viewers.” They take pleasure in the experiences, becoming co-creators and co-conspirators.

Recent generations of spectators have visited museums, theaters, met with artists and creators and forged relationships with the arts. They have asked questions, and have even explored creative processes themselves. What does this mean for us, as social arts curators, arts educators, artistic directors and cultural mediators?

As curators, we are fostering meaning. Actually, we are “suggesting” ways for people to come up with their own meaning. We are sharing tools for them to approach and access the works; peek behind the curtain a bit and see what they make of it. Social arts curators are engaged in fostering relationships between audience, artists, and artworks. In doing so, how can we be better storytellers? How can we build stronger communities? How can we imagine new ways to encourage participation? How can we transform live arts into a shared, meaningful experience? How can we ask more powerful questions to both artists and publics? Working on this book has given me an opportunity to further acknowledge my role as a curator, to think and write about these practices.

Véronique Hudon

Live arts curation invites us to reinvent our relationship to artistic work through the presence of the active and sentient body, by way of an artistic statement (of the artist, their body, voice, and actions) and in interaction with the spectator, whose interpretations are made in continuity with the work. On the whole, live arts curation becomes the framework for artistic experimentation on a human scale. The curatorial statements distributed throughout the book take into account this experimental dimension by offering diverse definitions of curators and artists, fostering an understanding of these curatorial practices through inventive and multiple strategies. It gives room for as many kinds of definitions of the practice as there are curators.

Jane Gabriels

I have been thinking about what this book might do further in the world, and about who was (and is and could be) left out of the development of live arts curation that this book is part of building. In other words, as this book and the lineage of materials on live arts curation further coalesces, what happens to those voices also doing curatorial work who are left out of developments that are formalizing this work into a profession with its own literature and programs of study? I am thinking about live art curators not yet coming to the gatherings and who are not writing about their work, and who might not think of themselves as curators. What are we losing by not hearing their perspectives in this increasingly public conversation?

There are artist-curators and institutional curators working in organizations that are often described as “isolated” and/or removed from what is considered the main sources and reference points for contemporary curatorial practices in

live arts. I am wondering how these “off the grid” locales and/or groups might be seen for what they also are: bubbling places full of movement and possibilities worth actively reaching towards to see if they are interested in connecting their works and perspectives with these ongoing developments in curation.

And I am wondering how it could be possible to inquire and further inspire a continuous cycle of “folding-in” of margins to create layering of inclusions. How the work of folding-in might carry its own inspirations, and what more it will offer conversations on performance curation. For now, this book is a moment of coming together, a creative huddle, as we continue folding, cultivating, spilling over, gathering, listening.

Véronique Hudon

Curation offers different frames for the arts in which artworks are no longer isolated from artists, publics, and their social and political contexts. Curation provides a space for thinking about relations between the world and the artistic sphere.

Thank you for picking up this book and joining in the conversation. *Bonne lecture!*

DENA DAVIDA, PhD, has been a performer, contact improviser, choreographer, educator, curator, and researcher in the field of postmodern dance for forty years. Co-founder and curator of the *Tangente* dance presenting organization in Montréal (1980–2020) and the Festival International de Nouvelle Danse (1985–2001), she was also a guest lecturer in the Dance Department at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) (1979–2010) where she taught dance improvisation, composition, and theory. She completed doctoral studies in artistic dance ethnography at UQÀM (2006), edited *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance*, and has published widely on dance and culture. Devoting herself to the development of the literature and educational programs in live arts curation since 2010, she co-founded the International Community of Performing Arts Curators (2012), mounted an international symposium (2014), and taught Canada’s first master’s level seminar in live arts curation at UQÀM (2014).

JANE GABRIELS, PhD, is a performer, writer, and curator/producer. Her dissertation (Concordia University, Montréal) focused on artists, creative processes, curation, and nonprofits in the Bronx, New York, her professional and artistic home for twenty years with Pepatián. She co-organized symposiums on performance curation at the Université du Québec à Montréal (2014), Duke University (2015), and Concordia University with the University of Toronto

(2017). In 2012, she graduated from the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance. Co-founder of the International Community of Performing Arts Curators (2012), she co-taught Canada's first master's level seminar in live arts curation at UQAM. Currently, she is Executive Director at Made in BC-Dance on Tour (Vancouver), a co-Director of Pepatián, and a visiting scholar at the Institute for Performance Studies, Simon Fraser University (2018–19).

VÉRONIQUE HUDON is a researcher, author, and curator of living arts; her place of intervention is between the stage and the book, the theater and the gallery, her work touches on the exhibition and the dramaturgy, writing and performance. She is a PhD candidate in arts studies and practices at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Her research focuses on curation of the live arts, especially choreographic and performative exhibitions in museums. She currently collaborates with several periodicals in the arts field.

MARC PRONOVOST is co-founder of B21—an organization working on the evaluation of the social impact of artistic projects in relation to sustainable development goals. He holds an MA in Development Studies from the Graduate Institute of Geneva and works with various cultural and social organizations to create disruptive events that engage the public in a participatory creative process. He is also a fellow of the Salzburg Global Seminar, Austria.

NOTES

1. Instead of “performance” we chose to use the term “live arts” in the title of this book. We decided that although “live arts” does not yet benefit from universal agreement about its definition and parameters, it is a more inclusive description for multiple, experimental, and new practices in performance at this time. It suits this collection of work more than the term “performing arts,” which is generally employed to create a counterpoint to the “visual arts,” a disciplinary boundary that has recently become porous. We also found the concept of the “live arts” to be more inclusive and specific than that of “performance,” which has a complex etymology and is deeply rooted in the historiography of the broad field of Performance Studies with its origins in a set of theories developed by Richard Schechner (2013) and its critics.
2. Visual arts journals have increasingly included essays on the presence of dance that is curated within the programming of museums, with special attention to cross-disciplinary projects and in particular, Boris Charmatz's Musée de la danse in France (see Hudon's interview with Charmatz in this book).
3. Some notable examples: *Beyond Curating: Strategies of Knowledge Transfer in Dance, Performance and Visual Arts* at PACT Zollverin in Essen, Germany (28–30 January 2011); our own *Envisioning the Practice: International Symposium on Performing Arts Curation* at the Université du Québec à Montréal in Canada (10–13 April 2014); *Show Me the World Symposium* at the Singapore International Festival of Arts (26–27 June 2015); *Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color* at Duke Uni-

versity, Durham, North Carolina (27–28 June 2015); *New Circuits: Curating Contemporary Performance* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota (28–29 September 2015); *Imagining Curatorial Vision in Performance* at the University of the Philippines in Manila (26 September–1 October 2017).

4. The certificate and master's program at The Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University in the United States (2011–present); a post-degree university course in Curation in the Performing Arts at Paris Lodron University Salzburg in Austria (2017+); the “Expanded Curation in the Performing Arts” profile within the DAS Theatre graduate program (2018+); and “Curating Performing Arts” in the Graduate Program in Visual and Performing Arts at the Università luav di Venezia in Italy (IUAV) (2019).

REFERENCES

- Bottioli, S., G. Polenta, and M. Belfini, eds. 2015. *How to Build a Manifesto for the Future of a Festival*. Italy: Santarcangelo Festival Internazionale del Teatro.
- Ferdman, B., and T. Sellar, eds. 2014. “Performance Curators: Transforming the Theater.” Special issue, *Theater* 44(4).
- Keil, M. 2017. *Reclaiming the Obvious: On the Institution of the Festival*. Lublin: The Theater Institute Zbigniew Raszewskiego, Konfrontacje Teatraine/Centre for Culture in Lublin.
- Malzacher, F., and J. Warsza. 2017. *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*. Berlin: House on Fire.
- Malzacher, F., T. Tupajić, and P. Zanki. 2010. “Curating Performing Arts.” Special issue, *Frakcija* #55.
- Schnechner, R. 2013. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Sellar, T. ed. 2017. “Curating Crisis.” Special issue, *Theater* 47(1).
- von Bismark, B., J. Schaffaff, and T. Weski, eds. 2012. *Cultures of the Curatorial*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.