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This conversation took place on two different occasions at the same restaurant in Fitzroy, Melbourne, in February and early March 2015. The curiosity that sparked this exchange is the recent move by the art historian and curator Tara McDowell to Australia in the capacity of Associate Professor and Director of Curatorial Practice at MADA, Monash University of Art, Design & Architecture.

**CAMILA MARAMBIO (MIAMI RAIL):** Tara, you have what seems like a very sincere commitment to novel ways of furthering curatorial writing and practice and have written about the particularities of recent artistic and curatorial shifts. Could you describe what informs your thinking in creating and directing one of the few Ph.D. programs in curatorial practice?

**TARA McDOWELL:** I cofounded *The Exhibitionist* journal and worked for several years as the editor, so I was in the very privileged position of having a flood of curatorial writing coming to me by really talented practitioners. When you have, let's say, fifteen to twenty writers per issue, you begin to notice certain emerging themes, common interests, or common questions. For one issue, there were a number of people who were generally feeling very tired of the debate about whether artists were acting like curators or curators were acting like artists. It was in the wake of the polemic around Anton Vidokle's essay "Art Without Artists?," which criticized of the auteur curator who instrumentalizes art and acts as an artistic voice organizing exhibitions. This critique felt so reactionary, so pointless, and perhaps not where we should be putting our energies. There was just a sense of exhaustion with this debate and a sense that we are all simply creative or cultural workers—or this other kind of emergent creative worker class that people have called "the cognitariat."

**RAIL:** I read that issue and remember sharing the feeling of exhaustion with that line of thinking that it only breached a sense of solidarity among creative workers.

**McDOWELL:** In response I wrote a text called “The Postoccupational Condition,” in which I attempt to map this shared situation onto debates around precarity and labor, trying to understand what it means when we no longer identify with a specific kind of labor or occupation. Does it mean that solidarity is no longer possible? Suddenly it seems like a situation where we’re all laboring, like freelancers, on creative projects with no support, no pay, no infrastructure, and no accountability, not even a job description. Rather than insisting on the dichotomy between artist and curator, I wanted to question how this emergent, hybridized, independent project-based person survives. What are his or her labor issues? There is a term, the *precariat*, which combines the proletariat and precarious and perhaps best defines this shared experience. There are strong, optimistic arguments for what the emergent class can do (if it coheres in any way) and there are very negative, pessimistic responses about atomization. That is the real concern: every person becomes an island when creative work becomes project-based. You fund-raise for every project, you are willing to accept so little, and you are never not working, but you do it because you care and you’ve invested so much of yourself.

**RAIL:** I wonder if you know a body of work by the artist Cecilia Vicuña that she calls *Lo Precario* or “The Precarious,” in which she expresses the impermanent, fluid, and all-encompassing nature of artistic activity through poetry, image, and performance. She reflects specifically on how precariousness is gendered and specifically “southern.”

**McDOWELL:** I’m also beginning to understand how precarity is gendered, and “southern.” I feel the *precariat* is not the freelancer—who we usually think of as a white, upper-class, upwardly mobile Western worker (designer, ad man, or otherwise)—but instead the housewife, who is the ultimate figure of multitasking. Housewives have an unending labor activity that do because of care and emotional investment. There is no “office,” of course; the work happens in the home, but it also happens everywhere and all the time. The housewife is meant to be a bit of a provocation, a nod to an imbalance in the art world. Most well-paid positions, such as museum directors, are filled by men. But if you were to take a cross-section of the volunteer labor of a museum, such as the interns, mostly women do this kind of work. Even the vast majority of assistant curators or emerging curators are women: hungry, ambitious women who are willing to do things for free and often don’t organize or have a sense of shared standards. When labor organizes, you are able to establish standard artists fees (what the New York-based activist organization W.A.G.E. is working toward) and curatorial fees. Any time a curator organizes a project, the first thing to go is her fee: she will insist that the artist is paid before she is. The move away from defined labels or defined roles toward a looser definition of a cultural worker needs to be interrogated in light of these labor issues. I’ve also been thinking about what Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls “Epistemologies of the South” and what it means to insist on the value of speaking from a specific, southern or indigenous position, which is complex in Australia—a

place that is geographically south but politically north. Haiti is farther north geographically, but is south if we follow De Sousa Santo's argument, so it's a socio-political-economical distinction rather than a geographical distinction. But I do feel that Australia suffers from an occasional sense that everything from outside matters very much, but that what you are doing here doesn't matter as much. Paradoxically, of course, it is such an incredibly well-resourced country and with such important histories and traditions of its own. I've noticed a kind of identity crisis in which a constant negotiating of one's position with the global contemporary coexists with an insistent localism, an intensely unapologetic local position that refuses to care what the outside thinks. So, there is a range of different people adopting one or the other position or something in between.

Emily Floyd, *This place will always be open*, 2012. Ian Potter Sculpture Court at Monash University Museum of Art. Photo: John Brash

**RAIL:** Does your interest in founding a curatorial practice Ph.D. program have to do with the need to create a set of standards for the well being of practicing curators?

**McDOWELL:** Well, before I started this program I traveled around and talked to as many people as I could who were involved in curatorial education, because even though I worked as a curator I've never had any formal curatorial education myself. I did my undergraduate, masters, and Ph.D. in art history, so I'm coming at it from another perspective. But there are very good things that come when you are slightly displaced from your professional activity. After my study tour, I decided that I didn't want to add to the literature on curating, which often feels tedious and narrow and too self-referential. It speaks of how expansive the world is and how expansive curatorial practice is, but the writing itself is so narrow. So the idea of a writing retreat came about as a form for the program, an anti-conference. I thought about the biennial as a format and perhaps making a biennial retreat, but only in that the retreat happens every two years! [*Laughs.*] And I thought the retreat should also be off-center, which Australia already is, but because of the difficulty of getting interesting curators to come teach so far away, it would be more useful to have the retreat be related to a major art event. That way my students would have a meaningful encounter outside of Australia. I had also been thinking a lot about the German theorist and artist Stephan Dillemath. We were at the first Tbilisi Triennial together, where he spoke about "bohemian research," or that no artistic research ever truly happens in institutions. Everything interesting happens outside of institutions. An institution brings people together, but essentially you need to carve out space outside of institutions, you need to have skepticism or to prod some distance between yourself and the institution. Artists have the studio as such a space, but curators rarely have space outside the institution because they are always working on institutional projects and have little time for speculative thinking, wild



thinking, thinking outside productivity or outcomes. I decided that it might be useful for curators to have this. I don't believe in any space totally outside of art institutions, but the goal was to create some space or retreat from that position, and that it would involve intense hospitality and conviviality.

**RAIL:** Five years ago, I was asking myself the same sort of question: How do I create a space where I and other colleagues can think and act aimlessly, uselessly even, outside of institutional constraints and pressures. It was a perfect coincidence that around that same time I traveled to Tierra del Fuego and discovered a place that understands its profound difference; a place so remote and ultimately so “southern” that it is almost physically absent from the world—though it exists so extensively in peoples’ imaginations—that it offered me a residency away from the art institution. However, already during the first residency period that I organized there, Tierra del Fuego revealed itself as a place of such complicated positions and geopolitics that it requires an evolving relationship to interests and positions, which ultimately involves much more work than if I was working for an institution! I suppose that the model of the retreat as opposed to the residency allows for a sort of withdrawal from the context that can truly afford one the time and space to delve into a single task.

**McDOWELL:** Yes, the retreat is a more speculative format. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev made use of the retreat as one of the positions explored by Documenta 13, but I was also thinking about Banff, in Canada (as was she), and about how the residency is so common for artists, but much less common for curators. Until a few years ago, it was almost unheard of that a curator could do a residency—all spaces of escape, or nonprofessional, nonproductive spaces of activity felt much less accessible for curators than for artists, whom I think of as actually coming from that space and then stepping into the space of institutions and then again retreating to the studio. Whereas the curator has nowhere to retreat to. I have seven Ph.D. students. Of those seven, three are independent and four are embedded in institutions, but even those who are independent have been at some point in their lives at institutions and only left them to come to the program. Being in an institution is the default position for the curator, but not for the artist. Sure, the art world and the exhibition are institutions, but I'm speaking about where you go every day, a daily institutional life. The retreat is a political gesture in the hyper production, hyper-activity of the curatorial, a belief that we can create a space for other types of thinking. Curatorial discourse feels to me very circular, over-determined, and self-referential, and it can be difficult to get outside of that model and language. Latitudes, which is two curators from Barcelona, emailed me that at a curatorial master's program yesterday, the students were shocked because they had spoken about art—the students told them, “we never get to talk about art anymore.” This is the extreme situation we are in. The retreat is co organized with the curatorial collective Vessel and set in Bari, Italy, just after the opening of the Venice Biennale, and we decided to concentrate on curatorial writing. Since several of the members of Vessel are writing dissertations in English, which is not their first language, and raises issues around translation as well. I think there is an incredible frustration in that dual displacement: first being

displaced from your primary language and then being displaced into the language of academia. It's a double alienation that happens both on the part of the writer and on the part of the reader because academic writing can be very alienating. There's not as much pleasure in the act of writing or reading in this dual displacement, so we began to think about how you could own those mistranslations. People who are non-native speakers use English in an incredibly beautiful way that is often evocative in an entirely different way than a native speaker would be capable of, and we hoped to find ways to bring that into the writing.

**RAIL:** But there is also a dangerous process of mimicry that occurs with non-native and native speakers alike, which is ultimately an adaptive tool that creates an art speak or shared vocabulary that in turn creates a homogenization of contemporary art writing. I just have this sense that there is this latching on to terms at the detriment of all the possible other ways in which we could think to describe the world or what we are doing. Like you said, writing, for so many curators, is somewhat of an expediency and this is precisely why your idea of retreat seems to me so very poignant. To retreat into the realm of language sounds like a precise form to go deeper. We all want to go deeper into our understanding of the world and of our place in it. When I started working with scientists in Tierra del Fuego, it was because of this thirst. So, at first I strove to grasp every bit of knowledge that the scientists were sharing with me, but in doing so I lost my footing. The stumbling made me realize that rather than try to apprehend all their information, what I had to do was strengthen my position so that when we would converse it would each be from our own depths, and this would lead each of us to stay vigilant to one another's reactions. It is in that shared space that we could actually break through our shallow bottoms.

**McDOWELL:** Sometimes, in terms of the idea of going deeper, I think of how contemporary art is a constant accrual. There is always so much more—with every biennial, there are forty artists I have never heard of. I can't imagine another body of knowledge that is so constantly replenishing or so constantly acquiring layers. If you are a historian of pre-Colombian art or the Renaissance, it is a set body of knowledge. I'm sure there are depths that you can discover, but you certainly don't have the sense that, "Oh my God, my area of study is constantly growing and growing." So pressures arise to remain nimble or to remain skimming, treading water on the surface [*laughs*]*—counter-pressures to going deep.*

**RAIL:** How do you deal with the realization and concurrent disillusion that the Eurocentric art world or art system disarms depth and potentially the political agency of artistic and curatorial practices?

**McDOWELL:** I think you have to believe in the propositional. To me, art is just a space for the propositional. You have to believe in the power of that or of modeling that. Last year, during the Biennale of Sydney, there were a number of calls to boycott the biennial. It was very black-and-white for the activists, you simply do not participate in this event, but it was much more gray for the artists involved. I felt their pain and agony over this decision and how radically different the decision was for activist and artists. The artists received a fair amount

of pressure to withdraw, especially the artists with political practices or socially engaged practices, because for the activists, there would simply be no possibility for any intervention in that space. The only response was nonintervention or boycott. It was really interesting to see that divide. It felt like a chasm, artists on one side and activists on the other, and I had never felt that, I had always felt like there was much more of a common ground. I could imagine some artists asking themselves during that event whether they would cross over to the other side.

**RAIL:** In what way do you envision curatorial Ph.D.'s will change the future? Not only of the field, but beyond it too?

**McDOWELL:** The MA in curatorial practice has become widespread in the past twenty years, but when I began looking for models for the Ph.D. program I was founding in Australia, I found very few existed. It felt like being at the vanguard of something, and that there was a real possibility to shape this new situation. That it comes out of Melbourne is very exciting because the first of something is not happening in New York or Europe, which means we're not repeating the same paradigms. There is a kind of provincializing of the centers that is happening, so we can be at the forefront of something from Melbourne. It's happening in Melbourne because this city has several extremely successful fine art Ph.D. programs, so there's a phenomenon of artists getting Ph.D.'s, which is not the case in, say, the United States. My feeling about curatorial practice is that there is almost always some kind of artistic precursor to it, so I'm not surprised that's the case here. The fine art Ph.D. developed in Australia and the United Kingdom and remains a very fraught area—there are plenty of people who will tell you that it is not good for artists and not good for the arts community. Yet here artists can be supported by the university. If not the university, and not the market (not in Melbourne), where else will they find support? We need artists to be able to afford rent, to raise children, and to have retirement—they deserve that just as much as any participating member of society. As for the new curatorial practice Ph.D., it's hard to know what the impact will be. The Ph.D. process asks you to be ready to test, defend, and revise your thinking, and then do it all over again. It's daunting but also deeply generative. I hope it gives curators more time, and makes curators more thoughtful and considered, but also more daring.

**Camila Marambio** *is the founder and director of Ensayos, a nomadic research residency program that considers Tierra del Fuego the center of the world. She received an MA in modern art: critical studies at Columbia University and Master of Experiments in Art and Politics at Science Po in Paris; attended the Curatorial Programme at de Appel Arts Center in Amsterdam; and has been curator-in-residence at the Kadist Art Foundation in Paris and Gertrude Contemporary in Australia.*