

The Othering Museum

A Case for Non-Selective Curation

Carrie Westwater



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Preface: What Is This Book, Who Is It for and Why?

The idea for this book came from my practice as a maker of professional theatre and an artist with a background in community arts. A little after 2010, I found myself working with Glasgow Museums who had hired me to research and create a learning programme for volunteers coming into the host city ahead of the 2014 Commonwealth Games. The project was called CurioUS (objects and us) and the learning programme I codeveloped with the team there was aimed at initiating effective intercultural dialogue through the cross-cultural co-curation of exhibitions and events. CurioUS was celebrated as best practice by the Museums Association's *Museums Change Lives* (Museums Association, 2013) and is central to how the premise of non-selective curation (which I will call NSC) began.

The Glasgow Museums project was innovative and experimented with non-didactic object interpretation and community-led exhibitions using personal stories, related to the object as labels (Strachan & Mackay, 2013). This work was exciting and aimed at true non-hierarchical participation; it was implemented just as Dr Bernadette Lynch's seminal work Whose Cake Is It Anyway? (2011) was published and many of the recommendations Lynch made were implemented within the project. The excellent work produced by Dr Bernadette Lynch and Glasgow Museums has ultimately inspired the work for this book and the method of non-selective curation (NSC).

During the development phase of the learning programme attached to the CurioUS project, it soon became apparent that intercultural dialogue cannot be taught without being experienced. The team decided it would become a day-long programme using a pilot process of *Exploration*, *Discovery*, *Reflection* and *Practice* (CurioUs Project, Glasgow Museums, 2012) Mapping this method to participatory action research (Bryman, 2004), we went through a process of thinking about what language does, what having a sense of a place means, what barriers to engagement people experience and how we as individuals communicate our worlds collectively, and as individuals.

Not surprisingly, centuries of societal patriarchy and colonial positioning became a core component and a contested site of deliberation. As a museum we used object-based learning (Addington, 2010) as the focus for discussion; as a theatre practitioner and community artist I used experiential pedagogies, such as the work of Augusto Boal (1973), and active learning techniques to complement the museum's use of objects from the collection. This combination appeared to enable conversations to be conducted above and around the focus of the 'thing', the object as a third space. This allowed participants a place to feel more relaxed, to be able to articulate their own stories and develop narratives around the collections through events, exhibitions and performances. During the CurioUs Project, the objects were open to interpretation as opposed to top-down academic and curatorial authority. This to me was interesting as with any object a memory or story can form, but who has the authority to determine whose memory or whose story is more valuable to be shared? Aileen Strachan and Lyndsey Mackay (Strachan & Mackay, 2013) were the curators on the project with Glasgow Museums and in their article 'Veiled Practice: Reflecting on Collaborative Exhibition Development Tracing the Journey of One Potentially Contentious Object' explains how the collaborative process used in the CurioUs Project reflects directly on Lynch's work (2011).

We will analyse why the kind of conflict which Bernadette Lynch sees as central to democratic practice in the dialogic museum did not occur in this collaborative exhibition development work. The model of museum as democratic space focuses on process, issue-based working, community knowledge and the curator's role as facilitator. (Strachan & Mackay, 2013)

The method of non-selective curation, similarly, focuses on community knowledge and the curator's role as facilitator. However, in non-selective curation the facilitator retains their own specialist power as also being knowledgeable, as part of a community, and is equal to the process with the community co-curatorial participants. This method comes away (to an extent) from bottom-up processes and instead rests on facilitated democracy utilising, among others, the idea of bell hooks¹ radical openness (hooks, 1989). The process furthermore has one combined overarching theme across *all* issues—that is creating greater spatial and social justice among people.

I came across this formulation of non-selective curation (before its testing and refinement) accidentally. I was curating an exhibition called Migration Through Children's Eyes (Strathclyde University, 2013) held at Scotland Street School Museum as part of my work with Glasgow Museums and their project partner Strathclyde University. This exhibition involved children from four primary schools creating art about the topic of 'migration'. A significant but ultimately happy accident occurred; one of the teachers forgot to put the children's names on the artwork, stories and sculptures they had produced. There was absolutely no way as the curator I could recognise whose work was whose or indeed be certain if all the children were represented. Therefore, I made the executive decision to include all the pieces for the exhibition, for fear of leaving one child out. The result was an eclectic mix of creations that told the stories of child experiences and perceptions of migration, from multiple voices in multiple ways. I will go on to discuss this exhibition in more detail in Part Two, but for now, this was the beginning of non-selective curation. Due to this work, I was invited to speak at the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood on how the exhibition was created. With this interest began a journey of exploration, discovery, reflection and practice to properly formulate the method and write this book.

I have since co-curated several exhibitions and devised many theatre performances using this method with children, refugees, asylum seekers, college students, staff from third-sector organisations, NGOs and professional artists. Some of this work are the case studies for this book, which will illustrate how NSC developed after CurioUS and why it is important. It will also tell you, the reader, how you too can be a non-selective curator.

To embed this work within equitable working, diversity and inclusion, the field of participation will be thoroughly discussed as well as several theoretical positions and approaches that can come together to create a truly participatory space of authentic representation and spatial justice.

¹ bell hooks does not capitalise her name as part of her philosophy.

This book will specifically focus on participatory processes when working representationally with people's cultures and stories. It will also discuss the pitfalls in traditional 'selective curation' that is non-participatory or empowerment-lite (Lynch, 2011) and why this should be avoided at all costs. I will deliberate this using my own experiences whilst also considering the works of Stuart Hall (Hall & Du Gay, 1996; Hall, 1997; Gilroy et al., 2000), bell hooks (1989), Michael Foucault (1973, 1994, 2002), Paolo Freire (2017), Augusto Boal (1973), Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993; Bourdieu et al., 2003) to firmly underpin this method theoretically and practically.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK, AND WHO IS IT FOR?

This book is a mix of theory (Part One), case study investigations (Part Two) and practical advice on how to do the work of NSC (The Workbook). It is also a treatise on pedagogic philosophies that underpin a method of working with underrepresented groups of people—people who often find themselves voiceless, othered and on the margins of representation. It is, overall, a book for anyone who is working in, or planning to work in, museums, NGOs and the third sector where co-creation, co-curation and participatory bottom-up to equitable processes are key to working with communities.

In The Workbook I will share a draft workshop plan with you and a few activities that will help you to go through a process of experientially witnessing what *you already know and do not know* and what resources you have to share as a specialist. I will guide you through identifying your space and place in the world, your interculturality and own barriers to participation, assumptions and praxis. Becoming a non-selective curator is a journey of self-discovery; a journey into the awareness of how power performs and how, if we are not careful, we could enact symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1989) on the very people we are trying to help.

Good luck, I look forward to joining you in this!

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I dedicate this book to you for participation, co-curation and social justice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Westwater is an artist with an academic agenda. She is a community artist, maker of theatre and academic. Much of her work has been looking at location-responsive storytelling that uses multi-platform methods for polyvocality. Her work predominantly has a human rights participatory focus and uses approaches, listed here, to facilitate spatial and social justice aims within community arts, arts and heritage projects, co-curation and matters around participation, social justice, equality, equity and diversity.

Carrie graduated from drama school in 2001 before completing an MA Honours in Comparative Literature and Slavonic Studies followed by an MLITT in Film Journalism. Both these degrees were from the University of Glasgow and in 2021 she completed her doctorate (PhD) in the practical application of theatre methodologies as effective participatory methods within museums and arts and heritage co-curatorial settings. Her thesis is the basis for this book which aims to encourage greater transparency in this work for socially just co-creation/curation under the name of non-selective curation.

She holds a lectureship at Cardiff University in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture.

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An Introduction and Theoretical Underpinnings



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Setting Out the Parameters

This book will be divided into two parts, beginning with this introduction which will give a brief discussion on how this book came about and introduce the theoretical beginnings by looking at the power of language in museum participatory practice, through the lens of Bernadette Lynch (2011).

This section will also identify the key issues, again theoretically, around othering, power and what makes working in a participatory manner challenging in a museum and other settings. This will present a historical perspective and critically discuss works of scholarship pertinent to the field followed by what museums have been doing to mitigate these.

Part two will present the challenges found in the practice of participation, co-curation and transition from selective to non-selective curation (NSC). This section will present three case studies to map out the learning that came from each whilst developing the method of non-selective curation.

This section will also present how the method of non-selective curation was discovered, what its method is and how to do it. In the back matters there is a workbook that will help you put into practice some of the ideas presented here. I hope that through these bespoke sections you will follow the same journey I took before truly feeling able to do this work.

As you read the following pages you will come to understand that there is a bigger picture in this work, one that is rooted in spatial and social justice aims—one that involves becoming open to new possibilities and

contributes to greater agency in meaningful participation (HLF, 2010). The key elements in how to do this can be found in the concepts and theoretical underpinnings of *radical openness* (hooks, 1989), *languaging* (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004; Freire, 2017), *just space* (Westwater, 2021) and the *spect-actor* (Boal, 1973). We will also discuss why this work is important by extensively presenting the meaning and performances of *othering* and *power* (Hall & Du Gay, 1996; Hall, 1997a).

At the end of this reading process, you will be able to identify the power dynamics in play, especially within the funded organisation (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). You will come to recognise how and why this particular space and place can often derail your aims at democratic equity. You will also come to discover how essentialist ideas, passed down from generation to generation, can hinder almost all egalitarian objectives and how as heritage workers and exhibition curators we have a power that must not only be recognised but be offered as a resource for greater inclusion.

Non-selective curation is overall a method of co-curation that acknowledges this power whilst opening possibilities for dynamic cross-cultural authority, autonomy and exchange as a profound pedagogical premise. Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) discuss a process called 'languaging' in their intercultural work, as one of the central tenets of this method. It is when two parties learn to create a new language of understanding between them that communion can take place. Let us embark on the same.

In this same spirit, the following section will summarise some of the key definitions that will frequent the pages of this book and explain how this language will be used.

I WILL 'LANGUAGE': KEY DEFINITIONS

Non-selective curation is a practice that is engaged with the subjects involved, or participants who will also be represented in the exhibition. Therefore, participation is key to its process. The definition I use is one from participatory development, provided by Guijt (Guijt et al., 1998: 1). Participation 'is to increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalized people in decision-making over their own lives'. In the context of museums, this decision-making is all about representations of self or cultural identities/heritages. The 'self' here is the participant who is taking part in co-curation, who is often called the community participant. The ideas attached to 'community' will be introduced more specifically, but for clarity from the offset let's define this as everyone who is not the museum or organisation involved.

Community arts expert Popple (1997) explains that community work is a specialised sensitive vocation, be that in community education, community arts or community development. Popple explains that working with communities is a long-term investment, one that is often difficult to achieve:

It is not a profession like any other. It is a profession dedicated to increasing the expertise of non-professionals; to increasing the capacity of people in difficult and disadvantaged situation, getting more control over their collective circumstances. Community workers stimulate and support groups of people working to improve conditions and opportunities in their own neighbourhoods. The immediate aims are often concrete - better amenities, housing, job opportunities; the underlying aim is an increase in confidence, skill and community self-organizing power which will enable the participants to continue to use and spread these abilities long after the community worker has gone. (Popple, 1997: 5)

Schwarzman (Knight & Schwarzman, 2017) further describes community arts as "any form or work of art that emerges from a community and consciously seeks to increase the social, economic, and political power of that community." When thinking about museums, the key message they as an institution communicate is that they help manage the expectations and processes of the participants using community arts practice in the UK. These actions I would argue are also aligned with hooks' 'radical openness' (hooks, 1989), a premise to be as honest as possible about subject positioning and allowing for 'a not knowing'. The not knowing and sharing of this position is essential and trumps what it is you do know. The language of 'radical openness' directs the artist/practitioner to be open, to not assume anything and to practice active listening. At the Centre for Creative Arts in St Louis they use a method of training that educates the community artist in 'negotiation, power and privilege, creativity, theories of learning, critical response, evaluation and assessment' (Borwick, 2012). It is these underpinnings that anyone wishing to practice non-selective curation should be well versed in.

Don't fear your own voice, Process! Process! Process! Share what you are learning, share what you already know. (Weiss in Borwick, 2012: 319)

There is much here that practitioners working in the fields of participation could gain from as within community arts practice there is also an

explicit understanding that we must 'know what [we] don't know' (Borwick, 2012). Until individuals have the experience and the opportunity to examine their own assumptions, they will be unprepared to participate effectively in partnerships that cross lines in human difference (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004). Therefore, by being open and transparent about what you do not know, but in a balanced way (which I will go on to discuss), expressing what you do know, you encourage the participant to do the same. By sharing what skills, you all have in the co-curatorial process, this starting space, levels out the space of engagement and enables all to participate together.

I will discuss *non-selective curation* as a socially and spatially just method of *co-production*, *co-curation* and *co-creation* and that through its premise of not selecting objects for an exhibition. The curator respects the participants' ability to make decisions about how they want to be represented. They are in charge of what objects they feel will do this, be that an object from the collection, a film, an audio file or a performance. It is intended through its praxis to be non-hierarchical and is instead egalitarian in terms of decision-making and agency with and by the community participant.

Often in this kind of work the 'co' participle denotes: a *shared* production, *shared* creation and *shared* curation (Prentki & Abraham, 2020; Prentki & Preston, 2009). However, as this work has found, these terms refer to a practice that is often collated and interchangeable, and instead of being bogged down with definitions, we will examine how each has power that performs in slightly separate ways.

Again, thinking about language positionings I will also argue that museums are spaces informed by specific discourse formations (Foucault, 1973, 2002) and will throughout the book draw on Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993) ideas on 'disposition'. He explains how performances of power are actualised by discourse formations (Foucault, 1973) as [dis]positions or [dis]positional thinking. The brackets I use denote that the positioning of the actor is informed by their dispositions (seemingly fixed ideas coming from discourse) which are difficult to shift. Further to all of this Space itself is a tricky term to define with connotations of the geographical and psychological and will here refer to the psychological space of engagement, whereas place will describe the geographical and physical site.

Ultimately this book will frame performances of power as operating between two opposing poles (Bourdieu, 1993) that illustrate irreconcilable duties being performed in this space and place of museums: with one

pole felt as a responsibility to the museum sponsor, the funder or project initiator (ICOM, 2007) and a second pole felt as a duty to open up processes to and with the participant as recommended by best practice (Bienkowski, 2014, 2016). Bourdieu (1993) explains that these separate poles occupy different fields of cultural production. These 'fields' are described by Bourdieu as either autonomous or heteronomous (Bourdieu, 1993) and are impossible to bring into harmony. Heteronomy is the state of being that is ruled by a lack of self-determinism motivated by a political currency and/or economic motives of responsibility, whereas autonomy is the right to self-govern outcomes motivated without consideration of political-economic or currency concerns and therefore gives all involved the freedom to make unencumbered decisions. We will see how these poles work against co-curatorial practice in the case studies of section three.

The case studies of section three investigate the reframing of co-curation whilst non-selective curation was still in development. It will outline some of the transitional experiences you may encounter or indeed recognise. Non-selective curation is somewhat an oxymoronic term; however, it dictates that when using this method, the curation is not determined by the museum selecting objects. The practice involves using all material created unless the participant decides to remove it. The curation is in *how* these materials are displayed not the selection of *what* is displayed. The objectives, which are grounded in theory as developed in case study one, explicitly respect the specialism of the museum with regard to access standards, but also in turn respects the cultural lens of the community participant (Strachan & Mackay, 2013) as an equal and different authority (e.g., to include self-representations that curators might miss during traditional selective-curation processes). This method aims then to represent the participant narratives more accurately and meaningfully.

The case studies examine how power performs when museums engage in co-curation with different groups of people: volunteers, community participants and professional partners.

To ground this practice in section one the book uses the lens of cultural theory (Foucault, 1973; Foucault et al., 2000; Bourdieu, 1992, 1993; Hall & Du Gay, 1996; Hall, 1997b; hooks, 1989) and compares two key variables: how the language related to Lynch's study is actuated in the practice of participation post *Whose Cake Is It Anyway*? (2011), and how power circulates in co-curatorial decision-making as experienced in practice by the participants and practitioners involved.

We will now embark on this journey by thinking about the theoretical positioning of the curator and the participant as having an *Us and Them* dynamic and how this is archaeologically formed through generations and generations of work. This can however be adjusted, as the following sections two and three will reveal. Until then, enjoy the scholarship of *how* this practice performs.

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