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Curatorial Methodologies of Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu

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Abstract: This article investigates the curatorial methodologies of Carol Yinghua Lu and Liu Ding, emphasizing their innovative integration of de-identification, decentralization, and research-driven approaches within contemporary art curating. Through a detailed case study analysis of three major exhibitions — Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art, From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: Echoes of Socialist Realism, and the 8th Yokohama Triennale — this research highlights Lu and Liu's practice of curating as collaborative knowledge production and critical intervention in art historical narratives. By systematically challenging hierarchical curatorial structures and promoting egalitarian dialogues among curators, artists, and audiences, their methodologies not only redefine the role of curators but also enrich global curatorial discourse through interdisciplinary research, critical engagement, and trans local interactions.

Keywords: curatorial methodologies; contemporary art; Yokohama Triennale; Chinese contemporary art



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1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary art, curating has far transcended the superficial act of selecting and displaying artworks, evolving instead into a critical and creative mode of knowledge production. As a vital component of curatorial practice, it engages with the interrelations, limitations, and latent meanings among various media and modes of expression, continuously generating new pathways of understanding through a recursive process of induction and deduction [1]. Within this theoretical framework, a close examination of the curatorial methodologies and practical strategies adopted by different curators not only helps to clarify their multifaceted roles in artistic production and social narrative, but also provides a critical perspective for understanding how curatorial practices respond to specific cultural, political, and historical contexts. This paper focuses on a curatorial duo as the central case study, highlighting their research-driven approach which underpins their curatorial methodology, characterized by intensive archival investigations, interdisciplinary theoretical engagement, and scholarly inquiry. The two have not only been appointed as the artistic directors of the upcoming 8th Yokohama Triennale, but have also collaborated on several significant curatorial projects over the years, including Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art and From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: Echoes of Socialist Realism (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu.

This article adopts a case study approach to analyze the key methodological features embodied in the curatorial practices of the lead curatorial team. Their curatorial methodology integrates a de-identified and decentralized curatorial stance with a research-driven approach. These methods have not only positioned them as highly influential figures within the context of contemporary Chinese art but have also expanded the boundaries of curating as a practice of knowledge construction. As they have repeatedly emphasized, curating is not merely in the service of displaying artworks, but rather a process of co-producing knowledge with art — one that reflects a highly theorized and critically engaged curatorial vision [2].

The lead female cultural practitioner is a multifaceted figure, with a professional background that spans curating, art criticism, and art historical research. She currently serves as the Director of an art museum in Beijing. The lead male artist and curator is an independent practitioner based in Beijing, who has been actively engaged at the forefront of contemporary art practices in China and has consistently demonstrated an experimental and critical approach in numerous interdisciplinary and cross-media projects [3]. The female practitioner completed her undergraduate studies in English literature at a major university and worked in English-language media prior to entering the art field, without receiving formal academic training in art. The male practitioner, on the other hand, did not attend university. In a 2017 interview, he recalled that his early artistic development was profoundly shaped by his family environment and self-directed learning, particularly after encountering the ideas of Chinese avant-garde writers in his twenties [4]. He entered the art field earlier than her, and since their partnership began in 2004, the two have developed a long-standing and stable collaborative relationship in the domains of art and cultural research. Although they are now widely recognized as an important curatorial team in the context of contemporary Chinese art — known for their critical perspective and theoretical rigor — their professional trajectories did not initially center on curatorial practice. Each pursued independent practices on the global contemporary art stage, gradually building a deep understanding of visual culture, institutional frameworks, and the narrative mechanisms of art history. As the female practitioner acknowledged in an interview, "I wasn't particularly interested in curating courses — I was worried the content would be too narrow" [5]. Despite their early ambivalence toward curating as a professional path, since 2007 they have increasingly engaged in collaborative curatorial projects, playing a key role in the reexamination of the historical development and narrative construction of Chinese contemporary art.

2. Curatorial Methodologies in Focus: From De-identification and Decentralisation to Research-Driven Curation — Analyses of Three Exhibition Projects

The curatorial practice is built upon two core principles: de-identification and decentralization. These principles act as the foundational pillars of the methodological approach, challenging the traditional, hierarchical structures prevalent in conventional curatorial practices, where roles are rigidly assigned to curators, artists, and audiences. In contrast, the curators blur these categorical boundaries, deliberately rejecting professional labels to cultivate an egalitarian, dialogical framework where curatorial agency is distributed across various stakeholders, fostering an environment of collaborative co-production rather than authoritative control. As one lead curator stated in a 2023 interview with Art Asia Pacific, "The role of the curator isn't all that important to me" [6]. She further explained that while outsiders often identify her as the curator and another as the artist, "the artist basically comes up with all the concepts, and I usually translate his ideas into language. So, I think all our curatorial thinking originates from him" [7]. This remark reveals that their collaborative model fundamentally resists fixed role assignments, instead emphasizing fluidity and mutual negotiation throughout both the conceptual and operational phases of curatorial work.

This methodological approach is fully embodied in their landmark project *Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art*. The curatorial concept for the project was inspired by an earlier artwork created in 2010, which involved in-depth, private dialogues with practitioners in the art field. The work sought to remove the performative pressure of public discourse and instead foster a more equitable mode of communication centered on shared experience. This premise directly shaped the direction of *Little Movements*, establishing a methodological foundation that emphasized "understanding history and reality from an equal perspective through practice" [8]. This curatorial strategy effectively embodies a scholar's notion of curating as a "mode of address", positioning curating as a space of egalitarian knowledge production and cultural dialogue, rather than hierarchical display (Figure 2) [9].

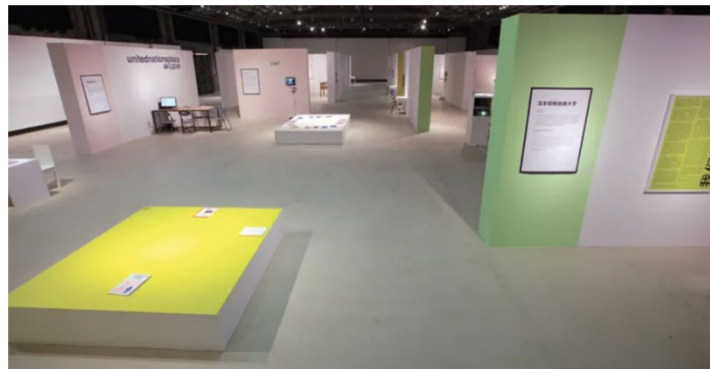


Figure 2. "Little Movements" Exhibition Site Photo 1.

Clearly illustrates the spatial equality among artworks in the *Little Movements* exhibition. This layout visually embodies the curators' curatorial methodologies of de-identification and decentralization by rejecting traditional hierarchical exhibition arrangements and emphasizing equal interactions between viewers and artworks (Figure 3).



Figure 3. "Little Movements" Exhibition Site Photo 2.

Clearly demonstrates the interactive arrangement of artworks, emphasizing dialogical engagement between viewers, artworks, and exhibition space, thus embodying the exhibition's core principles of decentralization and collective dialogue.

The lead curator explicitly stated that one of the motivations for curating *Little Movements* was their shared dissatisfaction with the overused and superficial labels frequently attached to art practitioners: "We were tired of the hollow tags assigned to roles such as curators and museum directors. So, we created a show that emphasized how these professional roles are equal in intensity and quality, and that no hierarchy should exist among different practices" [10]. The project stresses the equal value of all participants in the art ecosystem — whether artists, curators, researchers, educators, or publishers — rejecting the notion that certain roles inherently possess greater cultural capital or symbolic authority. This curatorial position is not only a reflection on the hierarchies within the art world but also a deliberate attempt to reconfigure the relationships of knowledge production through curatorial practice itself. This curatorial methodology reveals a conscious turn away from authorship-centric exhibition logic toward a collaborative, dialogical structure, wherein curatorial agency emerges from negotiation rather than assertion. It affirms what one theorist calls "the co-productive and multi-authorial dimensions of curating" [11]. Further, this curatorial methodology reveals a conscious turn away from authorship-centric exhibition logic toward a collaborative, dialogical structure, wherein curatorial agency emerges from negotiation rather than assertion, embodying what another curator and scholar terms "curating as a mode of address" — foregrounding curating as cultural mediation and political responsibility [12].

In this same exhibition, the curators further demonstrated their approach by turning curating into a critically engaged, problem-oriented research tool through intensive text production, archival excavation, and interdisciplinary theoretical translation. *Little Movements* was not merely an exhibition, but rather a sustained cross-disciplinary platform integrating research, publication, dialogue, and display [13]. As a comprehensive contemporary art research project, the exhibition presented the outcomes of a year-long process of inquiry, discussion, and reflection by the curators and participating artists [14]. As noted in the exhibition statement: "Little Movements: Self-Practice in Contemporary Art is an ongoing research, discussion, publication, and exhibition project conceived, initiated, and organized by the project's initiators. It investigates, studies, and presents attempts to establish and develop new working models in art and theoretical practice." These include individual artistic practices, group collaborations, institutional operations, independent curatorial initiatives, art historical writing, and pedagogical experiments [15].

In order to further extend the influence and accessibility of the project's findings, the curators also oversaw the publication of key textual outcomes associated with the exhibi-

tion. The writing and editorial labor involved in these volumes not only served as an extension of the curatorial research, but also constructed a translingual and trans contextual textual network for disseminating their curatorial theory across diverse audiences and discursive frameworks.

The curators reject the reduction of curating to a mere operational process of arranging artworks for display. Instead, they conceive of curating as a critical extension of scholarly inquiry — a stance that underpins their research-driven curatorial methodology, which has been systematically articulated across several major projects. This methodology was especially evident. Through interviews, archival analysis, and case studies of artists, the project proposed a de-stylized approach to historical narrative, thereby challenging the dominant art-historical logic that classifies contemporary art primarily through stylistic categories. The exhibition of the same name, presented as part of the "New Works #1" series at OCAT Shenzhen, showcased the first phase of the research. By selecting representative artworks, ideological trajectories, and artistic positions, the exhibition constructed a complex and sustained dialogue with the legacy of socialist realism [16]. This curatorial practice explicitly challenges conventional art-historical categorizations, aligning with Beatrice von Bismarck's conception of curating as a politically responsive cultural action, thus reinforcing the curator's role as an active intervener rather than a passive presenter [17].

More significantly, the project did not merely rest on interpretive argumentation or visual display; rather, it leveraged the institutional format of a museum-scale exhibition to systematically transform its research outcomes into a publicly accessible platform for reflection and debate. As someone has observed, while curatorial positions that directly challenge conventional assumptions about Chinese contemporary art's oppositional stance to bureaucracy remain rare, articulating such a perspective within the framework of a museum-scale exhibition is nonetheless groundbreaking [18].

Moreover, the project conducted an in-depth examination of socialist realism not only as a visual language and aesthetic system, but also as a mechanism of ideological control, a logic of dissemination, and a mode of thought — all of which have exerted a profound and lasting influence on the production of contemporary art in China. Building upon this analysis, some researcher offered a critical reassessment of the evaluative frameworks that have shaped Chinese contemporary art practices over the past three decades. They argued that many conceptual forms and institutional structures within contemporary art continue to be conditioned by the structural residues of socialist realist logic.

More importantly, the outcomes of this curatorial research extended beyond the domains of exhibition and publication. They were also articulated in academic form through essays published in *e-flux Journal*, enabling broader engagement within global discourses on contemporary art theory. As the duo asserted in their writing: "Curating is not merely a method for presenting works of art, but a process of knowledge production and historical construction." They emphasized that curating must move beyond traditional exhibitionary mechanisms and instead function as a research-oriented platform — one that intervenes in art historical narratives, activates critical theory, and responds directly to contemporary socio-political conditions [19]. By employing archival and historiographic methods, the duo not only deconstruct aesthetic taxonomies but reposition the curator as a critical historian — a move that resonates with Beatrice von Bismarck's proposition of the curator as a "politically responsive cultural actor" [20]. The project articulates curating as a mode of epistemic excavation that intervenes in the writing of contemporary Chinese art history.

To further explore some researchers' curatorial methodology, this article turns to the 8th Yokohama Triennale, held in 2024. Although curated more than a decade apart, both *Little Movements* and the 8th Yokohama Triennale exhibit striking methodological similarities, especially in their emphasis on decentralization, de-identification, and collective dialogue. However, significant differences emerge in their contextual adaptation: *Little*

Movements was primarily concerned with critiquing China's own contemporary art ecosystem, using it as a platform to challenge institutional hierarchies and narrow labels. In contrast, the 8th Yokohama Triennale expanded this critique on a global scale, incorporating broader geopolitical dialogues and adopting a more inclusive curatorial framework, which reflects Lu and Liu's evolving curatorial ambition and their desire to create a transnational dialogue in the art world. As the artistic directors of the Triennale, Lu and Liu extended and deepened their long-standing research-driven curatorial methodology, while systematically incorporating de-identification and decentralisation strategies into the exhibition's design, narrative structure, and modes of audience engagement. The exhibition took inspiration from *Wild Grass*, a 1927 prose poetry collection by Lu Xun, and was titled "Wild Grass: Our Lives". The theme responded to the question of how individuals might seek spaces of survival and imagination under multilayered structures of oppression and crisis in contemporary society. Drawing from this thematic foundation, Lu and Liu introduced the concept of "individual internationalism" into the curatorial framework, emphasizing that curating should function as a structure of support for individual intellectual and spiritual agency rather than as a top-down narrative apparatus [21].

The research-driven structure of the exhibition was reflected in the curatorial team's in-depth revisitation of twentieth-century East Asian political and cultural movements. The exhibition was organized into seven thematic chapters. For example, the section titled "Streams and Rocks" drew on research into the Sino-Japanese woodcut exchange of the 1940s and 1950s, combining archival materials and contemporary artworks to demonstrate how historical experiences continue to shape contemporary political imagery and modes of expression [22]. Importantly, the chapter structure was not unilaterally imposed by the curators; rather, it was collaboratively developed with a group of "Thinking Partners" — a knowledge network composed of artists, scholars, and social activists — who participated in both the research process and the writing of curatorial texts, thereby diminishing curatorial dominance over the exhibition's narrative authority (Figure 4) [23].



Figure 4. Liu Ding, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Their Team of "Thinking Partners".

By forming an interdisciplinary network to collaboratively conduct research and write exhibition texts, they put into practice their curatorial principle of decentralization, deliberately diminishing the curator's authoritative control over the exhibition narrative.

At the same time, the logics of de-identification and decentralisation were vividly embodied on multiple levels. First, the exhibition featured 93 artist groups from 31 countries and regions, including 31 artists exhibiting in Japan for the first time, highlighting a sustained commitment to cultural marginality and non-Western perspectives [24]. Second, site-specific installations were situated in public spaces such as the Motomachi-Chūkagai

subway station and Queen's Square, integrating art into the daily life of the city and resisting the elitism of the traditional "White Cube" gallery context [25]. Third, the exhibition's title "Wild Grass" was not rendered by a professional designer but handwritten by local Yokohama residents, emphasizing co-authorship and the participatory nature of exhibition language [26].

The publications and textual production associated with the exhibition also reflected Lu and Liu's consistent research-driven strategy. For instance, the exhibition featured a text station titled "Directory of Life", which included excerpts from thinkers such as Karatani Kōjin, Wang Hui, and Judith Butler. These texts were made accessible to viewers through tablet devices installed within the exhibition space, emphasizing the intertextual coexistence of theoretical discourse and visual material [27]. Taken as a whole, the 8th Yokohama Triennale not only continued the curatorial concepts established in *Little Movements* and *From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position*, but also expanded their methodology beyond the Chinese context into the entangled historical and geopolitical conditions of East Asia and global port cities. Through emphasizing local participation and translocal dialogues, this exhibition vividly demonstrates what some researchers identifies as "curating as criticality", where curatorial practices actively foster epistemological openness and decentralised exchange rather than reinforcing centralized narratives. Lu and Liu conceptualize curating as an inherently unstable, polyphonic platform of knowledge production — where research, exhibition, education, negotiation, and intervention coexist — thus exemplifying the curatorial field's complex function as both a site of intellectual labor and a mechanism for sociopolitical transformation. The decentralised, multi-voiced curatorial model seen in the Yokohama Triennale exemplifies what Irit Rogoff identifies as a "turn to participation as epistemology", where knowledge is generated in the interstitial space between curators, publics, and situated contexts. Lu and Liu's engagement with local publics and "Thinking Partners" exemplifies a curatorial ethic grounded in translocal negotiation rather than thematic authority [15].

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, through extensive textual research, interdisciplinary dialogue, and decentralized collaborative approaches, Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu's curatorial methodologies effectively expand contemporary curatorial discourse. Their reconceptualization of the curator's role embodies the theoretical arguments of Maria Lind, Paul O'Neill, Irit Rogoff, and Beatrice von Bismarck, who collectively advocate curating as a critical, collaborative, and decentralized practice. By integrating strategies of de-identification, decentralization, and research-driven curating, Liu and Lu not only redefine curators as critical knowledge producers and active intervenors but also demonstrate the transformative potential and methodological pluralism of curating within global contexts. Their curatorial methodologies not only redefine the role of the curator but also resonate profoundly with Irit Rogoff's conception of "curating as critical practice", emphasizing curators as active agents within cultural and political realms. By positioning the exhibition as a process of knowledge production and historical intervention, their approach significantly contributes to global curatorial discourse, enriching theoretical frameworks outlined by Paul O'Neill and Beatrice von Bismarck regarding the evolving role of the curator.

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