

# Introduction: Semiotics x curating, or why this now?

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The main question that curators must continuously ask themselves and be prepared to answer is: Why this now? In other words, what is the rationale for presenting this content in this context at this time? It is a question of public accountability and cultural significance. Curators, as institutional figures (Groys 2009), are beholden to justify why public resources and attention should be spent on their selected content and how its display contributes, in a meaningful and beneficial way, to shaping collective sense and values. Otherwise put: why should anybody care about this? – which is arguably an increasingly urgent question in today’s attention economy. As guest author Isabella Pezzini observes in her text for this issue, curators, by definition, care; but the fact that they care is not nearly enough. Curators must also ensure that what they care about matters to others and the collective – and, let’s face it, there are serious limits to their power of persuasion. It follows that the key question at the core of this issue, at least for us curators, is: why examine the intersection of semiotics and curating now?

Before answering this question, however, it is worth clarifying our working understanding of curation because it is a fluid and evolving term that is here being addressed in the context of a semiotic journal. Within the curatorial field, curating is generally defined as an intermediary practice that utilizes acts of selection and arrangement to facilitate interpretation – that is, to support individual and collective meaning-making – and add value. Since the mid-1990s, the practice has gained increasing scholarly attention. It has emerged as an autonomous field of study that examines the rationale,

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mechanisms, and impacts of different multimodal display strategies deployed both in the physical and digital domain, with a particular focus on identity and ideology, tracing their social, political, and cultural implications.

Curatorial studies are closely related to the field of museology (also referred to as museum studies or museum science), which focuses on examining museums' historical development and societal functions. This field also encompasses the practical aspects of museum operations, including exhibition development, collection management, conservation, public programming, and educational initiatives – often categorized under operational museology – while remaining distinct from it. Given that museums, along with their collections and collectors, historically played a central role in reinforcing the dominance of colonial Europe and narratives of cultural superiority, critical museology emerged as a response. Informed in part by anthropological research, critical museology interrogates the fundamental assumptions that underpin museum studies and museum practices, including their historical foundations, architectural forms, exhibition strategies, programming approaches, and the provenance of their collections (Bennett 1995). Additionally, critical museology engages with the economic and political ideologies that shape contemporary museums, positioning them within the broader framework of the cultural and creative industries.

In the same vein, curatorial studies critically examine contemporary and historical exhibitions, display formats within the art world and in broader cultural contexts, the work of individual curators, and the political and theoretical frameworks shaping exhibition production. The increasing impact of technological media on curating has recently expanded the practice's focus to include audience perceptions as well as constructions of reality on both an interpersonal and societal level (Henning 2005). Curatorial studies not only explore the expanded cultural role of curating beyond the creation of exhibitions for public engagement; it also interrogates the concept of the 'curatorial' as a site of value production: that is, curation as a work of art and intellectual labor (Derieux 2007), curation as a form of art research (O'Neill 2012; Borgdorff 2012; Smith 2012), curation as a heuristic dispositive in the human and social sciences (Bjerregaard 2020), curatorial practice as pedagogy (O'Neill and Wilson 2010), curating as an activist practice that questions social hierarchies and advocates for social change (Reilly and Lippard 2018; Thompson 2012), and curation as a mass phenomenon beyond the art world (Balzer 2015). This social and anthropological perspective and emphasis on curating experiences is particularly relevant in the context of "platform capitalism" (Kompatsiaris 2024), where the idea of the "curated life" has gained prominence within the broader phenomenon of "hyperculturalization" (Reckwitz 2020) and the increasing significance of the creative economy.

Having said this, we can now turn back to our initial question: why examine the intersection of semiotics and curating now? The simple answer is that while the obvious

connection between semiotics and curating – as a holding pattern for meaning – is not new and has lurked in the background of cultural mediation debates for decades, it has curiously never been adequately examined or resolved in either semiotic or curatorial literature. Since the professionalization of curatorial practice in the 1990s, there have been notable and productive crossovers between semiotics and curation. From a curatorial perspective, these have included the conception of the exhibition as a discursive, intertextually organized space; the recurring analogy of the curator as translator; the debate surrounding the “grammar of the exhibition” positing curation as syntax (Misiano 2009); the introduction of a criterion to distinguish between different exhibition-making practices based on how they fix artistic reference (Bertrand 2022); and the understanding of the exhibition visitor as a model reader (Manacorda 2016). Conversely, semioticians have analyzed the semiotic power of the exhibition space and utilized different semiotic approaches to decode not only exhibition communication, ranging from in-gallery wall texts and label copy to digital promotional material (Navarro and Renaud 2020), but also interpret the cultural practices and behaviors of museum-goers and the visiting strategies implied by a museum (Davallon 2013; Verón 2013). Notwithstanding, while the semiotics of visual arts have a long tradition, the study of curation as a semiotic system with substantive effects on signification, meaning-making, communication, and interpretation is still relatively underdeveloped and has only been the subject of isolated contributions (see, e.g., Pezzini 2021).

Accordingly, the initial aim behind this special issue was to expand and enhance existing understandings of the semiotics of curation, or, more precisely, of curating as a semiotic practice. The goal was to examine its theoretical elaboration, methodological perspectives, and manifold applications in diverse sectors where curating is now ubiquitous but effectively used to serve diverging purposes, including personalize access, signal distinction, amplifying ideological positions (propaganda), generating wealth by inflating value, and even establish identities. Otherwise put, the issue’s original ambition was to explore how semiotics (with an emphasis on interpretation, framing, translation, engagement, enunciative assemblages, image-acts, storytelling, open text, multi-modality, and meta functions) could be used as a valuable toolkit to unpick and grapple with the intended and unintended consequences of human and algorithmic curation on personal and collective sensemaking and valorization processes. The range and quality of the submissions that we received indicate that this relatively underexploited area of research is vast, rich, and highly relevant today. Among other findings, the contributions featured in this issue demonstrate that exhibition visits offer a unique case study for semiotics’ recent turn towards embodied social practices. Conversely, semiotic approaches offer insightful methodological tools to unpack the increasingly complex blend of physical and virtual devices used by curators and institutions to mediate cultural artefacts, knowledge and artworks, and grasp their distinct impacts.

Since this issue is one of the first publications dedicated to the intersection of semiotics and curating, we opted to showcase different theoretical facets instead of presenting a more unified perspective, as reflected in the variety of topics and approaches outlined below:

**Elena Ananiadou** and **Elisabeth Miche**'s article, "The museum project of the Cases Barates: An actor in the semantic space of the Barcelona housing conflict," provides a semiotically nuanced analysis of the discourse produced by museums. It focuses on a heritage restitution research project initiated by the Barcelona History Museum (MUHBA) in 2023, which relates both to a 1929 social housing program in Barcelona and to the city's conflictual urban plans regarding its contemporary housing crisis and eviction policies. The authors position their semiotic inquiry between the expectations of "curatorial activism" (Reilly 2019) that often questions institutional policies reinforcing dominant narratives and perpetuating social inequalities, and ICOM's new museum objectives (2018), to actively engage with the social issues they address and take social responsibility (participative turn in museology). In elucidating the museum's role as a discursive actor, the authors deploy an intricate framework based on argumentative semantics, primarily drawing on the works of Carel and Lescano, that is, the Semantic Blocks Theory (TBS) and the Argumentative Theory of Polyphony (TAP), as well as New Museology. They focus on the exhibition text used in the physical and online displays to interrogate the curatorial choices related to stance-taking within this political issue. At the core of the authors' approach is the claim that "reasoning, even when it appears as informative, is inherently argumentative," which recalls both J. L. Austin's speech act theory regarding the non-declarative uses of language as well as Benveniste's work on the distinction between the *énoncé* and the *énonciation*. The semantic and enunciative analysis radicalizes this intellectual tradition and posits that discourse does not describe reality but actively constructs and transforms it. Setting the basis for the semantic theory of social conflicts, the study employs Lescano's (2023, 2024) concept of semantic space in conflicts to argue that the museum's discourse operates within a contested field of meaning, where specific programs (i.e., conceptual frames for action) are naturalized while others are suppressed. This analytical approach successfully demonstrates how discursive framing legitimizes particular social structures while marginalizing alternative perspectives. The discussion of how the museum presents inaccessibility to housing as an inevitable consequence of economic imperatives rather than a political choice underscores the ideological stakes embedded in supposedly neutral narratives.

For guest author **Mieke Bal**, making meaning transmittable, or rather sharable, is the primary point of both semiotics and exhibitions. For Bal, Lotman's notion of the 'semiosphere' marks the complementarity of disciplines studying culture, the movement towards creating a general theory of culture, and a "flexible methodology," both

explored in Bal's book on "traveling concepts" in the humanities (2002). Bal argues that the tools of meaning-making are not simply related to conceptual language but that "meaning happens" in encounters, which involve the temporal and affective aspect of looking back, listening, and establishing dialogue, as well as the performative rituals that develop within the tradition of museum culture. Drawing on a distinctive reading of Adorno's concept of the "essay" as a thinking model, the paper addresses curating as a fragmented, incomplete, partial, subjective, affective, and always dialogic practice. It allows any exhibition visitor to transform the experience through their own "semiosphere habits," which aligns with Lotman's view of semiosis as a social concept. In an earlier article, Bal investigates the difference between an empirical and ideal spectator, or between an actual, viz. 'instantiated,' and a model spectator while echoing reader-response theories to discuss "protocols of viewing," sustaining that viewing is based on codes and that "members of groups acquire their familiarity with codes of viewing, and their ability to operate those codes, to varying degrees" (Bal and Bryson 1991: 186). According to Bal, ambiguity is at the heart of intermedial curating. To make this point, she discusses her own film essay "It's about time! Reflections on urgency" (2020) – available on YouTube – as an example of semiotically oriented curating. Semiotics and curating are sites of encounter between individual viewers and the objects, be it films or artworks, that enhance ambiguity. In Bal's film, ambiguity is related to the story of Cassandra, who was fated to utter true prophecies but never to be believed, as retold by Christa Wolf. This becomes a metaphor for the curator, who persists in the indistinguishability of words and images, further drawing on Lyotard's notion of the 'figural,' which brings to mind Nietzsche's notion of philosophy as images in disguise – later addressed in Blumenberg's metaphorology. However, the past and present intertwine against the linear conception of time and our obsession with history, clearly implying Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image and the montage as history's construction principle. Quoting or re-envisioning a work of art changes it forever in active re-working that creates new versions of old images and new perceptions of the already seen. The intermedial juxtaposition of the tableau vivant, painting, and text presented as a film seeks to show the precarity of the distinction between sign and thing, in which Peircean categories of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity merge. In this regard, temporality in its threefold aspect systematized by Genette – order (sequentiality), duration, and frequency in narratology – is exemplified in the action of the film's protagonist/curator/viewer, which becomes a crucial feature in the discussion on curating. Last, drawing on Peircean iconicity, Bal discusses color's capacity to act as a sign at length. Color advances to the status of an icon because it possesses a character that renders it significant, even though its object has no existence. In this regard, color supports the deployment of the imagination (hence, fiction), much like the workings of a dream, making it an ideal bearer of ambiguity – clearly demonstrated in abstract art or the work of contemporary artists such as

Ann Veronica Janssens. Bal maintains that ambiguity, understood as a key to cultural complexity, is at the heart of the concept of a global semiosphere. Its political and social power for change depends on curating's capacity to enhance and perpetuate constructive ambiguity, understood as a distinct semiotic quality. This goal equally informs the curator's role and agency. Embracing the heterogeneity of semiospheres, Bal's argument is not just theoretical but deeply ethical. In a world marked by cultural instability and political crises, fostering interpretive openness becomes necessary, recalling philosopher Jacques Rancière's understanding of curatorial practice as a means of redistributing the sensible and allowing for new modes of perception to emerge that can eventually support civil emancipation. This is Bal's ongoing interest, as previously demonstrated in her seminal article "On Show: Inside the Ethnographic Museum" (1996), in which she shows how semiotics can be utilized to reveal how exhibition strategies, object placement, and visual storytelling construct the perception of cultural 'others.' Curators as essayists and curating, when approached with an awareness of ambiguity as a method, can cultivate critical engagement and social responsibility.

**Camille Béguin** and **Patrizia Laudati**'s key contribution lies in their proposal that curation can serve as a methodological tool to support research in the humanities and social sciences. This approach is framed within a semiotic-communicational perspective, which considers exhibitions as multimodal constructs that operate on three levels: as material devices (the artifacts displayed), as spatio-temporal materializations of social and cultural narratives, and as heuristic operators generating meaning for both the curator and the audience. Béguin and Laudati maintain that although curating is and should be related to the ethos of the academic article, understood as the main device of conducting research, it should also adhere to poietics - echoing '*poiēsis*' in its original, that is, Aristotelian meaning. Studies on semantic-sensory experience and embodied cognition help to understand the embodied poietic process of the researcher-curator, which mirrors the three dimensions of exhibition semiotics: (a) finding, selecting, and producing "objects of knowledge in their own right" (b) arranging and spatializing content and (c) making the exhibition accessible and intelligible – a tripartite model that reflects a paradigmatic hybridization of methodological tools from museography, communication sciences, and cognitive studies. Choosing materials disrupts preconceived narratives and invites serendipitous discovery, echoing Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, where meaning emerges through montage rather than preordained structures. Davallon's idea to move "from the use of space as a writing surface to writing through space" (2011: 39) informs their notion of museum spatialization. The authors' engagement with "expographic writing" (Goody 1979: 109) suggests that exhibition-making can be an alternative form of scholarly argumentation. Since the process of designing interpretative materials (labels, texts, scenography) requires researchers to translate their work into formats that are also accessible to non-specialist audiences, the authors

maintain that this act of translation is itself a heuristic device that prompts deeper engagement with the research material, revealing gaps, contradictions, and new connections. Drawing on Bäckström's (2023) concept of "the exhibition as essay," the authors propose curation as an alternative form of research-based creativity, inviting scholars to reconsider the cognitive and communicative potentials of exhibition design.

**Emily Butler's** "Towards a Curatorial Translation Zone" offers a compelling examination of how translation – both linguistic and cultural – operates as a curatorial practice, since *translatio* – the etymological backbone of the term translation – is understood in its threefold meaning as "a transfer from one place to another, an interpretation in different terms, and finally, a transformation into a different form." Central to her analysis is applying semiotics, postcolonial theory, and translation studies to explain curating as a dynamic process of meaning-making, renegotiation, and potential epistemic transformation. Butler draws on various theorists, including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Donna Haraway, to situate curating within a broader semiotic and postcolonial discourse. By framing the curatorial space as a "translation zone" (Apter 2006), she foregrounds the interplay between sign systems, cultural contexts, and power structures. Moreover, she extends Barthes' idea of the "death of the author" that paves the way for the "birth of the reader" (1977: 148) to curating to suggest that curators, like translators, do not impose fixed meanings but instead facilitate an open-ended engagement with the exhibits. The poststructuralist rejection of stable meaning reinforces her claim that exhibitions function as semiotic texts subject to infinite reinterpretation but also to postcolonial re-interpretation of power structures, for which "translation is necessary but impossible" (Spivak 2022: 69). Derrida's notion of "différance," which further enriches Butler's analysis, emphasizes that translation is not merely a transfer of meaning but an act of deferral and transformation. By invoking Derrida's assertion that "nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense, everything is untranslatable" (1998), Butler presents curatorial translation as a process that resists closure. This aligns with her discussion of "mis-translation" as a generative act – one that embraces hybridity rather than striving for fidelity to an original. Haraway's concept of "material-semiotic actors" (1988) is another crucial reference in Butler's exploration of curating as a politically charged act. She highlights how curators and artists operate within "power-differentiated" contexts, where translation can either reinforce or challenge dominant narratives. This perspective resonates with Homi Bhabha's (1994) critique of neo-liberal multiculturalism and his notion of a 'third space' of enunciation beyond binaries, which Butler uses to conceptualize the curatorial translation zone as a site of cultural negotiation rather than mere representation. Butler draws on curatorial literature (Harald Szeemann and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, among others) to contextualize her point on curating as a semiotic act of negotiation, disruption, and meaning-making.

Central to guest author **Isabella Pezzini's** "Forms of Caring" is the increasing agency of curators within the art world. The author grounds her exploration in the dual meanings of '*cura*' – as both preservation and interpretation – highlighting how curators oscillate between safeguarding cultural heritage and recontextualizing it within contemporary frameworks – echoing Nicholas Serota's twofold definition of curating, swinging back and forth between providing experience to the audience or enabling interpretation (Serota 2005). As both "adjuvant (facilitator) and destinant (authority)," the curator shapes the reception of artworks, sometimes to the extent of overshadowing the art itself. The paper critically engages with this tension, particularly in light of Modena's assertion that curatorial interventions risk instrumentalizing works of art. However, Pezzini does not merely critique this phenomenon but instead situates it within a broader discourse on the evolving responsibilities of curators in an era of rapid cultural transformation. Drawing on Balzer's notion of 'curationism' (2015), she critiques the transformation of curators from caretakers of objects to cultural auteurs, expressed in the form of romanticized idiosyncratic geniuses, enterprising professionals, and cosmopolitan super-curators. This shift, Pezzini argues, aligns with a broader societal trend in which curatorial expertise extends beyond art into commercial and digital spheres, reinforcing the curator's role both as a meaning-maker and enhancer of the museum's surplus-value. The paper discusses care in the context of the sustainability challenges faced by major museums such as the Louvre and the Pergamon, situating conservation efforts within the emerging field of 'maintenance & repair studies.' The example of a performance by artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1973), who has made maintenance her ongoing social practice and investigates care as a systemic, feminist and political factor, underscores the often-invisible labor of curatorship, framing it as an act of cultural stewardship rather than mere exhibition-making. Her paper is situated within the current discourse concerning curating and care studies (Krasny 2023).

**Silvia Pireddu's** study, "Voices in the museum: Exploring soundscapes in curatorial practices," investigates the role of sonority as a meaning-making mechanism in exhibition spaces. It examines contemporary curatorial trends that integrate digital technologies and immersive environments, emphasizing the significance of soundscapes and soundspaces in enhancing visitor engagement. These approaches either seek to augment the entertainment value of exhibitions or address the evolving expectations of audiences who seek deeper cultural contextualization. Her methodological approach is both theoretical and empirical, combining semiotic analysis with case studies spanning three distinct exhibition formats. Pireddu draws on theories in sound studies, acoustic ecology (Schafer 1994), auditory neuroscience (Weinberger 2004), and cognitive psychology (Juslin and Västfjäll 2008) to construct two tables that systematically present the semiotic schemata of sonority (including signifiers, interpretants, and cultural meanings) in terms of meaning-making.



**Aluminé Rosso's** essay, "Curatorship and mobile applications: The physical-digital interactions of museum visitors," offers an in-depth semiotic analysis of the role that mobile applications play in shaping museum experiences and redefining the notion of the public. Rosso draws on Goodwin's notions of the "semiotic body" and "embodiment" (2002, 2000), Mondada's notion of "interactional space" (2005), Verón's analysis of museums as spatial networks shaped by visitors' movements (2013) and Hillman's and Weilenmann's digital ethnography (2015). Employing semiotic, multimodal, and interactionist analytical tools, Rosso focuses on the interactional space of the museum (architectural/institutional), the interactional space created by the artwork (curatorial dimension), and the interactions of/among visitors (social dimension) to analyze "visitor's experience as embodied and multisensorial, mediated by technologies and socially co-constructed." By further applying Traversa's (2009) categorization of the enunciative pacts between the museum and its visitors (symmetrical, authoritarian, friendly) and bonds (complete, semi-restricted, restricted and paradoxical) to digital interactions that take place during the physical visit (through the use of mobile museum apps and social media), Rosso critiques digital applications for failing to account for visitors' embodied and in-situ interactions, such as movement, gaze, and conversation. Through case studies, she demonstrates how apps function primarily as content delivery systems rather than facilitators of engagement with the material environment. Rosso calls for closer collaboration between UX designers, curators, and educators to ensure digital tools enhance rather than detract from the museum's spatial and social dynamics and complement rather than replace embodied encounters with art.

As demonstrated throughout this special issue of *Punctum*, curating extends beyond the traditional role of exhibition-making, positioning itself as a critical and reflexive meaning-making practice that shapes and is shaped by social, political, and ideological contexts. By integrating semiotic problematics, curatorial studies gain a robust analytical framework, ultimately reinforcing the argument that curating is not merely about selection and arrangement but about the dynamic construction of discourse. Furthermore, the discussions in this issue underscore the inherently political dimensions of curating, particularly its potential to challenge dominant pedagogies and narratives and advocate for alternative perspectives. As the field expands, future research should further investigate the impact of emergent technologies, algorithmic curation, and participatory models on meaning-making processes. In doing so, curatorial studies can continue to evolve as a critical discipline that not only reflects on but actively shapes how cultural knowledge is produced, disseminated, and reinterpreted within an increasingly interconnected and mediated world.

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