

Interview

Light Bulbs and Round Tables

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A Conversation about MA in Curating at Aarhus University

By Trine Friis Sørensen, Nanna Balslev Strøjer and Line Sandvad Mengers

This conversation was prompted by an invitation from the editors of *Peripeti* to reflect on the possibilities and challenges of introducing a curatorial study program at Aarhus University, the first of its kind in Denmark. Initiated in 2018, MA in Curating is a two-year, part-time, low-residency and seminar-based study program. It is designed for curators, artists, educators and cultural workers, who wish to develop their professional practices and experiences within curating and expand their interdisciplinary understanding of curating in contemporary society. The conversation involves two alumni from the program, Line Sandvad Mengers and Nanna Balslev Strøjer, as well as programme coordinator Trine Friis Sørensen. Although the programme is international and interdisciplinary and includes students with backgrounds in for example the performing arts, architecture, communication and cultural programming, both Line and Nanna primarily engage with contemporary visual arts. However, as the conversation discloses, their approaches within this field are quite different as Line draws on her background as an artist whereas Nanna's background is in academia. The conversation unfolds in relation to three main questions concerning the incentive to seek further education, the relationship between practice and theory and the politics of curating beyond the white cube.

Time to Think

Trine: MA in Curating (henceforth MAC) at Aarhus University is the first curatorial study program in Denmark¹. You, Line and Nanna, were part of the first class of students to complete the programme. What are your backgrounds and what made you apply?

Line: Being an artist with a conceptual and social practice, I am interested in how art operates in wider contexts. I came into curating as part of an interest in contextualising artworks, and I have been doing a number of curatorial projects in which the cultural context or site was the framework for experimenting with the potential meanings of artworks. As a self-taught curator, I wanted to inform my curatorial practice. When I joined MAC, I was head of the contemporary programme at The West Jutland Art Pavilion², and in this capacity working professionally as a curator. However, my educational background from The Funen Art Academy focused on art production rather than exhibition making and mediation. So, I was interested in learning more about curating; I wanted to figure out what I was doing and update myself on readings and writing in order to get a sense of what was going

1) Further information about MA in Curating at Aarhus University can be accessed via <https://cc.au.dk/uddannelse/evu/curating/>

2) The West Jutland Art Pavilion is an exhibition space that combines a curated contemporary art program with community house activities and exhibitions run by local volunteers. It is located in the town of Videbæk in Western Jutland.

on in curating and art theory. Also, I was very enthusiastic about the possibility of engaging in a more complex conversation with peers. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, I really wanted to go to university!

Nanna: Working in the art industry after graduating, everything was focused on production, the pace was high and there was never really any proper time to spend with the artists or reflect on what I was doing – or how and why I was doing it. My academic background is in philosophy, so I am naturally drawn towards a need to understand our being in the world – how we engage with our surroundings and how they in turn shape our understanding of ourselves. When I applied for the MAC programme, I was directing a Design Fair which activated a whole different set of professional skills – and I needed something to ground me and regain my focus. It sounds simple, but I really missed being able to engage in deep thinking – and deep listening. I had been considering a PhD but struggled with the idea of devoting myself entirely to academia for three years, so when I saw this programme, it seemed perfect for me. I could be a part-time scholar and a part-time fair director! Also, I guess in some ways I am a sucker for theory, so I was definitely drawn towards that aspect of the programme.

Trine: I guess it is not surprising that you both mention a desire to further educate yourselves and gain a deeper understanding of your curatorial thinking and practice as incentives to join this programme. Those aspirations are truly at the core of the MAC programme, which is designed for professionals working in the expanded field of curating. But, like you, Line, those professionals do not necessarily have academic backgrounds, which is why our admission requirements include a number of different educational backgrounds as well as a minimum of two years of relevant work experience. You mentioned another incentive to return to school, Nanna, namely that jobs within curating rarely allow us time to think. Today, so much is about production, which makes it difficult to find the time to read or stay with an idea for a longer period of time. Is this production regime apparent in the work lives of both of you, and what role does educating yourselves play in the larger scheme of things?

Nanna: As Jan Verwoert (2008) points out, we have entered into a culture where we no longer just work, *we perform*. A high-performance society upholds a need for constant reinvention in order to stay relevant and *on top*, which essentially spurs what Verwoert calls the politics of exhaustion. Not a very sustainable way of operating, but that is the production regime that we all succumb to – and the reason why no one has the time or mental capacity to ask the big *why*? However, as Verwoert also points out, there is potential for agency if we interrupt the vicious cycle before it recharges itself with meaning. And perhaps, taking this course to think and to educate myself was a way for me to do that on a personal scale. As with most aspects of life, I think it is important to keep educating ourselves. Education is most often something we do at the beginning of our lives. We go to school until we reach a certain age, and then we go into the world with that backpack of tools. Especially within the field of curating, everything is constantly evolving, and I think it is important that we allow ourselves to evolve too. Another dimension of this is responsibility. The role of the curator has evolved from a caretaking figure to that of a gatekeeper. While it may not

always feel like it, the curator has authority, and with authority comes responsibility. I think I also felt somewhat of an obligation towards the field to educate myself in what I was doing – and the MAC program was a way for me to do that.

Line: I certainly recognise the production regime from both my curatorial and artistic practice. However, as an artist, the time for reflection is so essential. It is something that I was encouraged to prioritise during my time at the Funen Art Academy, and it is now embedded in my way of navigating the world. What I am trying to say is that artists must find time to observe and reflect on society. Obviously, reflection is also vital when curating, but I think perhaps the production compulsion is more present in curatorial work, especially within institutions. To me, making time to think is always a matter of prioritising time vs. money, and it is a constant negotiation that relies on personal circumstances and financial obligations. So, while I recognise the demand for production, I have prioritised differently because I find it impossible to function as an artist without the time to reflect. To me, MAC was such a reflection break – even if I had to put in a lot of working hours to pay the tuition fee and consequently did not have a lot of time to make art projects. MAC really was a wonderful opportunity to read and reflect.

Trine: What you are saying, Line, reminds me of what Virginia Woolf (1949) identifies as the preconditions for writing for women of her time: to have money and a room of one's own. Obviously, a lot of things have changed (and some have not) during the almost 100 years that have passed since Woolf wrote her essay, but it seems to me that what you are getting at in relation to artistic practice in some sense reconfigures the relationship between money and a room of one's own. You can *either* have money to support yourself *or* room and time to think. In terms of this programme, you are calling it a reflection break, and here the monetary relation remains in place: you are literally buying yourself some time – and space – to think and to share this thinking with others. Does that make sense?

Line: Sure, it makes perfect sense. However, being able to choose between time, space and money is obviously only possible when speaking from a highly privileged position.

Thinking Practice, Doing Theory

Trine: In an interview from 2016, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a number of comments about the relationship between practice and theory that I find really interesting. She argues that theory does not exist in a sphere separate from the workings of the world – although one might think so. On the contrary, theory is in the world. In fact, we would seem to be theorising all the time, because, Spivak claims, “it's impossible to think without theorizing one way or the other.” So, what she encourages us to do is to consider the relationship between theory and practice as a much more interconnected and intimate one. “Theorizing is a practice,” she argues, [i]t becomes internalized. You are changed in your thinking and that shows in your work.” I find these considerations really interesting in relation to our programme – not least because incoming students are required to have obtained at least two years of experience within curating or related fields after completing the

study programme on which admission is based. Considering your quite different educational backgrounds, Line and Nanna, I am interested to hear how you consider and negotiate the relationship between theory and practice, and how this programme has influenced this?

Line: Coming from a conceptual artistic background, conceptualising and theorising sort of comes with the territory – in a way not unlike what Spivak describes. Joining MAC, what I really enjoyed was to read all these texts and suddenly have a number of brilliant people that I could talk to and who, in writing, formulated some of the ideas that I had been pondering myself. Ideas that I had been trying to materialise in the shape of curatorial projects. Before MAC, my theoretical reading was fragmented and random to say the least, but the programme generated some scheduled reading time and consequently I actually read entire articles and got engaged in these exchanges. I have always been conceptualising in my work, but entering academia opened up the conversation so to speak; the assignments we had to write enabled me to enter and engage in it from a complementary perspective. I really enjoyed participating in this ongoing exchange of ideas – like a virtual roundtable with curators and theorists in my head.

Nanna: It is really interesting to listen to your thoughts, Line, because they are very different from the way I consider theory, and that is probably because I have an a-cademic background in philosophy. I agree that theory isn't separate from the world, but to me there is definitely a difference between curating and the curatorial³. In my work, the process of conceptualising is rooted in the practice of curating. It seems to me that there are two ways of approaching it. One, which was the case with my first dissertation on site-specificity in contemporary art curating; I conceptualise a curatorial project in an almost intuitive way, and then theory comes afterwards, almost like an evaluation of the project or a prism through which to understand it. Two, as with my second dissertation that engaged with a distributed museum exhibition; theory comes first and then forms the basis of the curatorial project.

Trine: So, unsurprisingly, your thoughts on the relationship between theory and practice, or thinking and doing, are fairly different. To you, Line, they seem to be intimately connected to such a degree that it is difficult to separate one from the other.

Line: Yes, I guess my artistic practice is somewhat theoretical.

Trine: Right, so on the one hand we have a fairly theoretical artistic practice that shapes your understanding of the relationship between theory and practice – and on the other hand, in your case Nanna, theory and practice are related but certainly separate entities. As you mention yourself, Nanna, your background in philosophy has shaped the way you think. It is interesting, though, that you describe the process of conceptualising as rooted in the practice of curating and you use the term “intuitive” to characterise that process. It reminds me of the session we had with

3) There are various definitions of the relationship between these terms, but here I lean on Simon Sheikh who distinguishes between curating as the activities involved in staging of a curatorial event and 'the curatorial' as something that employs the thinking involved in exhibition-making and research (Sheikh 2015, pp. 33-34).

associate professor Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen on intuition, aptly titled “Knowing without Knowing Why – Intuition and Knowledge Production” based on texts by N. Katherine Hayles and Gilles Deleuze. A main argument was that intuition does in fact draw on a solid foundation of experience, because our consciousness operates within a much larger field of nonconscious cognition, which includes, I would imagine, insights from your academic studies as well.

Nanna: You are right, Trine. Intuition is rooted in experience – which in turn is rooted in both theory and practice. In general, I believe the programme has helped me to connect the two (theory and practice) in a new way. I used to consider them as quite different things – obviously, not entirely different, because they constantly inform each other, but representing different phases of a project for example. While it has always been important to me to be part of the practical installation of the exhibitions that I have been curating, I have struggled to make that part of my practice the subject of academic inquiry. To me, such practical work seemed so obvious, so why make it the subject of academic scrutiny? However, the course has inspired me to be more open to practice-based knowledge, and to dismantle the supposed hierarchy between these knowledge forms. For example, during the course, curator Rhea Dall invited us to read a draft from her then unfinished practice-based, curatorial PhD thesis (completed 2020). She wrote in a very informal, descriptive way, almost like how you would tell someone about your process in a conversation. While reading it, I felt as if a little light bulb appeared on top of my head, because it was so different from what I had read before – and to be honest probably something I previously would have considered rather un-academic. But I realised that perhaps this is part of a process of unlearning or decolonising knowledge; liberating how we produce, communicate, and think knowledge from academic standards. This is something that I am very much in the process of re-learning and experimenting with.

Trine: Yes, I think it’s really important to reflect on how we produce and communicate knowledge, not least in academia. I certainly recognise the kind of serious discourse that you indirectly refer to, Nanna, one that would seem to imply that rigorous academic work has to be formal, neutral and disembodied to ensure objectivity. Donna Haraway (1988), of course, teaches us otherwise. With new and perhaps previously marginalised modes of knowledge production entering academia, we also come to realise that the institutionalised standards of dissemination may no longer be sufficient. So, in addition to recognising that knowledges and research positions are always situated, we may also have to forge new modes of dissemination. Not to do away with the established ones, but to add to them, to multiply the ways in which we produce knowledge.

Nanna: Definitely! But in order to add to them we have to actively engage in the exchange between theory and practice. If we are only introduced to theory in the beginning of our lives, and then go on to practice for the rest of our lives, we leave no room for the two to nurture each other. Essentially it is about method. Mieke Bal (2003) criticises the lack of development in academic method, arguing that we have to fundamentally change the way we *think* methodology and start considering our practice as both discursive and narratological.

Line: Absolutely, Nanna. Bal's reflections about how methodology should evolve in synergy with practice completely resonate with me. In fact, methods, theory, and practice are and should be interconnected as well as attentive to the world.

Leaving the White Cube, Reentering the World

Trine: For decades, one of the defining conditions of contemporary curating has been – and continues to be – the white cube, a term that has become synonymous with the pristine, whitewashed and windowless exhibition space. In this final part of our conversation, I suggest that we turn our attention to this convention of exhibition making – and not least beyond it. This focus ties in with the political framing of this issue of *Peripeti*, because although the white cube supposedly offers a neutral backdrop for the presentation of art, it is highly ideological as Brian O'Doherty (1976) argued over 40 years ago. Since then, numerous curators and scholars have further problematised the white cube. Catherine David (1997) essentially argues that the white cube has become an anachronism, because it was introduced to serve a particular *exhibitible*, modern and predominantly Western art object (Filipovic 2010), in turn making it an unaccommodating framework for a diversity of other contemporary aesthetic forms and practices. Daniel Birnbaum (2010) has called the white cube “a structure of exclusion” due to its regulation of audience behaviour – no laughing, eating, drinking, touching, dancing etc. And Nika Elder has further problematised these politics of exclusion in her article “African American Art and the “White Cube”” (2019). Line and Nanna, I know that you both have worked quite a lot beyond the confines of the white cube. What are your thoughts on this old but persistent question about the politics of the exhibition space? And what about the politics of curating beyond the white cube, is it more accommodating for artworks and audiences?

Line: I have produced exhibitions outside the white cube on a number of occasions, one example is the contemporary art platform *bull mengers* that I initiated in the tiny village Laven where I live. As I mentioned earlier, I am interested in the encounters between artworks and audiences, and working in my own small village enabled me to meet audiences on different terms, not only as a distant expert but as a neighbour and friend. As a resident of the village, I have a deep understanding of the place, and I use this knowledge to raise questions about complex subjects such as gender and national identity in subtle ways. For this reason, I often work with artists with social practices where the conversations prompted by the artwork become the artwork itself. My neighbours would not necessarily visit a contemporary art space, but by introducing curatorial projects in their local environment, I have been able to facilitate informal encounters and conversations. Working in this ultra-local way is difficult to transfer, but I have tried to incorporate the approach beyond Laven to make it possible for these more genuine and complex conversations to take place. In my experience, such conversations are more challenging to facilitate in a clean, crisp white cube. As a means of taking this specific curatorial method with me into other curatorial contexts, I've coined the term *residential agent* to conceptualise how professional and contextual knowledge can merge and facilitate these encounters.

Nanna: We share an interest in site-specificity, Line, but I have also always been interested in institutional critique and in challenging the concept of the white cube. It has been a red thread throughout my practice. The first project I curated was called *Outdoor Experiments*. I currently work at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde (DK), which is in the process of permanently vacating its buildings and in this way departing with the idea of the white cube altogether, moving out of the institutional space and literally becoming a museum without walls. Beyond these walls, we are able to work with artistic practices that have not been able to flourish in the white cube. So, from now on my work will be as this type of residential agent. I think it is a great term because in so many ways it is what you actually do. You realise that when you enter public space, you enter a world of negotiation. What drives the work is having conversations with people on a somewhat *shared* territory – creating the basis for a type of dialogue that has been if not eliminated then restricted by the white cube. The white cube is a controlled environment, separated from time and social context, which definitely also has a lot of advantages, but as a museum without walls we want to bring art back into the lived life. To re-enter the world so to speak.

Trine: Interestingly, your departures from the white cube correspond quite distinctly with the public symposium, *The Curator Has Left the Building* (2020), that your class organised at the end of the third semester. You and your fellow-students all presented inquiries that abandoned the conception of the curator as someone who steals the show (e.g., the curator as an exhibition auteur. Heinich and Pollak 2005). Instead, you explored curatorial positions that occupy marginalised or peripheral positions as well as conceptions of the curator as someone who listens, cares, and strives to unlearn. I don't think that these concerns are isolated phenomena. I believe that they speak to an increased attentiveness towards sustainability whether environmental, psychological, or social both within and beyond curating. Working beyond the white cube is of course not particular to our time, but the urge to do so today is. The production regime that we discussed earlier is very likely a contributing factor – although the push to perform and produce is not exclusive to art institutions *with* walls. But to re-enter the world as you call it, Nanna, which could be expanded to also include “taking care of the world” (Sheikh 2016, p. 157), we have to rethink how we work. Based on our conversation, it seems to me that MAC has encouraged a change in your thinking – and mine – along the lines of what Spivak talks about. Hopefully, this transformation of our thinking will be a continuous process, and one that in fact shows in our work whether curatorial, scholarly, or somewhere in-between. For my own part, the first round of MAC certainly changed my thinking in a number of ways, and I am trying to implement these changes in my work first of all as an educator and programme coordinator, but also as a curator and researcher. It has been so interesting to learn more about your backgrounds, practices and not least your thinking, and I am very curious to see how this emphasis on reflection will shape your work moving forward.

Line: Trine, you mention Sheikh's suggestion to transform our curatorial care for artworks and artists into an extended care for the world – I find this ambitious idea highly relevant. We are obligated to pay attention to the contributions we produce in the field of curating and the impact they have on a planetary level.

Nanna: Definitely! As Timothy Morton talks about in his work *The Ecological Thought* (2010), it is not only a matter of *what* you think about but *how* you think about it. Everything is interconnected and we must practice thinking of it in that way – thinking about interconnectedness in an interconnected way, if you will. Perhaps this is what we started doing during the MAC programme.

Line Sandvad Mengers is an artist, organiser and curator. She focuses on identity and cultural currency within the areas of social and conceptual art and works with projects in which location and participation are key. She has exhibited at project spaces and public spaces as well as institutional venues such as *Manifesta 11*, *ACVic Centre d'Arts Contemporànies*, *Kurgan Art Museum*, *Kunsthal Charlottenborg*, *Malmö Konsthall*, furthermore her work is in the collection of *Danish Art Foundation*. She is currently Director at Aarhus Center for Visual Art, a centre supporting local artists and connecting them with international artists, curators, and institutions.

Nanna Balslev Strøjer is a Copenhagen-based curator and writer. She holds a bachelor in philosophy and an MA in modern culture and cultural communication from The University of Copenhagen, along with an MA in curating from Aarhus University. Since undertaking the public art project *Outdoor-Experiments* at Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art in 2011, she has had a passion for expanding the notion of the exhibition space. This interest is reflected in her curatorial practice as a curator at The Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as in her academic work, which in particular inquires into democratisation processes within the art institution.

Trine Friis Sørensen is a New Carlsberg Foundation postdoc fellow at Aarhus University and Kunsthal Aarhus. She has been the coordinator of MA in Curating at Aarhus University since 2018. Her practice-based, curatorial PhD (2015) examined the commission as a curatorial mode of inquiry in the context of archival research. Her latest curatorial projects include *The Timeshare Project* (2017), *How We Curate* (2018-19) and *Host* (2019-20) by Céline Condorelli, all at Kunsthal Aarhus. Her recent writing is published in *MASKA Performing Arts Journal* and *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*.

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