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Who cares?

Understanding the Role of the Curator Today

The curator is having an identity crisis. Curating is now an industry, constructing its own histories as it evolves. At the same time, it is an increasingly multifaceted practice that gives rise to much speculation as to how it functions and what it entails.

In the opening paragraph of an essay intended as advice to a new generation of curators, Harald Szeemann suggests we look to the root of the word, which is *curare*, meaning “to take care of.” He writes, “After all, the word curator already contains the concept of care.”¹ But what is this seemingly inevitable “concept” that Szeemann is referring to? It has a number of implications that influence how the role of the curator is understood.

While the word stemmed from the Latin, in English it evolved to mean “guardian” or “overseer.” From 1362 “curator” was used to signify people who cared for (or were in superintendence of) minors or lunatics, and in 1661 it began to denote “one in charge of a museum, library, zoo or other place of exhibit.”² In each case it has hierarchical connotations—a curator is someone who presides over something—suggesting an inherent relationship between care and control.

This is not uncharted territory. Michel Foucault, for example, has extensively explored how this and other meanings of care have developed. In his book *Madness and Civilization*, he describes the Hôpital Général in Paris as a 17th century institution that was not a medical establishment, but a house of confinement for those deemed insane. Rather than being a place of protection and aid, he suggests that it was “a sort of semi judicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges and executes.”³ Similarly, the operations of a public gallery or museum could historically be understood to be as much about the administration and governing of culture as about a concern for its preservation and presentation.

Many public museums were initially funded and run by the government or state, and curators were therefore civil servants, working in the service of politicians and bureaucrats. In the United Kingdom, at least, some of the first local art

museums were created to bestow care on the people, using art as a pedagogical tool. In a newspaper report written in May 1892 about the opening of a public museum in Walsall (a small industrial town in the west Midlands), the journalist quotes extensively from the mayor’s inaugural speech, which started with an explanation of how societal developments indicated that the council could no longer be content with restricting civic duties to “maintaining law and order, and preventing people from dying of starvation.” The gallery—filled with paintings and objects borrowed from local dignitaries—was instigated because it was time to “look after the popular culture of the masses.” The journalist went on to describe how the mayor was met with great applause when he suggested that “the manners of the people would become softer and less uncouth” when they stood before art. He also predicted that the workers would be “cheered and instructed and lifted to a higher level” as a result of their experience.⁴

In this ceremonious display of generosity, exhibition-making is given a charitable sense of social responsibility. In other circumstances the impetus is more ideological, with art used as propaganda. This is evident in footage of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, which documents the trains that were used as mobile exhibitions, dispatched across the country to give word of the revolution to the peasants. Here, carriages were adorned with artists’ romanticized visions of the worker and filled with slogans and images that illustrated a new world order.

While its politics were markedly different, after its assumption to power, the Nazi Party built museums and used exhibitions to control the dissemination of culture. Perhaps the most famous example is the *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition that opened in Munich in 1937, which was initiated as an official condemnation of modern art that promoted morals the public was *not* encouraged to embrace.⁵ The magnitude of the Nazi’s convictions only served to reveal the depth of their anxiety, a condition that is generally recognized as both a source and a by-product of caring.

Over 650 paintings, sculptures, prints and books that had been confiscated from thirty-two state-run museums were hung chaotically in the cramped second-floor confines of the former Institute of Archaeology. Rooms were themed to highlight how artists had demeaned aspects of society such as religion and women, or were dedicated to “degenerate” styles, such as Dada, abstraction and Expressionism. Throughout the exhibition, artworks were interspersed with slogans such as “Nature as seen by sick minds,” or “An insult to German heroes of the

Great War," as well as signs that revealed how much money the previous government had paid for such abominations. In all probability the majority of visitors were intrigued by the spectacle, rather than educated on the virtues of racial purity, as was the intention. Either way, the exhibition went down in history as the first (and probably the only free) blockbuster of modern art—it is generally recorded as the most highly attended show in the 20th century.

With the charge of researching, acquiring, documenting, and publicly displaying art, the curator becomes the propagator of taste and knowledge for the public "good." It stands to reason, then, that during this process one must also have the opportunity to further refine oneself. This is the give and take of generosity. In this respect care takes on a reciprocal value, rather than just being an act of dubious kindness or concern. The curator becomes a connoisseur as much as an administrator. His or her role is expanded beyond "overseeing" to encompass what Foucault calls "the cultivation of the self."

He explains that from Ancient Greek times, this was practiced between small social groups that were "bearers of culture," who understood that the "art of existence" could have meaning and worth if one followed the principle of taking "care of oneself." He describes it as involving the adoption of an approach to life that used "procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected and taught. It thus came to constitute a social practice, giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions."⁶ It could be said that several modern museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, developed under such conditions, as a socialized process of self-fulfillment for those who brought it into existence.

Founded in 1929, the museum was privately funded and governed by a board of trustees who were all connoisseurs, if not professionally active in the field. Alfred H. Barr Jr. became the first director at the age of 27. His curatorial approach was influenced by his education at Princeton and Harvard and his travels in Europe and Russia. In particular, at Harvard he was introduced to the Fogg Method, which included museology, as well as courses that focused on physical attributes and the syntax of the work of art, rather than the social and psychological contexts of the form.

Throughout his tenure, Barr's motivation was academic, as opposed to civic or political. He was less concerned with "improving" the public than with proving the merits of the formal qualities of modern art to critics, collectors, artists

and philanthropists. Upholding both the self-cultivation and the control in Foucault's descriptions of care, Barr used the sanctity of the white cube to produce exhibitions that elevated the "autonomous object." Becoming one of the first well known, or celebrity, curators, he was heralded for major contributions to the study of modern art and established many artists' careers in the process. But although Barr respected and was influenced by artists, architects, and designers, his practice was still one that promoted his own knowledge and opinions over theirs.

For the most part, it was during the 1950s that there was a significant shift in these relationships of power in Europe and the United States, with the rise of artist-led initiatives in establishing venues and forums for art. For example, in New York a number of artists' collectives started accumulating around Tenth Street in Greenwich Village, such as the Hansa Gallery, founded in 1952, by students of Hans Hoffman, including Jean Follet, Allan Kaprow and George Segal. What each gallery had in common was that the curatorial role was taken on by artist committees, leveling the hierarchical model of exhibition-making.

In London, the Independent Group transformed the audience from a spectator into a participant in the production of culture. Consisting of artists, architects and critics—Richard Hamilton, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Lawrence Alloway, to name a few—the group developed around the Institute of Contemporary Art from 1952, providing a forum for public debate through lectures, dialogues, and exhibitions. Its project aimed to be anti-elitist and anti-academic, discussing art as part of a communication network that also included movies, advertising, fashion, and product design.

Such activities signaled the evolution of the art scene into a dynamic and contradictory system. Just as curating exhibitions was no longer only the domain of the museum professional, audiences weren't a faceless public, devoid of the people who were the makers of culture. Through the deviances that rapidly developed from that time on—such as museums acknowledging the voice of the artist, or artist-led galleries employing exhibition organizers—the function of the curator was potentially released from charitable responsibilities and the service of power. Open to reinterpretation, the role became more flexible and therefore also more vulnerable.

These were the conditions under which Harald Szeemann began to make exhibitions. Although he is now generally acknowledged as the first "independent" curator, he also appropriated the concept of care from the conventional root of the

profession, as we have established. Along with others of his generation, such as Walter Hopps, he understood curating as more intricate than presenting art in relation to the mandate of an institution.

From the mid-50s on, Szeemann and Hopps each developed practices that have greatly influenced how the curator and exhibition-making are perceived today.⁷ Both also died early in 2005, signifying closure on an era of major transformation in cultural production. While their characters and careers were markedly different, they shared a desire to challenge the bureaucracy of institutions, earning reputations for actively questioning the form of exhibitions as well as for their sustained engagement with artists and their work.

In 1969, as director of the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland, Szeemann initiated *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Processes-Concepts-Situations-Information*, an exhibition that turned the gallery into a studio, with artists traveling to Bern to produce installations and actions that extended into the city streets. Recognizing new art forms that were developing under terms such as earth art, concept art, anti-form and arte povera, the show included projects by nearly seventy artists, including Joseph Beuys, Michael Heizer, Eva Hesse, Mario Merz, Allen Ruppersberg and Robert Smithson. *Attitudes* marked the advent of the contemporary curatorial drive, what Bruce Altshuler calls “the rise of the curator as creator,” whereby exhibition organizing became a critical and potentially experimental endeavor.⁸ Shortly after the show, Szeemann left the Kunsthalle (where the trustees largely disagreed with his methods) and developed projects for a variety of museums, galleries and biennials, as well as for quasi-private and non-gallery spaces. From this point his practice focused on the concept of exhibition-making as an ongoing process that was separate from the programmatic functions of an institution. Becoming in effect the precursor to the “frequent-flyer,” “nomadic,” or “itinerant” curator, Szeemann instigated a number of curatorial models that we now take for granted.

For example, as the director of *Documenta 5* in 1972, he challenged the established premise that the quinquennial take the form of a temporary museum, introducing instead the concept of the exhibition as a live project, or a hundred-day event. In this context he organized performances, happenings and films under sub-themes that considered works in relation to science fiction, advertising and utopian design, as well as inviting artists to present their own museums and political statements. In 1980, as co-commissioner for the Venice Biennale, Szeemann introduced

the Aperto⁹—a themed, international group exhibition for emerging artists—which transcended the national divisions of the pavilions. This lasting intervention into the structure of the Biennale asserted his long-held belief that exhibitions did not have to be conceptually or qualitatively conclusive, but rather could act as a testing ground for artists and a barometer for the development of art practice.

Walter Hopps never completed a formal education. He started out working with musicians in the Los Angeles jazz scene, which influenced his ideas on how to help artists give a public presence to their work. Then he set up the Ferus Gallery in 1957 with artist Ed Keinholz, which would be the first platform in Los Angeles for international post-war art, as well as for unknown beat-generation and West Coast artists such as Wallace Berman, Jay DeFeo, and Georg Herms. Conceived of in the spirit of an artists’ collective, within a year the gallery had developed into a successful commercial (although still experimental) enterprise under the leadership of Irvine Blum, establishing a financially driven momentum that remains a contested aspect (or perhaps a sub-plot) of exhibition-making.

Known as a perfectionist and nonconformist who refused to submit to the administrative logic or routine of the institution, Hopps nevertheless worked for a series of museums and biennials, while sustaining an interest in developing projects outside the gallery or museum setting. At the time of his death he was an art editor for the literary arts journal *Grand Street*, and also served as an adjunct senior curator at New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, as well holding the position of senior curator of 20th century art at the Menil Collection in Houston.

While it is possible to cite a number of important group shows curated by Hopps, what is potentially most interesting about his practice is his expansion of the parameters of solo shows by living artists. He curated Marcel Duchamp’s first retrospective in 1963 (arranging two live chess matches for Duchamp as part of the show) and developed presentations of the work of Joseph Cornell, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, and Kurt Schwitters, to name but a few. In an interview with curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Hopps said, “To me, a body of work by a given artist has an inherent kind of score that you try to relate to or understand. It puts you in a certain psychological state.” His practice involved ongoing research into conducive ways to present art: “Fine curating of an artist’s work—that is, presenting it in an exhibition—requires as broad and sensitive understanding of an artist’s work as a curator can possibly muster. This knowledge needs to go well

beyond what is actually put in the exhibition.”¹⁰

This philosophy underpinned his role at the Menil Collection, where he became the founding director in 1979, at a time when Dominique de Menil wanted to extend the feeling of intimacy that she had with her collection into its public display. Likening the experience to working in a research laboratory—in terms of how the artworks were commissioned, acquired and presented—Hopps championed the potential of museum spaces as places of discovery, surprise and contemplation.

The actions and attitudes of both Szeeman and Hopps highlight key factors in curating today: namely, that it provides a platform for artists' ideas and interests; it should be responsive to the situations in which it occurs; and it should creatively address timely artistic, social, cultural or political issues. It could be said that the role of the curator has shifted from a governing position that presides over taste and ideas to one that lies *amongst* art (or object), space, and audience. The motivation is closer to the experimentation and inquiry of artists' practices than to the academic or bureaucratic journey of the traditional curator.

Given that their careers began as the curatorial climate was changing, it is relevant to note that neither Szeemann nor Hopps called themselves curators at the outset. Hopps frequently likened his practice to that of a conductor, and Szeemann often chose to use the title *Ausstellungsmacher*, or exhibition-maker, describing this role as one of an “administrator, amateur, author of introductions, librarian, manager and accountant, animator, conservator, financier, and diplomat.”¹¹ Indeed, it is only relatively recently that the use of the word *curator* in this contemporary context has gone mainstream; as awareness has grown, so has the proliferation of specialist articles, interviews, books, symposia, and graduate courses.

These have accumulated for the last decade, forming a critical framework through which exhibitions—as opposed to artworks—are given a kind of autonomy. Predominantly generated from within the field, the commentaries are indicative of the continuing self-reflexive aspect of the curatorial role. In working between theory and practice, the curator is simultaneously initiating, supporting, disseminating and evaluating projects. This differs from the production of meaning that has developed around art, which is mostly generated by schools of art history and critical theory that exist alongside art practice.

Updating Szeemann's description of exhibition-maker, we can now add mediator, facilitator, middleman and producer to the ever-expanding list of roles.

Instead of comparing the curator to a conductor, as Hopps did, we live in an age when the curator is compared to a DJ, or any similar master of improvisation who “samples” and combines works, actions, and ideas. The institution is now not just the museum, but a whole industry that has grown up around exhibition-making. This situation has parallels with that described by Rosalind Krauss in her essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” first published in *October* in 1979, when new forms of art practice (such as those that Szeemann and Hopps supported) were increasingly being recognized. In the beginning of her text she writes:

“Over the last ten years rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert. Nothing, it would seem, could possibly have given way to such a motley effort to lay claim to whatever one might mean by the category of sculpture. Unless, that is, the category can be made to become almost infinitely malleable.”¹²

If we replace the word *sculpture* with *exhibition*, this could equally read as a commentary on recent forms of curatorial practice. Taking this further, we can replace Krauss's list of “surprising things” with recent examples of exhibitions, to see how far the term has been stretched. These could include: twenty-six days of live and Web-streamed radio broadcasts; artworks that can be touched, used and taken from the display; a human-scale live jungle installed alongside a laughing-gas chamber; mobile units, performances, outdoor museums and film screenings sited in the desert. Of course, such a list could take many forms, but by echoing Krauss we can readily establish that contemporary exhibitions are now not only dealing with the presentation of an expanded notion of art, but also extending their own spatial parameters into conceptual and virtual realms, as well as experimenting with the role of the public in the “completion” of a project.

Furthermore, as Szeemann and Hopps demonstrated, actively engaging with art and artists is central to practice, which is an aspect of the role for which there are no guarantees of immediate or quantifiable outcomes. This requires a kind of creative “maintenance,” as opposed to Foucault's “care,” as it involves supporting the seeds of ideas, sustaining dialogues, forming and reforming opinions, and continuously updating research. It could also be said that exhibitions are not the first, or only, concern of the curator. Increasingly the role includes producing commissioned temporary artworks, facilitating residencies, editing artist-books, and

organizing one-time events.

In her essay, Krauss describes how “critical operations,” such as art history and criticism, have historicized artists’ practices so as to invent a virtually seamless trajectory for the development of sculpture from its “historically bound” category. In contrast, rather than trying to smooth over the “ruptures” that have taken place in the field, she recognizes that they are a symptom of the breakdown within changing cultural conditions of the logic of the original definition. As a result, she charts the theoretical structure of an expanded field of sculpture that acknowledges the inconsistencies and transgressions.

Within contemporary curating the contradictions are evident to all. There is a widening divide between two camps—the independent and the institutional—that supposedly signifies where curatorial allegiances lie in relation to the “historically bound” aspects of the profession. These categorizations are overly simplistic, giving rise to restrictive perceptions of the role of the curator, even among those working in the field. Following Krauss’s lead, we need to complicate the dialectics and acknowledge the diversity of practices that continue to develop around artists and their ideas. We need to start thinking in terms of an expanded field of curating.

1. Harald Szeemann, “Does Art Need Directors?” in ed. Carin Kuoni, *Words of Wisdom: A Curator’s Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art* (New York: Independent Curator’s International, 2001), p. 167.
2. These definitions are taken from the *On-line Etymology Dictionary*, Douglas Harper (www.etymonline.com, 2001). In cross-referencing *The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. Robert K. Barnhart (New York: Harper Resource, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1995) p. 178-179, more incarnations of the word are found. From around 1375 “curature” is a person having the care of souls.
3. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books Edition, Random House, 1988), p. 40.
4. *Walsall Observer* May 21, 1892. The article was transcribed and archived by the Walsall Historical Society and the journalist’s name was not recorded.
5. Max Nordau first developed the theory of degeneracy in 1892 in his book *Entartung* (Degeneration) where he used pseudoscientific reasoning to suggest that modern art movements such as Symbolism and Impressionism were the result of artists experiencing mental pathology and having a diseased visual cortex. The Nationalist Social Party adopted Nordau’s theories during the Weimar Republic in Germany.
6. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*. Volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1988), p. 45.
7. Harald Szeemann died February 18, 2005, in the Ticino region of Switzerland, at the age of seventy-one. Walter Hopps died March 20, 2005, in Los Angeles, at the age of seventy-two.
8. Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 236. Of the curator as creator, Altshuler goes on to say: “While there had been many earlier attempts to subvert the traditional exhibition format, these efforts were made

by artists themselves. ... In the late sixties such exhibition forms proliferated, but major innovations would also be generated by exhibition organizers. Like the work displayed, their exhibitions sought to undercut the standard way of framing art for the public, the manner and mode of presentation becoming part of the content presented. In this way they were engaged in the same sort of critical enterprise as the artists, and their exhibitions became works on a par with their components.”

9. The first *Aperto* section for young artists at the Venice Biennale was arranged by Achille Bonito Oliva and Harald Szeemann in the Magazzini del Sale. It was at the 48th International Art Exhibition in 1999, when Szeeman was director, that the *Aperto* was first presented throughout the historical spaces of the Arsenale, growing to the hyper-large exhibition that we know today.
10. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, “Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps—art curator,” *Artforum*, February 1996.
11. Obrist, *ibid*.
12. Rosalind Krauss’s “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” was originally published in *October* 8 (Spring 1979); reprinted in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture*, edited and with an introduction by Hal Foster, (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 31-42.

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