

<1>

This interview with Moritz Küng on *Curating the Library* was made by e-mail in September 2015 at the initiative of Julie Peeters & Scott Ponik, on the occasion of their presentation at Kiria Koula Gallery & Bookstore, San Francisco, September 11 – November 21, 2015 ●

*Curating the Library*, initiated by Moritz Küng, was a library project based on a monthly lecture series that took place at deSingel, international arts center, Antwerp, between March 2003 and May 2009. In that period, 110 guests from different professional backgrounds presented their favorite books, 1557 in total. All have been stored together with a digital archive in a custom-made library designed by Richard Venlet □

■ The guests you invited over the years ranged from graphic designers to artists, writers, architects, publishers, curators, photographers, etc. Specifically, we're curious if you noticed a different way in which a graphic designer selects and discusses books compared to guests from other disciplines?

>>> The graphic designers I invited between 2003–2009 were Paul Elliman, Armand Mevis, Michael Amzalag & Mathias Augustynak (M/M Paris), Filiep Tacq, and Linda van Deursen. Linda came for a so-called *Bonus* lecture, in which the guest briefly presented his/her own recently published book, which in her case was the controversial *Recollected Works*. Looking back on that short list now, I would have liked to invite more graphic designers. However – surprisingly or not – most of the designers presented books they designed themselves. But there's no rule without exception – Paul Elliman didn't present any of his own, but instead shared 15 books by Charles Dickens, among others!

Were there certain people you really wanted to invite that declined your invitation? If so, who, and why did they decline?

>>> Of course, but not many. A person I really wanted to invite was Judith Butler, since her book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* had been presented already by three guests (the philosopher Charlotte Nordmann from Paris and the artists Cerith Wyn Evans from London and Heimo Zobernig from Vienna). So I contacted her several times but never got a reaction from her... a pity! One book was even presented four times: Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, but, as you can imagine, it was too late for inviting Sterne. And there were guests with whom I really had to be patient over several years until they confirmed their participation, but in the end it was absolutely worth it. The architect Rem Koolhaas and the artist Allen Ruppersberg both made memorable contributions. On the other hand, invitations to Ed Ruscha or Richard Prince remain still open, if I am ever in the position to re-launch this project.

▀ Most (or all) of the evenings consisted of two different guests. How did you pair them with each other? Was it important that they were very different or was it the opposite, did you look for a connection?

>>> Indeed, *Curating the Library (CTL)* meant curating the guests in order to create, as you said, opposites or symbioses. After all, I tried to create a convenient atmosphere for all, the public and the guest. An example of a very much “curated” evening were the talks by two internationally acclaimed Antwerp “high priests” who couldn’t be more opposite – the theater director Jan Fabre and the painter Luc Tuymans... memorable as well. But there were others who seemed to be more connected and who turned out to be surprisingly interesting, as it happened with the Belgian philosopher and mathematician Jean-Paul Van Bendegem and the American photographer Lewis Baltz, two kind of introverted characters.

▀ Related to the idea of the specific amount of book-buying money that was given to the speakers: who surprised you most by stretching the limits of the budget?

>>> Well, I guess stretching in both ways; back in 2003 the artist duo Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys spent all the money (€ 400) on the production of a unique hand-made book – their 300 page *Google-Book*, which is, as a matter of fact, a work of art. On the other hand, the artist Sophie Nys presented 55 titles, all of them artists’ books, ranging from Asher, Baldessari, Barry, Bayrle, Boltanski, and Brouwn to Warhol, Weiner, West, Wool, and Zobernig. But she had a true spotting talent, which enriched this collection enormously.

▀ We remember so clearly (and will never forget) how Yves Gevaert talked about the Sandberg catalogues for the Stedelijk Museum in such a moving way that it made the room dead quiet. Is your experience that books make friends (as Dieter Roelstraete once said) and that *Curating the Library* created a community of some sorts?

>>> Indeed, but that community was shaped very slowly. When I started the *Curating the Library* project in March 2003, presenting a selection of books myself, together with Richard Venlet who contributed his mirror-blinded container-sculpture to hold this growing library, there were only some ten persons in the audience. But since those double talks happened every month, people got increasingly interested, so, over the years, the average attendance grew to over 50 persons. Needless to say, the few so-called “star-talks” – which was not an aim as such – attracted so many visitors, that those lectures had to be transmitted on a big screen from the 90 seat auditorium to a large hall of 800 seats. However, Dieter Roelstraete, who presented together with his anarchist-boy-band *Spasm* a specially made magazine in a limited print run (including a “noise-act performance”), is absolutely right. Visitors and guests met each other in a rather intimate circumstance to share what they love: special and specific books. I guess that was the very success of this project.

■ We're interested in the physical *Curating the Library* library, which you refer to as a mirror-blinded container-sculpture. How did you define what it would look like, was it completely in Richard's hands or did you give him some pointers?

>>> In 2002 I was appointed to curate the Belgian participation at the 25<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennial for which I invited Richard Venlet, an artist known for his minimalistic approaches and language. On that occasion, the mirror-laminated container-sculpture *Untitled, 2002* had been produced in Belgium and shipped in parts to Brazil. It was a mobile structure on four invisible wheels with the dimensions 303 x 408 x 283 cm that referred to the dimensions of the artist's working space at the time. This "container" was equipped with a double door and the interior was finished as a white cube with a gray, industrial, wall-to-wall carpet. Venlet's original idea was to create a "platform," a space for presentations that he first used in São Paulo for some of his own works (*Untitled 1998*, a 500W light bulb hanging in the very center of the space; *Untitled 1997*, a video on monitor showing the surfaces of several gallery walls; *Untitled 2002*, another new work consisting of 37 aligned cardboard boxes, each containing 2500 take-away photocopies representing visual source material). However, after this sculpture returned again to Belgium and was shown a second time at the M HKA (Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen), the artist didn't have a place to store it. And it happened at the same time as I started to work as head of the exhibition department at deSingel (international art center, Antwerp) with the idea in mind to initiate *Curating the Library*. One thing led to another and I decided together with Richard to re-use his work on permanent loan and adapt it slightly to hold the library. The other important thing was of course the lectures, the live encounter with the book and its reader. For this purpose I created a very simple setting in a small auditorium; a table with a camera above that captured the tabletop with the books, which were rear-projected as an enlarged image behind the reader. That setting was itself captured again by a second camera for the digital archive that went along with the books in Venlet's container.

■ Was the library also open to the public during visiting hours of deSingel, and if so, would it be used very often?

>>> Yes, the library was open during exhibition hours and in the evening during the performances (classical concerts, contemporary dance and theatre). The library was also generally open for consultations. Visitors who hadn't attended the monthly talks could also review the DVD recordings of those presentations while going through the books that had been discussed.

■ We just found this on the website of deSingel:

2. *Richard Venlet (B) from 2003 till 2009, Untitled reflecting black container in the corridor, removed.*

Where is this container sculpture now?

>>> Well, in 2005 I initiated another format, the exhibition series with young Belgian architects entitled 35 m<sup>2</sup>. For this program, a second, exact copy of his Biennale container-sculpture was constructed, authorized by Venlet. That twin-container was literally the inverse of the library-container, this time with a matte blackboard paint on the outside. The use remained the same: a space for presentations (now changed for shows by young architects). Both of Venlet's sculptures were then incorporated in another program I initiated at that time, *Curating the Campus*. [It was] a growing collection of annually installed, permanent, site-specific art works by (18 in total by 11 artists) that ran from 2004-2014 (including, among others, the 1200 m<sup>2</sup> *Ballard Garden* by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, two monumental banners by Matt Mullican, a neon-text work Cerith Wyn Evans, and a new European flag by Christophe Terlinden). Meanwhile both Venlet containers have been removed. The black container had been destroyed as part of the last exhibition of the 35m<sup>2</sup> program in 2008 and the original silver one de-installed in 2009 because of construction works on the spot where it was installed. The CTL container and its entire content has been stored since 2010 in the harbor of Antwerp, and the continuation of the project became, so to speak, on-hold, when I left for Barcelona.

■ Is its physical presence very important to CTL as a project? If the series would happen again in another location, would you use the same sculpture, or was it specifically made for the building of deSingel?

>>> The physical presence of Venlet's sculpture is not important per se. But that sculpture became, with its hermetic yet visually dissolving and mirroring appearance, a signifier of the project and "anchored" the forthcoming library of the rather intimate lecture program. Should this program indeed be re-launched, I guess the container should again play a role. At least as a display element it could hold an additional 1000 books, hypothetically representing four years [of the] program.

■ deSingel is not a very easy space to work with in terms of presenting art, but we liked a lot how this box was placed in the middle of the corridor, which really was also the space to see art in the building. How did you feel about the building when you were working there, and was this series also a way to connect the visual arts with the performance arts, and to use different spaces in the building (We would say the café also became part of the series in a way)?

>>> At the time I started my work as a curator, deSingel didn't have an exhibition gallery (that only came with the new building inaugurated in 2011). As a consequence, I declared the entire site as an exhibition space and the invited architects or artists dealt with that definition by conceiving site-specific works or exhibitions. The interdisciplinary character of *Curating the Library* indeed functioned as an interface within the diverse program of deSingel. And if ever possible I tried to incorporate artists that performed at the very moment (e.g. the theatre director Romeo Castellucci, the choreographer William Forsythe, the composer Kris Defoort).

And now you mention the cafeteria of the artists-foyer; it indeed had an added value for after-talks and meeting [after] the lectures.

■ We often hear about similar projects to *CTL* (which are never as strong in our opinion), it's safe to say that you've really set an important precedent. Have you encountered many other lecture series or projects that are similar to *Curating the Library* in recent years and if so, did you find them interesting?

>>> No, I haven't encountered similar projects with an equal regular and year-long pace. But *CTL* was hosted as a satellite within two group exhibitions: *Société Anonyme* in 2007 at the FRAC Île-de-France (Paris) and *Book Show* in 2010 at East-Side Projects (Birmingham). On both occasions the complete digital archive [was] presented; in Paris six live, additional lectures and in Birmingham 22 titles on display, selected and commented [on] by myself from the archive of 1557 books. Both "stages" were designed on those occasions, by Venlet.

But of course there must be similar projects or approaches to books since it is no big deal to ask someone about his/her favorite titles or to establish a list like "the book next to my bedside table," "the book I would take to an island," "100 unavoidable books to read," "the 10 most significant novels, books on art, architecture, etc. recommended by XY". The truth is, those lists remain abstract since the books aren't present as a physical object. For me a book or a library is a physical given and a mental space. But above all – and that was the main reason to launch *Curating the Library* – I consider a private library or book collection a portrait or mirror of its owner. A library is a very personal and intimate given that only exists because of subjective preferences, fascinations, obsessions, etc. Having asked and invited all those personalities involved in *CTL*, I wanted to know them better, and their particular book choice embodied that very intention. One has to imagine that it is very challenging to establish a selection of books, since the perception of them might change radically depending on which title you place next to another. That said, the architect Rem Koolhaas stated in his talk on May 10, 2007 something thought provoking, a text (in Dutch) that he projected during his entire presentation: "Essential when choosing books are the randomness and chance. There is a "goal," but in 9 out of 10 cases by mid-spontaneous emergencies. I've never looked for a book without leaving the store with another one."

■ We're interested in what you mention about it not being a big deal for people to speak about books or share their favorites. We agree with that, yet to present your favorites in front of an audience in the form of a lecture is a completely different affair than as an informal conversation in a bar, or in somebody's house for example. Did you notice in some cases that people would prepare a much different lecture than you would expect from them because the notion of the audience would come into play?

>>> I guess that some speakers are more comfortable with talking in front of an audience than others. By making the combination of two in one evening, this also played a role in scheduling the guest. Of course there were surprises, good and bad ones. The brilliant choreographer Meg Stuart was so uncomfortable and nervous performing "not in character" that she decided after her talk – which was a very interesting one – to delete all digital records and to remove her contribution, which I respected since I always have been aware of the intimate and at the same time exposing character of this project. Others prepared a kind of "show". The artist Rita McBride presented only one book genre, guides to feng shui. While talking about her favorite book shop in Topanga Canyon close to Los Angeles, she reconstructed the architecture of this shop with her 30 feng shui titles, well aware of the camera above the table that captured the image as floor plan. The artist Ann Veronica Janssens invited nine friends and authors of books to present together with her their own published book. Or the artist Aurélien Froment transformed the surface of the table in a kind of "stage" with different visual layers to establish a spectacular scenario of expanded books.

■ About the aspect of your own curiosity: What was your brief when you invited people to be a part of *CTL*? Would you write them in a very personal way to connect your curiosity about their taste in books with the lecture series? Or was the invitation always the same?

>>> It was a combination of both, a personal approach with general information about the project. That sometimes provoked a whole correspondence as in the case with Allen Ruppersberg. Since his *CTL* presentation – reading excerpts from Kafka's *The Burrow* while presenting his list of 148 titles in a custom made unique book, together with 22 hard copies that had been chosen randomly – took almost two years in preparation. The whole correspondence was later published under the title *How a Talk turns into a Book* in his artist's book *Chapter VI*, a limited collectors edition published by mfs–Michèle Didier in 2009.

■ We love the quote from Rem Koolhaas and completely agree with it, a book is never alone and the aspect of chance is often a part of buying and collecting books. Did you find yourself often looking for the same books that were presented in *CTL* to add to your own collection? And if so, would that search lead to unexpected finds?

>>> Being a book lover myself organizing that meta-library I was of course inspired by the choice of others... So yes, I acquired quite often a book for myself that had been presented in *CTL*. The first one was *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, which was proposed by the philosopher Lieven De Cauter in 2003 that was typeset in a very particular way. And one of the most unusual researches was the one for Erik Thys. Eric is a professional psychiatrist, and an artist, he acts sometimes in the video films of his brother Harald Thys (who collaborates with Jos de Gruyter) and composes scores for them. He published as well a comic book that explains autism. He wanted to present one of the most scarce

<7>

– and scary – books I can imagine: the guide-pamphlet of the exhibition “Entartete Kunst” (Berlin: Reichspropagandaleitung, Verlag für Kultur- und Wirtschaftswerbung, 1937). Finally it was Erik who located a copy.

▀ Did you ever help invited guests with the tracking down of books?

>>> Most of the time. I requested a list from them and based on that I started to research the books. But often the guests arrived the very evening with their books, which was always exciting.

▀ Besides *CTL*, which libraries have been important to you as a mental space? Did you ever invite a librarian to *CTL*?

>>> The more specialized the library, the more intriguing it gets, at least for me. Recently I visited a book collector here in Barcelona – a teacher – and to my surprise he had more than four meters (!) [of shelves] with books by or on Marcel Duchamp. A library that has been important to me was the one of the architects Robert & Trix Haussmann in Zürich, where I was formed as [a] technical drawer. They had an exquisite collection of mostly art and architecture books in a *séparé*, entirely furnished in mahogany wood with brass fittings and a reading table with inlaid leather, where I spent quite some time in between working hours. Here – to quote “the Dude” Lebowski – “that rug really tied the room together!” I guess that the atmosphere of a library has quite an impact on how the content is perceived as well. A place I often frequent nowadays is the beautiful library of the Tapies Foundation here in Barcelona, or the public library in Stockholm made by Gunnar Asplund that I discovered this summer for the first time. However, I never invited a librarian for *CTL*; maybe because I didn’t know any, maybe because a librarian is professionally too close to books, I don’t know. But I did invite publishers like Koen Brams, Michèle Didier, Yves Gevaert, Wilfried Huet, and Guy Schraenen.

▀ We very much enjoyed your opening speeches, which were always fed by your own curiosity and desire to see the lectures yourself. Besides the video documentation, have you kept a record of these speeches in a text form, or were they mostly improvised?

>>> There are almost no text records from the given lectures, even though they were written down by some speakers. A great part of the lectures were improvised anyway.

▀ As we have been talking about a printed pamphlet in relation to our proposal to show footage of *CTL* in San Francisco, could you imagine the project being turned into a book one day?

>>> Of course, and I have even put some thought into that. Since there aren’t any transcriptions of the lectures – with the exception of Rem Koolhaas made by the Dutch architecture magazine *Mark* and published in their issue #10, 2007 (pages 194–199) – and that some 60% of them were given in a language other than English (Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Italian), it

would take a tremendous effort by someone to do that job. Abandoning that thought, one could imagine as well a more conceptual approach by just representing the 1557 book covers together with some basic information on the 110 speakers who have selected them. But would that make sense? You can't judge a book by its cover! I think the true beauty of *CTL* is the parallel existence, be it the reader together with his books in the lecture, be it the book archive with all its digital records. But the pamphlet you are planning to do on *Curating the Library* is a nice way of leave more traces... and maybe I'll have the opportunity to launch this project again and to continue inviting people. As mentioned earlier, books make friends!

## # Colophon

Curating the Library  
Library project and monthly lecture series  
deSingel, international arts center, Antwerp  
March 2003 – May 2009  
Initiated by Moritz Küng

Julie Peeters & Scott Ponik presented at Kiria Koula Gallery & Bookstore 15 books of their choice, together with this booklet and a small selection of 8 lectures from the digital archive of *Curating the Library* that holds 110 recordings: (English language lectures by Lewis Baltz (US, photographer), Paul Elliman (GB, graphic designer), William Forsythe (US, choreographer), Rita McBride (US, artist), M/M Paris (FR, graphic designer), Matt Mullican (US, artist), Allen Ruppersberg (US, artist), and Cerith Wyn Evans (GB, artist).

Editors and graphic design: Julie Peeters & Scott Ponik  
Publisher: Juana Berrio, Kiria Koula, San Francisco  
Print run: 50 copies  
Acknowledgments: Jerry Aerts, director deSingel, Antwerp  
© Texts: the authors  
© DVD's: Curating the Library, deSingel, international arts centre, Antwerp

Kiria Koula  
3148 22nd Street  
San Francisco, CA  
94110 USA  
[www.kiriakoula.com](http://www.kiriakoula.com)