

## On the Curating Degree Zero Archive

**Barnaby Drabble** in response to questions from Virginie Bobin and the 17th Session of the Ecole Du Magasin.

Over the years since its conception in 2003, the archive has been the focus of several articles, interviews and online discussions. In these Dorothee Richter and myself, as co-initiators and organisers of the archive, have often found ourselves discussing the issues of access to documentation of practice in relation to contemporary art curating, its fragmented history and possible futures.

It is perhaps interesting for your readers to have a look at some of these, as they form a background to my answers to the specialist questions you have addressed to us.

Critical Curating – A discussion hosted by Discordia, with contributions from Stella Rollig, Ryan Griffiths, Geert Lovink, Paula Roush & Aileen Derieg, 2003  
[www.discordia.us/scoop/story/2003/10/19/13513/297.html](http://www.discordia.us/scoop/story/2003/10/19/13513/297.html)

Curating is Not Enough - An interview with Simona Nastac  
Idea – arts+society – #21, 2005.  
<http://www.idea.ro/revista/index.php?nv=1&go=2&mg=53&ch=153&ar=582>

On Independent Curating - an online conversation between Cecilia Canziani, Benedetta di Loreto, Daniele Balit (curating.it), A Constructed World, Barnaby Drabble and Dorothee Richter (Curating Degree Zero Archive), 2007  
[www.curating.it/punbb/punbb/docs/discussione\\_cdza\\_en.htm](http://www.curating.it/punbb/punbb/docs/discussione_cdza_en.htm)

*Virginie Bobin: By definition, an archive only exists by being used. Here, it depends on its exhibition, which definition itself is extended to symposium, debate, etc. The archive therefore both documents and exists through independent curatorial practices. How did you foresee this entanglement?*

Barnaby Drabble: I like the idea that ‘an archive only exists by being used’ but fear that traditionally the connection between archives and their use value is more tenuous than you claim. The scientific impulse of the archivist is one of gathering knowledge within particular criteria. This is usually data of a particular type, often records, images, or documents. Traditionally the value of such archives is understood in relation to their thoroughness, continuity and completeness; which can be understood more as internal characteristics than those we might define as use-oriented. The setting of criteria is of extremely high importance in archiving practice. If these are vague the archivist’s work becomes difficult, as they are too frequently confronted with the question of whether something belongs in the archive or not. Traditionally then, once criteria have been set archiving is an administrative mode, less about knowledge production or mediation than about knowledge retention. For the most part, archives are created and sustained in the imagination of future use, rather than existing through their use as you propose.

As you rightly mention, a major feature of the archive’s tour has always been debate and discussion, and it’s a rare event if one of these passes without someone questioning whether the CDZA is really an archive at all. It is a fair question, as the project departs from many of the traditional characteristics of an archive listed above. Indeed, our criteria of ‘critical’ and ‘experimental’ curating are vague and open to multiple interpretations, the method by which the selection grows as it travels is informal, and the outsourcing of the role of archivist to a network of individuals welcomes the kind of overlaps and conflicts most archives would be keen to avoid. The question of whether ‘archive’ is a misnomer for the project normally comes from one of two critical points of view; either those who find the very idea of archiving contemporary practice problematic, or those who would like to see practice archived but see the CDZA as insufficiently scientific in its methodology. The way we see it, such critique has its place, but both our choice of the title ‘archive’ and our adoption of a non-traditional method of gathering material are deliberate. The former points to a tradition of artistic

archives that see new forms of cultural memory as necessary, potentially in opposition to those upheld by and carried out in the museum, and the latter is in itself an experiment based on this impulse. The self-reflexivity, inherent in an archive that both documents and lives from independent and critical practice, can be seen as symptomatic of the project's wish to foreground discursive processes. As curators ourselves, we are more interested in observing and debating the questions that emerge from trying to test criteria in a field that is in constant flux, than in surveying practice from a space of imagined stasis and objectivity.

*Will the archive eventually find a definitive place? Or do you only conceive its activation through a touring exhibition process? If conserved in a defined place, will it still be actualized with new documents and curators? Under which criteria?*

The fact that there is continued interest from venues and partners worldwide that wish to host the archive and use it as a backdrop for their own enquiries into curating encourages us to maintain the project under the logic we originally developed. There are several benefits of a nomadic archive. The first is clearly one of being able to recognise and incorporate the local working-conditions in each of the places it visits. As we have found out, ideas of what constitutes critical and experimental curating vary widely, and just as there is no unified discourse on these issues, there is also no singular history. Possible definitions and examples of practice vary from place to place and those inviting the archive, often do so because they see a lack of debate about alternatives to mainstream exhibitions in their own local context. Secondly, the tour ensures that the archive grows over time, without it representing solely the networks of Dorothee and myself. It is our partners in the places to where the archive tours who propose new additions, based on their networks, specialisms and localities, and through this engagement the archive benefits from a breadth which we could never achieve alone. Out-sourcing curatorial control is consummate with sharing responsibility, and we have been pleasantly surprised by how the various venues over the years have made the archive their own for the duration of its stay; adapting it, re-ordering it and even performing it.

But there are practical limitations that may force us to reconsider this current modus operandi. Now, after touring for five years and being presented at seventeen venues, the archive contains documentation of well over a thousand projects. This means a lot of material to be moving around (at present over 400kg) with the related costs that this entails for the interested hosts. As the archive is regularly updated by the curators whose practices it includes and extended by the invitation of new positions its tendency is to grow exponentially; a fact which may eventually make touring the archive in its complete form almost impossible. Add to this the fact that the materials are fragile and susceptible to the wear and tear of being endlessly unpacked, packed and transported and you can recognise the dilemma we face. With all this in mind it seems likely that the archive will eventually come to rest somewhere, but as yet we have no concrete plans for this or an idea of whether, at such a time, it will be conserved as a static collection or continue to grow.

*Do you think that part of the documents could effectively be available on the website?*

Our website [www.curatingdegreezero.org](http://www.curatingdegreezero.org) is pretty basic and we quite like it like that. Probably its most important function is as a tool for incorporating the work of new media curators into the archive, several of whom work in a purely web-based way. Aside from this vital function the site does offer an itemisation of all the material in the archive, as a downloadable pdf or Excel file and this has proved useful for academics and students. Of course we have frequently talked of ways the website might be developed including the possibility of uploading documents, but the large amount of work involved in mirroring the contents of the archive online, even partially, seems prohibitive at this stage. At present, the focus remains on the physical archive, the questions it represents and the activities it provides a background for as it tours. The website extends this, but in a modest way. We are however on the point of launching a new web-journal [www.on-curating.org](http://www.on-curating.org), which explores many of the issues, addressed by the archive. In typical self-reflective style the first issue is a broad range of views on the suitability of the web as a platform for exchange about curating.

*Can Curating Degree Zero Archive be conceived as a compilation or a summary of "late" exhibitions (only observed after it happened through reports and documents, a little bit like performances?)*

Interesting that you use the term 'late' here, which in its English usage generally means dead (e.g.

my late husband), this leaves me thinking of the archive as a sort of graveyard for past exhibitions; a curious image and one that raises the question: when are exhibitions alive? If the life of an exhibition is to be understood as the time during which it is open to the public than yes, the archive is a compilation of documents and reports of past events. But, I think the archive is also much more, because it includes not only material about discrete projects but also about practices, which by their nature are ongoing. As the archive updates itself and changes its character over time, through the activities of its participants, hosts and visitors, it offers the opportunity to follow practice. In relation to this the archive and the practices it documents might be better understood as unfinished and its concerns therefore as 'live' rather than 'late'.

*Do you see the Archive as a potential for reactivation and reinterpretation of history? (cf Bart de Baere, Potentiality and Public Space, Archives as a metaphor and example for a political culture in Interarchive)*

This question nicely follows on from the last, because there is perhaps another way of understanding the life of an exhibition, one hinted at by de Baere's terms reactivation and reinterpretation. It is clear for Dorothee and myself, along with many of our colleagues, that the discourse surrounding curating suffers from a lack of documentation. We too frequently find ourselves working with a minimum of information when addressing exhibitions of the past; a handful of photographs, a first person account or an interview with the curator long after the event frequently stand in for a more thorough documentation of what went on, what was where and who did what. One can argue that the relatively conservative state of mainstream curating is related to this lack. On the one hand we need to recover as much of the multi-faceted history of curating as we can, to avoid this 'cultural amnesia' and point to the divergent trajectories for the art exhibition format that these provide. On the other we need to avoid repeating the mistake by failing to document the diversity of current and recent practice. Though exhibitions in and of themselves may be temporary, the documents referring to them endure. Statements are capable of timelessness, images (both still and moving) can transport the momentary and allow us to re-imagine it as contemporary, archives are therefore about both the 'presence' and the 'present' of history. As such they are powerful cultural tools.