Curating Context describes a field where the curatorial practice is extended beyond curating exhibitions into working with entire contexts. It articulates the why and how of curating art projects that gain their meaning in relation to a surrounding context, or which need a specific structure in order to play out. In this practice, curatorial considerations are interwoven with the production, and the intentions of artists and curators lead the way rather than institutional structures.

The texts and conversations in this book reflect on how these curatorial methodologies not only situate works in different places, but also transfer curatorial methods into other fields, such as the contexts of law, urban development, and constructions of the civic. This exciting curatorial approach where each project sets new demands, requires very specific skills rarely taught in curatorial programs. Curating Context is an attempt to share a sustained conversation among practitioners in the field.

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Statens konstråd



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TRANSFORMING,
COMPOSING,
INSTITUTING,
DISAPPEARING
Four Movements
of the Curatorial
Inquiry

Grégory Castéra

Elaborating on the curatorial methodology of defining an "issue" and the clarifying story of an elephant.

TRANSFORMING (The Promise)

1.1 The Inquiry

The inquiry, the method I describe in this paper, has been devised over the past three years of collaboration with Sandra Terdjman within our curatorial platform Council. It also brings together a number of things I have been thinking about for some ten years relating to the curatorship of research, ecologies, and public audiences in the field of art.

The inquiry is a specific form of research that fits in with the "pragmatic" intellectual tradition and the work of the philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952). It has been brought up to date in France by the philosopher, historian of science, and anthropologist Bruno Latour, within the Ecole des Arts Politiques at Science Po Paris, but its method and the challenges it poses are debated and interpreted today well beyond Latour's circle.

In his Manifeste compositionniste Latour stresses that, in order to be composed, "things have to be put together (Latin componere) while retaining their heterogeneity. Also, it is connected with composure;

it has clear roots in art, painting, music, theater, dance, and thus is associated with choreography and scenography; it is not too far from 'compromise' and 'compromising,' retaining a certain diplomatic and prudential flavor. Speaking of flavor, it carries with it the pungent but ecologically correct smell of 'compost,' itself due to the active 'de-composition' of many invisible agents."

1.2 Taking the Form of its Subject

Starting from a societal issue, the inquiries we conduct with Council bring together a collective which over the course of time comes up with an organization, practices, and a discourse that are specific to it. The inquiry is organized over several years in successive sequences ending in an output—a work, an event, an exhibition, a book, etc. The formats of these are not predetermined, but result from the inquiry. Nor do the public and the context exist prior to the project: they are constructed with the inquiry. A happy outcome of this process can be the emergence of autonomous structures, driven by their necessities.

Thus the inquiry sets out to institute (establish in a sustainable way) compositional practices. The forms that stem from the inquiry do not establish an aesthetic break, but disappear into the fields that existed before it—"The method must take its form from its actual subject; it is not enough for it to adapt the subject to its way of constructing and seeing things, but rather it has to derive its way of doing so from the nature of that subject."²

In addition, the inquiry attempts to act using the means of art in the fields of knowledge production and social commitment. Its method makes it possible to try out the adaptation of curatorial practices to the environments in which they are located. Through its hybrid nature and its duration, the inquiry attempts to achieve a long-term economy, outside the logic of the market and short-term commissions. It is likewise a means of navigating between different scales of places and groups, changing the description and the depiction of an issue, constructing a public appropriate to it, even altering the standards of the issue's institutions. As a result of these conditions, it carries a promise of social transformation.

1.3 Three Examples of Inquiries

Three inquiries3 will be used as examples throughout this paper.

TACET was initiated in 2013 with the Al Amal School for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired, during the Sharjah Biennial; it tackles the way in which listening can be transformed by the experience of deafness and by deaf knowledge. Through workshops, lectures, and publications, TACET built up a collective of individuals who hear differently, entered into collaboration with Tarek Atoui's WITHIN project, and culminated in an exhibition, Infinite Ear (Bergen Assembly, 2016).

Again in 2013 Legal Agenda, an NGO of lawyers, and Ashkal Alwan, an art school and art center (Beirut) along with Council initiated *The Manufacturing of Rights*, an inquiry focusing on article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, which condemns sexual intercourse "against nature." This article is likewise present in the penal codes of 53 countries in the world. The inquiry consisted of enhancing the NGO's action by bringing together a collective whose views provided many different definitions and interpretations of the concept of nature in law. After giving rise to workshops, the production of works, an event, and a publication, it will take the form of a journal, *The Against Nature Journal* (2017–20), distributed by hand to several judges, lawyers, religious leaders, and other experts interpreting the "against nature" law around the world.

In 2015, to coincide with the Paris Climate Change Conference and the opening of the Musée de l'homme, we initiated a different inquiry focusing on the measuring climate change. After organizing an event (Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge Not8: On Becoming Earthlings), the next sequence of the inquiry will happen from 2017 to 2019. It will take the form of residencies on sites where climate is manufactured (measured, described, changed, discussed).

Bruno Latour, Pour une école des arts politiques: Manifeste compositionniste (2010).

^{2.} Gianbattista Vico (1668–1744), criticizing René Descartes's method.

^{3.} These three inquiries can be consulted on Council's website, under the heading "Inquiries," www.formsofcouncil. org/en/inquiries/.

COMPOSING (The Method)

2.1 Starting with an Issue

For the philosopher John Dewey,⁴ the public does not exist a priori. It forms because its members are affected, directly or indirectly, by an issue. It appears, alters, and disappears with the issues. Depending on the description, depiction, and prevalence of the issue, individuals who did not feel concerned will gradually enlarge and enhance that public. Thus every inquiry starts with an issue.

An issue exists first and foremost because it affects a group in a specific way. One particular issue is not of itself more interesting than any other. It is its ecosystem (all the agents leading to its existence) that makes it relevant, and affords the possibility of an intervention. Thus the issues choose us rather than us choosing them. They are defined with people who are affected by them daily. These are NGOs, activists, members of a specific community, or more generally people who have developed an idiosyncratic field of knowledge. We had not foreseen that we would develop projects associated with gender studies, law, handicaps, sound, or ecology. These fields emerged as relevant through meetings.

For example the intervention by the NGO Legal Agenda is specific to several countries that used to be colonies and where the forms of representation of LGBTQI communities are less robust than in Europe and the United States. As it cannot change the law, the NGO is going to initiate discussions with judges involved, focusing on the interpretation of the concept of nature in the expression "sexual intercourse against nature." As a legal experiment, this action reframes the issue of the political representation of different sexual orientations in a new way.

2.2 Identifying the Ecosystem of an Issue

The inquiry starts by studying the various disciplines and controversies that the issue involves, the individuals and institutions responsible for it at a local and international level, the artifacts that represent it, in short, the ecosystem that is unique to the issue.

4. John Dewey, The Public and its Problems (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927). Apart from that ecosystem there is a vaguer set of considerations, consisting of agents that do not yet have a role but are affected by certain—sometimes indirect—aspects of the issue. Often these agents have remained cut off from the history of the issue and those affected by it, because their involvement has little or no legitimacy. The history of the relations between art and science is shaped by these sets of exclusions,⁵ but sometimes it is also the history of the political representation of a community that will exclude some forms of knowledge in favor of others.

For example, deaf culture has centered on the often painful advocacy of sign language. The "Deaf community" has frequently been presented by some of its members as "the people of the eye," maintaining a distance from any approach to sound and hearing. However, the deaf and the hearing-impaired perceive sound differently from those who hear, and that difference could make it possible to take a different view of the scientific history⁶ and political representation⁷ of hearing.

2.3 Looking for a Compositional Plan: Re-describing an Issue

Seen from the perspective of the history of ideas, art can be addressed as a field in which we experiment with the representation of ideas. In order to be represented, ideas are set down in practices, collectives, and techniques, and this culminates in the production of artifacts. These artifact are displayed and circulated in a specific way and could lead to a general agreement on how an idea or a fact could be a good or true. The art comes before the setting down of an idea. Thus the issues we choose take account of the transitory state of a fact or an idea, a moment in its history when it is in the course of being elaborated, when it is the subject of controversy, when it is not experienced as real by the groups it affects, and there is some precariousness in its authority.

Global warming demonstrates the state of weakness of scientific institutions vis-à-vis businesses, which have called the facts into question for decades. In addition to this crisis in scientific authority, there is debate about the validity of the Anthropocene hypothesis stipulating a new geological era suffering the impact of human activity.

5. Among the many papers written on this subject, see the exemplary book by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, Objectivity (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

- 6. Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich, "Sound Studies meet Deaf Studies," in volume 7 of the review Senses and Society of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2012).
- 7. H-Dirksen, L. Bauman, and Joseph J. Murray eds., Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

Starting from that first description of an issue, we look for a new description allowing us to bring together practices and areas of knowledge, which are not usually found side-by-side. The inquiry on the measurement of climate change, and the controversies surrounding it, began by looking at how climate changes the measure of man:

Living and thinking the anthropocene means to set humankind into new proportions. Anthropocene calls out for a practice of re-scaling and re-framing to establish other relations between humans and non-humans (and between humans and humans as well). [...] Anthropocene-thinking tries to connect differently to the beings surrounding us and the environments we are living in, regardless if biological or technological. Who can teach us to become much smaller or much bigger? Small as swarm fish are, or microbes, or even molecules, in order to be able to contemplate and to commiserate, how climatological changes influence local behaviors and how these local changes retroactively have effects on their environments. Or large as clouds or geological dimensions of time, in order to be able to put ourselves in a concrete relationship with the geo-hydrological time of climate, the development time of fossil fuels, or the disintegration time of radioactive and other highly contaminated waste.8

Considering the Anthropocene from the point of view of exercises in change of scale makes it possible to give the same legitimacy to a marine biologist, a representative of an Amazonian Indian community, an advocate of pastoralism, a choreographer for animals, a gardener, or an expert in ecological investment. Non-humans (animals, plants and living organisms, objects and machines, the dead) are also among the non-legitimate perspectives it is necessary to conjure up. It is then a question of giving them a voice—of speaking for, speaking with, speaking as or in the name of these entities.

2.4 Looking for a Compositional Plan: Navigating

In a famous Chinese fable, several blind people touch an elephant to learn what it is. Each of them feels one part, but only one part. Then they compare what they have learnt. And the person who touched the trunk, the one who touched the tail, and the one who touched

8. Alexander Klose and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, concept of On Becoming Earthlings (2015), http://www. formsofcouncil.org/ en/inquiries/ing_on_ becoming_earthlings/737 the ear each disagrees regarding what the elephant is like. An issue is an elephant. It is impossible to define it from a single perspective, and even if visualizing different perspectives allows us to gain a better understanding of its complexity, it will never give us more than a partial image. The most exact and sensitive overall view of an issue is provided by the specific form of the ecosystem attached to it. It is by navigating through its ecosystem that an experience of the complexity of an issue is formed. That experience gives the navigator the sensitivity and intuition that round off the navigation tools. Rather than an image or a resolution, navigation constitutes a representation of an issue in which contradictory forces can coexist.

Thus the collectives brought together by the inquiry do not seek a consensus, a univocal approach to the issue. On the contrary, the inquiry creates the conditions allowing divergent perspectives to coexist and be articulated. It tries to preserve the richness of the antagonisms, it makes it possible to experience how "the way I don't understand you is different from the way you don't understand me."

2.5 Building a Public

In elaborating the compositional plan, the inquiry tries to build a specific public, through the perspectives the plan includes, and to enhance public audiences already in existence. In particular, we work with groups that have a rich history of political representation (LGBTQI for *The Manufacturing of Rights*, Deaf and hearing-impaired for *TACET*), but at the same time our interventions do not fall under the category of community art with its historic concern for empowerment and advocacy. We turn to these groups because they have developed areas of expertise that are seldom taken into consideration. The inquiry gives legitimacy to their knowledge, on equal terms with other areas of knowledge, and makes it possible to showcase these divergent perspectives. The inquiry can contribute to the political representation of "communities" only if it is adopted by those communities.

2.6 Situated Research

9. This quotation is

often used to sum up

the notion of radical

otherness in the work

of the anthropologist

Eduardo Viveiros de

Castro. For example see

the book Métaphysiques

cannibales (Paris: PUF,

2010)

A context is an environment in which this or that behavior takes place: a speech, an action, a belief, etc. While it determines the meanings and features of that behavior, it is not affected back by it in return. [...] On the other hand, every situation involves a mutual action, an interaction. Whereas a situation is defined by the fact that some aspects of the environment are conducive to action and can be used as tools for persevering in life, a context rather expresses all the conditions that limit action. The first increases possibilities, the second restricts their number. Whereas a context is a given, a prior condition, a situation is a result. The first is immutable, the second changes.¹⁰

Relationship to a context renews the historic opposition between a form of universalism imposing a model without taking account of cultural peculiarities, and a form of relativism refusing to make any judgment based on difference. The idea of situation, resulting from a mutual action, offers the chance to think of this issue in a different way. The inquiry, and the practice of composition, works out a method of *situated* research.

INSTITUTING (The Practice)

3.1 The Time Taken by an Inquiry

We are observing that an inquiry lasts for a minimum of three years, and has no predetermined end date. It is organized in sequences each of which marks an advance and they are achieved by the production of a work of a specific format. Each sequence is preceded by a period of preparation, so the life of an inquiry is punctuated by rises in intensity (which correspond to the usual pace of a production) interspersed with periods of rest. Just like letting land lie fallow, this rest is vital for assessing the impact of the intervention. Therefore it is a good idea to alternate different inquiries (and leave several months between two sequences of the same inquiry). This relationship to time allows the collective to take stock and find a language and a way of working appropriate to it.

As it is organized in sequences, the completion of the inquiry is delayed, complemented by intermediate formats. This process allows for formal invention specific to the issue and for the inquiry to be left open for as long as possible, thus a final outcome with lasting effects can be found.

to. Joëlle Zask,
"Situation ou contexte?
Une lecture de Dewey,"
Revue Internationale de
philosephie 245 (2008).

3.2 The Intermediate Formats

Whatever its format, the presentation of an initiative tacitly implies that it is complete enough to be able to "satisfy the expectations" of an already existing public. The inquiry, on the other hand, requires intermediate formats, which offer the temporary setting down of a process. These intermediate formats belong to a history of art, architecture, and science in which continuity between the space and time of production and those of presentation is experienced. They do not impart results that can be boiled down to a few ideas or images, but attempt to involve the public in the activity of the actual search, and so to enrich both all those people affected by the issue, and the issue itself through increasing the number of points of view.

Here I am attempting to make an incomplete typology of intermediate formats, which I use today in designing our future inquiries. The work then consists of specifying the format, which may call on many disciplines and traditional formats of presentation—exhibition, performance, talk, projection etcetera.

1. The collection (and its relatives, namely the encyclopedia, the database, and the archive) is essentially processual. Knowledge is produced by defining (in a way that can be more or less open or specific) criteria of selection and classification of the collection. It is in the course of these definitions, in conjunction with the constitution of the corpus, that heterogeneous practices can meet and take shape.

Both *The Against Nature Journal* and the exhibition *Infinite Ear* consists of collections of artworks, documents and objects that grow larger with research. Every presentation is an opportunity to add new people to the group of curators and researchers and allow, by walking through the collections, the coexistence of antagonistic views on the issues (respectively the interpretation of nature in legal regulation of sexuality and the transformations of hearing).

2. The processual nature of an inquiry encourages the implementation of exercises, which can sometimes be shared with the public.

Infinite Ear collection includes musical instruments designed by Tarek Atoui with deaf and hearing-impaired people, and sound-based

therapies by Valentina Desideri and Myriam Lefkowitz, Ione and Pauline Oliveros, and Thierry Madiot. The same exploratory approach operated in *Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge Not8*: On *Becoming Earthlings*," during which 75 experts suggested individual exercises of re-scaling and re-framing to establish other relations between humans and non-humans.

- 3. Third places¹² are spaces where individuals can meet informally outside the home or workplace—bars, hair-dressers, saunas, etc. These spaces permit the making of informal contacts over and above the collection of information. They represent an apprehension of the environment through an everyday activity and the gradual integration of the public into the inquiry.
- 4. The diversity of the media, digital and printed, makes it possible to adapt documentation, its dissemination, or archiving, and the participation of the public. Inquiries are an opportunity to design pluri-media systems in which several speeds and scopes of dissemination of the process can be linked.

The Against Nature Journal, an outcome of The Manufacturing of Rights inquiry, will be distributed confidentially to the doors of judges, lawyers, religious leaders and other experts interpreting the "against nature" law. This move, private to the particularly complex organization, is a condition allowing a debate to be embarked on in many countries where censorship is in place. The newspaper will be complemented by a program of conversations and commissioned artworks, intended for a wider public, in countries where the project is not liable to have dangerous consequences for those involved in it.

Each stage of an inquiry enhances research. It can increase the amount of data, enshrine a practice, and measure the scale of the intervention. The locations and facilities of art make possible experiments that could be regarded as irrelevant or offensive in the fields usually associated with the issue. For example, in *The Manufacturing of Rights* we produced a video by the artist Carlos Motta¹³ and presented it in the context of a seminar on the interpretation of nature in law, on equal terms with interventions by activists and researchers. In our experimentation, the art space of helps find the appropriate distance to an issue.

3.3 The Completion of an Inquiry

At the end of each sequence there is the possibility of bringing the inquiry to a close. The inquiry can then be rounded off with the production of a publication sharing its whole history, productions, and its method and theoretical concerns—a tool that in its structure and content reflects the hybridity found during the inquiry as much as the public (existing or otherwise) it wants to reach.

In every sequence there is also the possibility of establishing the inquiry on a lasting basis. The participants are then sufficiently transformed by the subject of their inquiry to get round to transforming their practice, and the inquiry finds more sustainable financing and a longer-term structure: It becomes instituted.

The Against Nature Journal can be seen as a stage towards the setting up of an NGO that would expand the legal activism of a set of structures focusing on the laws that condemn "sexual intercourse against nature." The *Infinite Ear* exhibition is also a prototype for a place dedicated to the diversity of perceptions of sound, the intersection between the scientific, artistic, and militant history of hearing.

DISAPPEARING (Aesthetics)

The inquiry does not force a hybridization between conventions, it does not mimic the aesthetics of a non-artistic field, it does not play ironic games with codes, it does not perform them in a critical way. In contrast to the break with a continuum of experience often associated with avant-gardes, the aesthetic operations favored by the inquiry create continuities that are natural to the existing conventions and their institutions.

The artifacts produced within the inquiries shape the language of a field from inside. Even if they may arouse curiosity, they do not proclaim novelty. Over time, they become so inscribed in the conventions of their fields that they give the impression of always having been there. They give such a good account of the complexity of an issue that we come to forget just how experimental the forms and protocols they employ are.

Mobile Academy, Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge (2005).

Ray Oldenburg, The Great, Good Place (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1989).

Carlos Motta in collaboration with Maya Mikdashi, Deseos (2015), www.formsofcouncil. org/en/productions/ 260_deseos.

The inquiry does not assert a position on an issue, the position is asserted through the composition. It changes the issue *by its contours*. It acts on the issue's conditions of existence rather than on its content. Thus, instead of acting against the institution, it is integrated into it, and acts from it. It is "a figure of adaptation," a footprint left by translation and diplomacy, a way of becoming invisible. In every inquiry there is the possibility of a withdrawal, temporary or final, from the economy and legitimate spaces of the art worlds.

1. The Value of an Inquiry (Conclusion)

"How to make things better. You'll end up only making things worse." 15

We admit that an inquiry only rarely fulfils its highest ambitions. It is unlikely that *The Against Nature Journal* will markedly reduce the number of convictions for "sexual intercourse against nature." An ambitious resolution can happen only with a momentum that goes beyond the action and influence of a project. Before social transformation takes place, the inquiry above all creates and maintains the conditions for its emergence. It involves attitudes, reflexes, intuitions, arrangements, enabling experimentation to take place and endure.

The inquiry produces a fiction in action, it creates a horizon, a hopeful narrative for an issue. That horizon asserts neither an ideal with no context, nor a speculation from another world. It endeavors to arrange what exists. It deduces what can be hoped for from what can be done.

The various initiatives described in this paper aim to think differently about the political representation of an issue and implement it differently. We are following the hypothesis that art, as a practice, discourse, and institution, has a central role in the realization of these initiatives. The inquiry tries out new legitimacies for the arts.

Lastly, the transformation promised by the inquiry is effected first and foremost on those conducting it. The inquiry is an exercise of attachment to an issue which challenges the methods and practices of its participants, a process conjoint with life, not a way of escaping it, by transcending it or disengaging from it. The transformation of each individual is accompanied by a reciprocal transformation. The inquiry allows a form of friendship.

14. John Dewey, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938).

15. John Cage, quoting Tchouang-tseu.

16. Dewey, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (1938).