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Curation as a Social Practice: Counter-Narratives in Public Space

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Abstract: The term “curation” has taken on a host of meanings beyond the museum context. While there are marked differences between its meanings – including the specific act of exhibition-making as well as the act of keeping and tending to an existing collection in a museum – we here specifically foreground curation as a social process of selecting and negotiating various forms of (embodied) performances in public, transcending institutionalized contexts such as museums. We argue that, when combined with the idea of counter-narratives, the concept of curation can elucidate aspects of social practices and open up a useful heuristic for the analysis of representations and performances in the public sphere. Since these practices make extensive use of imaginaries of the past, this approach is suitable for combining perspectives from public history and anthropology.

Keywords: curation, counter curation, narrative, social practice, anthropology

Curation today is a multifaceted term in both academic discourse and everyday life. From its origin in museums, exhibition making, and the art world, it has expanded to encompass everyday social practices. Almost anything can be subject to curation, from Instagram accounts and

Spotify playlists,¹ to collections of a favorite team’s branded jerseys or one’s own wardrobe. Curation has thus become part of a lifestyle. “Have you already curated today?” read the headline of an article on such varied acts of curation in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in 2014, demonstrating how deeply rooted in everyday culture the practice had become by then.² As the contributions in this special section indicate, this is a global phenomenon. It would be shortsighted to interpret this phenomenon as a simple pastime or an outgrowth of narcissistic self-expression,³ because what is curated by private individuals and collectives in the present can be far more complex than the examples above suggest. Curating understood as a social practice, we argue, offers people the opportunity to draw attention to perceived political and social imbalances and to oppose hegemonic narratives. In these cases, counter-narratives are called on and curated. Public protest for example, can be understood as the curation of a counter-narrative. This aspect of curating is the focus of our further considerations.

1 From an anthropological perspective, the aspects of digital curation are explored in the projects “Curating Digital Images: Ethnographic Perspectives on the Affordances of Digital Images in Heritage and Museum Contexts,” <https://www.goingdigital.de/christoph-bareither-curating-digital-images/>; “Curating the Feed: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Digital Image Feeds and their Curatorial Assemblages,” <https://uni-tuebingen.de/de/239241>. See Christoph Bareither, Sharon Macdonald, Elke Greifeneder, Katharina Geis, Sarah Ullrich and Vera Hillebrand, “Curating Digital Images: Ethnographic Perspectives on the Affordances of Digital Images in Museum and Heritage Contexts,” in *International Journal for Digital Art History*, no. 8 (2021): 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.11588/dah.2021.E1.83929>.

2 Quoted in Christine Bischoff, “Kennen und Bekennen. Konversion als Kuratieren des religiösen Selbst,” in *Sakralisierung des Selbst. Praktiken und Traditionen der Subjektivierung*, eds. Michael Roth, Barbara Thums and Mirko Uhlig (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2021), 77–90, 77 (author’s translation).

3 Anthropologist Klaus Schönberger has pointed out that these negative valuations are often tendentious positions that do not correspond to empirical realities. See Klaus Schönberger, “Persistence and Recombination: Digital Communication and Socio-Cultural Change,” in *Race and Ethnicity in Digital Culture. Our Changing Traditions, Impressions, and Expressions in a Mediated World*, ed. Anthony B. Buccitelli (Santa Barbara: Praeger Books, 2017), 17–30.

The articles in this special section are based on presentations given at the panel “Restoring Pasts, Rewriting Rules? Negotiating Norms within Practices of Counter Curation” which we organized as part of the 15th SIEF Congress “Breaking the Rules? Power, Participation, Transgression” (Helsinki, Finland, June 19–24, 2021).

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While there are marked differences between meanings of curation – which can include the specific act of exhibition-making as well as the act of keeping and tending to an existing collection in a museum – we here specifically foreground curation as a social process of selecting and negotiating various forms of (embodied) performances in public, transcending institutionalized contexts such as museums. We are well aware that this extended use of curation appears to negate some aspects essential to the discourse surrounding curation and the curatorial in museum studies and practices. Yet, we argue, when combined with the idea of counter-narratives as we propose here, the concept of curation can elucidate aspects of social practices and open up a useful heuristic for the analysis of representations and performances in the public sphere. Since these practices make extensive use of imaginaries of the past, this approach is suitable for combining the perspectives of public history and anthropology.

History as a field concerned not only with the facts of the past, but also with how they are made visible, usable, and narrativized for multiple uses and through multiple perspectives, would do well to take on more forcefully curatorial practices as a subject of research. Studies in public history have frequently demonstrated that a scholarly look at such social practices can lead to productive engagements with the various ways in which history is selected, presented, or performed for different audiences. In this special section, we understand curation as a social process and thus as a way of historical meaning-making or reconfiguring historical meaning in the present. By following an anthropological approach which emphasizes the perspectives of all actors involved in the social practice of curating,⁴ the articles shed light on the micro level of various public history phenomena. Our approach demonstrates how curating as a mode of selecting and aesthetically arranging content serves as a way of subjective meaning-making by individuals for an audience. Furthermore, curating as a social practice is a strategy for individuals to make sense of, and find orientation in, the constellation of a general surplus of narratives and knowledge about the past in late modern societies. In the following, we first explicate our use of the term curation and its companion, the curatorial. In a

⁴ In anthropological research, the concept of curation has been used in non-museum contexts for several years. See Christoph Bareither, Katharina Geis, Sarah Ullrich, Sharon Macdonald, Elke Greifeneder and Vera Hillebrand, eds., *Kuratieren. Reihe Begriffe des digitalen Bildes* (München: Open Publishing LMU, 2023) [in press].

next step, we explain the potential of focusing on counter-narratives in this context.

1 Curation Outside the Museum: A Brief Overview

Initially deriving from the Latin *curationem*, meaning “a taking care, attention, management,” the word curation entered English as closely related to medicine. Its root is shared by the word “cure,” intimately connecting curation and the act of healing or making whole.⁵ The association of curation and the managerial dates back at least to Roman antiquity, when officials called *curatores* “were entrusted with the management of paths and roads and [to see] to it that the Tiber did not become filthy.”⁶ Until the eighteenth century, the curator was primarily a custodian. Still today, curation as a form of stewardship highlighting the aspect of taking care of existing collections and exhibitions is a common aspect of curation within the museum context. Already by the end of the nineteenth century, the term had come to also represent an instrumentality of creative cultural production and an activity of putting together and arranging objects or works of art for public display.⁷ The process of how exactly this semantic migration occurred in detail is itself significant but cannot be fully addressed within the confines of this particular exploration. The examples above do, however, already shed light on the fact that the term’s long-standing ties to the realms of art, museums, and the production of exhibitions as spatio-temporal constellations are loosening. Curation as a concept has expanded to encompass the sphere of everyday life.⁸

Taking this observation as a starting point to analyze phenomena of curation as a social practice does not mean that we neglect lively discussions surrounding the concept within museum studies. Recent debates in museum theory reflect on museums’ attempts to intensify the direct participation of visitors in exhibitions. Experiential and participatory learning, community engagement, and participatory opportunities, including social media

⁵ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=curation>.

⁶ Bischoff, “Kennen und Bekennen,” 80 (author’s translation).

⁷ Andrew McClellan, “Professionalizing the Field: The Case of the United States,” in *A Companion to Curation*, eds. Brad Buckley and John Conomos (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 43–66, 43–4.

⁸ Stefan Krankenhagen, “Geschichte kuratieren,” in *Geschichte kuratieren: Kultur- und kunstwissenschaftliche An-Ordnungen der Vergangenheit*, eds. Stefan Krankenhagen and Viola Vahrson (Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau, 2017), 9–14, 9–10.

and various digital tools, highlight a shift from a top-down communication model towards an understanding of visitors as involved actors who co-create meanings in museum spaces.⁹ Such debates are anything but new. Dating back at least to the 1980s, approaches of “new museology” have stressed a people-centered, action-oriented approach which understands the museum as “devoted to social change and development.”¹⁰ Subsequently, new forms of museums have arisen, including community-based museum initiatives, ecomuseums,¹¹ or “wild” museums¹² set up by laypeople. This diversification in the museum landscape impacts the idea of curation and the question of who is a curator. Anthropologist Christina Kreps analyzes developments which have made museums and curating “more people- and socially-oriented.”¹³ Kreps labels her reflections on these changes “Curatorship as a Social Practice,” a title closely related to the one we propose here. However, observations about the social and cultural dimensions of curatorial work remain confined to museums. In contrast, we propose to use the idea of curation as a social practice in a heuristic way. This helps illuminate social phenomena of historical meaning-making which are not necessarily related to exhibition making or the realm of museums but happen in other spheres of public spaces.

The roots of these diversified and extended semantics of curation, along with an expanded understanding of the figure of the curator, can in part be traced back to changes in the art field in the 1960s. It was at that time that conventional and conservative ideas of what an exhibition should look like started to be increasingly questioned. In conjunction with this, practitioners critically addressed the role of the exhibition space and that of the visitor within the context of a general critique of institutions.¹³

Over the course of the twentieth century, processes of diversification and globalization significantly impacted the sphere of cultural production and the arts. This in turn influenced how the idea of curatorship and the figure of the curator were perceived by both practitioners and the public. The emergence and rise of curation as a practice and a “creative, semiautonomous and individually authored form of mediation (and production)” also brought with it the abandonment of the idea of an artwork’s autonomy.¹⁴ The resulting wave of independent curatorship in the art world reached its peak in the late 1980s and led to an understanding of curation as a distinct practice almost as important – or in some cases even more so – than the production of art itself.¹⁵ Curated art exhibitions began to be regarded as valuable and as artistic expressions in their own right. Curators were mythologized as dynamic nomads, gifted “self-made men, stars, heroes, or magicians”¹⁶ with a special intuition and ability to put together works of art in order to inscribe value on them. These imaginaries marked a sharp contrast to the older idea of the curator as a custodian working under stable conditions in a museum where they took care of a collection or a depot.¹⁷ Art critic Michael Brenson famously termed this development the “curator’s moment.” He was referring to a time in the 1990s when “influential, celebrity” and “high-profile curators” gained widespread public attention and recognition at international biennials and triennials.¹⁸

2 Widening the Scope: From Curation to the Curatorial

According to art historian Annette von Tietenberg, curation primarily describes the practice of selecting objects in order to put them into spatial orders which are presented at certain sites to produce specific constellations or to inscribe these objects into preexisting narratives.¹⁹

⁹ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010); Paolo Bianchi, “Zeigen von Dingen als Dialog – der kuratorische Ansatz,” in *Handbuch Museum. Geschichte, Aufgaben, Perspektiven*, ed. Markus Walz (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2016), 248–52.

¹⁰ Christina Kreps, “Curatorship as Social Practice,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 46, no. 3 (2003): 311–23, 315; see also Peter Vergo, “Introduction,” in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 1–5.

¹¹ Peter Davis, *Ecomuseums. A Sense of Place* (London/New York: Leicester University Press, 1999).

¹² Angela Jannelli, *Wilde Museen. Zur Museologie des Amateurmuseums* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012).

¹³ Beatrice von Bismarck, *Das Kuratorische* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021), 19–25.

¹⁴ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 4.

¹⁵ Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse,” in *Issues of Curating in Contemporary Art and Performance*, eds. Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick (Bristol/Chicago: Intellect Books, 2007), 13–28.

¹⁶ Annette von Tietenberg, “Was heißt ‘kuratieren’ heute?,” Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, <https://www.ifa.de/blog/beitrag/was-heisst-kuratieren-heute> (author’s translation).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Marie Fraser and Alice Ming Wai Jim, “Introduction: What is Critical Curating?” *RACAR* 43, no. 2 (2018): 5–7, 5.

¹⁹ Tietenberg, “Was heißt ‘kuratieren’ heute?”

Recently, the term curation has come to be steadily accompanied by its corollary expression “the curatorial.”²⁰ Understood narrowly, the practice of curation entails a set of professional skills and activities with the aim of generating a product, most likely an exhibition, while the curatorial is an overarching approach and linked to an “ability to think everything that goes into the event of knowledge in relation to one another.”²¹ With references to actor-network theory and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the social field, the concept of the curatorial is “the dynamic field where the constellational condition comes into being,”²² and which embraces different social activities, agents, symbols, and situations related to curating.²³

The idea of the curatorial is thereby linked to relations and relational knowledge, as well as to an aesthetic and spatial approach to knowledge production.²⁴ In short, the notion of curating as expressed by the curatorial has become widened in scope. It is no longer solely related to putting together, showing, or displaying works of art or museum objects. It additionally includes conceptions of “enabling, making public, educating, analyzing, criticizing, theorizing, editing, and staging.”²⁵ The shift to understanding curation in a broader sense has been described by anthropologist Philipp Schorch as a trend to “liberate [...] curation, as a method and practice, out of its predominant confinement to museum institutions, while deploying it, as a conceptual and analytical lens, to consider and study the process through which an idea [...] becomes spatialized, materialized and visualized.”²⁶

20 Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski, eds., *Cultures of the Curatorial* (London: Sternberg Press, 2012); Bismarck, *Das Kuratorische*.

21 Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck, “Curating/Curatorial. A Conversation between Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck,” in Bismarck, Schafaff, and Weski, *Cultures of the Curatorial*, 21–38, 23. We use “curating” and “curation” as synonyms throughout the text but distinguish them from “the curatorial.”

22 *Ibid.*, 24.

23 In a separate article, Daniel Habit argues in the same vein for an “emancipation of the term curation from the realm of museum context” and uses curation to study processes of redressing the past in the urban context of Bukarest. Daniel Habit, “Curating (Counter-) Memories. Plädoyer für eine begriffliche Emanzipation,” in *Welt. Wissen. Gestalten*, eds. Gertraud Koch et al. (Hamburg: Institut für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft, 2021), 362–70 (author’s translation), <https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/hjk/article/view/1759>.

24 Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, “A History of Curating – Past and Present,” *Critique d’art* 45 (2015): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.19153>.

25 Bismarck, Schafaff, and Weski, “Cultures,” 8.

26 Philipp Schorch, “Introduction,” in *Curating (Post-)Socialist Environments*, eds. Philipp Schorch and Daniel Habit (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2021), 11–27, 22.

Schorch’s idea to extend the scope and range of the term curation into environments outside of the museum context, as well as his suggestion to conceptualize it within the broader framework of a “constellational field” related to knowledge production, have informed our approach towards curation as a social practice. This approach additionally spotlights the aspect of audience in conjunction with the aspect of an aesthetical arrangement.

Curation as a social practice is therefore related to and intertwined with concepts already well-established in the public history discourse. In a broader sense, it connects to theoretical approaches which try to grapple with how historical knowledge is created in society, as elaborated by the concept of historical culture and historical consciousness. Historian Jörn Rüsen argues that the representation and creation of historical knowledge in the public sphere is always bound to, negotiated, and reconfigured within a constellation of at least five dimensions which define the historical culture of a society or a group. Among others, these always include a cognitive and an aesthetic one.²⁷ For the purpose of this introduction, it is worthwhile to connect Rüsen’s ideas of an aesthetic dimension with Stefan Krankenhagen’s approach to curating the past. Krankenhagen claims that curation is a cross-cutting mode employed to reduce the overwhelming surplus of available and experienceable historical narratives or remains from the past in late modern society. This enables those who engage with them to make sense and provide orientation in the present. His interpretation of the use of curation is inextricably tied to an aesthetic arrangement of the outcomes of these individualized processes of historical knowledge production in public.

Curating further relates to concepts such as *staging* or *performance* and *performing*.²⁸ The idea of staging has inspired research far beyond performance studies and has had an impact on historical, sociological, and cultural studies research. This is expressed in such analytical concepts as theatricality – most clearly defined in the

27 The other dimensions are the political, the moral, and the religious one. Jörn Rüsen, *Historische Orientierung: Über die Arbeit des Geschichtsbewusstseins, sich in der Zeit zurechtzufinden* (Schwalbach: Wochenschau, 2008). An overview over the debate on historical culture and historical consciousness is provided by M.C.R. Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Historical Culture,” in *Bloomsbury History: Theory and Method* (digital resource, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350970854.056>.

28 Erika Fischer-Lichte, ed., *Theatralität und die Krisen der Repräsentation* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2001).

theatricality as a model approach espoused by Erika Fischer-Lichte,²⁹ *doing history*,³⁰ or *staging the past*.³¹ The focus in all of these analytical frameworks is on the processuality of social practices, which is especially relevant with regard to the production of historical knowledge. For cultural analysis in particular, this shift emphasizes cultural change and puts a stop to speculations about cultural continuities.³² Both *staging* and *curation/curating* can be used as descriptions for actions by individuals or groups who present something to others in a public space intentionally. In both, as in bricolage, already existing pieces are brought together, and thus new contexts of meaning are created. Both *staging* and *curating* – understood as specific practices to structure, present, and establish orientation in the world – display and transmit values. The notable difference between the two concepts stems not from a great categorical distinction but instead is found in how they relate to the objects or narratives that are being presented in the context of subjective negotiation.

3 Curation as a Social Practice

In linking up the above concepts and ideas, a definition of curation as a social practice emerges in which we can understand curating as (1) a form closely related to practices of staging that is (2) decidedly about presenting a repertory of objects, values, and subsequent narratives to an

audience as a meaningful, coherent whole and (3) for a precisely defined period of time. Furthermore, (4) the value of the repertory is accepted as given, conscientiously cultivated, and affirmatively staged. This repertory (or set) of values is usually neither questioned nor critically deconstructed.³³ Curating as an act of “taking care” (of something preexisting) (5) depends on being understood as meaningful and coherent in the view of the curator.³⁴ The repertory that curation is based on is ennobled and given value precisely through the conscious selection of its components. These subjective expressions, which the curator brings into the discursive sphere through selection and presentation, allow conclusions to be drawn about the larger social discourses in which they are situated. Another distinguishing feature of curating is found in the fact that (6) the public presentation of what has been curated is characterized by an expectation of direct resonance. Those individuals or groups engaged in the act of curating expect a prompt reaction by others. In contrast also to archiving – another related form of staging knowledge, which is primarily concerned with preservation and selection for long-term, inexplicit, use – curating aims for an immediate response.

Practices of selecting and maintaining holdings for public presentation invariably reflect contemporary social needs. The fact that curating as a term and as a theoretical concept is currently en vogue in Western intellectual discourses is related to the conditions and configurations of contemporary late modern societies which are shaped by a surplus of available items and by multi-optionality in terms of experiences. This surplus of possibilities, data, and impressions must somehow be organized, perhaps even

²⁹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “I – Theatricality Introduction: Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies,” *Theatre Research International* 20, no. 2 (1995): 85–89. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883300008294>.

³⁰ Mark Donnelly and Claire Norton, *Doing History* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Sarah Willner, Georg Koch, and Stefanie Samida, eds., *Doing History. Performative Praktiken in der Geschichtskultur* (Münster/New York: Waxmann, 2016).

³¹ Judith Schlehe, Michiko Uike-Bormann, Carolyn Oesterle, and Wolfgang Hochbruck, eds., *Staging the Past. Themed Environments in Transcultural Perspectives* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010). Another related concept is *theming*, which can result in themed environments, spatial arrangements, and generally identifies “material forms that are products of a cultural process aimed at inventing constructed spaces with symbolic meaning and at conveying that meaning to inhabitants and users through symbolic motifs.” Gottdiener quoted in Wolfgang Hochbruck and Judith Schlehe, “Introduction: Staging the Past,” in Schlehe, Uike-Bormann, Oesterle, and Hochbruck, *Staging the Past*, 7–20, 9.

³² Timo Heimerdinger, “Theatralität als heuristisches Modell für die Volkskunde,” in *Ort. Arbeit. Körper. Ethnografie Europäischer Modernen*, eds. Beate Binder, Silke Göttsch, Wolfgang Kaschuba, and Konrad Vanja (Münster/New York/München/Berlin: Waxmann, 2005), 513–24.

³³ This position has been challenged within the art history discourse for instance by looking at the “curator as an agent of social change [...] who comes to curating from a political, social or ethical position.” It can also be termed “radical curating” or “radical museology.” See Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology or: What’s “Contemporary” in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (London: Koenig Books, 2013). It critically engages and revisits museums’ own history. Fraser and Jim draw the conclusion that “critical curating can take place both inside and outside of institutions and the art system in general.” Fraser and Jim, “Introduction,” 5.

³⁴ Critical approaches towards the conservative notion of curation are inspired by postcolonial studies. See e.g. Csilla Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museum. A Guide with Global Examples* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021). In the American context, calls for the eradication of colonial practices have been discussed vividly using the term “critical curating.” See for instance the program of the conference “Reimagining the Museum. Critical Curating in the Americas” at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, October 2020, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/programs-events/2020/online-critical-curating-americas>.

domesticated. In such a context, curating proposes the possibility of subjective reassurance and consolidation, as it always encompasses a selection and sorting of material and a presentation of the results of these processes in a narratively meaning-making manner. The practice of curating (and the field of the curatorial) might offer “solutions for two areas of tension in modernity: dealing with the quantity of possibilities and with the contingency of the self.”³⁵ Curating is therefore always an act of self-positioning. As these solutions are immediately useful not only to an already-existing hierarchy of professional curators, but also more generally to everyone faced with the same dilemmas, it is to diffused practices of curation that we must turn in order to explain how the idea of curation has manifested itself within societies. We are particularly interested in how counter-narratives and alternative offers of selection are curated. In the exploration of curatorial practices that oppose hegemonic discourses, imaginaries of how any one community sees itself or would like to see itself become more apparent.

4 Counter-Narratives

Narratives, as conceptualized in the humanities, are social interpretations that are orally and medially transmitted, reproduced, and sometimes reframed in these transmission contexts.³⁶ In contrast to anecdotes which individuals utilize in everyday life to secure their place within a social community or to strengthen a sense of community, narratives “place individual stories in a larger context and thus make them collectively effective.”³⁷ Narratives often refer to the past, are passed off as a common story, and may offer people the possibility of temporally framing what they have experienced and thereby lend coherence to their lives. By presenting as plausible if not interrogated, these narratives can easily become belief systems. It is because of this salience that

narratives can also hide, reinterpret, whitewash, or conceal parts of history that do not align with such beliefs. Narratives fulfill an important function in social communication in that they condense the hardly manageable late modern everyday into a meaningful whole and reduce complexity. Counter-narratives are therefore collectively shared representations and imaginaries that question already established narratives. They point out alternatives to them and offer individuals and groups novel modes of location and identification. The term counter-narrative relates to concepts which have highlighted the idea of counter, for instance in conjunction with culture as counterculture. This expression was coined in the 1960s as a reaction to (white middle-class) youth movements that questioned certain values and ideas of their parents’ generation. Above all, their protest was directed against a dominant display of capitalism and against a technocratic belief in the feasibility and desirability of progress. At the center of countercultural movements stood a struggle for self-determination and the attempt to attain for themselves a comprehensive power of interpretation. Counterculture, however, was not simply about being against something, i.e., it was explicitly not an anti-culture. Instead, it aimed at countering and unsettling the status quo in order to open up new spaces of possibility.³⁸

Any use of the concept of counterculture must be scrutinized so as to avoid giving it a tendentious slant stemming from a romanticization of social movements without taking into account their internal frictions and their social or semantic diversity. Not all of the groups that have been subsumed under the moniker counterculture since the 1960s actually set out to create the political upsets that scholars have attested to it at large. The term counterculture can also lead one to erroneously assume that one is dealing with two different and self-contained cultures and, consequently, two homogeneous groups: the “culture” and the “counterculture.” It is understandable that such a truncated representation cannot do justice to reality, especially in societies experiencing the conditions of late-capitalist reflexive modernity.³⁹ Counterculture, as Andy Bennett notes, is not a “specific socio-cultural entity,

³⁵ Krankenhaus, “Geschichte kuratieren,” 10 (author’s translation).

³⁶ This assumption is based on H. Porter Abbott’s definition of narrative as “the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*; story is an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*); and narrative discourse is those events as represented.” H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative. 2nd edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19.

³⁷ Silke Meyer, “Narrativität,” in *Kulturtheoretisch argumentieren. Ein Arbeitsbuch*, eds. Timo Heimerdinger and Markus Tauschek (Münster/New York: Waxmann/UTB, 2020), 323–50, 325 (author’s translation).

³⁸ Whiteley and Bennett offer a concise overview over the concept’s development in the humanities. Sheila Whiteley, “Counter cultures and Popular Music,” in *Counter cultures and Popular Music*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jedediah Sklower (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–15; Andy Bennett, “Reappraising ‘Counterculture’,” in Whiteley and Sklower, *Counter cultures*, 17–26.

³⁹ Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994).

but rather an entity with a significant degree of fluidity such that it could incorporate diverse groupings, and thus manifest itself differently at specific times and within specific places, depending on local socio-economic, cultural, and demographic circumstances.”⁴⁰

We must all the while be cognizant of the danger in presenting a dichotomizing view of culture that implicitly hierarchizes human thought and behavior. Such a view would obscure a differentiated analysis of cultural practices. This is important because a binary division is still reproduced in even very recent contributions on the topic – for example, when a distinction is made between high culture and popular culture.⁴¹ As a heuristic, this division can contribute to differentiation, but as soon as the artificiality of the division is no longer reflected upon and its binarity is reified, this leads to epistemological problems and in the worst case to the rote reproduction of clichés. According to Bennett, the concept “‘counterculture’ acts as a mechanism for describing particular points of convergence through which individuals are able to connect temporarily in the pursuit of specific goals.”⁴² In the same vein, the term counter-narrative draws on interdisciplinary discourses on *counter-memory/counter-history*. The literature on various aspects of these is too expansive to discuss at this juncture, but we would like to briefly outline the discursive environment in which our approach is embedded.

In a common reading following Michel Foucault, the term counter-memory encompasses remembering as a cultural effort that stands in opposition to interpretations of the past (e.g. through an official national historiography, mass media coverage, and so on) that are perceived as hegemonic and repressive by socially marginalized groups.⁴³ Political implications are already inherent in Foucault’s work, and the concept of counter-memory has also taken on an activist orientation in the course of its further reception. For “a socio-political, activist artist,” Pritika Chowdhry emphasized in 2021, “counter-memory is an individual act of resistance, to relentlessly question the

veracity of ‘history as true knowledge.’”⁴⁴ Counter-memory is thus both a heuristic for gaining scientific knowledge and a social practice that social movements use to draw attention to and fight against social imbalances and oppression.⁴⁵

The discourse on “counter” as a modifier for memory and history has also long supported instabilities and non-commensurabilities. For James E. Young there is a constant tension between memorialization through monuments and its opposite: forgetting. Citing Martin Broszat, he points out that “monuments may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations.”⁴⁶ Young highlights the importance of analyzing counter-history in the shape of counter-monuments that have complicated the German discourse on memorizing the Holocaust since reunification. Randolph Starn and Natalie Zemon Davis, in their introduction to a 1989 special issue of *Representations*, also address the question of the instability of memory. They juxtapose counter-memory with counter-history and define the Foucauldian idea of counter-memory as “residual or resistant.” To them, “counter-memory operates under the pressure of challenges and alternatives.”⁴⁷

The papers in this special section further explore these and other aspects of curation, narration, and “counter” on an empirical basis. They employ the term “counter-curation” as a heuristic shorthand to denote the curation of counter-narratives.

Juliane Tomann (Regensburg) tackles the question of gender representations in communities of Napoleonic Wars reenactors in Poland. Using evidence from personal interviews with female and male reenactors, Tomann complicates the view that reenactors seek to represent a traditional view of gender roles and therefore reestablish patriarchal hegemonies within heterotopic spaces. Neither, however, can women taking on male roles as soldiers in reenactments be regarded as wholly a protest against such gender norms. Instead, as the article describes, the counter-curatorial possibilities of reenactments in which an otherwise inaccessible alterity

⁴⁰ Bennett, “Reappraising,” 22.

⁴¹ As in Bismarck, *Das Kuratorische*, 57.

⁴² Bennett, “Reappraising,” 26.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–64; Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976* (New York: Picador 2003), 66.

⁴⁴ “What is Counter-Memory?,” Pritika Chowdhry, accessed July 14, 2022, <https://www.pritikachowdhry.com/post/what-is-counter-memory>.

⁴⁵ Verónica Tello, “Counter-memory and and-and: Aesthetics and temporalities for living together,” *Memory Studies* 15, no. 2 (2022): 390–401, 390–91.

⁴⁶ James E. Young, “The German Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 267–96, 272.

⁴⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, “Introduction,” *Representations*. Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory 26 (1989): 1–6, 2.

prevails allow for both the deconstruction of normative gender performances and their stabilization. Female-to-male cross-dressing in a reenactment context can therefore also lead to a strengthening of traditional gender conceptions among the women who take part.

Olivia Casagrande (Sheffield) engages with counter-curatorial practices in the Chilean capital Santiago. This paper draws on a collaborative ethnographic project with indigenous youth in Chile which explored new ways of relating to the city, negotiated collective belongings, and questioned hegemonic narratives and iconographies through creative re-imaginings and art. Building on two years of fieldwork with Mapuche artists and activists, the paper elaborates on the articulation of meanings conveyed by the artistic gesture of “performing the Mapuche city,” interrogating the possibilities of redefining practices of curating aimed at opposing dominant historical narratives. By reflecting on an experience of collaborative ethnography and co-curation, it asks if and how these practices question established and institutionalized modes of remembrance while at the same time undertaking the challenge of a redefinition of the political and poetical boundaries of ethnographic knowledge.

In his contribution, **Robbert-Jan Adriaansen** (Rotterdam) focuses on the aesthetic dimension of counter-curation in times of the COVID pandemic using the contemporary social media phenomenon “dark academia” for his case study. Understood as an “aesthetic style,” dark academia imagines and reproduces idealized notions of everyday life in boarding schools, public schools, and colleges from the end of the nineteenth century to the post-war period. Based on the analysis of various social media profiles, Adriaansen works out the subjective motivations of the actors involved, as well as the infrastructural conditions of the movement which started on the microblogging platform Tumblr and thus also integrated queer and marginalized positions from the beginning. A particular feature of this internet movement, as Adriaansen elaborates, is the actors’ efforts to initiate change by countering “hegemonic narratives through nostalgic or romanticized re-readings of established historical narratives.” Adriaansen directs our scholarly attention towards social media platforms, which are highly informative as objects for the analysis of curating counter-narratives “when they host internet subcultures that experience marginalization and aim to challenge hegemonic norms and narratives.”

Lijing Peng (Dublin) describes counter-curation using the example of an ancient origin tale, for the Miao ethnic group in West Hunan Province, China. While the

tale itself has been claimed by several ethnic groups who emphasize different interpretations and draw different conclusions through the centuries, the counter-curatorial aspect in more recent memory emerges on two levels. On the surface, Peng finds, it draws on a traditional museum context in a museum run by local scholars who belong to the Miao ethnic group. That museum context supports the story worlds of the Miao, distinguishing their origin and therefore identity from that of the dominant Han Chinese ethnic group as well as from neighboring cultures building on the same mythical tales. This makes visible, through counter-curation, a marker of group cohesion that has frequently preceded the assertion or reassertion of cultural, regional, and even national identities. Peng therefore opens up counter-curation as an analytical framework for acts of putting together narratively artifacts, traditions, and reimaginings of earlier myths in what she calls the text-building of a “fluid” identity. Less immediately obvious, Peng also finds counter-curation in the telling of the tale of the three heavenly kings as seen through the active use of its symbols and adjacent newly-created myths from the middle of the twentieth century. The parallel use of the old and the new myths in art and everyday objects by a younger generation of Miao can, according to Peng, be traced to folkloric publications from the 1950s through the 1980s and even the museal exhibits themselves.

5 Conclusion

What the case studies in this issue point to is the fact that “counter” is a term always conditioned by perspective. What “counter” refers to must be answered anew for each individual case; it cannot be deduced from first principles. In order to account for the complexity of each individual situation, an inductive approach is insightful and the actors’ perspectives must be taken into account. These, in turn, can only be adequately understood by embedding them in their respective contemporary historical context.

Accordingly, the subjective experience of the involved actors, and thus methodological approaches that start from the actions and ways of thinking of the actors themselves, come to the fore. In the case of counter-curation – in the sense of curating counter-narratives – as a publicly displayed practice of distinction, we should ask: What are specific actors opposing through their own acts of curation? What alternative perspectives do they present in response to those that are prevalent?

In a general sense, then, curating means the sorting and presentation of something (like objects or narratives). This is done according to specific aesthetic conventions. When this act of ordering and validation has been completed by a person, group, or institution that has the ability to show the necessary care – or at least can credibly suggest it – and is perceived as truthful and trustworthy by a prospective

audience, the product of this ordering and pre-sorting appears itself valuable. This is why a wide variety of phenomena and assemblages of objects, from online shops to social media channels, from reenactments to museum exhibits and contemporary art events, can usefully be read as curated: all are visited or carried out mainly because what is on offer is considered significant and valuable.