

This publication accompanies the exhibition
DRAW YOUR OWN CONCLUSION
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“DRAW YOUR OWN CONCLUSION”
AS A WRITERLY EXHIBITION

Maura Reilly

NEVER BE;

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Since the late 1980s, Jean-Hubert Martin has pushed the definition of what constitutes innovative curatorial practice, beginning with the canonical, *Magiciens de la terre*, held at the Pompidou Centre and the Grande Halle de La Villette in Paris in 1989. It was the first attempt by a curator in museum history to mount a large-scale, postcolonial exhibition that eliminated any sense of hierarchy between the Western and non-Western participants. Unlike the much-criticised exhibition *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984—which valorised Western artistic practice over the “primitive” objects it displayed alongside such “greats” as Picasso and Matisse—*Magiciens* sought to exhibit multiple works by so-called first- and third-world artists together in a nonhierarchical way, and one that would not involve projections about centres and margins and high and low art. Instead of imposing Western aesthetic criteria on the art and ritual objects, *Magiciens* attempted cross-cultural dialogue via the careful juxtaposition of works from different cultures, allowing each culture to speak for itself rather than relegating it to a footnote in Western art history. In a bid to open up the Euro-U.S. art world, the exhibition argued for the universality of the creative impulse and endeavoured to offer equal aesthetic experience of contemporary works of art made globally. The exhibition ultimately attempted to challenge a very tired Eurocentric view of art production and, in so doing, became the established precursor of all global exhibitions of contemporary art.¹

Since then, Martin has continued to redefine curatorial practice, most spectacularly with exhibitions like *Une image peut en cacher une autre* (Grand Palais, 2009), *Carambolages* (Grand Palais, 2016), and the present *Draw Your Own Conclusion* (*Pas besoin d'un dessin*). Each of these exhibitions is a curatorial activist project—a term I coined and extrapolated upon in my 2018 book, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, which celebrates contemporary curatorial strategies that provide productive and, at times, transformative

alternatives to exclusionary, mainstream curatorial techniques that continue to reproduce inequality in their almost exclusive focus on white, Western cis-male artists. Curatorial activists employ an array of strategies in effort to pry apart the traditional art historical canon. Some address exclusions by simply revising the canon, whereby individuals are reclaimed from history and the canon itself is rewritten, the principal aim being to include those who had hitherto been refused, forgotten or hidden (e.g., revising the Impressionist circle to include Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt on equal par to their male counterparts). Other curatorial activists prefer an “area studies” model, which, whilst also revisionist, produces new canons and supplements the traditional discourse by focusing on work that is based on race, geography, gender or sexual orientation (e.g., an all-women artist exhibition or an LGBTQ+ exhibition). Both strategies, whilst productive, still assume the white, masculinist, Western canon as its centre and accepts its hierarchy as a natural given; the Other will always necessarily remain subordinated. Such strategies are problematic because such revisionism can become a kind of homage, as well. As Susan Hardy Aiken warns, “One might, by attacking, reify the power one opposes.”²

The third curatorial activist strategy, and the most transformative, is what I refer to as “relational”. A relational approach to curating begins with questions such as: What if history was reconceived as dialogic instead of synchronic? What if time itself was understood to be wide or kaleidoscopic as opposed to linear? What if historical objects were presented ahistorically, ignoring national borders or periodic categories, or were arranged thematically or without a coherent thesis? What if we were to abolish historic canons, arguing that all objects (e.g., jewellery, furniture, coins, “high art”), non-Western and Western alike, have equal significance? What if oppositions and hierarchies (high/low, West/East, white/black) were dismantled?

Curators adopting a relational approach present a collection of voices that, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests,

“tell alternate stories of difference, culture, power and agency”.³ Using a model of relational analysis, curators can place diverse works in dialogic relation to one another in order to underscore what Mohanty refers to as “common differences”; that is, the significant similarities as well the localised differences between artists/objects across cultures. A relational approach to curating, then, is interested not in a monologue of sameness, but in a multitude or cacophony of voices speaking simultaneously. With careful juxtaposition of works, then, curators employing a relational approach draw attention to important differences in artists’/artisans’ treatment of similar themes. A relational approach to curating presents artefacts/artworks as if they were a polysemous site of contradictory positions and contested practices. This focus goes beyond a mere description of discrete regions and cultures; it transcends the “additive” approach to the art historical canon, collapses the centre-periphery binary and is essentially postmodern in nature: it is textual, dialogic and “writerly”. According to French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes—whose work also addresses and has had an immense impact on how we perceive the visual world—a writerly text is characterised by heterogeneity and incoherence. It is “a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash”.⁴ In a writerly exhibition, then, the reader, or viewer, can be seen as an active participant in the construction, or “writing” of meaning with respect to the works on view.

Draw Your Own Conclusion is a relational or writerly exhibition. In it, Martin has presented an ahistorical, nonchronological, anticategorical selection of 800 objects from an encyclopaedic collection, dating over thousands of years. The exhibition demonstrates no overarching or coherent thesis: the works are organised in a personalised manner, chosen for their formal similarities or poetic affinities, outside the confines of traditional art history and its strict chronology. There are no art historical “isms” here. The exhibition, as writerly text, has no syntagmatic order and thus can be entered at any point.

As Barthes explains, a writerly text “has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one”.⁵ Similarly, entering the Martin exhibition on the second floor, for example, or traversing it in reverse (i.e., from the ground up), will not alter one’s “reading” of the show. There is no one way to view the exhibition-as-text because, as Barthes claims, “the text is always paradoxical”.⁶ It is a system or network with neither an end nor a centre. As a result, Martin’s installation has broken down the once-traditional approach to and viewing of art in which an authoritarian curator forces viewers to follow a narrative trajectory. Instead, the formal, semantic, and conceptual analogies that unite the works can be understood by the viewer without reference to history, mythology, or art history. As Martin explains, “The history of art is only one factor among others when it comes to understanding a work... It is imperfect because instead of there being a succession of big historical shifts, there is on the contrary an enormous continuity between those who painted the Chauvet cave and today’s artists. Artists have asked themselves the same questions across time”.⁷ Or, similarly, he has stated, “You don’t need cultural references to enjoy a work of art”.⁸ Our senses can do the work for us. In his exhibition, the viewer’s mind and eye are free to appreciate the multitude of objects that Martin has organised for their visual pleasure. His aim is to awaken the viewer’s gaze. He wishes for the viewer to follow the sequences of often unexpected visual analogies in order to discover the vastness and multifariousness of visual culture itself. Like a writerly text, the exhibition reveals that there is no such thing as artistic “originality”, no such thing as the “first” artistic work: all art is intertextual. In his configuration, he has transcended the borders of genres, eras, and distinct cultures. Time is not linear or long but wide and kaleidoscopic.

The objects in the exhibition, which range from “high art” paintings, jewellery, and ritual objects to furniture, folk art, and fashion, have been arranged into a series of whimsically titled “chapters”. Under the heading “From the Birth of Venus to the

Waterfall”, for instance, where water is the uniting feature, we encounter an etching copy of Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (second half of the nineteenth century), an Aphrodite vase from circa 500, a Japanese print by Utagawa of an actor emerging dramatically from the sea (dated 1813–1827), a painting of a fountain personified by Jacques-Laurent Agasse from 1837, a purse made from a bivalve shell in white mother of pearl, and a painting of a waterfall from 1867 by François Diday. In the chapter, “From the Flag to the Blanket”, the viewer encounters fibre works, ranging in date from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, most of which were produced by unknown practitioners and all of which include beautiful geometric patterns. “From Hair to the Beard” comprises objects that depict subjects with beards or in relation to hair, including accoutrements used by barbers (e.g., a basin, sponge, tiara and hairbrush), objects made from hair (e.g., bracelets, sculpture), multiple portraits of bearded men, paintings of women at their toilette, as well as portraits of two bearded ladies and a painting of the long-haired Saint Marie-Madeleine. This gathering of objects is visually and conceptually united by hair. Other chapters, like “Rich and Poor”, the largest of the groupings, allow for the integration of multiple mediums, from sumptuous jewelry and historic coins to decorative arts and extravagant fashion, which are presented amidst paintings of usurers, beggars, street singers, and royalty. “From Bacchanal to the Bistro” is a joyous chapter, with paintings of Bacchus and his fellow revelers, images of drunken or riotous celebrations, portraits of anonymous drinkers, as well as objects associated with imbibing (e.g., gourds, pitcher and carafes), including a terracotta amphora from the first century. The remaining chapters are similarly organised around a single concept set in sequences, like from love to hate, from glory to vulgarity, from ambiguity to enigma, from swindle to decapitation, from breast to maternity, the senses.

Draw Your Own Conclusion is a postmodern or poststructural cabinet of curiosities that swerves far from the strict periodic categories once typical of the museum and art history.

In this heterogeneous, ahistorical show, unknown artists and artisans are presented as equals to the “celebrity” artists—and deliberately so. In arguing that all cultural artefacts have significance, Martin’s exhibition is a totalising critique of canonicity itself. Vis-à-vis a free play of language and signs, Martin’s writerly exhibition aims to drastically rewrite and reorganise the object it “contemplates” (i.e., art history) so that it can no longer be easily recognised—like the starred (*) text of Barthes’ *S/Z*, which disperses Balzac’s *Sarrasine*. Martin hopes to reveal a history of object making that has hitherto remained unnoticed. He hopes to “appreciate what plural constitutes it”.⁹

Martin’s curatorial strategy is entirely unique. He has, of course, acknowledged Aby Warburg’s influence on his approach, emphasizing that he is not the first curator to organise works of art and artefacts in a personalised manner. Much like Warburg in his picture atlas, *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927–1929), or Sir John Soane in his eccentric London museum, or Duc d’Aumale in Château de Chantilly or André Malraux’s *The Museum without Walls* (1947), Martin’s exhibitions underline the importance of individual interpretation on the part of the viewers, who are perceived as active participants in the construction of meaning. What differentiates his curatorial technique from theirs is that the viewers are encouraged, as Martin explains, to perceive the exhibition as “multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives”.¹⁰ In other words, *Draw Your Own Conclusion*, in fully liberating viewers from the straitjacket of art history, allows them to rely on their own judgement; they can wander and dream with lightness and humour, with awakened sensitivity and aroused emotions. With this vast repertoire of objects, viewers can enjoy the simple fundamentals of form and shape, devoid of context and conventional taxonomy, and play freely, roaming through a series of sequences of visual analogies and pleasures. With this “birth” of the viewer (and “death” of the author), Martin imparts *jouissance*, and transforms them into blissful scribes.

- 1 Martin’s show came under almost immediate attack because of his attempt to depart from the traditional curatorial practices of Euro-U.S. institutions, which continue to grant supremacy to Western art over all other regions of the world. In an 1989 interview with Buchloh, Martin stated that he would like to see the show “operate as a catalyst for future projects and investigations”. *Magiciens* has done just that. Martin, quoted in *Paris Diary by Laure*: “Listen with your eyes: Jean-Hubert Martin”, 4 March 2016.
- 2 Susan Hardy Aiken, “Women and the Question of Canonicity,” *College English*, Vol. 48, No. 3, March 1986, p. 298.
- 3 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 244.
- 4 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, p. 146.
- 5 Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 5.
- 6 Barthes, “From Work to Text”, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. by Brian Wallis, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p. 171.
- 7 Martin, quoted in Roxana Azimi, “Carambolages, un melting-pot d’œuvres d’art au Grand Palais”, *Le Monde*, 7 mars 2016.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 5.
- 10 Martin, quoted in *Paris Diary by Laure*: “Listen with your eyes: Jean-Hubert Martin”, 4 March 2016.