



Tea Tupajić and Petra  
Zanki's *The Curator's Piece*  
(*A Trial against Art*), ps 122,  
New York, 2012. Photo:  
Monica Santos Herberg

# *Up Front*

## THE CURE

*Tom Sellar*

This issue of *Theater*—the first of two on the subject—consists primarily of interviews (and a photo dossier) from seven performance curators. It is surprising how little has been published about curators, at least in English, given the significant role they have long played in determining which performances are commissioned and seen—and how they are presented and to what public.

But in the past decade, independent curators have embraced new models, beyond selecting, slotting, and championing works on behalf of institutions and festivals. A resurgence of site-based, transdisciplinary, socially engaged, and participatory performances has seen the performance curator, who frequently establishes the context for such events, become an equal creative and intellectual partner with the artists—if not eclipse them in a few notable cases. The emergence of such a figure in the performing arts has occasionally raised suspicions and hostilities in forms struggling for relevance and for economic survival. On the other hand, since many of these curators consider it part of their job to offer institutional critiques and to devise new modes of presentation and production, an entire sector of the theater and performance world stands to transform along with this professional role.

For this reason, we decided to focus this issue on curators whose conceptual or creative vision originates performance projects and perhaps also the structures and modes in which a public experiences them. Some, like Matthias Lilienthal, have served as producers and festival directors for major commissioning bodies. Others, like Gavin Kroeber and Joanna Warsza, have founded their own research-intensive platforms after working for larger commissioning organizations. In another category are artists like choreographer Ralph Lemon, who extend their own creative work into curatorial practice—or apply a background in dramaturgy to curation, as Norman Frisch has. Some of the best-known performance curators are not here, precisely because their

views and accomplishments are already so familiar to readers, for example, RoseLee Goldberg, founder of Performa, and Mark Russell, founding producer of Under the Radar, who have invigorated New York's progressive performance and theater scene for many years.

Curating is defined differently by each practitioner, mirroring personalities and idiosyncrasies. No single voice could speak for the field, but in composite the reader can get a sense of its dynamics. We could have chosen seven curators from the most ambitious or prestigious institutions. Or seven curators working independently, on a freelance basis, moving between different kinds of organizations on a project-by-project basis. Or seven curators whose ideas are most radical. We opted, instead, for a sampling, even though it is not representative, hoping to convey a range of perspectives and practices taking place under this appellation today. This is not to overlook the amazing constellation of producers, programmers, researchers, artistic directors, and presenters who, of course, curate in some form independently or on behalf of their organizations. Although they are also not included here, their work matters enormously, and we hope to return to them in a future issue, and to expand our geographical horizons to include creative producers in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in addition to Europe and the Americas.

But we wanted to begin the conversation by looking at some blurring lines in the field closest at hand. Curators occupy an increasingly essential role in a transformation of the theater's defining edges, which have begun—finally—to overlap with socially engaged art forms and the visual arts more broadly. The ideas and impulses of these creative professionals are encouraging new forms and nourishing alternative practices. The results can be seen, nearly any day, in a vast array of urban sites, public spaces, and private residences—as well as in museums, galleries, and auditoriums under their institutional stewardship.

Everything ever written about curators mentions the Latin origins of the word, from *curare*, “to care,” or *cura*, “care.” For this project, we certainly wanted to know what these stewards of our theatrical experiences care *about* and how their attentiveness to those principles might shape the future of the arts. *Cura* is also the source of the word *cure*—a connection not often drawn—and in the twenty-first century we need to know how creative actions can induce change. Whenever possible, we tried to focus our conversations on actual performance projects made possible by curation, rather than strictly

theoretical questions about mediation and presentation often covered in visual arts publications on the subject. Of course, in some cases, theoretical and practical considerations entangle, enjoining questions about form, politics, economics, and institutions. Recording these dialogues has brought us, via video links and via subway, into busy creative offices from Buenos Aires to Berlin, to book-crammed living rooms on rare days off, and to bars in North Brooklyn. It has led our editorial team to some stimulating conversations about what ails and how to alter our field, and we hope they will inspire you, too, to participate in the cure.

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