

ALMA

The Curationist Moment

by Joe Bucciero

2015 was full of electronic music “curators,” but Oneohtrix Point Never’s ‘90s culture-inspired Garden of Delete went beyond name-checking.



Everyone’s a curator these days. It’s an observation that spurred art critic David Balzer to write *Curationism*, a late 2014 book that aims to break down the when, why, and how of what Balzer terms the “curationist” moment. Noting the increasing abundance of art curators and, say, sandwich “curators” in contemporary society, Balzer explains that today’s curators seek to “cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers.”

Curators elevate the things they like as a means of establishing

their own agency or identity—a practice that seems necessary as we spend more and more of our time online, interfacing with others under the guise of social media avatars that make us look more or less the same (Twitter’s square profile pics, Facebook’s uniform cover photos, etc.). To combat this homogeneity, we “curate” these frameworks—posting a coherent body of memes, “attending” an enviable slate of events. Sometimes, referring to these online activities, we even label ourselves “curators” in our social media bios.

In the contemporary art world, Balzer says, curationism

manifests itself in the proliferation of exhibitions packaged as “experiences”—shows that, due to the primacy of their overarching concept, make the curator, rather than the artists, the star. This explains the celebrity status of curators like the Serpentine Gallery’s Hans Ulrich Obrist and MoMA PS1’s Klaus Biesenbach. The former, known for his interviews with notable artists as well as multi-faceted group exhibitions like 2014’s *Extinction Marathon: Visions of the Future*, serves as Balzer’s chief subject; the book’s prologue is titled “Who is HUO?” and posits Obrist’s jet-setting, star-making career as the pinnacle of curationism. The latter curator is well-known in New York and elsewhere for his ambitious curatorial concepts, like 2015’s multimedia Björk exhibition at MoMA or 2014’s expansive *Rockaway!* exhibition, which featured large projects by Patti Smith, Adrián Villar Rojas, and Janet Cardiff, plus a group show, all throughout Rockaway Beach.

Is there a Hans Ulrich Obrist or Klaus Biesenbach, then, of music?

Not necessarily, but we certainly see the “curationist” phenomenon at work in music, too. Contemporary musicians and industry workers “curate” everything from music festivals to videos to playlists. Within the electronic music milieu this year, the curationist impulse also led to the release of numerous multi-faceted, collaboration-heavy albums—“curated” group exhibitions, if you will, which, furthermore, often included plenty of “curated” extra-musical material, from videos to performances to art objects to pop-up shops.

Early in the year, two dance music supergroups, Future Brown and Jack Ü, released self-titled debut full-lengths that, despite coming from different cultural spheres—one arty, one pop—demonstrate the curationist phenomenon. Through their employment of a disparate array of talented collaborators, each offered the type of totalizing artistic experience present in wide-ranging, curated art exhibitions (for instance, *Rockaway!*). These albums’ relative merits and demerits aside, each positioned its respective supergroup as something of a curatorial team, coordinating a multi-artist, multimedia project under a unique vision.

Especially given Future Brown’s connections to art institutions like Biesenbach’s PS1, it doesn’t feel like a stretch to call the group’s members “curators.” On *Future Brown*, Fatima Al Qadiri, J-Cush, Asma Maroof, and Daniel Pineda provide musical backdrops for a select cadre of vocalists. In

line with the musicians' continuing investigation of globalism, race, and forward-thinking dance music, they featured vocalists of color operating largely in localized urban music genres—from Chicago bop duo Sicko Mobb to London grime mainstay Riko Dan. The result is an album that traverses plenty of stylistic ground, rooting itself in Future Brown's signature maximalist productions. The music—informed by internet-era eclecticism and post-human sonics—is certainly of-the-times; the collaborative approach itself is too.

“But is there any danger,” Dummy's Jazz Monroe asked Future Brown in February, “in replacing [the musical guests'] context with Future Brown's?” “What year is this?” J-Cush answered. “How much information is there floating around? Of course we're gonna be drawing from here and there.” Like countless albums and exhibitions in the information age, Future Brown makes the juxtaposition of clashing styles its aesthetic M.O. Nevertheless, *Future Brown* is still a record by Future Brown: “Collectively,” J-Cush continued, “yeah, we have a sound.” And the Future Brown sound rests in part on the group's curation of, as Monroe put it, their collaborators' disparate contexts or sounds.

Skrillex and Diplo Present Jack Ü likewise exhibits a stylistic panoply, sonically referencing bounce, trap, and house underneath curated vocal takes from Justin Bieber, 2 Chainz, AlunaGeorge, and Fly Boi Keno, among others. Having made his career on inducting underheard genres—bounce, B-more club, dancehall—into wider pop contexts, Diplo particularly appears to relish his curatorial role on *Jack Ü*. “A lot of times a big star will take up most of the space,” he told Charlie Rose after the album's release, “and you will only have a little say in the work.” With *Jack Ü*, however, the two producers, per Diplo, “did 95 percent of the work and the direction it went.”

David Balzer's characterization of curationism—that it involves “cultivat[ing] and organiz[ing] things in an expression-cum-assurance of value”—applies as much, then, to *Jack Ü* and Future Brown as it does to most art biennials: each entity expresses itself by organizing others, utilizing some ineffable guiding “curationist” principle.

In May, another big-ticket, heavily curated dance music album dropped: Jamie xx's *In Colour*. Jamie xx's outward role as curator was built into *In Colour*'s narrative.

In nearly all his interviews, Jamie discussed his formative experiences as a DJ, mentioning the funk, hip-hop, and Latin music he spun as a kid, and then the jungle, drum'n'bass, and dubstep that drew him as a young adult. For Jamie, *In Colour* is also something of a eulogy for the famous London club Plastic People, an incubator for the UK bass scene—from grime to dubstep to garage—throughout the 21st century, which closed at the beginning of 2015.

By exhibiting the myriad UK dance sounds he heard at Plastic People, Jamie, like many current artists and curators, creates not just an artwork but an experience—in his case, a celebration and embodiment of his memories of a now-bygone era of inspiring London club music. But though it was widely lauded for its well-curated influences (Plastic People staples) and collaborators (Popcaan, Young Thug), *In Colour* also drew derision for what some perceived as curation without sufficient consideration. The Quietus' Christian Eede wrote, for instance, that Jamie “slathers on the rave signifiers with sledgehammer subtlety.”

To his detractors, Jamie xx's “expression-cum-assurance of value” roots its “value” in

name recognition—“rave”—instead of musical innovation and transcendence, which renders his “expression” flaccid. The song “Gosh,” according to Eede, employs club music signifiers, like clipped childlike vocal samples and typical 2-step snares; it moves beyond its obvious influences with a new-wave melody in the second half, but the song remains fundamentally a sonic homage to UK rave music. How might a curator not just point us to things he or she likes, but use these references to help us approach viewing and listening differently?



In August, a PDF questionnaire appeared on the website of another noteworthy electronic musician (and curator), Oneohtrix Point Never, a.k.a. Daniel Lopatin, hinting at a new album that would become November's *Garden of Delete*. The seventeen questions in the PDF—a visually appealing, curated selection—provoked readers to reveal childhood memories, listening habits, influences, fears, and even to “write a poem.”

In interviews leading up to the album's release, Lopatin answered many of these questions

himself, outlining various experiences he had growing up in Massachusetts. He told AdHoc about getting a guitar for his 16th birthday a night after being caught with alcohol and a bong by police; and about buying Rush's *Counterparts* by himself at the record store. Before recording *Garden of Delete*, Lopatin noted that he "fell into these circumstances that were pretty remarkable": a 2014 tour with Nine Inch Nails, who he "idolized when [he] was a kid." Besides informing the industrial-pop-tinged songs on the album, the exposure to Nine Inch Nails, Lopatin said, triggered memories of his "adolescent coming of age and coming into agency, like 'I'm gonna make my own decisions with my music taste.'"

Memory and taste run deep in the OPN project—from his late '00s *Eccojams* tapes, which dug up and looped outdated sounds, to his nom de plume, a mishearing of his hometown radio station "106.7." But where his influences had previously seeped hypnagogically into his music—wavy and full of holes—with *Garden of Delete* Lopatin more clearly filled in the blanks. Beyond his direct citations of Rush, Nine Inch Nails, and Grotus in interviews, the heavy, cybernetic grooves that characterize the album call to mind bands like KoRn and Static-X: music that, one imagines, might've played on the radio during Lopatin's youth. From the industrial bombast of "I Bite Through It" to "Sticky Drama" and its squealing, moshpit-friendly breakdowns—much of *Garden of Delete* sounds suited to a stadium, maybe even to some alien version of alt-rock radio. (The *Garden of Delete* live show, replete with strobe lights and fog machines, bolsters these feelings.)

Garden of Delete's unusually imaginative rollout campaign further explicated the theme of teenage cultural consumption, adding nuance after nuance to Lopatin's treatment of his influences and musical fandom in general. He released a curated selection of material, including MIDI files of the record (before anyone had heard the songs themselves); a tween-filled "Sticky Drama" video, directed by the artist Jon Rafman; a fictional teenage fan/nemesis named Ezra; a fake industrial band called Kaoss Edge; and Twitter accounts for both. Each entity provided a new lens through which to view the relationships between music, fandom, and adolescence.

Ezra, a teenage humanoid alien and pseudo-music critic that keeps a blog called kaossed.blogspot.com, evokes Lopatin's professed desires to be an edgy, Richard Meltzer-like music critic when he was younger. ("That was one of the ways I identified myself as a teenager and early in college,"

Lopatin told AdHoc. "I was reading Richard Meltzer and Lester Bangs, and writing this ridiculous jazz-poetry.") On Ezra's Twitter page, though, the pimply alien moves beyond personal associations with Lopatin to become a sort of ur-teenage boy: awkward; alternately loud and shy; dick-ish; interested in violence, sex, bodies. Ezra's visions and traits surface most forcefully in the video for "Sticky Drama." Starring legions of warring children and a young female protagonist covered in CDs, the clip visualizes the shifting, slimy, and confusing feelings of pubescent obsession and rage, cutting between oversaturated images of battlefields, bedroom singalongs, and exploding Tamagotchis.

Which is to say, Lopatin paints a particularly '90s-centric portrait of musical development. This could theoretically alienate audiences with different networks of experience, but Lopatin's inclusion of the initial questionnaire helps to universalize his project, inviting fans to perform their own retrospection alongside him. Jamie xx taps into a shared memory with his evocations of Plastic People, but only those with first-hand experience of Plastic People can fully understand what it means to

miss the venue; even those who didn't grow up with Rush or Nine Inch Nails, however, can say the last album they listened to, or whether or not they're a virgin, and as a result enter the *Garden of Delete* exhibition.

One might detect a similar logic at play with the MIDI files, which implicitly courted fan-made covers and, as Lopatin told AdHoc, "[dealt] with the inevitable complexities of ownership," seeing as the covers technically preceded Lopatin's originals. Tapping into his listeners' inspirations via the questionnaire, and then allowing them to, in effect, compose the upcoming OPN album themselves, Lopatin simultaneously affirms and devalues his status as "curator." The type of creative exchange he encourages allowed his audience to literally construct their own *Garden of Delete*—with Lopatin's guidance, but without his individualized alt-rock bombast.

Indeed, rather than manipulate his '90s references as points of interest in themselves, he uses them as jumping off points, working towards something wider. "Child of Rage," for instance, draws its opening lines from the film of the same name, a 1992 documentary about a kindergarten-aged girl, Beth,

with Reactive Attachment Disorder. Lopatin samples an exchange in which Beth coldly, indifferently tells her psychiatrist of her violent feelings toward her younger brother: “Why is your brother afraid of you, Beth?” “Because I hurt him so much.” The eerie exchange packs a punch whether the listener has seen the movie or not, especially because Lopatin stops the dialogue abruptly and launches into what becomes *Garden of Delete*’s mildest, jazziest track. The effect is disorienting, much like the disquieting disjuncture between Beth’s words and her vocal affect.

More than an homage to a relic from his childhood, OPN’s “Child of Rage” is an homage to the conflicting feelings Lopatin has watching *Child of Rage*. As teens, he and his friends would “get some demented kick out of [watching] it,” he told AdHoc. But “thinking about that in retrospect,” he added, “and watching it recently on YouTube, I felt pretty ashamed that that was something I would do for fun.” You may not have seen the semi-exploitative *Child of Rage* when you were younger, but you’ve surely looked back on some adolescent fascination with a similar feeling of shame, no?

In other words, Lopatin’s use of this material isn’t instructive; he

doesn’t say, “You should like Rush. You should like KoRn. You should like *Child of Rage*.” Instead, he offers a universe—an exhibition—in which these cultural objects exist, then strips down signifiers in favor of auditory chaos, and asks his listeners to sort it all out.

In addition to his musical and television influences, Lopatin has cited philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva as an inspiration for *Garden of Delete*—specifically, her idea of the “abject.” In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva wonders about an object “as tempting as it is condemned”: something, like *Child of Rage* for Lopatin, that causes “a vortex of summons and repulsion [that] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.” Think: snot, corpses, the kind of grotesque stuff that looks alive but isn’t (i.e., much of the imagery that appears on Ezra’s pus-and-blood-covered Twitter page and the slimy “Sticky Drama” video). Why, Kristeva and Lopatin both seem to ask, does this stuff tempt us? Why can’t you look away when you see an oozing pimple?

For Kristeva and Lopatin alike, the appeal of the abject lies in its peculiar liminal status—on the edges of appealing and disgusting, life and death, knowable and abstruse—within a culture of

more rigid classifications, binaries, and visual and ideological frameworks. Kristeva calls those particularly obsessed with the abject “exiles”—a term that fits in with *Garden of Delete*’s angsty teen-addled universe.

Indeed, for Lopatin, the abject in many ways describes the teenage experience, pimples and all. “We like to think that things are stable,” he told THUMP editor (and AdHoc founder) Emilie Friedlander, “but with enough time, any number of objects or ideas or bodies inevitably change. I think mutation on a biological level is as punk as anything can be—it just flies in the face of order.” *Garden of Delete* places power in adolescence, with its rebellion and confusing hormonal makeup. As we grow into our adult selves—throbbing, gurgling, sweating—Lopatin sees possibilities for positive new relationships with art, man, and machine, amidst the post-industrial chaos. 😊

