

CURATOR AS LEAD ARTIST

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ABSTRACT

My thesis research methodology investigates the spaces between curatorial and artistic practices. More specifically, I am interested in the boundaries and slippages between these separately defined disciplines, and the potential that exists in testing points of crossover and confusion. With this in mind, this thesis considers the *curator as collaborator as artist* position, to explore beyond the conventional expectation that artists make works of art which curators then display. Through my work, I attempt to demonstrate the opportunities and challenges that arise when curators take on increasingly authorial and creative roles in both the production and presentation of the work of others. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, a curator who has in the past refused to use this professional designation, notes that “the curator is the most emblematic worker of the cognitive age” (Balzar 9). Christov-Bakargiev’s quote is an important place to begin my research because although she acknowledges that curators are significant, she hesitates to identify as one, demonstrated by her use of the term *agent* and such (Judah). If curators are at the forefront of cultural production, where does that put the artists? This thesis project is a way to investigate, through creative and material practice, the historical and contemporary discourse around a specific type of relationship between curating and art making: the area where the labour of curators and artists intersects. Additionally, it attempts to blur and reframe the ethical questions raised specifically regarding issues of authorship, artistic responsibility, collaboration, and contextual engagement. In our spectacle driven culture with a multitude of content readily available, we increasingly value those able to reshape, select, and organize this content in generative ways. New modes of practice, organized around the position of a kind of *lead artist* or *curatorial artist*, provide a critical space for rethinking the possibilities of making, postproduction, representation, and display.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis project explores the territory where curatorial direction pushes up against artistic practice, a controversial site of engagement that many presenters of exhibitions are increasingly engaging in regardless of their title. The conventional expectation is that artists make works of art which curators then display. Challenges arise when curators take on increasingly artistic roles in how they produce and present exhibitions. At times, these practitioners compromise the individual artworks and artists that they work with, while at other times, they create new opportunities for cultural production. As I will later describe, Vancouver-based artist Geoffrey Farmer has been credited with providing emerging artists with opportunities through his curatorial projects, while New York-based curator Jens Hoffmann has been criticized for creating exhibitions that are heavily designed and overshadow the artwork. The middle ground between these polarized situations is where my practice lies. My project accepts the uncertainty and frustration that currently face both curators and artists alike in reconceptualizing the terms of practice in a neo-liberal moment. I believe that the most productive way to approach the state of curatorial practice today is to work with the increasingly blurry division between the work of the artist and curator, which reflects my own skepticism towards generalized binary positions. The spaces of making and displaying works of cultural production have long overlapped—emphasizing this tension or point of collision allows for heightened awareness to be generated. This constructed exercise proposes that recent trends in curating are creating a condition whereby curating is becoming a pseudo-artistic practice. As a result, there are many artists and curators who are creating a new identity marked by an array of new titles as a way to reflect these changes.

With a growing number of stakeholders (i.e. educators, funders, publics, etc.) investing in exhibition practices, the work of curators and artists becomes increasingly caught in a web of shifting ideologies and politics that questions their role within the institutions they work. This project gains perspective on the ambiguity of participating in this emergent practice, and achieve some insight as to the value of flexibility in attempting to carve out new intellectual fields. I have yet to find a new designation for this curator as artist practice and I question the degree to which a simple title can resolve complex issues that have been debated for half a century. French conceptual artist Daniel Buren states that Swiss curator Harald Szeemann was the inventor of a new tendency in the art world in the late-1960s whereby the organizer of the show is the real artist (Fox). The intent of my thesis project is not to find a new title, thereby suggesting that I am carving out new territory for myself, rather it is a way of practicing in and around the uncertainty that has created these established conditions. The question remains open-ended: Has curating become an artistic practice? Is the curator a kind of *lead artist*? The implication of this project is that the actual process of putting these questions into practice is more interesting than resolving them in any fixed or stable way.

SHIFTING AWAY FROM CURATING TOWARD A NEW ROLE

Over the past fifty years, there has been a “shift away from curating as an administrative, caring, mediating activity towards that of curating as a creative activity more akin to a form of artistic practice... The function of curating has become another recognized part of the expanded field of art production... The issues inherent to the *curator as artist* question remains one of the key debates within curatorial discourse” (O’Neill 21). According to curator and educator Paul O’Neill, this shift away from caretaking is controversial, as it raises the question, is it ethical for a curator to pursue their own interests if their primary role is to care for the work of others? It is important to challenge the false dichotomy suggested by the belief that a curator can’t do both at the same time. My thesis involves, to some extent, using the work of other artists to further my own agenda; however, any claims that this directly compromises the work of others is a reductive overgeneralization. It is certainly feasible to exercise one’s own interests and those of others at the same time, yet there is doubt as to whether *curating* is an appropriate term for this. As art critic Hettie Judah asks, “Who wants to be a curator? Not everyone, it seems. At least, not anymore... After a decade or more in which *soi-disant* curators bestrode the earth like canapé-guzzling colossi, a subtle schism is underway, led by a number of art world personnel drawn to the use of alternative wording” (Judah). The origin of the word curator is from the latin word *curare*, which means to care. In the Middle Ages, curators were clergy having a spiritual cure or charge (Levi Strauss). Throughout the twentieth century, the curator was a custodian of a museum collection. “Curatorial knowledge is now becoming a mode of discourse with unstable historical foundations” (O’Neill 26). Many terms, some more synonymous with the historical definition than others, have been used to describe and construct a problematic mythology of the curator: collector, caretaker, priest, arbiter, auteur, editor, interpreter, guide, trickster, alchemist, and, more recently, vampire (Balzar 80). “Bauman adds the term *scapegoat* to a long list of ingredients for a curator’s role which he lists as animator, pusher, inspirer, brother, community maker and someone who makes people work and things happen and someone who inspires artists with ideas, programmes and projects” (O’Neill 23). In our current era, where information is so abundant and easily accessible, the task of selecting and sorting material, whether artistic or not, becomes the work of nearly everyone, and the proliferation of the term curator has moved it further and further away from its ecclesiastical origins. “And so it is that not only galleries and museums, but also corporations, businesses, cultural organizations and not-for-profits, are using the model of the curator to imply their products and services have been created, selected and expertly managed in their buyers’ favour...,” critic David Balzer offers, “Examples of guest curators like Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry are everywhere...” (82). Since the role of the curator has been displaced over time, the context of my curatorial practice—demonstrated by a blend of caretaking, directing, and collaborating with artists—needs to be challenged and reinterpreted.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ARTIST AND CURATOR

With my research, I'm struggling to understand and explore the difference between an installation artist and an independent curator—the former incorporates many spatial objects within one art work and the latter presents many art works within one art exhibition—in terms of how they are defined and how their work is signified.

Dorothee Richter, a professor of contemporary curating at the University of the Arts Zurich, states “the curator and the artist now closely imitate each other’s position” (O’Neill 252). Art historian Claire Bishop’s essay entitled “What is a curator?” (2007) looks back to the late 1960s and early 1970s as a time period when two new creative practitioners emerged within contemporary art: the installation artist and the independent curator. Bishop uses this essay to argue against a previous essay entitled “Multiple Authorship” (2006) by Boris Groys who positions that there is no difference between *exhibitions* that are constructed by curators and *installations* that are constructed by artists. “At least since the 1960s, artists have created installations in order to demonstrate their personal practices of selection. These installations, however, have been nothing other than exhibitions curated by artists, in which objects by others may be—and are—represented as well as objects by the artist” (Bishop). Groys argues that exhibitions and installations are both mediums of contemporary art that incorporate smaller art objects within them as components. His point: regardless of whether they are constructed by a curator or an artist, they are essentially the same thing. “Once the identification between creation and selection has been established, the roles of the artist and of the curator also became identical. A distinction between the (curated) exhibition and the (artistic) installation is still commonly made, but it is essentially obsolete” (Groys 93).

Bishop argues that there are very different social, political, and economic factors that separate the function and value of the installation artist and exhibition curator, and when an artist takes over a curator’s role, the unique role of the curator as a contextualizer and interpreter for viewers is lost, along with any sense of distance or objective viewpoint, however fraught this notion might be. “But—to paraphrase Foucault paraphrasing Beckett—does it really matter who is speaking? Because what is at stake is not the precise and pedantic difference between the curator and the artist, but the different discourses within which each player functions” (Bishop). There are two very distinct concepts here that are at play. One relates to authorship, and the other relates to context. In this debate, authorship is defined as the state of being the creator of a work of art, while context is defined as the circumstances and discourses around the creator of an artwork and an exhibition, and how the conversations and debates around the implications of these roles are shaped over time. I speculate that my work functions somewhere between the realm of installation art and the evolution of curating.

Unlike Bishop, Groys doesn't seem interested in the context and circumstances of the artist and curator—he's more interested in the fact that both artists and curators are authors and have a particular *voice* that they are using to express the creative work that they produce. Bishop's argument is that the context surrounding artists and curators are fundamentally different in the sense that curators, even the ones that are considered independent, are often beholden to the institutions and sponsors that hire them to produce an exhibition, as well as the audiences who have, in most cases, paid admission. "This is important, for it introduces the idea that the curator has an ethical obligation that is significantly different to an artist's aesthetics of artistic presentation" (Bishop). What sculptor and conceptual artist Robert Morris wants from a curator... "is someone who respects the artist's wishes, communicates clearly, and is available for negotiation. In other words, a figure who is subservient to the artist and who does not contest his/her authorship" (Bishop). Due to the sociopolitical, historical, and sometimes economic relationships between institutions and curators, curators seem to be and are often more responsible to those who support their work and also to those whose work they present. Thus Bishop argues that the difference between a curator and an artist is not so much an issue of authorship; rather it is an issue of responsibility. By authoring or composing a visual experience using the work of other artists, meanwhile employing ethical or responsible curatorial methods, my practice is situated somewhere between Groys' and Bishop's argument.

CURATORS AS ARTISTS LOCALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY

I'm certainly not the only person in this industry who is exploring such designations. There are many examples of artists who work between the roles of the curator and artist, or whose collaborative relationships are core to their practices. This is evident, for example, in the work of Vancouver-based artists Anne Low, Gareth Moore, Hannah Jickling and Helen Reed, Vanessa Kwan, and Eli Bornowsky; as well as that of Geoffrey Farmer who combines artistic and curatorial roles while adopting the language of the performing arts. "Most brief biographies of Farmer describe him as an installation artist who incorporates elements of video, sound, lighting, and text into his practice. Farmer prefers to describe himself as an 'arranger'" (Laurence). In music, an arranger is someone who re-conceptualizes a previously composed work. Farmer has described himself using this title in reference to his piece *Leaves of Grass*, composed of thousands of shadow puppets, which are typically props used in theatrical performances. Farmer is an artist, but in 2010, when he created an art space called *Every Letter of the Alphabet*, he took on the role of a curator by commissioning and presenting work by many other artists.

Jens Hoffmann is a Costa Rican exhibition maker based in New York. He abandoned the title curator because for him, curating is fundamentally linked to exhibition making: "I feel some frustration with how the term *curating* has been adopted by all sorts of fields to describe any process that involves making a selection of something... For me curating is about formulating a certain theory or argument, based upon which one makes a selection of artworks or other objects with the aim of creating an exhibition in which those objects and artworks are displayed to the public" (Hoffmann and Lind). Hoffmann studied theatre in Berlin and Amsterdam in the mid-1990s. It was his role in organizing the performance-arts program at Documenta X that led to his curatorial positions in the visual arts. Hoffmann approaches the exhibition in a similar way that a director approaches the stage—for him the artworks are actors or performers. Hoffmann discusses his role as authorial, conceptual, and highly personal, which reflects a curator that is not dissimilar to that of an artist (Theatre of Exhibitions). For Hoffmann, artists and artworks are to the exhibition what actors and props are to the stage, which suggests that he sees his work as being somewhere between installations and exhibitions: the former being an amalgamation of dependent objects, and the latter being an arrangement of delineated objects. Hoffmann's position raises an important question: If an object or a composition of objects attributed to an artist is already accepted as an artwork, can it be accepted as a component of a new artwork through its use within a larger artistic composition by a curator? In responding to this question, we must consider a negotiation between historical positions and the stakeholders involved.

CRITICISM OF THE CURATOR AS ARTIST

Throughout the early 2000s, Hoffmann made a series of exhibitions that used 19th century western literature as themes for arranging contemporary art: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. His first in this series was based on *Around the World in Eighty Days* at the Institute for Contemporary Arts London and the South London Gallery in 2006. It used Jules Verne's 1873 classic adventure novel, which marked the end of the age of exploration and the start of an age of global tourism, as a way to present international contemporary artworks that, over 130 years later, described the effects of globalization. The artworks dealt with social constructions of place and identity, and included work by artists from Lebanon, Iraq, India, Singapore, Nigeria, England, Germany, New Zealand, France, Japan, Portugal, Switzerland, Ireland, Canada, Bangladesh, Serbia, Ghana, and Brazil. The exhibition contained poignant work by renowned artists: marbles arranged on the floor in the shape of a map that were sometimes dispersed accidentally by the audience (Mona Hatoum); photographs of decayed animal corpses in the sand alluding to problems related to water access and desertification (Jananne Al-Ani); and, video documentation of locations and people that were previously under British rule (Erika Tan). And yet, despite the impact of these individual works, Nav Haq stated that "Visually speaking, the design was overly dominant and at times ran the risk of eclipsing the exhibited works" (Haq). Similarly, Sue Hubbard criticized the exhibition by claiming that the extent to which Hoffmann themed the exhibition overshadowed the individual artworks (Hubbard). Although the issue of overshadowing doesn't necessarily suggest that curators are artists, it does indicate that some curators are emphasizing their own thematic interests, rather than pushing the work of other artists forward. This can be seen as an abdication of responsibility in favor of one's own creative interests, marking the shift away from caring in curatorial practice that O'Neill describes.

Hoffmann responded to his criticism by acknowledging that curators are often accused of using artworks to address or illustrate their own ideas, interests, topics, and themes, and suggested that curators should respect how artists want their work to be presented: "I personally always give the last word about installation, the selection of work for a show, etc, to the artists, and could not imagine forcing an artist or a work of art into a frame where it does not belong" ("Yes, but ... Jens Hoffmann answers back"). He goes on to state that the formation of exhibitions is complicated: "I hope every artist has the strength to articulate her or his concern should they feel used by a curator, but the dynamics of putting together an exhibition are often far more complex than this oppositional formulation suggests" ("Yes, but ... Jens Hoffmann answers back"). The success of an exhibition depends on assessing the quality of the viewer's experience, and if new modes of production can aid in that endeavour, then the risk of overshadowing individual artworks may be warranted, and may ultimately serve to benefit the artworks involved. Exhibitions

that steer an artist's work in a new direction, or use their work for another purpose, may contribute to an area of cultural production that has value, providing that the artist is effectively involved in the production of the exhibition and is given sufficient opportunity to articulate their concerns.



Fig. 1. Film by Lauren Marsden of upside down bird of paradise being dissolved by smoke.

CURATOR AS LEAD ARTIST

My thesis exhibition is titled *Purgatorio to Paradiso by Justin Muir (feat. found object and video by Lauren Marsden, dance by Sydney Southam, painting by Edmund Li, text by Donato Mancini, and audio by Liz Solo)*. *Purgatorio to Paradiso*, the first part of the title, references the second and third cantos from the epic poem *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. The literary theorist Joan Ferrante describes Dante's purgatory in the poem as representing a society in transition that is moving from self-centredness to care for and commitment to others, and paradise as representing a society of people that are responsible to others (Ferrante 132). This sociopolitical reading of Dante's paradise was a useful allegory in planning my exhibition because care for others versus care for oneself is at the core of my research. In preparing for this exhibition, I employed a variety of curatorial methods that are conventional today:

1. Researched a group of work by artists that could be used to reference *The Divine Comedy*;
2. Requested new work by these artists and provided them with parameters and tools for production;
3. Arranged the work to create a single art exhibition.

However, these methods can also be thought of as artistic methods:

1. Researched a group of material objects that could be used to reference *The Divine Comedy*;
2. Engaged a group of artists to make predetermined objects under my direction with materials and resources that I provided;
3. Arranged the work to create a unified art experience.

Each of the individual pieces stems from a bird of paradise flower and were produced by artists from outside the university in collaboration with myself. The flower is featured alongside a mixed media painting, a 46 second video loop, a remixed excerpt of text, and, a 92 second audio loop. The title wall uses parenthesis and the abbreviation *feat*, which is common in the music industry to identify when an artist is invited to perform on another artist's track. This tension between curatorial and artistic methods can position me as akin to a *lead artist* or *curatorial artist*. I use this as a strategy to suggest that contemporary curatorial and artistic methods are increasingly similar, and that today, independent curators of temporary exhibitions are actually more similar to artists than they are to traditional curators who predominantly care for and present artworks in a permanent collection. This responds to my earlier question around the difference between the roles and functions of the artist and curator designations within the conventions of the contemporary art industry: If an object or a composition of objects attributed to an artist is already accepted as an artwork, can it be accepted as a component of a new artwork through its use within a larger artistic composition by a curator? By positioning myself as *lead artist* or *curatorial artist*, rather than just positioning myself as a curator, I am emphasizing the collision of artistic and curatorial practices. Rather than simply accepting this as a new state of



Fig. 2. Dance inspired by an upside down bird of paradise by Sydney Southam.

curating, I heighten an awareness to this state so that I may further consider its unresolved implications. It is easy to overlook the similarities between these practices if we just accept that this is how curators now function, but without paying close attention to these methods, we assume a resolution that doesn't exist.

The multiple iterations of the paradisiacal flower function as a utopian—yet synthetic—symbol of the collaborative artistic process. Through the title wall, I assert that the exhibition as a whole is by myself and features the other artists. The usage of these terms on the title wall, combined with the symbol of paradise used by each featured artist, implies that curating an exhibition that functions as an individual artwork is a utopic endeavour; it situates the curator as akin to a *lead artist* or *curatorial artist* who presents the work of other artists within their artwork. This is a situation that, as O'Neill has mentioned, has been debated and theorized for half a century, but has yet to be resolved (21). All of the artists featured in my thesis exhibition created work about my thesis research by using the exhibited bird of paradise prop as a symbol. Marsden's film depicts the bird of paradise hanging upside down, disappearing and reappearing in a cloud of fog (see fig. 1). Marsden's video of Southam depicts her performing a pole dance maneuver called *Upside Down Bird of Paradise* (see fig. 2). Li's painting depicts Marsden shooting in my studio (see fig. 3). Mancini & Solo's spoken word piece is an excerpt from Dante's *Paradiso* that describes Dante's fictional account of paradise consisting of dances, turns on poles, fulfillment, desire, and individual parts coming together to form a whole. Together, these artistic methods demonstrate how each artist worked in tandem with myself as the *lead artist* or *curatorial artist* to create a piece about moving toward paradise as a symbol of investigating the blurry and uncertain area whereby a curated exhibition may also be seen as a work of art. This is an important way for me to attempt to understand my professional trajectory because it forces me to look more closely at how the methods I use correspond to the practices I claim to occupy. If the methods used to situate my practice are within the margins of the curatorial and the artistic, then it is important for me to illustrate that position.



Fig. 3. Mixed media painting by Edmund Li of Lauren Marsden filming in my studio.

CONCLUSION

My graduate work is an attempt to explore the ethics of using artists' work to make exhibitions that can be seen, in and of themselves, as works of art. In this scenario, what responsibility do I have to the artists that I work with? At what point is this responsibility compromised and to what effect? Can curatorial practice be seen as an artistic practice? Outside of my studies, I am employed by a nonprofit artist-run centre as an executive director. Within this context, I take the issue of responsibility very seriously, and always seek to support, credit, and interpret the work of artists for the benefit of cultural advancement through the mandated functions of publicly supported institutions. As I have mentioned, Bishop argues that the curator's ethical obligation to institutions is what differentiates them from artists. My thesis project complicates this position and raises questions that would be difficult for me to address outside of an art school environment. Curators have a responsibility and by no means do I want to abdicate that responsibility; however, there is a fundamental shift that has been happening away from the caretaker origins of the word curator whereby some contemporary curators present their own creative interests by using the work of other artists. This supports Richter's claim that the curator and artist now imitate each other's position (O'Neill 252). I'm interested in how a curator can maintain the caretaking responsibilities of art and artists and at the same time fulfill their own creative drives. The conundrum is that there seems to be no clear delineation as to where these creative drives intersect, and there is no term that adequately describes such a practice, nor is there any clear structure for doing so. I believe that curators as who operate as akin to *lead artists* can simultaneously make exhibitions that function as works of art while respecting the interests of the artists they collaborate with. This is a vague area to theorize, as it can affect individual artworks differently depending on the situation and the exhibition; however, I think there is value in the notion that curated exhibitions and art installations are not always mutually exclusive. Although many have investigated this terrain from both a theoretical and practical perspective, a resolution has not yet been found. Making exhibitions as an artistic practice is challenging. Thoughtful attention has to be taken to not compromise the individual artworks and artists that are presented. My interest is in pushing the boundaries between these positions to see the type of work that can emerge, and to reveal any uncertainty and disorientation in the process.

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