# EPILOGUE: ON NONLINEAR GROWTH

Bridget Riggir-Cuddy

An epilogue denotes a post hoc, linear rationalisation of the event. The epilogue encloses and domesticates the event into a product, a distinct and intelligible narrative. Perhaps the epilogue intends to tell us *it was always meant to be this way*—that complex data and random noise might, with the benefit of hindsight, form a complete whole, the way one might find images in clouds.

The Emerging Curator's Programme (ECP) began in November 2015: twelve emerging curators and four established mentors were invited to a 'curatorial retreat' at the base of Aoraki, Aotearoa's tallest mountain. According to the ECP press release, the programme was 'designed to challenge current models of exhibition making, generate a discursive environment and build relationships through peer mentorship, activity and connectivity'.[1]

After the retreat, each curator presented their idea of a curatorial project that addressed these goals within the programme's budget. This took the form of a wide-ranging group email conversation, in which, over a series of months, each participant's offering was considered and incorporated into the next. These ideas included offering of communal spaces and educational resources, a mobile conversational research project, a library, the establishment of networks between practitioners, a collaborative exhibition and a journal. After this conversation, the organisers divided the curators into three groups, each with its own prescribed outcome: an exhibition, a public programme and a publication. Within each group we developed ideas towards these outcomes, sharing them with the others in a process of long-form mutual critique.

A year later, after the realisation of an exhibition and a public programme, ECP comes to an official end with the launch of this publication. The end necessitates some form of legible closure, the translation of our outcomes; an epilogue.

As the sum of all parts of a curatorial practice or a project's collaborative process, it is often expected that all exchangeable value—be it curatorial, artistic, political or otherwise—can be found within the limits of the final product: *the outcome*. The curatorial outcome can feel like a flattening of something that once had depth and motion.
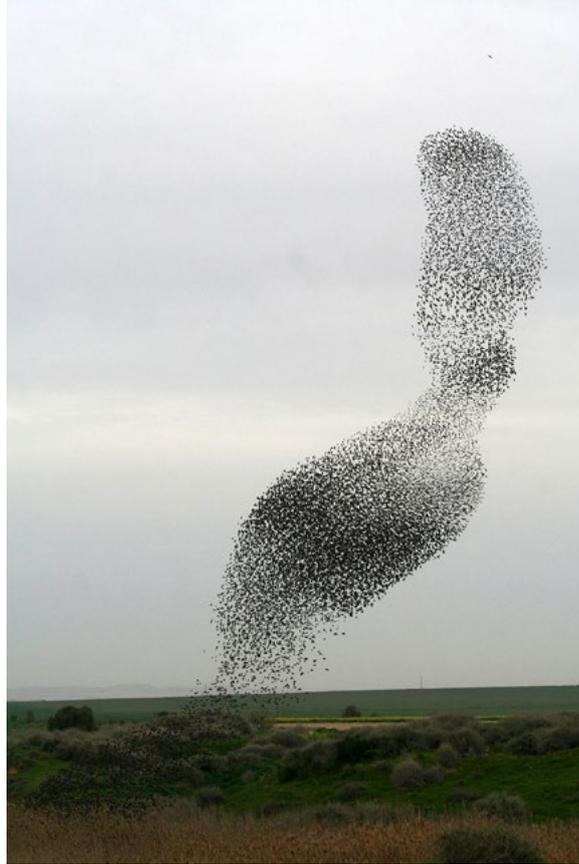
A Starling Murmuration, Negev, 14 February 2013.
Source: Wikimedia Commons. Photo: Oronbb.

Of course, this issue of reduction is not isolated to the curatorial. Whittling is a process native to all creative endeavours. Research, relations and experimentation are often necessarily obscured by the outcome. However, the accelerating institutionalisation of this relatively young, turbulent field seems defined by its complicity with outcome-driven economies. Very often an agent defined by institutional quotas, the curator learns to attest to the success of traditional models and structures.

As the curator by definition works with outcomes, it is out of necessity that I write an epilogue for ECP. But it is also out of necessity that I address and resist the deficiencies of an outcome-driven economy. While a product of an institutional process, what I consider the successes of ECP are incompatible with institutional models of value, exchange and development. Rather than presenting a series of outcomes that make this year accountable to dominant structures of worth, I intend to give space to emergent

qualities found within the year's programme, those aspects that do not yet register within or are accounted for by the institution in the hope that they might extend and regenerate beyond the limits of the programme itself.

Institutions trade in linear products, thereby requiring processes that are visible and traceable. Delimiting complex adaptation by defining conditions for growth, the institution cannot account for outcomes that take place at irregular paces and angles, as it can only account for itself—for the perpetuation and repetition of its own linearity. The 'curator-as-manager' neglects nonlinear trajectories of growth not delimited by top-down expectations.

Retrospectively, I believe most generative and productive periods of ECP took place in-between: in-between the fulfilment of symbolic expectations; in-between our degrees of incommensurability and the pressure to forge shared ground. Our sustained inter-actions in the early stages of the programme, at Aoraki and in our subsequent conver-sations, gave rise to the possibility of realising products that could not have emerged in isolation. These anomalous energies, patterns and behaviours cannot be accounted for by the institution, but they will come to play in new projects, relations and networks, in different systems of different scales.

If ECP's aim of challenging dominant modes of exhibition making was achieved anywhere, it was in these complex interactions of its sixteen diverse practitioners. This state of prolonged synergy, and naturally fractious asymmetry, caused challenges and adaptive growth, not only within our individual practices, but within that of the institution. This growth is less discernible, nonlinear in its progression, innovations emerging within our individual practices to disperse throughout the ecologies in which we practice. This sporadic growth emerged, surprisingly, from the expectation to progress in straight lines, in prescriptive collaboration.

In this way, the linearity of institutional constraints can be highly generative. In navigating the restrictive systems of the creative economy we need to continually formulate adaptive strategies to maintain our creative, political and ethical integrity. In the case of ECP, this state of actual productivity—as opposed to symbolic productivity— was increased by way of it being an intensely collective negotiation. In this state of increased variety and interactivity, novel and unexpected strategies emerged as possi-bilities. Through collaboration, we created the basic forms of a more complex curatorial practice that may have never emerged in isolation.

I am most interested in this dynamic of heightened creativity, the co-adaptive progress and complex growth caused by proximity, and further, how these might disperse and

come to fruition in larger systems. To me, this seems like the defining result of ECP. I believe that we should consider a state of dynamism and co-adaptation within a system as holding the same value as a traditional curatorial outcome. ECP felt most generative, nuanced and political in these moments of the collective discovery of unfamiliar contours.

At the cusp of ECP's completion I feel that we should value the emergence of difference within its parameters, rather than that of repetition. At the close of the programme, we found ourselves facing the goal of an outcome, and communal attention was bent away from natural growth and towards performance. As we moved to familiar and sanctioned trajectories known to reliably lead to outcomes, the feeling of a growing yet unformed territory dissipated. This move did not stem from a single decision, but perhaps an unconscious and systematic bias towards an outcome.

This bias towards treating the curatorial as the managerial, towards curation as a static medium, leads us to dismiss products that are as-yet-indefinable and to dismiss what they might offer other ecologies. When we cling to institutional expectations, these indefinable products fall away as waste, the by-product of a predetermined trajectory.

By valuing time and space for interactivity, creativity and precarity, the curatorial process might allow itself to exist as an actual practice and medium, one of constant renegotiation, open to co-adaptation, to cross-pollination within its own operations and between other media. It might be a creative practice, rather than a managerial practice, wherein the curator does not prescribe formulas for success but is open and willing to experiment. At the very least, we should find ways to articulate emergent qualities and their potential for radical disruption of the institution's borders.

Emergence is a type of nonlinear growth or adaptation. It occurs in a system via the interactions of smaller agents making up that system. Larger entities or new characteristics of a system find form by accounting for the behaviour of its smaller agents, although these smaller agents may not undergo change themselves. An emergent order occurs when 'agents residing on one scale start producing behaviour that lies one scale above them'.[2] Emergence rises out of chaos, when the anomalies and disruptions caused by the interactions of different agents generate novel forms within a system. In turn, these novel forms are subsequently understood as a part of that system. The system has been redefined from the inside, by its own components.

Curation, as an inherently social medium that contains a diversity of agents, is easy to consider in these terms. To consider curation in terms of emergence is to consider every curatorial interaction as having the potential to generate changes on higher scales. The curator, therefore, has very good reason to honour process as a creative and experi-

mental place, instead of an efficient and compliant march towards outcome. Thinking curating through emergence could figure practices and an institutional allowance for entirely new forms of this medium. What is first absolutely necessary is the simple acknowledgement that curating, by nature and definition, is not a static thing.

If curating is primarily considered a static, professional category, its potential for quiet resistance and change is lost. In this instance, the curator would be in danger of forgetting the ethical and relational aspects at the heart of their medium: privileging these over results can be, in itself, a radical act. Within current structures it is too easy for the curator to function as a piece of machinery, capturing, channelling and delivering culture with the least resistance and expenditure. In doing so, they neglect their potential to find and relay new ways of being in the world. Privileged to operate in an ecology of diverse practitioners, the curator is in a position to help rewrite the lore of the art world and puncture its dehumanising market logic. In every interaction the curator has the chance to steer away from colonialist and capitalist aspirations towards a creative production that privileges difference over repetition.

I would argue that the possibility of this difference lies in the complex sociality of the curator. A curator collaborates: their primary material is that of interactivity. To simply import a practitioner's known output into a space is to foreclose any chance of mutual collaboration and the possibility of its emergent qualities to grow outside of the space, into the wider community. Impoverished interactions lead to impoverished outcomes. Though a large part of the curator's labour is immaterial, it has a fundamental value. The relational, collaborative and developmental material of curatorial process should be treated as gently as any final outcome. A curator brings philosophy, ethics, politics and poetics to their material field: these do not just form an outcome, but are the very basis of the curator's relationship with practitioners. Good relationships recognise the emergence of the rich and unexpected, rather than denying them in favour of a communicable outcome with a clear value. While not denying the importance of these outcomes, I believe shifting our focus towards the *process* of curating would not only be of benefit to the curatorial climate in Aotearoa, but would also enrich the final results of curatorial projects.

In this last year, I began to consider what it would feel like to embody the institution and how I could resist this transition in the course of my practice (or career). Through the curator's own complicity with its administration, they can come to be seen as little more than the institution's human face. My time in ECP has made me aware of the need to create space for the curatorial as a creative practice—a practice distinct from the institution's administration—and of a curatorial openness to complex communal trajectories. While a practice like this may be less focused on concrete outcomes, it would enrich the

institution's networks in an ecosystem, the benefits of which are obvious. With curating recognised as a creative practice, the diversity of voices, politics, identities and practices within this medium will have the freedom to be reinvented from the inside.

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1   'Emerging Curators Programme
      2015/2016', The Physics Room,
      Christchurch.

2   Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The
      Connected Lives of Ants, Brains,
      Cities, and Software* (New York:
      Scribner, 2001), 18.