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ART AND LITERATURE: UNDISCIPLINED RESEARCH

The Curator's Novel: Interview with Sinziana Ravini

La novela de curador: Entrevista con Sinziana Ravini

O Romance do Curador: entrevista com Sinziana Ravini

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Abstract: Recent years have seen a growing consensus regarding the exhaustion of the language typically used to write about contemporary art – a textual model that is increasingly perceived as inadequate for providing a meaningful account of current artistic practices. Within this context, the present paper aims to discuss the curator's novel capacity to offer a viable alternative to the dominant textual model and its renewing potential within the visual arts. The curator's novel is a term that refers to those instances in which a curator employs their novel as a mediating device. It is a curatorial tool that enables them to engage with their own practice by means of narrative, fiction, and imagination – which brings about repercussions on both the curatorial work and derived institutional dynamics. In the second part of this paper, I reproduce my interview with curator, writer, and psychoanalyst Sinziana Ravini. During the interview, we unravel the processes by which she weaves her novels and curatorial practice. We discuss how writing fiction allows her to introduce notions traditionally ascribed to literature, such as imagination, which take a central role both in the production stage and the public reception of her exhibitions.

Keywords: fictocritical writing; curator's novel; curatorial writing; narrative fiction; imagination.

Resumen: En años recientes se observa un progresivo consenso sobre el agotamiento del lenguaje utilizado habitualmente para escribir sobre arte contemporáneo: un modelo textual que se percibe cada vez más inadecuado para ofrecer una explicación significativa de las prácticas artísticas actuales. En este contexto, el presente artículo tiene como objetivo debatir la capacidad de la novela de curador para ofrecer una alternativa viable al modelo textual dominante y su potencial renovador dentro de las artes visuales. La novela de curador es un término que se refiere a aquellas instancias en las que un curador emplea su novela como dispositivo de mediación. Es una herramienta curatorial que le permite desarrollar su práctica por medio de la narrativa, la ficción y la imaginación, lo que trae repercusiones tanto en el trabajo curatorial como en las dinámicas institucionales derivadas. En la segunda parte de este artículo, reproduzco mi entrevista con la curadora, escritora y psicoanalista Sinziana Ravini, en la que desentrañamos los procesos mediante los cuales ella entrelaza sus novelas y su práctica curatorial. Discutimos cómo la escritura de ficción le permite introducir nociones tradicionalmente atribuidas a la literatura, como la imaginación, que adquieren un papel central tanto en la fase de producción como en la recepción pública de sus exposiciones.

Palabras clave: escritura fictocrítica; novela de curador; escritura curatorial; ficción narrativa; imaginación.

Resumo: Nos últimos anos, tem havido um consenso crescente sobre o esgotamento da linguagem tipicamente usada para escrever sobre arte contemporânea – um modelo textual cada vez mais percebido como inadequado para oferecer um relato significativo das práticas artísticas atuais. Neste contexto, o presente artigo visa discutir a capacidade de o romance do curador oferecer uma alternativa viável ao modelo textual dominante e o seu potencial renovador nas artes visuais. "Romance do curador" é um termo que se refere àquelas instâncias em que um

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curador emprega o seu romance como um dispositivo mediador. Trata-se de uma ferramenta curatorial que lhe permite envolver-se com a sua própria prática por meio da narrativa, ficção e imaginação – o que gera repercussões tanto no trabalho curatorial como nas dinâmicas institucionais derivadas. Na segunda parte deste artigo, reproduzo a minha entrevista com a curadora, escritora e psicanalista Sinziana Ravini. Durante a entrevista, desvendamos os processos pelos quais ela entrelaça os seus romances e a prática curatorial. Discutimos como a escrita de ficção lhe permite introduzir noções tradicionalmente atribuídas à literatura, como a imaginação, que assumem um papel central tanto na fase de produção como na recepção pública das suas exposições.

Palavras-chave: escrita fictocrítica; romance do curador; escrita curatorial; ficção narrativa; imaginação.

1.1 Critical Art Writing in Crisis

The status of critical art writing is being fundamentally called into question. Recent years have seen a growing consensus regarding the exhaustion of the language typically used to write about contemporary art – a textual model that is increasingly perceived as inadequate for providing a meaningful account of current artistic practices. This shift is reflected in the ongoing debates surrounding the crisis of art criticism, the phenomenon of International Art English, and the rising demand for a reassessment of curatorial prose. Within this context, the present paper focuses on the specific strand of curatorial writing, aiming to discuss the curator's novel capacity to offer a viable alternative to the dominant textual model and its renewing potential within the visual arts.

The history of art in the twentieth century could be summarised as a continuous expansion of the notion of 'artwork'. Since the moment when Marcel Duchamp presented a urinal as an artwork, it has been established that that which grants an artefact an artistic status does not depend on any intrinsic quality, but it is rather bestowed upon by a sub-social group: the art world. In contemporary art, it has been long understood that the contents of the artwork largely lie in the context where it appears, be it spatial, cultural, social, or political. Such context is defined by a number of elements that may not be immediately obvious to the spectator. It is then necessary to employ mediation devices that clarify those elements, being one of the most important the text that will guide the spectator through the ideas, intentions, and, ultimately, the reason why the artefact in front of them is worth their artistic attention. As a result, what is exhibited is increasingly communicated in a textual apparatus, making the interpretation of what is being shown more and more compulsory (*cf.* Segbars, 2009, p. 104).

In the convention that dictates the terms of the encounter with an artwork, a text always accompanies it with the purpose to help the spectator situate their artistic experience. As art theorist, critic, and philosopher Boris Groys explains: "When works of art aren't provided with a text—in an accompanying pamphlet, catalog, art magazine, or elsewhere—they seem to have been delivered into the world unprotected, lost and unclad" (Groys, 2008, p. 111). The text is normally written from a critical perspective that offers the promise of a direct access to the contents of the artwork. A professional mediator (art critic, curator, art historian, or theoretician) carries out the task of interpreting the artwork for the spectator. However, Groys is quick to add that such critical texts "are, from the start, texts not necessarily written to be read. The art commentator's role is entirely misconstrued if one expects him to be clear and comprehensible. In fact, the more hermetic and opaque a text, the better" (Groys, 2008, p. 111).

Whilst it may be easy to deem Groys' words to be somewhat exaggerated, it is also true that, more often than not, the critical text that is supposed to facilitate the artistic experience is perceived as nearly unintelligible by those who are not used to such use of language. Those who are (the 'art insiders'), however, rarely take it seriously. In other words, the text that, in principle, should explain, clarify, and guide, achieves exactly the opposite. With the use of a jargon that has become as recognisable as illegible over time, the critical text, instead of mediating the artistic experience, adds more obscurity to it, effectively blocking the spectator's capacity for a meaningful response. As a result, it creates an air of mystification, an impression that art is difficult, regardless of the work on display. Art comes expertly framed

by a language that is little concerned with clarity, that becomes inconsequential to professionals and feels alienating to non-specialists (*cf.* Fox, 2016, p. 109). Yet, despite all its problems, critical art writing has become the by-default textual template with which to read and write about contemporary art.

Having explained the current state of affairs regarding critical art writing, I will now discuss how it manifests in one of its specific strands, namely, the modality known as curatorial writing.

1.2 Curatorial Writing

Far from simply displaying artworks in an exhibition to an audience, the art curator ('curator', from now on) must count with a varied set of skills to carry out their job. Whether they work independently or for an institution, they are typically in charge of selecting the artist (or lineup of artists) and the artworks; designing the exhibition (from the internal narrative to the architectural decision on materials, lights, colours); researching; fundraising; supervising the budget and production; managing the engagement with the audience; the promotion and communication, and so on. They also organise events, such as panel discussions, performance programmes, book launches, and conferences.

Insofar as their job is to mediate the audience's reception of the artwork, their mission consists, firstly, in selecting the artist that is exhibiting among hundreds of other possible candidates and, afterwards, justifying such selection by contextualising the artist's work. From that viewpoint, the curatorial text plays a crucial role. The spectator can encounter it in the exhibition catalogue or in booklets and handouts available at the exhibition venue, in wall texts, or the captions accompanying the artworks. The text is essential to the point that it largely defines the con-text where the artistic experience takes place. If one goes to see an exhibition by Leonardo da Vinci, one may not need to read much of the text provided in the venue, because one has probably already gained the necessary knowledge by having read it before, in art history books or articles. If, however, one goes to see an exhibition of a relatively unknown contemporary artist, the curator will need to do a good job in convincing the spectator why that particular artist deserves their artistic attention. Ideally, this work of contextualisation should be carried out by means of a critical analysis that situates the artist, artwork, or exhibition, in the larger field where it operates, whilst considering its relevance in relation to that field (be it institutional, cultural, social, or political).

In reality, however, curatorial writing has spawned a wealth of literature condemning the language that it commonly adopts, a language that oscillates between the analytical and the promotional. As curator and writer Tirdad Zolghadr points out: "The diplomacy of curatorial writing, the unwillingness to abandon an evasive language of intellectualized innuendo […] makes for bloody awful prose" (Zolghadr, 2016, p. 43). The curator's professional commitments undermine their critical integrity in "an oversaturated job market that discourages polemical positions" (Zolghadr, 2016, p. 44). Unlike the art critic, the curator does not critique an artist's work from a disinterested point of view. The artist's public perception must be elevated, because the only reason for that artist to be shown and written about is the curator's professional criterion.

This leads to a particular situation, in which the curator's authority is exerted in the act of either presenting something or not. Thus, the moment of critical assessment consists in the decision to show a particular artist. The curatorial text that follows is 'quasi-critical' because all that remains to do is to promote and describe, as the critical judgement has already taken place at the exhibition lineup (*cf.* Schawbsky, 2022, p. 83).

When discussing curatorial language, art philosopher John Rapko (2015) does not exactly employ flattering terms. He describes it as vague, obscure, superficial, clumsy, hollow, pseudo-intellectual, vapid, and 'over-heated'. How can such a terrible device not only be allowed to exist, but actually thrive in the art world? From Rapko's viewpoint, curatorial writing is not meant to be understood. Instead, "it functions, with great reliability, to police

the social distinction between art world insiders and outsiders". He is not alone in this opinion. There are many others who consider curatorial writing to produce an inflation of language, overstuffing the text with an excess of words and unnecessary opacity.

Take, for example, what Julian Stallabrass has to say about curatorial writing:

> This abuse of language is familiar to anyone who has spent much time reading recent exhibition wall labels or catalogue texts. Some of these statements remain opaque even to my graduate students, who bring considerable intelligence and knowledge to their reading. Those that turn out to be decipherable often yield vacuous generalizations. A thick and viscous vocabulary is used to gloss over the agendas and contingencies that form an art event and might otherwise become too transparent. [...] So why is this opacity and vacuity so prevalent? (Stallabrass, 2013, p. 71).

In the same vein, curator Dieter Roelstraete speaks of "the boosterist ignominies of 'curatorial' writing, much of which is an embarrassment indeed to long-held standards of both literary and critical quality" (Roelstraete, 2012, paragraph 5).

The writing these authors describe is an exercise in mystification that prevents curators from expressing themselves with clarity. With the use of an impenetrable language, they avoid the perceived risk of producing a text that may be deemed too short – which might imply that the artist's work is uninspiring or that the curator lacks the intellectual depth to extract its meaning. Furthermore, this jargon distracts the reader from the actual contingencies that shape an exhibition. In reality, the visible portion of an art project is the product of many informal factors: shifting intersubjective relationships, personal sympathies, disagreements, accidents, coincidences, competence or incompetence of those involved, meetings where budget constraints and communication strategies are discussed, and so on. While these practical realities crucially determine the project's outcome, they are rarely accessible to the viewer. Instead, the curator hides this pedestrian reality behind a wall of obscure assertions, theoretical references, and an 'evasive language of intellectualised innuendo'.

1.3 The Curator's Novel

Fuelled, perhaps, by these sorts of critical assessments, an increasing number of curators are now venturing into the realm of experimental novels – which I shall call the curator's novel. The curator's novel is a term that refers to those instances in which a curator employs their novel as a mediating device. Whereas some curators conceive the creation of their novel within the limits of a literary ambition (and, in that sense, would not be different from any other literary novel), others use it as a curatorial tool that enables them to engage with their own practice by means of narrative, fiction, and imagination – which brings about implications for both the curatorial work and derived institutional dynamics.

In some instances, the curator's novel could replace the conventional catalogue as a suitable instrument to explore the subjective aspects of the artistic experience. For example, Martí Manen's curator's novel *Contarlo todo sin saber cómo* (Manen, 2012) was published on the occasion of the exhibition he curated with the same title at Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (Móstoles, Spain). In the fiction, the protagonists encounter artworks (e.g., Félix González-Torres candy sculptures) that were presented in the actual exhibition. Manen employs novelistic resources (such as narrative empathy) to enquire into the emotional impact that those artworks have on the characters. I propose that the curator's novel is a mediating device because the reader who visits the exhibition perceives the artworks from a specific perspective, that of an emotional engagement that may otherwise become overlooked by analytical distance.

Mark von Schlegell's *New Dystopia* (von Schlegell, 2011) is a science-fiction novel that he wrote and published in relation to the exhibition *Dystopia*, which he curated at the CAPC Musée d'art Contemporain in Bordeaux. With the creation of a fictional reality set in the future, the artworks become connected by a narrativity that traverses the exhibition, bringing that worldbuilding to life. *New Dystopia* proves that there is nothing wrong in stepping out of the critical realm and showing an

artist's sculpture as, for instance, the remnant from a postapocalyptic scenario – rather than resorting to explain it with a tired conceptual category. An implication for this strategy is the possibility that a different kind of text (the curator's novel) prompts a different sort of response, redefining in so doing the terms of the artistic experience.

In a recent interview I conducted with curator Yann Chateigné Tytelman, he defines his curator's novel in progress, *The Other Night* (expected to appear in 2027), as "an exhibition in the form of a novel". Parallel to the writing process, he started to work on a new exhibition at the Fondation Carmignac, in France. According to him, in *The Other Night*, he can "bring ideas, atmospheres, references, and artists that are not in the exhibition, and vice versa". Thus, both curator's novel and exhibition are connected but, in the curator's novel, he can "slow down and guide the readers into microscopic details or take the time to connect notions at a rapid pace that would be impossible to propose in a museum".

In the second part of this paper, I reproduce my interview with curator, writer, and psychoanalyst Sinziana Ravini. She is a theory teacher at Sorbonne University and the editor-in-chief of the Swedish Art magazine *Paletten*. She is also the author of several curator's novels, such as *The Black Moon* (Ravini, 2013a) and *Aphrodisia* (Ravini, 2014), among others. In the interview, which was held on 5 December 2025, we unravel the processes by which she weaves her novels and curatorial practice together. We discuss how fiction allows her to introduce notions traditionally ascribed to literature, which take a central role both in the production and the public reception of her exhibitions.

2 Interview with Sinziana Ravini: 'Fiction Can and Must Be Critical'

David Maroto [DM]: Your curator's novel *Le Château d'Étain* (Ravini, 2010a) was published alongside an exhibition that you curated in the Swedish Institute in Paris, called *Nordic Delight*. You and the seventeen participating artists collectively wrote the novel instead of a catalogue. You invited them to respond to a five-page long text that you had written. Based on that, you wrote the rest of the novel. Can you tell me more about this curator's novel's creative process?

Sinziana Ravini [SR]: I began by inventing a character that had a dilemma with two identities: on the one hand, she was an art critic; on the other hand, she was a curator. I wanted to frame this in a conflict between doing what others criticise and criticising what others do – and I did it by creating a monster with two heads, a fictional character that lives in a castle fighting the conflicts between creation and criticism. The story starts when the monster enters the castle and, in it, a big room which is an exhibition space.

I said to my artists that they were free to continue the story from that initial point. The result was like a *cadavre exquis*. The Surrealists played with the combination of different parts of images. They started by drawing the head, then the neck, the body and so on. They continued the drawing without knowing what the other previous participant had drawn before. I tried to transpose this technique to collective novel writing. I did not want to make it necessarily democratic but, instead, allowed the desire of the artists to decide when they would enter the writing scene, so to speak. It was an extremely fun thing to do because I did not know what would happen in the narrative.

I loved the fact that, through each chapter of the novel being written by the different artists, I could discover new things about their artworks and secrets about how they looked at the world. It was a way of entering their *Weltanschauung*, as the Germans say, their worldview through literature. It was a perfect lens for speaking about art and exhibition planning, much more enjoyable than asking: "What are the dimensions of your work? How should we ship it?" And so on. Karl Marx said that we often get alienated by our works if we continue doing the same things all over repeatedly. Curators are also alienated by their methods. Thus, fiction was a way of escaping that alienation, of having more fun. And why should I write it myself? I wanted to write it with others, to

get into an adventurous aspect of it, not knowing what would happen next.

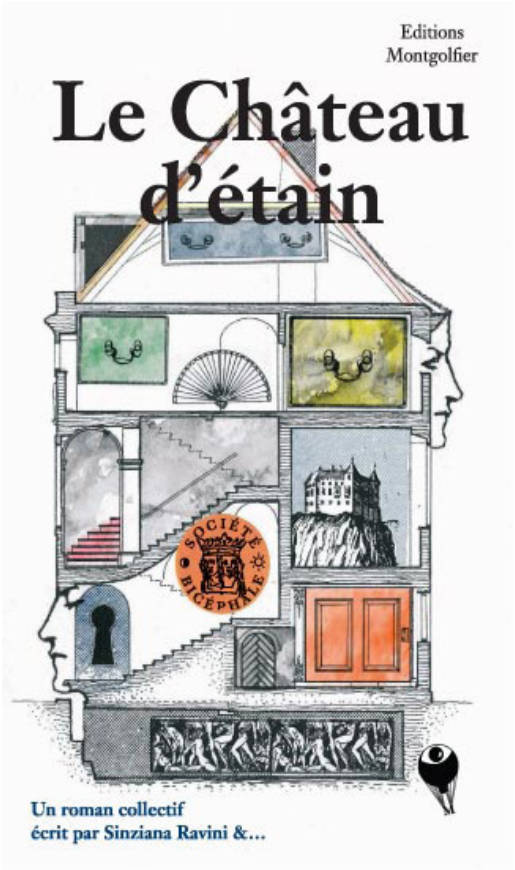
We all decided to write collectively and they found it a fun way of preparing the exhibition. Then I said to them that the space where we were going to have the exhibition [the Swedish Institute in Paris] was going to be the fictional castle. It gave another historical, surrealist, and psychoanalytical dimension to the space.

[DM]: Did the textual structure of the curator's novel give you a (spatial, curatorial) structure for the exhibition?

[SR]: Yes and no. Georges Perec was a great inspiration for me and has always been because he wrote novels based on concepts. For example, *La disparition* [*A Void*] was based on the idea of writing an entire novel without the letter 'e', which is the most frequent letter in the French language. I just wanted to invent a space almost like in Perec's novel *La vie mode d'emploi [Life: A User's Manual]*. The cover of my novel was inspired by the cover of *La vie mode d'emploi*.

I applied a psychoanalytical reading to the exhibition: on the first floor, we had the conscious; on the second floor, the superego. But I wanted to deal with the unconscious of the show in a different way, by creating a secret society in the castle. I invented a ritual with the artists. They were coming from Sweden and we spent seven days together in Paris. I asked each of them to bring an object they considered important, but which they also wanted to leave behind. They had to wrap it in paper or textile, so no one would know what that thing was. We buried all these objects in the cellar of the Swedish Institute building (which resembled the catacombs of the fictional castle). Then we went upstairs, we lied on the ground, and I asked each of them to tell a story about the object. It was a way of creating something only for us. Because I see the preparation of the exhibition almost like a secret society, where it is very important to create desire.

Figure 1 – *Le Château d'Étain* (Ravini, 2010a)



Source: Sinziana Ravini.

[DM]: You become a character in *Le Château d'Étain*: a bicephalic being that is reminiscent of your critic/curator dichotomy. It also refers to Janus, and perhaps even to George Bataille's *Acéphale*, in that you also created a secret society for the artists of the show. What role did imagination play in the context of your curatorial project?

[SR]: Imagination was important in the artists' works. I wanted to showcase artists from the North of Europe whose aesthetics differed from those fashionable when Hans Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé curated an exhibition titled *Nuit blanche – Scènes nordiques: Les années 90* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, in 1998. I wanted to play with the idea of 'Nordic Delight', as in 'Turkish Delight'. It was a hybridisation between the North and the South, offering a more pluralistic image of the North. Most of the artists came from the art school where, one day, I had wanted to become an artist. They came from different cultural backgrounds and were doing a sort of work where imagination, fiction, symbols, and allegories were very important – all those things that were not at all fashionable when Obrist and Bossé did their show. Those two curators were trying to pack the Nordic arts in cold aesthetics and minimalism.

In the novel, I appear in the form of a character to retell the story of what happened years ago in that art school involving a personal trauma. In this way, the artists discovered something about me that they did not know. The idea was not so much about me fantasising, but about telling stories to my artists, so that they could extend them in a fiction that was enjoyable. For example, one of the artists, Martin Formgren, creates surrealist images, and his text became also very surrealist. It made me travel through the world of Étienne-Louis Boullée, a French architect who made futuristic buildings, like the *Cenotaph for Sir Isaac Newton*. Martin further developed the fictional part of my character, whilst other artists took it down to the ground and wrote it much more realistically. The idea that the novel was made of fragments of each participating subject did not create chaos. In a way, it was very well structured.

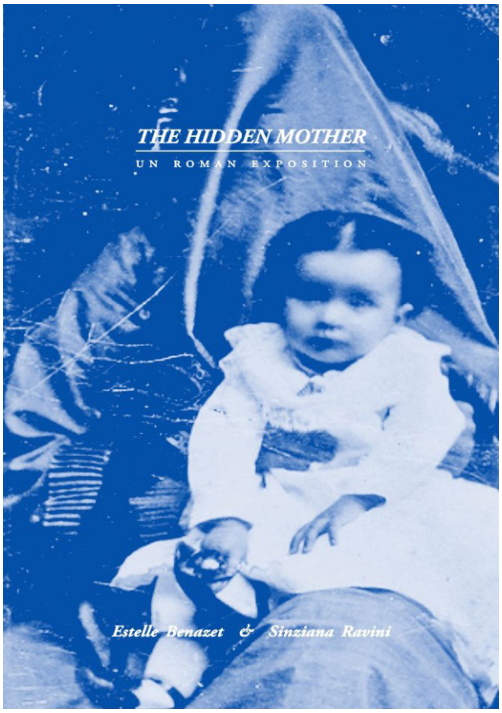
[DM]: In a video interview about *Nordic Delight* (Ravini, 2010b), you say that you feel split between your roles as art critic and curator, between voyeurism and narcissism. Could you elaborate on this reflection? Does fiction lessen the split between these two sides of your practice?

[SR]: Definitely. Fiction is a way of remedying the fact that, as Sigmund Freud discovered, we are not masters of our own house. As Carl Jung said about the shadow: we all have parts within ourselves that we do not want to conscientise or be aware of. Writing fiction becomes the means of combining different forces in order to remedy this loss of control. In fiction, we can freely accept the complexity of our nature.

I do not like when curators come with a theory and try to apply it to art, or to exhibitions, because it is too brutal and inorganic. Every time, my starting point is a personal trauma that I try to, not to heal, but to traverse, to cross through the exhibition in order to understand something about myself as a subject.

One could say that working with subjectivity as a curator is very narcissistic, exposing my inner insecurities, as I did, for example, with the exhibition *The Hidden Mother* in 2012, where I curated a project about motherhood whilst doing psychoanalysis with my co-curator, Estelle Benazeth. In this way, I demonstrated that it is not the spectator who makes the artwork, but the intersection of two gazes that create it. We spoke about the artworks and our personal relations to them on the divan, so that the pieces in the exhibition became symptoms of our relationships with our mothers. Estelle had a very present mother, whereas I had a very absent one. By doing these crossed fictions or gazes upon the artworks, I wanted to have different dimensions and escape the tyranny of the ego.

Figure 2 – The Hidden Mother (Ravini, 2012)



Source: Sinziana Ravini.

We decided to find a psychoanalyst that would accept Estelle on the divan. We transcribed the sessions between them, until the psychoanalyst said: "Sinziana, you have doubled yourself with a co-curator. I want to double myself and invite another psychoanalyst." So we became four, as it usually happens in psychoanalysis. That is called the *cartel* and it is very important to be four when you analyse a text. But after a while, Estelle found that they were hindering us from talking about our inner wounds. Every time we got personal, they cut us off, and we thought that was very bizarre. To the point that there was a moment when Estelle did not show up at one of our sessions. When I met her afterwards, she said that she wanted to write about the artworks in a different way. She then invented a very fun method by which, when we were looking at artworks we were going to show, we recorded ourselves speaking freely for thirty or forty minutes. We then transcribed what we thought and felt. By speaking about our affects, the emotional impact became very important when analysing the artworks. We sent these transcriptions in letters to each other.

A novel also called *The Hidden Mother* (Ravini, 2012) came out of this exhibition project. Its first part contains the transcriptions of our cartel psychoanalytic sessions. The second part has our letters to each other. Suddenly, I once again changed the rules by saying to Estelle: "We should go and visit our mothers and show them the exhibition and see what happens. Let's have an encounter with them." Confronting the real, as the psychologists say. We did that and, for me, the exhibition became an excuse to re-encounter my mother, whom I had not seen for several years and who was hiding in the Carpathian Mountains in Romania, in a secret society, in a sect that she created [laughs]. I arrived with *The Hidden Mother* exhibition, a bit like Duchamp used to carry miniature versions of his artworks in a suitcase, the *boîte en valise*. The first encounter with my mother was very tough, but when I started showing the artworks to her something happened. We were changed by the encounter with those artworks – especially the series of nineteenth-century photographs of women covering themselves in black. They did it so that they could not be seen

whilst holding their baby in front of the camera, because the baby was the only subject of the photograph. The mothers are both exposed and hidden, appearing only as a silhouette very much as if they were wearing a burqa. These images are incredibly phantomatic when you look at them.

In the exhibition space, I recreated the atmosphere of Freud's cabinet in a closed room, where visitors could undergo psychoanalysis. The rule was that they could choose one artwork that they were touched by within the show. I had thirty artists such as Sophie Calle and Orlan. Visitors then selected an artwork and spoke freely about it with an artist on the divan, or with me, or someone else. Otherwise, they could choose to take the place of the psychoanalyst. In this way, I discovered incredible stories told by the visitors of the show that I got very touched by. I recorded them and made an archive of these incredible encounters.

[DM]: In 2014, you curated another exhibition called *Aphrodisia, la science du désir*, organised by Galerie Géraldine Banier, in Paris. It included four artists of the gallery, plus several students from the Fine Art School of Paris, ENSBA. The exhibition was accompanied by a curator's novel written by you, called *Aphrodisia* (Ravini, 2014). You refer to this project as an 'exhibition novel'.[2] Could you explain the concept?

[SR]: I took this term from art critic Jean-Max Colard, who first created it when reviewing my show *The Hidden Mother*, calling it an 'exhibition novel'. I always try to tell a story through my exhibitions. I like the idea of creating a literary dimension that continues to exist after the exhibition has finished. It is a way of showing the relations that there have always been between art and literature, creating bridges between the two, whilst developing narratives through the exhibition, either alone or in collaboration with the artists.

[DM]: The exhibition *Aphrodisia, la science du désir* took place in different venues, which appear in the fiction. For example, the bookstore *Librairie Alain Brieux*. Was this curator's novel available at the exhibition venues? Did you expect the viewers to read it during the exhibition, as a sort of guide? Not only as a guide through the curatorial concept, but also to literally guide the spectator's steps through the different spaces – and what to find in them.

[SR]: This time I wrote the novel on my own, and it became something that visitors could read during the exhibition.

The exhibition was inspired by a political, sociological, and economical problem in ENSBA – having to do with the fact that the nude models who worked posing in the art school were paid very little. On the other hand, I was exhibiting artworks by the art school students in different antique shops. A lot of artworks dealt with the connection between eroticism and science. So, I invented a story about a nude model living in a timeless period, who falls in love with a stuffed crocodile in a bazaar. This actually happened to me when I entered a very strange space, *Librairie Alain Brieux*, which is a sort of cabinet of curiosities. It is a place where you can buy all kinds of obsolete scientific objects and curios. There I found that crocodile. This animal is a very important symbol for pharmacology found in old images of cabinets of curiosities. I see the collectors who gathered those cabinets and invented narratives about the relationship between all kinds of strange objects, as proto-curators.

I wanted to tell the story of a woman who works as a nude model in an art school, who goes to a store and sees an extremely bizarre and beautiful stuffed baby crocodile. She wants to buy it but does not have the money. Over time, she becomes a prostitute. I also wanted to reflect upon what Charles Baudelaire said: that all artists are prostitutes in one way or another. Thus, I told the story of a character who has a very complex attitude towards art and life. She is a female dandy, and she wants to transform her life into a work of art. She continues her prostitution with the help of artists – which allows me to tell the story of how

[2] Whereas Sinziana calls it 'exhibition novel', I prefer the term 'curator's novel' – which is not limited to exhibition-making as part of what constitutes curatorial practice.

art functions elsewhere. Back then, ENSBA had conflicts and debates about aesthetic issues, which I tried to put in the novel as well. Eventually, it ends in a tragedy, of course.

[DM]: I am interested in the pragmatics of the exhibition. If I was a spectator and I went to see the show, how would I encounter your curator's novel *Aphrodisia*? Were there free copies available?

[SR]: There were free copies of the novel in the exhibition venues that people could sit down and read. There were also copies that people could buy and take home with them.

But there was another aspect to it: the artists and I were trying to live the novel out because a lot of performances that they were doing were narrated beforehand in the novel. Things that happened in reality had already been told in the novel, and vice versa. This was a way of combining different temporalities through fiction.

The novel also inspired an artist, Émilie Pitoiset, who invited me to perform with her. She proposed doing a *tableau vivant*, which was an old practice in France, at Versailles, where Louis XIV organised them. And we decided to do one in L'Hôtel, in the room where Oscar Wilde died, very poor. We invited all the people who were visiting the different venues to enter the room and listen to six or seven characters that I took out of the novel. The basic question of the novel is: "What is your true desire?" We were having this conversation in Oscar Wilde's room, and people entered and saw a discussion between me and the characters. Sometimes, I asked the visitors: "What is your true desire?" And we got fantastic answers from them, which was a way of taking the story out of the novel and transforming it into a performative event. The spectators could access the novel in that way as well.

[DM]: Who is your ideal reader? Someone who watches the exhibition and reads the novel at the same time? Or do you expect people to read it afterwards and mingle their reading experience with the memory of the exhibition that they previously saw?

[SR]: I like [experimenting with] different ways of dealing with exhibitions. I find catalogues that try to explain the artworks boring. [Writing a novel instead] is a way of creating an intimacy within the exhibition space that you seldom get otherwise, letting people follow their own desires. With *Aphrodisia, la science du désir* there were no prescriptions, no rules, even if we used game rules to produce the exhibition. We had, for example, two people playing important characters from the novel: one represented Death, another one Mnemosyne. The character who was playing Mnemosyne took care of transcribing everything that happened during the performance at Oscar Wilde's room. She also transcribed a lot of events that I carried out afterwards, because I wanted something to remain.

The phantoms or reminiscences of the show are important. So that it is possible to read a novel where the exhibition becomes almost a phantom that remains in one's mind after having visited the show. The novel allows the reader to live with these phantoms and make them their own, like in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project,* where the phantoms of the past live in the present.

[DM]: Do you consider your curator's novels to retain a certain degree of autonomy, so that they can be read independently after the exhibition that originated them is over? What kind of experience would such a reader have? Does imagining the exhibition in its absence succeed in replacing the experience of the actual artworks?

[SR]: I think that it might succeed in that. What remains after an exhibition? It is a question for artists as well, not only for curators. I think the novel is the best way of perpetuating the life of an exhibition. I do not like the classical documentation of a show. That is very boring to me. I seldom read catalogue texts starting from the 2000s, because that knowledge production became quickly consumed by the passage of time. But a novel has a longer survival potential than a catalogue. It survives as an imaginary phantom. The novel is a way of archiving without having the boring aspect of it.

I always write my novels before making the show. Of course, there is always a discrepancy between the novel and the exhibition. And what

happens in the space between those two is what interests me the most.

[DM]: Although the novel is written before the exhibition, you have already thought of the concept of the show and selected the works and the artists.

[SR]: Yes.

[DM]: Has it ever happened that the process of writing the novel influences and changes your initial plan for the exhibition?

[SR]: It happens all the time. Your question is very important, because a traditional curator usually writes a concept, then makes a list of artists, and then places them in an exhibition space almost like throwing them in the room. It is a very rationalistic way of making exhibitions. I want to work in a psychological way with my own wounds. Every exhibition contains a personal wound. I call it 'Achilles heel', that is my departure point, the personal story, and the exhibition becomes a collective experience.

[DM]: A typical curatorial text is often written in a critical jargon that may alienate readers who are not used to this kind of language. In a curator's novel, the exhibition is mediated by a different use of language.

[SR]: Absolutely. It is a means of reaching a broader public. With the use of fiction, it is always much easier to get involved emotionally.

[DM]: Would you say that narrative fiction may offer a more accessible text to mediate the artistic experience?

[SR]: Yes. [For example, my curator's novel] *The Black Moon* (Ravini, 2013a), is a love story between two people with two different philosophical backgrounds. One, a man, is materialistic and cynical, and the other, a woman, is idealistic and romantic. They have not met for several years, and they meet again in the exhibition that I curated in Palais de Tokyo (Paris), also called *The Black Moon.* Each artwork becomes the ground where they can develop their ideas and fight for their love.

Every time I curate an exhibition, there is a lot of joy and excitement, but this time it was something new because I also made a film with two actors inside the exhibition. The actors improvised, and they were also moved by the artworks. In this way, they influenced the script of the film. For example, I exhibited Pierre Huyghe's *The Host and the Cloud*, a film installation with a fragmentary narration, and I let one of my actors stand in front of this piece. I never knew which scenes from Huyghe's artwork were going to end up in the final cut of my film. The beauty lied in overlapping different kinds of narratives: the narrative of my film and the narrative of Huyghe's artwork. The relationships that happened between those two were extremely exciting.

Philippe Parreno says that he makes films without cameras. Like him, many artists deconstruct fiction and invite us to create new connections, because their fictions are often fragmented. My stories are not fragmented. I try to write a narrative close to the realistic novels of the nineteenth century, or surrealist novels – always with unity of time and space. If I made a fragmented story, it would create too much chaos for the reader. I am very concerned about what the visitor understands from all this. That is why I try to tell stories that are easy to understand.

[DM]: You use the fact that we all have been trained to understand narrative fiction. You also make use of the coherency that is inherent to the novel to organise the contents of the exhibition in a narrative. All these elements result in a more accessible text than the usual curatorial jargon.

[SR]: You have exactly understood it. Furthermore, in *The Black Moon* I also made a film, which visitors could see in the exhibition. So, they had both the love story and the artworks combining different time frames.

I have made five exhibition novels: *Le Château d'Étain* (with a surrealist exhibition about the Nordic art scene); *The Hidden Mother* (with a psychoanalytical exhibition); *The Chessroom* (Ravini, 2013b), about the relation between art and politics; afterwards, *The Black Moon*, and then *Aphrodisia*. Once, I met someone at *The Chessroom* exhibition who told me I had to see the exhibition *The Hidden Mother*, because it was made by someone who worked the same way

as me [laughs]. They did not know that I was the author and curator of all those exhibition novels. I was a sort of underground curator.

[DM]: How did the visitors of the exhibition *The Black Moon* come across the novel? Was it available in the exhibition space, or could they buy it afterwards?

[SR]: We had some copies available at Palais de Tokyo. Visitors could also buy the novel afterwards in the bookshop.

[DM]: The artworks included in the exhibition appear in the novel *The Black Moon*, being discussed by the characters in the narrative. Where does the critical element lie in your curatorial text when you use such literary devices (characters, dialogues, narrative)?

[SR]: Fiction can and must be critical. In *The Black Moon*, criticality is very present because the protagonists, the man and the woman, are constantly fighting about their love relationship through the artworks and criticising them in front of each other, and against each other.

When I write as an art critic, I always try to have a non-dogmatic, non-academic approach. At the same time, I work with affects, pondering how and why a certain artwork touches me. When I saw Tova Mozard's piece about her mother and grandmother, I was very moved. I started crying and I did not understand why. The emotional impact of that work led me to curate a show about my mother. Thus, the critical dimension for me is not as important as analysing my own relation to the artwork.

I ask my students to do that when I teach art theory. I wrote a theory book called *Les psychonautes* (Ravini, 2022), where I consider the artists to be travellers towards the unconscious. Several unconsciouses are combined: I explore the intersection of the unconscious of the artist, my own unconscious as a curator, and the beholder's unconscious.

[DM]: What is the purpose of introducing artworks in your curator's novels? Are you interested in the emotional effect that they produce on the viewer? Perhaps writing how the characters experience them allows you to give an account of this emotional reaction?

[SR]: Yes. I sometimes use the artworks as props to be discussed in the novel. Almost like MacGuffins, as Alfred Hitchcock defined the concept, as something that becomes an object of desire, a motor of the action. I display the artworks in a non-rational way, trying to work with the unconscious undercurrents of the exhibition. I try to escape the tyranny of the white cube. Fiction enables me to escape the tyranny of the theme. The way artworks are usually displayed in exhibitions is extremely boring. For example, I recently saw an exhibition at Palais de Tokyo about how French theory has inspired American art. It was very rationally organised: first we have institutional critique; and then we have this, and then that. Or exhibitions that are about dance. At the end of the show, the last thing you want to do is to dance. We are ruled and colonised by a thematic way of curating exhibitions. Every time we go to see the Venice Biennale, we ask: "What is the theme of this edition?"

I always try to reinvent how I tell my stories. It is never the same. I do not have a formula that I apply to everything. For instance, in *The Chessroom* (Ravini, 2013b), I had two groups of artists with whom I carried out an experimental approach to the exhibition novel. The artists decided to write a novel collectively: one group wrote it as fiction, the other group as non-fiction – so it became a double novel. It is much more fun to do exhibition projects like that. I stopped curating exhibitions in that way for a while, and now I dream of coming back to it.

[DM]: In an exhibition, there are actual artworks to look at. On the other hand, in a curator's novel, the images are evoked by the narrative fiction in the reader's imagination. How do you conceive both processes (reading and viewing) to complement each other?

[SR]: It depends. Every exhibition views the artworks in a different way, it is very subjective. By inserting the artworks in the fiction of my novels, I add things to them that were not there. I add my own reading on the artworks by seeing them as stories within stories, because I add a narrative

to an already existing narrative. It is almost like a battle of narratives that must become unified.

Take *Aphrodisia*, for example. I chose to include photos of the artworks in the novel, because I wanted to explore the relationship between eroticism and science. Other times, however, I want the reader to imagine the artwork because then everyone will do it in a very individual way and no one will see the same artwork in the same way. Literature gives us this imaginative dimension: no one reads the same *Don Quixote*.

I love artists like *Le peuple qui vient*. They are a duo who have created a tribunal for fiction where they debate ideas on what fiction should do or not. For example, someone was accusing Donald Trump of being the perpetuator of a Nietzschean way of seeing fiction. The alternative fact was for them a continuation of the Nietzschean way of seeing truth. So, what are the truths that fiction produces about artworks? That is an important question for me. Is it a common truth for everyone, or is it a pulverised truth? We have to ask these questions again after postmodernity.

Who killed the author? In the sense of putting a lot of emphasis on the viewer, on the reader, on the beholder. We must reimagine new ways of making exhibition novels where we either reinstate the author's authority or we do the complete opposite: we give as much authority as possible to the reader, to the visitor. There is so much to do – we are only at the beginning.

[DM]: Your curator's novels we have discussed so far seem to be out of print and thus not available anymore. Were they self-published under the rubric 'Éditions Montgolfier'? How were they distributed?

[SR]: Éditions Montgolfier is a fictional publishing house. I always try to have my novels available in the exhibitions and they all have been sold out during the exhibition's time. *The Black Moon* was sold at Palais de Tokyo; *Aphrodisia* was sold at Galerie Géraldine Banier. My novels' print run is not very large, only a thousand copies of each title, because I like making them not too available after the end of the show. I am very picky when I speak about my exhibitions, and with whom, because I want to keep it a bit underground.

[DM]: Your curator's novels and exhibitions are always connected. One cannot walk into a bookstore and randomly find a curator's novel of yours. The exhibition is always the distribution point of your curator's novels. Afterwards, they become very difficult to find.

[SR]: Yes, and I like it that way.

[DM]: In a previous conversation we had, you said about *La diagonale du désir* (Ravini, 2018): "My latest novel will have an exhibition, curated by me, later on this year." Can you tell me more about the exhibition and its connection with the novel?

[SR]: I did not realise this exhibition, though I may want to do it one day. I was very picky about the hosting venue. I was offered several spaces but I wanted something more intimate. I even turned down the Palais Galliera, which I regretted afterwards. I wanted to do an exhibition where I told the story of a character who was pretty much based on myself. I created a double called 'Madame X'. The novel is a way of creating fiction through a game where I asked women I admire to give me tasks that my double had to do in my place. Those tasks generated the narrative. The character can be seen as an empty vessel that is animated by her muses, that is, the women that were giving her different kinds of missions. It is possible to see the novel's structure almost like an orchestra conductor being directed by his own musicians.

Figure 3 – La diagonale du désir (Ravini, 2018)



Source: Sinziana Ravini.

[DM]: Did you carry out those tasks in reality or only in fiction?

[SR]: I never tell that to anyone, so it is up to everyone's imagination. The novel is based on this adventure. I really wanted to write a novel that would be like a picaresque: a woman that is looking for her true desire but does not know what she desires. Since she does not have the courage to imagine a novel, she decides to ask other women to give her missions. Madame X, my fictional double, becomes increasingly real, to a point in which she takes over the author herself.

The novel is also about the secret society of psychoanalysis. The protagonist finds a psychoanalyst that accepts her fictional character in analysis. There is also a stormy love story with a man that is very cold and unreachable. But it is also about art, because there is a moment when Madame X starts curating an exhibition called *Aphrodisia* [laughs]. That creates a sort of *mise en abyme* where the entire production of the exhibition is narrated, starting with the crocodile, till the end of the show. The novel offers a peek behind the scenes of the exhibition.

[DM]: This time, you work with a real publishing house. Would you say that this is your most autonomous novel?

[SR]: Yes, it is not so much an exhibition novel as the others are. It could be seen as a novel in its own right. On the other hand, some readers have said that it is almost like an exhibition, because it is very much based on all kinds of erotic sceneries which are told like a series of *tableaux vivants*. Catherine Robbe-Grillet is one of the muses who gives the protagonist several missions that are quite erotic and very visual. Thus, it is quite close to the art world, because it tells a story about someone who is a curator and art critic. Although it is not directly connected to the production of an actual exhibition, it narrates the making of an exhibition, *Aphrodisia*, which in *La diagonale du désir* is called *Venusia*. I changed it a bit, but it is still the same, resulting in a *roman à clef*, where each character can be related to a real person, because the novel is based on a true story.

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