

**Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018, 240 pp. 107 colour illus., \$ 32.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780500239704**

**Marissa Largo**

Volume 43, Number 2, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1054395ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054395ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

**ISSN**

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Largo, M. (2018). Review of [Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018, 240 pp. 107 colour illus., \$ 32.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780500239704]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 43(2), 142–144. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054395ar>

as they encounter art—is necessary to the aesthetic experience. As Arya and Chare point out, Barrett “[shifts] the focus from the reading of an artwork to an experiential encounter,” thus drawing the study of abjection into timely commentary on embodiment and the sensory in the reception of art, asking what is the force and function of abject works such as those produced by artist Catherine Bell, whose photographic and video works give rise to a complex of affective sensations (9).

The jacket cover for *Abject Visions* promises a “path-breaking volume” and it is clear this collection marks a useful attempt to reread the abject in the present day, however difficult it is to leave behind the temporal period and theoretical ensemble from which the abject art movement was born. The scholars in this collection demonstrate how the abject in art destabilizes the field of identity and ruptures social and political norms through disturbing confrontations with the viewer. Arya and Chare, along with their contributors, are successful in developing a critical scholarly examination of the history of abject art. ¶

Yani Kong is a PhD candidate in Contemporary Art History and an instructor at Simon Fraser University, School for the Contemporary Arts. —ykong@sfu.ca

---

**Maura Reilly**  
***Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating***

New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018

240 pp. 107 colour illus.

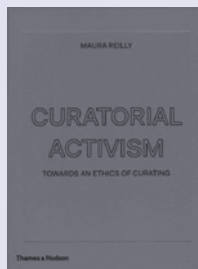
\$32.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780500239704

Marissa Largo

---

Maura Reilly's *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* is a much-needed volume in the field of criticism and curatorial practice. This

book seeks to urge art-world gatekeepers to take on the politics of difference in ethical ways in order to bring to the fore lesser-known art histories or to create radically different ones. According to Reilly, “curatorial activists” take on a variety of tactics that decenter the racism, sexism, and homophobia that have been institutionalized in museums and canons over the centuries. Prominent and well-known examples include Lucy R. Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Amelia Jones, and Okwui Enwezor—cultural workers who did or are doing the work of “leveling hierarchies, challenging assumptions, countering erasure, promoting the margins over the center, the minority over the majority, inspiring intelligent debate, disseminating new knowledge, and encouraging strategies of resistance—all of which offers hope and affirmation” (22). One of the key contributions of Reilly's book is the delineation of three “strategies of resistance” (23): revisionism, area studies, and the relational approach. While revisionism calls for the margins to be included in the grand narratives of art history as it is represented in institutions, collections, and canons, an area-studies approach goes beyond this and seeks to cultivate entirely new narratives organized around marginalized categories of gender, race, or sexuality. The relational approach is the most capacious and multivocal of the three strategies:



it exceeds linear, progressivist narrations in favour of nonhierarchical conceptions of provenance, materiality, and theme.

Currently the executive director of the National Academy of Design in New York, Reilly has developed a theoretical framework of “curatorial activism” informed by decades of feminist interventions as a curator and arts writer, but particularly as the founding curator of the Brooklyn Museum's Sackler Center for Feminist Art. With this firsthand experience in contesting the hegemony of the art world, Reilly illuminates the social, cultural, historical, and political significance of each curatorial intervention she cites, and simultaneously provides behind-the-scenes details, such as critical reception, limitations, and drawbacks.

In the first of the book's five sections, “What is Curatorial Activism?,” Reilly cites the trailblazing work of the Guerrilla Girls and Pussy Galore, and offers statistics that index the appalling underrepresentation of racial and gendered difference in major Western institutions. These statistics help underline the need to attend to feminist, queer, and decolonial representational politics. She discusses landmark exhibitions that took place in the US and Europe between 1976 and 2017 that revealed the critical fissures in the grand narrative of Western art history. The second section begins with the unapologetic, post-1970s subversion of two exhibitions: *Bad Girls*, curated by Maria Tucker, and *Sexual Politics*, curated by Amelia Jones. Here, Reilly outlines feminist art interventions that not only resist the masculinism and sexism of the art world, but also raise internal debates about the effectiveness of strategic essentialism in writing feminist art histories. The author examines the exhibition *Women Artists: 1550–1950*, presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976 and at the Brooklyn Museum in 1977. Curated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, this major revisionist exhibition sought to reinsert accomplished female artists, such as Artemisia Gentileschi and Berthe Morisot, back into the Western canon. Reilly pinpoints a disjuncture between these historically

celebrated artists and modern academics' lack of interest in them: "The fact that scholars of the 1970s were unaware of the work of these artists reflects widespread discrimination against women, historically, and the persistent erasure of their cultural production" (45). In the third section, "Tackling White Privilege and Western-Centrism," Reilly gestures to the limits of the discourse of inclusion in light of the West's globalized economic and cultural power. "By bringing artists and marginal centers of art to the purview of the West, are mainstream curators simply constructing the conditions of a new appropriation of the Other by the West?" (105) She frames artist Fred Wilson's site-specific conceptual work *Mining the Museum* (1992–1993) at the Maryland Historical Society as one of her cases of curatorial activism. Wilson's curatorial intervention/installation troubled the whitewashed history of the museum by reframing and representing Black histories, thereby revealing the constructed nature of exhibition practices and policies. Here, Reilly suggests that curators can learn from artists in developing critiques of museums' institutionalized racism. For the fourth section, "Challenging Heterocentrism and Lesbo-Homophobia," Reilly admits that most of the case studies are heavily white and androcentric, thus illustrating the risk of producing new hegemonies in writing alternative canons. In this regard, the book would benefit from bringing emerging work on queer curating into the conversation, such as the interventions of Canadian curators/artists Syrus Marcus Ware and Kama La Mackerel, who not only examine LGBTQ2S+ identities in art, but also look at "queer" as an aesthetic engagement with radical difference that is grounded in intersectional politics. The final section, "A Call to Arms: Strategies for Change," speaks of the professional responsibility to resist discrimination by embracing practices that are transnational, relational, decolonial, and multivocal. Reilly calls upon gallerists, collectors,

art critics, boards of directors, and other stakeholders to reject "laziness" (222) and to commit to diversifying their programming, acquisitions, membership, and critical attention.

This book is a celebration of the good work that has been done thus far in mainstream contexts, but while many of the cases can be considered groundbreaking, they are not without their flaws. For example, Jean-Hubert Martin's *Magiciens de la Terre* took a relational approach to curating that sought to tear down hierarchies between Western and non-Western visual culture and contemporary art, but, as Lippard, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak have noted, women and African American artists were again sidelined. In a volume that tackles identity-driven social issues in the arts, there is also a glaring omission of a sustained discussion of intersectionality, which emerges from Black feminist thought and acknowledges that one's various subject positions function together—not separately—to inform experiences of oppression or privilege.<sup>1</sup> Missing in particular are discussions of disability and the arts and critical curatorial projects led by women of colour and queers of colour. Also absent are historical and contemporary Indigenous curatorial interventions. If *Curatorial Activism* is a form of institutional critique, interventions that reveal the colonial legacies of museums, their cultural appropriation, and the erasure of Indigenous nations and cultures should be foregrounded and particular attention paid to the politics of location, especially in light of the connection between curatorial practice and the history of Empire. Reilly fails to problematize curatorial activist practices in the context of settler colonialism.

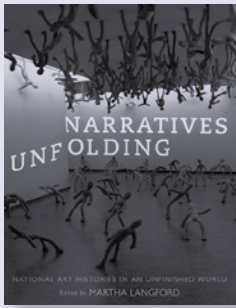
In the current political climate of social conservatism, and with the rise of overt white supremacist movements, *Curatorial Activism* offers tactics in generating knowledge and culture that do not reify relations of domination and subjugation. Many of the cited examples in Reilly's book

evidence "strategic essentialism" in terms of organizing around particular political identities. While some critics would accuse these exhibitions of being reductive, Reilly argues that until parity is achieved in mainstream institutions, curators must actively create the spaces in which to centre marginalized representations.

Echoing Griselda Pollock, Reilly ponders how we can "difference" the canon. "Which counter-hegemonic strategies can we employ to ensure that more voices are included, rather than the chosen, elite few?" (23) Perhaps the more important question is, do Other artists (Black, Indigenous, people of colours) want to be "included" in mainstream institutions and in canons whose very existence is based on violence, erasure, and discrimination? Reilly's cursory handling of the colonial foundations of these institutions and canons may make the reader wonder, who is curatorial activism really for?

Reilly's critique is largely limited to biennales, gallery and museum retrospectives, and other large exhibitions, and only provides a glimpse of alternative spaces in the final chapter. However, it can be argued that the most progressive and smart curatorial activist practices occur outside of official sites. As many contemporary marginalized artists know from experience, many of the cutting-edge practices in equity in the arts are happening at the grassroots level: at the artist-run centers, among ethnocultural community arts groups, activist arts organizations, and experimental digital spaces that are nimble and unhindered by institutional politics, colonial inheritances, and economic viability. Reilly does little to acknowledge that Other artists have had to organize and establish their own alternative spaces—far beyond official sites—for support and exhibition opportunities in order to sustain their very survival.

*Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* would be most suitable for courses in criticism and curatorial practice and special topic courses in



Martha Langford, ed.  
***Narratives Unfolding: National Art Histories in an Unfinished World***  
 Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017

437 pp. 100 colour illus.  
 \$39.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773549791  
 \$120 (cloth) ISBN 9780773549784

Lee Rodney

museum studies that examine equity and access and its intersections with race, class, gender, and sexuality. It would equally complement cultural policy studies in arts administration. Reilly's clear and accessible writing style and the thematic and chronological organization of the chapters make this volume ideal for week-by-week integration into a course syllabus, and the succinct length of each chapter makes the content easily digestible and useful for class discussions. Each case study concludes with a brief overview of critics' responses, many of which reflect a belief that quality was often sacrificed for equity in mainstream exhibitions. Since notions of "greatness" are still largely measured by colonial and heteropatriarchal standards, such debates about the incommensurability of "quality" and the politics of difference are relevant today for students of art history and criticism. Brought into deeper conversation with critical debates in intersectionality, queer of colour critique, Indigenous visual cultures, and alternative art spaces, this book will be a valuable resource to those who are committed to fostering more equitable art worlds. ¶

Marissa Largo is an independent researcher, artist, curator, and educator.  
 —mlargo@ocadu.ca

1. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 8 (1989), 139–167, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf> (accessed August 27, 2018).

*Narratives Unfolding: National Art Histories in an Unfinished World* is a complex collection of sixteen new essays that tackle the difficult and persistent problem of art history and its national frameworks. Unlike many critical anthologies that emerge as topical or thematic collections offering a divergent direction in a field, *Narratives Unfolding* presents a retrospective conundrum that lingers in the conjoined and overlapping fields of art history and visual culture since their disciplinary shake up in the 1970s and 1980s. Langford begins by naming the global as the "éminence grise" that has, for some time now, irreversibly complicated the relationship between the discipline of art history and the metric of nationhood. In this collection, the global is not conjured up as an artefact of recent history (post-1989). Instead, its beginnings are teased out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as margin notes in a range of national art histories that are inherently modernist projects. As such, Langford has intentionally steered away from editing a volume that attempts to cover a global perspective, outlining instead the shortcomings of "global art" history and its orientalizing operations. Though the conference that preceded this collection took place in London in 2014, the resulting volume offers a broad compendium and seeks to renew discussions about the shortcomings of the globalized art world, which tend to remain ahistorical and embedded in the contemporary moment.

Langford's emphasis on national art histories telescopes in from the conditions of the global. The collection proceeds in a roughly chronological fashion, starting with the "unfinished" or latent features of nineteenth- and twentieth-century national projects, which sit uncomfortably in the present geo-political moment, and includes case studies from Turkey, Ireland, Scotland, Egypt, Israel/Palestine and Palestine/Israel. The second half of the collection concentrates on contemporary issues emerging from the ways in which contemporary art has performed its exchange value as a globalizing function over the last few decades. *Narratives Unfolding* assembles diverse case studies of modern and contemporary art, architecture, art history, and visual culture, and offers alternative geographies of art that deviate from the familiar, Western, place-based narratives as singularly urban or national phenomena. Many contributions also address transculturation and decolonization as specific forms of circulation that move within and beyond the framework of the nation. Taken together, the essays in this collection trace complex relays in the decentralizing networks of the global that highlight local or "unorthodox" anomalies in national contexts, stories that, in Langford's words, "could never take hold in national art-historical accounts, but really belong nowhere else" (35). This is where the collection becomes deeply compelling, but also where readers must work to suture connections between the historical and temporal points on an itinerary that, with a few exceptions, remains weighted toward the Global North. Langford's introduction to the collection is a tour de force, highly valuable in its own right for artists, art historians, and theorists navigating the interstices of networked art history and the archives of modernism and contemporary art. She charts a labyrinthine history that goes between the historical foundations of national art histories in the