

According to an Office Desk II

- The Call of the Bowerbird as a Curatorial and Representational Device

Brief

The presentation *According to an Office Desk II*, subtitled *The Call of the Bowerbird as a Curatorial and Representational Device* will put forward the intricacies of the Bowerbird's mating call in which objects (findings) are assembled, arranged and staged in order to reflect back on oneself, to create an appeal for being the right partner. In that, the presentation will diverge slightly to human nature and touch upon a similar dynamic as present within the curating and writing practices of The Office for Curating, as headed by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk. Furthermore, the presentation will touch upon the notions of *Zuhandenheit* (ready-to-hand) and *Vorhandenheit* (present-at-hand) in relation to the objects and texts assembled by the office, their redistribution in the shape of different curatorial formats, as well as the idea of having a unified and continuous sense of practice by instigating an office, by moving away from the "independent" self and applying a generic name and somewhat fictitious facade instead.

Presentation

[Video fragment of "The Vogelkop Bowerbird: Nature's Great Seducer", BBC One, 5'43"]

In order to commence this presentation, and to pick up on the previous video fragment, I would first of all like to mention that common knowledge would suggest that animals tend to lean towards a more domesticated curatorial practice. More domesticated than, for instance, aliens, or perhaps even humans. In the case of the Bowerbird we see that the male species decorates the ground in the proximity of his nest with all kinds of findings, with flowers, nuts, fruits, etcetera. Interestingly enough, we can establish that the selections and groupings of objects put forward among the Bowerbirds vary in terms of choice: so it seems their selections are subject to choice and preference, or based on another instinct, that of rivalry and competition among their peers. In the latter case we might conclude that the process of selection is influenced by the actions of the other birds: a call and response of who came first with a certain object, and by what means you would reflect that within your own selection by deviating from another's presentation. As often referred to in our own practices, we might say that this is an example of being context-responsive. A second instance of being context-responsive arises when we look at the activities of the Bowerbird in light of their geographical location and the inherent biodiversity of the site: they work solely with those objects that are readily available in the near proximity of their nests. From a Heideggerian perspective, one might argue that the Bowerbird engages with those objects and entities that are ready-at-hand (*Zuhandenheit*), rather than that what is present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). In other words still, but this might as well be a preconception, the Bowerbird finds its interest in the objects that are ready for usage, that can be employed as a tool for another aim, rather than theorising and reflecting on, more neutrally and objectively, the

state of the object as such, its potentiality, or the state of the object as being broken. However, fascinatingly enough, we can see that when the group of dung starts to sprout and produce fungus, the Bowerbird reacts by removing the stems, which we might hold for a reaction towards the perfect, or envisioned image that has become disturbed, and broken in a sense.

All in all, by no means undermining the activities of the Bowerbird, it seems that the aims of this endeavour, this mating call, are geared towards a more domesticated sense of curatorial practice, in which the act of selection-making, of assembling, and somewhat rigidly and neatly grouping various objects at one and the same stack serves as a means to an end: of luring the female species, of mating, and perhaps even of family life. In shifting to another context, I would like to employ the previous scenario of the Bowerbird to establish an analogy of various fragments that serves in light of my own curatorial practice: one that equally moves from I to It, from the figure of the curator to the objects and texts of reflection I employ to make a statement and to represent myself in the various constellations I engage in.

In 2012, after having graduated from a curatorial course in London and having moved back to Rotterdam, I found The Office for Curating: an office that, very briefly put, is deeply invested and interested in curatorial practice as a tool and a means for thinking contemporary society through artistic practices. In that, more specifically, and through exhibitions predominantly, the office has taken various stances on daily living and working conditions, among the position of the artist in a time-pressured culture of high-performance, or the potential of abstract and formal artistic vocabularies in a information-driven society, the future of the book and other variable formats, the human deviation and retreat from nature, and one's relation to the present moment – to mention a couple of examples.

To move back in time slightly, I would first like to talk briefly about the coming-into-being of The Office for Curating. Generally speaking, I would say that having studied in London, in working for the David Roberts Art Foundation and the Whitechapel Gallery, have been rather formative of my current modes of thinking, curatorially. At the same time, however, this period abroad could be defined as the “champagne years”, by being supported exuberantly by the Dutch Mondriaan Fund, and subsequently being kept somewhat naive and uninformed about what it means to work as a curator in London – how it is practically, financially and existentially impossible to survive with this mode of employment solely “independently”. It precisely at this point that one could see the unavoidable rise of having to divide one's time between a money-job and the constant grappling for the actual mode employment desired. In other words still, to start working as a curator, as a recent graduate, feels as being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss. In putting this potential and somewhat skeptical survival-mode scenario aside, I anticipated the situation and returned to Rotterdam and opened The Office for Curating there. However, the situation might be less precarious in the Netherlands, it is also less invested in supporting young curators, and perhaps more importantly, through recent and ongoing funding

cuts in the arts, and culture in the broadest sense, the possibilities for (institutional) employment were lowered as members of staff were fired, and the remainder is clinging on to their jobs. In short, The Office for Curating is borne out of necessity and a current deficiency: a need and an urge to remain active in the field of contemporary art, and thus to develop a supporting structure in order to do so.

In making a linkage between the nest and the decoy put forward by the Bowerbird and the structure of The Office for Curating, the office proper, its website, the social media it deploys, all, in a sense, are properties and enablers to establish a greater good: to realise one's projects and to have a continuous sense of practice. In other words, the facade that is maintained by instigating an office structure, by, for instance, using some of the characteristics of corporate entities, a certain deviation and especially a distance is created between a client – a gallery, an institute, and so forth – and the figure of the curator, that being myself. It is precisely this distancing act that holds, in my opinion, the potential for creating a more mutual understanding and equal way of working between curator and host. One could argue that, rather by working “independently” by one's own name, the idea of applying a more representative, neutral and general naming – whilst behind that you are simultaneously and still working “independently” – allows one, partially, to overcome those individual struggles of employment by applying this sense of a “unified whole”. What I mean to say by a “unified whole”, and this strongly applies to the structure of The Office for Curating, is that it seeks to go public and present a frontal and total overview of that what has taken place: those projects, exhibitions, texts, publications and lectures that took place, and that are normally scattered over various locations, spaces, time-spans, and so forth, become part of an assembly that *is* the office. To put it differently, the deployment of an office as a support structure that both puts forward and assembles materials, institutionalises an “independent” practice.

In the framework of The Office for Curating specifically, I would like to address a number of shifts that are common to institutional practice, so at which points could and should these two positions, the position of the “independent” curator and that of an institute overlap and diverge:

The Office for Curating equally works with a programme. However, the programme is not structured alongside the common divisions of “past”, “present”, and “future”, but takes an indexical, and moreover an alphabetical organisation of its projects, whilst leaving that option to see what is taking place currently. In so doing, the idea of an archive is defied in the sense that materials remain visible – perhaps it is an open archive, so to speak. The idea that an exhibition, or a lecture has passed, should not lead to its immediate archiving for the sake of “job done, on to the next one”.

Secondly, somewhat more metaphorically speaking, the index gives a more authorial and authored perspective as it is headed by a title “The Office for Curating”, its author, as followed by

various projects, or parts and fragments so to speak, and in a sense, by generating materials within the silky flow of time, a growing body of work is constituted in the shape of chapters. This idea was taken from Jacques Rigaut's book "Agence Générale du Suicide": to have a fictitious, but equally real agency or office, that in his case would present a menu list of various possibilities for suicide, made available to his reader-customers.

Moving from Rigaut's example, The Office for Curating is rather paradoxically a for-profit company, with a strong not-for-profit appearance. One could say that there is an incongruity, and moreover a zone of conflict between the office's - my - endeavors and how it presents itself to the world. Consequently, one of my questions for this symposium would be, rather pragmatically, how can one be sincere *and* lighthearted, strive towards a deeper understanding of matters *and* at the same time skirt on the surface of things. In other words, how can any "independent" curatorial agenda, represented by an office, or any other structure, reach consensus between client, host, and secondary, any potential audience? Also, this is one of the reasons why I have brought forward the call of the Bowerbird, and without being facetious in any way, I am still wondering whether an "independent" practice is in need of the properties of a mating call to mark your presence in the narrow confines of curators in various interconnecting art worlds. The point at which we substitute and replace leaves, beetles and flowers with what we call work - our resumes of exhibitions, talks, bursaries and experiences - how can we let those efforts account for in the eyes of a future prospectus? What I am aiming towards is this idea of a more grounded and structural sense of "independent" practice, a practice that defies this idea of utter precariousness and defying the pressure to perform, as Jan Verwoert has touched on in a number of his texts with, for instance, "Standing on the Gates of Hell, My Services are Found Wanting". As since the appeal of institutional affiliation is always lurking around at the back of our minds to create stability, whereas, at the same time, most of these positions have been accounted for already - at least in the Netherlands - there seems to be a need to think of different approaches to not only support, but also to secure and embed the figure of the "independent" curator more thoroughly. I suppose that an office for curating is among possibilities. Or are these all a bunch of preconceptions, and is the practice of the "independent" curator our poor man, in which the impoverishment of his circumstances has an urgency as a medium for critical production?

In touching upon the idea of critical production, I would briefly like to talk about another metaphor that could be found in examining the call of the Bowerbird. It concerns the idea of a nest, or in the case of The Office for Curating, the image and actual property of having a desk. The commonality between the two is found in the idea of having a fixed location from where one can operate: the nest of the Bowerbird being an example of craftsmanship, of creating an attractive domestic space; the desk of The Office for Curating as a similar mode of representation, but equally a structure that is rooted and grounded in the context of Rotterdam. Thus, a way of positioning oneself more permanently, whilst operating, at least until now, almost

always outside of Rotterdam. In zooming in, I have chosen to work with the image of a desk as it not only connotes one of the principle structures in an office, but perhaps more importantly, as a way of having an actual surface from which to work – a surface that is fixed. We have had a long time of discussing “independent” practices according to the idea of the curator operating nomadically: this suitcase mode of operation. By now, through for example Skype, we can bring our laptops to some kind of plywood espresso bar with WIFI, partially defying the need of physically bridging distances, and maintain our agenda’s and organisations from there. However, I have the feeling that by having an actual and physical support structure – a desk – one is enabled suddenly to exclude background noise, but also to allow for different materials to enter into the frame: materials that do not function and are not present within the digital. Hence, from the desks as an assembler of materials, of books, articles, pdf’s, slides, loan forms, and so forth, these digital and analog resources co-exist. I know that I am preaching to the converted here, that what I am saying is common knowledge, but also I believe that there is a tendency towards an ad hoc and hushed approach towards writing proposals and concepts – partially defined by a need, a need that lies in the imperative to perform.

As some concluding words, I think it would be interesting in looking at our various practices in the key of a broken practice, one that is shattered into pieces. A practice in which we are conscious and self-reflective about the fact that from the fragments and strains of thought we have and have assembled, for example on a desk, we lead to new fragmentary constellations that seem to be this coherent whole, this end result of a thinking process. But they are not. Now that we have the cognitive capacity to judge our work and the fragments inherent to certain projects both in terms of what is ready-to-hand and what is present-at-hand: to distinct between the usage of objects and entities as a means to a curatorial end, but equally to regard our ideas and the objects of reflection and interaction we put forward to an audience as being broken: broken in the sense that our thoughts are shaped by those of others. I feel it is my duty to show the cracks between and in the various fragments I put forward, to create meaningful analogies of examples that also show the voices inherent to what I am saying again, differently.

I am starting to ramble, so I should probably wrap up.

Thank you for listening.

x.

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk