

carolee thea

[home](#) | [bio](#) | [articles & interviews](#) | [foci interviews](#) | [contact](#) |



On Curating



Carolee Thea in her 1975 *For Fools or Mad Men*, wood, barbed wire, and hardware cloth.



Photographic documentation of Thea's Red Tape performance.



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An Interview with Carolee Thea: On Curating

By Richard J. Goldstein

Carolee Thea happens to have been both installation artist and curator in her ever-evolving career as an artist, historian, curator, and writer. Now, she's asking the questions of some of the most dynamic names in curating with her d.a.p release *On Curating // Interviews with Ten International Curators*, a follow-up to her *foci // Interviews with Ten International Curators*.

With art, it isn't just the looking, but how one moves through it. Be it by the installation artist or the curator's vision -the difference and distance between the two seeming less and less-experience is not necessarily mediated, but for sake of a more positive word, produced. Carolee Thea happens to have been both installation artist and curator in her ever-evolving career as an artist, historian, curator, and writer. Now, she's asking the questions of some of the most dynamic names in curating with her d.a.p release *On Curating // Interviews with Ten International Curators* a follow up to her *foci // Interviews with Ten International Curators*. The following is an email interview with Thea which traces her arc from the early '70s as an art student at Hunter College to the many hats she wears today. For Thea, art was never one thing, there are no boundaries to what makes an artist.

Richard J. Goldstein: What was the point at which you discovered you wanted to be a curator?

Carolee Thea: In the mid-'70s I was an artist and a critic, I taught at the College of New Rochelle, managed a home, a studio, children, and feminist activities that included co-founding the NOW chapter of artists and writers of Westchester County. I also worked for the Urban League, house-busting for African Americans. In 1975, I moved to NYC, set up studio and became an editor for *Heresies V*.

I was not interested in curatorial ideas until the early '90s when I worked with Amnon Barzel as his curatorial assistant from 1996-97. This was also the year my mother died and the point of my last installation, *Material Connections*, an exploration of four generations of my matriarchal DNA.

This was the coda for my studio practice as well as the beginning of my international art travels, writing, and interviewing artists and curators about exhibitions and the curatorial practice.

My fascination with curating was spurred by working with Barzel but my initial interest in curating was spawned by the apexart curatorial program. They also helped to publish my first book in 2001 *foci // Interviews with Ten International Curators*. That book had its beginnings back in 1997 when my editor sent me to Munster to interview Kasper König, the interview was later published in *foci*.

RJG: What was your studio practice like?

CT: From 1973-96, I was interweaving disciplines of painting, sculpture, film, photography, performance, and conceptual art. I focused on the metaphor of the interior/exterior and was motivated to break all formal confinements. In terms of painting, I was making painted constructions that dialogued with the collapse of the frame and other outmoded formal categories. You know, "After 1968, an artist could do or combine all styles. Style was no longer the important issue, it was to live out one's own mythologies." That's what Harald Szeemann said in my first book of interviews.

RJG: And your early experiences with installation?



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CT: Well, as an artist, my first constructed/installation in 1975, *For Fools and Madmen* was built in a Soho gallery. Here, viewers animated a maze of narrow corridors made with barbed wire and hardware cloth. I sat in the rear with a spilled ball of yarn, referencing Ariadne and Theseus while a metronome signifying heartbeats ticked away.

During and afterwards, I talked with participants about their encounter with the artwork. After this installation, I made others that also involved viewer participation.

RJG: *Artforum* has said about your *Fools and Madmen* performance "The viewer is the performer." How is the viewer a performer?

CT: What the review in '73 meant was that the viewer could do what they wished in my construction, be complicit, be free, hold nothing back. While walking though, one child peed on the floor and his parent wiped it up.

RJG: How did studying with Leo Steinberg, Robert Morris, and Robert Barry influence you?

CT: Steinberg, Barry, and Morris, were my MA professors at Hunter College in 1974-76. Robert Morris presented us with a series of challenging assignments. One was to create a performance in the Port Authority Bus Terminal in NYC. In *Red Tape*, (my performance) I quietly activated myself as a living sculpture by wrapping myself in red tape. All of our works were misunderstood; venues such as today's Creative Time and Public Art projects were not yet incorporated into the city and performances were done in artist's lofts. In this particular situation, by causing crowds to gather our performances were ceased, as the law decreed, by the police who tried to expel us from the Terminal. Of course, this delighted the trailing Morris whose intent was twofold; to take us out of our comfort zone and to test the boundaries of exhibition space. Hans Ulrich-Obrist's fitting remark in his foreword for *On Curating*, "We should always be open to surprise so that the unexpected happens."

Robert Barry, my thesis advisor was supportive especially of my thesis *Mask, Power and Sisterhood in African Society*. It dealt with the mask as an object whose iconography is connected to the traditions of its culture, not as a source for artistic interpretations. My interest in the subject developed because I discovered that the Bundu or Sande was the only female secret society permitted to wear the mask during their rituals. This practice revealed the strong matriarchal underpinnings among the Mende speaking people of West African.

Leo Steinberg's brilliance, humor, and generosity opened me up to a life of critical thinking. In his famous class on Michelangelo, the last one he taught at Hunter CUNY, he assigned an analysis of *Eve's Idle Hand*, from the Sistine Chapel ceiling's Temptation Panel, which appears in the 1976 *Art Journal*. He quotes and credits each of our interpretations there.

RJG: Which formal boundaries of curating and art writing are you most interested in breaking?

CT: Today, I am an observer; interested in recording the way others (curators, artists, and writers) are creating new situations. I believe Roselee Goldberg, one of the curators I interviewed for *On Curating*, is doing some of the most heroic work. The Internet and performances in the city are boundary breakers and I watch, I read, I assimilate, and I report.

RJG: We're at a point where virtual space has merged with actual space. Already one can download exhibition tours before even getting to the museum. How has the curatorial practice changed since your first book *foci*, and how have your views changed?

CT: Propelled by the increasing number of large-scale exhibitions, certain developments irrespective of the markets have emerged around the exploration of interest in contemporary art. It is now not enough for contemporary art to become a "spectacle" embraced by cities and people in all corners of the world. What matters more is that artists, curators, and communities are sharing information and mingling cultures at a rapid pace; reinventing themselves through these interactions and through a renewed engagement with the commonalities of everyday life. Cyber communication and technological innovations may be accelerating these transmutations, and where they lead unfolds daily.

RJG: What is the future of the biennial?

CT: The biennial is an exhibition structure beyond itself, an event that allows for very difficult

subject matter. Its function, as defined by planners and curators, is to add intellectual capital, to think about the relationship between past, present, future and to experiment with truths.

Today, artists and curators are unavoidably affected by the onslaught of art fairs and consumerism. Some curators focusing on the transformative interactions of the biennial, seemed to anticipate the lean times ahead by privileging the audience over the object and by utilizing the working city's less seductive structures. This kind of work is meant to alter the trend of spectacle and engage the local population, which relates to the installations in the '70s and '80s.

RJG: How have current demands of the economy and the reality of the entertainment industry shaped the curator's role or job?

CT: The relationship between new artistic practices and new modes of production, new forms and new meanings-and the specialized economies they engender-cannot be considered without taking into account the recent transformations in the global markets. The exponential increase of wealth that produced a host of uber-collectors and fund managers, whose pursuit of fine art bought, then, the joy of ownership and entrée into a privileged society, has suddenly shifted, and the effect of the newly unstable financial condition is unraveling with time. Already we see more and more artists tuning the ordinary into novel forms, bringing to the forefront a more democratic structure for art practices and their social functions.

RJG: What is visual literacy now, and how can it move forward?

CT: Because of the Internet and the speed and accessibility of information, visual literacy is entering the public universe automatically and at lightening speed. Contributing to this are the increasing number of students in the art schools, who are among the spores that fertilize cognition as indispensable to life in the information age.

RJG: Would you say the viewer has grown overly reliant on the curator to translate work?

CT: Biennials are a component in spreading visual literacy-they now number over 150 in cities across the world. To theme an exhibition is practice. However, most curators today are aware of the drawback of over-thematizing shows as it becomes dictate and inhibits audience intuitive creativity. One of the most successful aspects of the 2010 Whitney Biennial was simply its title, *2010*. This curatorial decision by Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari allowed the audience to conjure their *own* imaginative references.

On the other hand, there was the 11th Istanbul Biennial in 2009 titled *What Keeps Mankind Alive* curated by WHW (What, How, & for Whom), a collective of four Slovak women. By adopting The Communist Manifesto and Brecht's epic theatre, they provided a look into a civil majority, or a third-world humanism. However, this politicization, propaganda and ensuing predictability resulted in a show that was more like an MFA thesis.

Charles Esche says in *On Curating* "The political moment in art is not documentary, didactic or accusatory, but ambiguous and sensual; it ushers in an instability that enables viewers to effect a transformation in themselves and to imagine the world other than it is."

RJG: Esche's statement about the "ambiguous and sensual" seems to mark the moment of the Sublime. Here beauty becomes political and revelatory. Would you say it is more of a challenge to reach people in this way today?

CT: He is talking about the exhibition as a space for reflection and dialog between the city-the city folk, the artist, and contemporary issues. The biennial is transformative; a place, where confronted with certain situations and issues, the viewer is drawn into a dialog becoming complicit in a drama of what they can be or who they are. It is about relational aesthetics and if you mean, Richard, about the moment of the *Sublime*, then so be it.

Richard J. Goldstein is a Brooklyn-based painter and writer.