

TOOLS FOR SLOWING DOWN

Chloe Geoghegan & Chloe Reith

It was Megan Johnston's article for the December 2014 issue of *OnCurating* titled 'Slow Curating: Re-thinking and Extending Socially Engaged Art in the Context of Northern Ireland' that first introduced me to the idea of slowing down curatorial practice. It was a year later that I hastily read this text on curating, along with a gruelling thirty-four others, in preparation for the Independent Curators International ten-day Fall Curatorial Intensive that took place during September 2015 in downtown New York. Johnston explained that by embracing a slower framework, a more dialectical approach that encourages knowledge production within curatorial practice could be achieved.¹

I confess that at the time I did not see the irony of attempting to cram these texts into a two-week window before beginning the Fall Curatorial Intensive, but since then I have been fascinated with the idea of Slow Curating. Those who know me both personally and professionally will be aware that I do not do anything slowly, let alone my job, and may find it surprising that I am interested in such an idea, having witnessed me present and co-present at least one new exhibition every month since June 2012 at both Blue Oyster and Dog Park art project spaces. It was not until the opportunity arose to co-develop and participate in the Emerging Curators Programme and to write a text for this publication that I began to see the idea of Slow Curating as a real possibility for exploration.

Perhaps part of the motivation to slow down was the realisation that I'm turning thirty soon, or the perspective that has come with those seventy-odd monthly shows, or that I've tried out fast and I'm ready to try something new. I do know, however, one of the main practical inspirations for exploring this phenomenon was meeting Edinburgh-based curator and Fall Curatorial Intensive participant Chloe Reith. Her proposed project *Sinkholes and broken telephones* employs 'concepts of slowed time, altered timescales, indeterminacy and ambiguity as both the exhibition's subject and structure'.² The following is a conversation between Chloe and me on the subject of slowing down our curatorial practices and participating in this ever-changing profession by disentangling ourselves from speed as one of the primary conditions today's curator must work within.

Chloe Geoghegan (CG): What inspired you to, as you have written, ‘broadly consider the hurried pace in which we consume and commodify culture today’?³ Was it something specifically related to your job as a curator or a personal sense of unease about working in today’s fast-paced, impulsive society?

Chloe Reith (CR): The project *Sinkholes and broken telephones* was originally conceived as a group exhibition with an expanded geographical framework, presenting the work of a small number of artists, one artwork at a time within private environments and domestic spaces across a cityscape. *Sinkholes* set out to create a differentiated viewing experience and disrupt the way artworks are typically presented and understood in a gallery situation by offering a reduced (and physically comfortable) environment with one point of focus. Withdrawing each artwork from the gallery, and even further, from the clamouring attention economy of the city, *Sinkholes* intends to cultivate more space and time for slower experiences and deeper reactions to artworks and in turn begins to suggest alternative modes of being, thinking and negotiating the world, and for consuming culture. By offering this constellation of slowed experiences where visitors are required to invest time performing and navigating the exhibition, the exhibition also aims to interrupt efficient channels of circulation and distribution.

Having lived with these ideas for some time now, it is quite difficult for me to think back and grasp their roots, or pinpoint when these thoughts really surfaced for me in a tangible, conscious way. I’m fairly certain it came from long-held, even subconscious feelings of anxiety (or crisis even), both due to the demands of my job as a curator and from the conflicting pressures of keeping up with our post-digital, information-saturated everyday lives. That awareness of being spread too thin; of every moment being absorbed; of being overwhelmed by the pace of activity around me and always experiencing FOMO; of the pressure to keep up and on top of that ceaseless assault of information coming from every direction, and of course, failing to do so. I think these types of experiences have been seeping into many aspects of our culture for a long time and are commonly felt by a lot of people, but particularly by those in professions like ours dealing with contemporary art and our proximity to the art market (not to mention our reliance on funding streams that simply no longer exist). For me, slowing down was reactive, a way of saying ‘this is not okay’, whilst at the same time opening up possibilities to intervene and seek out other ways of being.

By coincidence I was visiting Vienna in 2014 and happened to see Cosima von Bonin’s 2014 retrospective at mumok, and this was a really exciting, liberating moment in relation to my feelings at the time. As part of her practice von Bonin creates these gigantic stuffed animals, imbuing them with characteristics of laziness, lethargy,

exhaustion and fatigue as sly comments against society's conformist demands for hard work, productivity and unremitting activity—a real tongue-in-cheek celebration of doing nothing that I find incredibly appealing! Von Bonin's work really opened things up for me and perhaps it was even the first time I realised that wanting to drop out of this swirling soup of recycled information was okay. And more than that: that withdrawal is actually a powerful position of resistance against societal norms, that there are more meaningful, gratifying ways of interacting with the world besides aggressively consuming and producing through these superficial modes and channels.

I think attitudes encompassing late-capitalist anxiety, general exhaustion and a growing resistance, have galvanised significantly, and politically, with 2016 feeling like a kind of tipping point. There is this brilliant essay by Isabell Lorey for Maria Eichhorn's Chisenhale project *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* where she discusses neoliberal economies, regimes of precarisation and questions how we might disrupt this state and end up with more time. She writes: 'To have no time, to tirelessly do more at once, to become increasingly flexible, to constantly change goals, plans, preferences – and to earn less and less. All this characterises neoliberal work and life.'⁴ This project was a real denouement for me because it really is a perfect articulation of how I perceive the present climate.



Cosima von Bonin, *HIPPIES USE SIDE DOOR. THE YEAR 2014 HAS LOST THE PLOT* (exhibition view), mumok, Vienna, 4 October 2014 – 18 January 2015. Courtesy of mumok. Photo: Laurent Ziegler.

But I wonder what your thoughts are from your own specific cultural and geographical context—this could be an interesting opportunity for us to see what similarities and differences there are across the world. I wonder if you experience a different set of values that are perhaps slightly more empathetic to a more considered, slower approach in your geographic context—do you feel the same or different pressures? I recently met

with an Italian curator, Viviana Checchia (coincidentally also an ICI alumna) who has just finished a PhD thesis on slowness in Mediterranean culture and how their processes, approach to work and end goals significantly differ to that of northern Europe and the rest of the world. Do you notice anything like this in the Southern Hemisphere?

CG: Geographically, I should be in the slowest zone: the bottom of the country at the bottom of the world with only a few institutions and a very small community. I think though that this causes me to become busier, to participate globally and to look outward in order to progress locally. I think that we, speaking for my peers in New Zealand, certainly experience the same pressures as others globally to read more and go to more openings, talks and symposiums. Platforms such as Facebook have of course accelerated and intensified a kind of immediate and overt attendance that makes you feel like everyone is constantly participating. Then, keeping up with the rest of the world is another job in itself.

CR: Thinking about contexts and geographies (and also time of year), I'm reminded of my own particular/peculiar context of Edinburgh and the phenomenon of the Edinburgh Festival, which really did influence my thoughts on slowing down culture. It's the world's largest arts festival with over three thousand shows, lasting twenty-five days and entirely absorbs the city (which is relatively small). The festival transforms Edinburgh—it is entirely other to what is normal for this place. The population more than doubles and all major cultural activity is focused on the festival around this time. Cultural tourists flock to the city with one goal: to consume as much as possible, creating intensive itineraries and strategies to enable this. It's an absurd, hyper phenomenon and the kind of overstimulated environment visitors to contemporary art fairs or biennales would be familiar with (high production, information saturated, demanding, attention grabbing, endurance testing and distracted consumption) but expressed on a city scale. I think the Edinburgh Festival must have reached this accelerated hypermarket of culture status long before the art market and multiplatform media. But then for the eleven remaining months the city is in a state of hibernation and recovery!

CG: I did hear about Maria Eichhorn's project at Chisenhale and I was excited to see an artist approach these issues in such an elegant way. Speaking of biennales, it reminded me of CASCO Director and 2016 Gwangju Biennale Curator Binna Choi's project where her institution (CASCO) is treated as a 'site for unlearning'. She proposed a series of 'unlearning exercises' with her staff including balancing chairs, reading together and making a time diary. On this project she writes:

So far the central thing we have been unlearning is 'busyness,' the familiar state and prevalent mode of 'business.' Running a business, in particular the business of an art institution, is irrevocably tied up with our feeling of constantly 'being busy,' loaded with stress and anxiety.⁵

Choi proposes a revaluing of 'certain reproductive tasks' that make us busy such as cleaning, cooking, hosting and maintenance work so as to unlearn habits and therefore open up the possibility for learning something new. For me, this is an attractive proposition simply for the reason of unlearning 'busyness'.

On this subject, I am reminded of Jan Verwoert's 'Exhaustion & Exuberance', an essay that I was grateful to revisit thanks to it being a core reference in your exhibition proposal. In addressing the pressure to perform, Verwoert asks how we can change the way our society lives as we consume our own products if we are performing and producing at a prolific rate? In relation to this I am wondering if, on an organisational level, you think we, as curators, are exploiting ourselves? What has it meant to you to resist this performance? I realise your project proposal has been halted due to funding arrangements so I am wondering how this curatorial research into slow curating has affected your other projects.

CR: Are we exploiting ourselves! That's a tough question to answer especially from the context of the public sector art world where, in my experience, many of us find ourselves with a certain privileged status (as someone in the arts who is in paid employment as opposed to so many highly trained individuals who are unemployed, working for free or very little) and it is that knowledge that puts pressure on us to be complicit in our own (self)exploitation. In accepting that privileged status (and this much-coveted job), we are acquiescing to sustaining the high-performance status quo—fulfilment of ever-greater demands, pressure to do ever-more with fewer resources, marginal room for error and of course agreeing to everything. I think this is partly what Verwoert is referring to when he says 'we are the avant-garde but we are also the job-slaves'.⁶ The art world is consistently one of the oddest working environments where you might be expected to espouse critical theory, say, or operate with high-profile donors and gallery directors, but you'll also be responsible for cleaning the gallery or serving drinks at previews, for example. The curator's position is constantly shifting from the macro to the micro and expectations are always high, but this of course is the card dealt by neoliberalism and in the case of the UK, years of austerity, cuts to the arts and conservative governments too.

Verwoert's assertion that there is productive power in simply saying 'no' is a hugely liberating ideology speaking against capitalist working patterns that push people, ideas and production beyond their limits and past exhaustion. He suggests a number of alternatives that involve caring, unwillingness, latency and delayed fruition, as well

as taking yourself out of circulation. These tactics are echoed by Anthony Huberman in his similarly influential text *Naïve Set Theory*, where he also advocates for refusal, withdrawal, absence and deliberate vagueness to stop the easy flow of information.⁷ In the context of work and society at large however, it's important to consider who might actually have the agency to perform this kind of activity—who can actually afford to drop out, to refuse, to wholly commit to saying no without consequence? These acts imply a person of a certain status, class and race even.

As you say, it is about the small adjustments you can make on a personal, attitudinal level—to reduce and focus inward, make better choices and resist the temptation to document, project, contribute and spread your consciousness around. It's quite a brave step too; so much of the art world is based on networking, knowing the right people and making yourself known. I think it's important to ask if this is sustainable and test what modifications we can make, asserting a different pace when possible.

I probably wouldn't describe *Sinkholes* as an active resistance, although perhaps it sits to one side of this and is mindful of this context. The project has been influenced by Verwoert and Huberman in terms of wanting to offer private space withdrawn from the mainstream (and the traditional gallery environment), instigating delays and actively encouraging incomprehension through ambiguity and geography even. I'm less interested in directly confronting neoliberalism than more generally highlighting difference, unsettling things, finding new ways of looking and opening up space in a discursive way. I think this is a broader tendency in my recent work: a desire to examine accepted conventions and just ask simply 'why do we do it like that?' At the beginning of the year I presented the exhibition *Objects from the Temperate Palm House*⁸ where I swapped conventional gallery plinths for these historical palm trunks, using them as stand-in display structures to present art objects. The idea came from thinking about display methodologies and taking a critical, albeit tongue-in-cheek perspective about received notions of the contemporary gallery space, and perhaps this is part of the same process, a desire to test normative practices—and to deconstruct the gallery a little!

What interests me the most is exploring more meaningful ways of operating and working with artists, attempting to reignite a kind of curiosity, and step out of the treadmill of production for production's sake. Ironically enough, because *Sinkholes* has been delayed due to a lack of funding, it remains in a latent state of potential that admittedly is frustrating but has offered me the time to test my relationship with the idea and its relevance through time. Having been denied the opportunity to complete and move on to the next thing, *Sinkholes* has evolved in a different way, it's something I have discussed more and shared with other people, and my relationships with the artists have expanded too, so it actually feels quite comfortable in this suspended state.



Yelena Popova, *Circles and Ovals*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Philipp von Rosen Gallery. Photo: Jules Lister.
The work of Yelena Popova will be presented in *Sinkholes and broken telephones*, (forthcoming).

CG: Making small adjustments when it comes to networking and establishing yourself in this field is something that I've been thinking about lately, especially with, well we all use this as a trope now and I hate to mention it twice in this text: Facebook. I think it's just the perfect example of how easy it is, like you say, to spread one's consciousness too thin. Of course to be active on the largest network in the history of humankind is necessary when participating in and promoting projects, but I think when it comes to maintaining this presence for future activity, there is value in trusting that your peers, your networks and your circles know you and what you're about already without you having to constantly prove yourself in a perpetually regenerating information feed. Recently I have been feeling that we don't have to know everyone, and that connecting on Facebook especially has grown to become an essential tool in the art world. I think it

could be more interesting to not know everyone and to spend a lifetime discovering new practices and new projects unmediated by flat white screens and hurried scrolls.

One text that has influenced us as an editorial group for this publication and has been mentioned by other contributors is 'On Curatorial Responsibility' by Raqs Media Collective. Early on in this text they bring up the idea of slowing down when addressing the idea that artists-curators often fail to juggle their responsibilities to either position, arguing that if the artist-curator actually slowed down enough to think about their dual position, they might end up retreating into being either one or the other rather than both at the same time.⁹ Firstly, I can't imagine doing both but I respect the abilities of those who are able to juggle the two. Secondly, when you mention stepping off the treadmill and exploring a more meaningful way of operating with artists it got me thinking about the way Raqs Media Collective and many of the contributors in this very publication are interested in curatorial responsibility, and maybe slowing in order to think more is the vehicle that moves us toward being more responsible for our positions in this field. Thinking about how 'curating' first started out as a derivative of 'to care' makes me think that now, after some time, perhaps we should be thinking about curating as a new reference to being 'careful'.

CR: It's true there are many quite complex and contradictory responsibilities a curator has to negotiate and often these are not immediately obvious to publics or even to many artists. Part of my desire to instigate a slowed curatorial approach was to acknowledge a responsibility towards experience and reception, to experiment with structures and methodologies that instigate new perceptions and create deeper resonances for individuals, as opposed to perpetuating contexts that support acts of browsing and consuming content. Contemporary society is now so well versed (consciously or not) in the vernacular of the gallery space through its absorption into the commercial world. As a result, we are confronted everywhere with these tasteful 'industry standards', empty signifiers of prestige or value. For me, it is the curator's urgent responsibility to artists and audiences alike to trouble the conventionalised ideology of the gallery. Going back to the curatorial as a caring profession—perhaps the curator's responsibility is to care enough to take risks and work in ways that might upset or rub against current thinking. Careful is a good and relevant word, however I would hate for a careful approach to result in more caution on the part of the curator because there's so much that can come from the relationship between artist and curator.

There are so many rules and constraints applied to the discipline of curating; what is permissible for the artist-curator for example is not the same as for the academic or institutional curator. There's this suggestion that a curator should not be subjective or authorial, let alone audacious or bold in the way that is permitted to the artist-curator.

I'm excited that there seems to be renewed interest in exhibition designers and architects like Frederick Kiesler, Carlo Scarpa and Franco Albini—it always surprises me how radical they were permitted to be with their displays. Looking back it almost feels like, as exhibition makers, we have become far too puritanical today. I am hoping this interest heralds a new wave of curatorial risk-taking!

Chloe Reith is a curator and writer based in Edinburgh, Scotland. Currently curator of exhibitions at Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, exhibitions curated for the gallery include Nicolas Party: *Boys and Pastel* (2015), Raoul De Keyser: *Paintings 1967–2011* (2015) and Tony Conrad: *Invented Acoustical Tools 1967–2014* (2014). She has delivered exhibitions including *British Art Show 8* and *I Still Believe in Miracles: 30 Years of Inverleith House* (both 2016) and solo presentations by Isa Genzken, Corin Sworn and Alex Dordoy. As an independent curator she has presented *Objects from the Temperate Palm House*, group exhibition, Bargain Spot Project Space, Edinburgh, 2016, and *Reality and Constructed Factual*, group exhibition, Art Sheffield festival of contemporary art, 2013. She has held posts at S1 Artspace, Sheffield, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead and Portfolio Contemporary Photography Magazine/Jerwood Photography Awards. She has written for publications including *Art News*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Corridor8*, *thisistomorrow* and *Line*. The group exhibition *Sinkholes and broken telephones* will be presented in early 2017.

Chloe Geoghegan is a curator currently living in Dunedin, New Zealand, where she has been director at Blue Oyster Art Project Space since January 2014. Prior to this she co-founded Dog Park, an artist-run space in operation for nearly three years in post-earthquake Christchurch between 2012 and 2014. Recent curatorial projects at Blue Oyster include: *The False Demographic* (2015, curated with Ted Whitaker), *A Tragic Delusion* (2015) and *The Optimists* (2014). Other recent curatorial projects include: *Zero to Hero* at TCB Art Inc., Melbourne (2016) and *Wingman* with Dog Park at Alaska, Sydney (2014). She has contributed to publications such as *Hue & Cry*, *Das Superpaper*, *un Magazine* and the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. Chloe holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design with Honors in Art History from the University of Canterbury (2008/2015) and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Art Curatorship, which included an independent course of study at Oxford University (2011).

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| 1 | Megan Johnston, 'Slow Curating: Re-thinking and Extending Socially Engaged Art in the Context of Northern Ireland', <i>OnCurating</i> 24 (December 2014): 23–33. | 6 | Jan Verwoert, ' <u>Exhaustion and Exuberance: A Pamphlet for the Exhibition Sheffield 08: Yes No and Other Options</u> ', exhibition pamphlet (February–March 2008). |
| 2 | Chloe Reith, 'Sinkholes and broken telephones', unpublished exhibition proposal, 2016. | 7 | Anthony Huberman, 'Naïve Set Theory', condensed version of 'I [love hate] Information', <i>Afterall</i> 15 (Spring/Summer 2007). |
| 3 | Ibid. | 8 | See <i>Objects from the Temperate Palm House</i> , group exhibition, Bargain Spot Project Space, Edinburgh, 16 January – 27 February 2016. |
| 4 | Isabell Lorey, ' <u>Precairisation, Indebtedness, Giving Time Interlacing Lines Across Maria Eichhorn's 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours</u> ', in <i>5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours</i> , ed. Maria Eichhorn (London: Chisenhale Gallery, 2016), 38–50. | 9 | Raqs Media Collective, 'On Curatorial Responsibility', in <i>The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art</i> , ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø (Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall, 2009), 278. |
| 5 | Binna Choi, 'Unlearning Exercises', <i>CASCO</i> (October 2015): 2. Sourced from the 2016 ST PAUL ST Gallery Symposium reading list. | | |