

ON CURATING:

Understanding the Role of the Curator

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- Brief history of curating: origins, consolidation, and developments of the curatorial profession
- Here and now: challenges and future perspectives for curators in Sweden

The role of the curator

The curator is a professional figure who is essential in the contemporary art field. Curating today can be defined in many ways, but perhaps one of the most well-known definitions is that which applies to the curator of exhibitions: their function is to research, select artworks, and organise exhibitions and art collections. Curators often work closely with artists to create a cohesive vision for an exhibition or an interpretive conceptual framework. They are responsible for conducting research, managing the production and installation of artworks and elaborating materials for mediation such as wall texts or labels. Curators frequently play a role in fundraising and managing budgets. They may also be involved in communication activities to promote exhibitions and engage with the public. These essential tasks do not however, reflect the creative aspect of curatorial work, which can take a start point in research and continue as a creative red thread through concept, spatial design, writing, and in other forms that frame the encounter between the artistic work and its publics. In short, curators are significant figures in the contemporary art field, as they creatively assist in shaping the way that contemporary art is presented and interpreted.

Curating is a complex role that goes beyond selecting artworks for their public presentation. To start with, a curator can select existing artworks or can be a partner to artists during the creation of newly commissioned artworks. A curator's task is often associated with an organised public display, and their efforts usually become visible for the public during the inauguration of exhibitions or art projects. The public presentation, however, is one stage of a long process which involves many other dimensions. The Swiss pioneer curator Harald Szeemann expressed it thus: "The thing is, people often forget that designing an exhibition is first and foremost the fruit of investing time in the work, and only secondarily an investment of time in the presentation (and, added to that, the time-consuming administrative work)"¹.

Exhibition-making requires extensive (and intensive) research, establishing a conceptual framework, investigating the specific situation where the artworks will be presented and identifying the most relevant issues to be addressed in such a context. The practical skills are also fundamental: project management and administration, handling contracts and agreements, managing budgets.

Exhibition-making is one of the possible outcomes of a curatorial process, but there are many more. A curator can be responsible for arranging a film programme, a podcast, a series of talks or public events; they can also act as project managers of newly commissioned artworks or temporary interventions in a particular space, whether public or private. Curatorial tasks may also overlap with the role of an art historian and include cataloguing a collection of artworks or researching the work of a certain artist or context.

There is a broad range of cultural institutions worldwide dedicated to the conservation and public presentation of art, and consequently the ramifications of the curatorial profession vary respectively. The aim of a curator working within an institution will be steered by the goals of the institution; the aim of an independent curator will possibly be driven by other forces. From historical museums to contemporary art biennials, facilitating the meeting between art and the public can take many forms.

Curators today can specialise in different areas; this is the case particularly within institutions with a stable curatorial team. Specialisation can encompass a certain historical period (e.g. curator of modern art) or a geopolitical context (e.g. curator of Latin American art); it can apply to a specific medium (e.g. curator of photography, curator of digital art); and it can also focus on a particular aspect of how the institution functions, such as collections, new commissions or education (i.e. curator of learning or curator of public programmes).

Whether working independently or within an institutional framework, a necessary feature of curatorial work is its collaborative aspect. Curating involves establishing a fruitful dialogue with the various collaborators involved in the project: from institutional representatives and commissioners to artists, architects, designers, production and installation personnel, communication and mediation teams, as well as administrative support.

To create a harmonious collaboration between all these areas of expertise, a curator needs to encompass a broad range of skills and qualities: researching,

1. Szeemann, Harald, 'Does Art Need Directors?', from *Words of Wisdom. A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*. New York: Independent Curators International (ICI), 2001, 168–169.

critical thinking, conceptual and aesthetic sensitivity, writing, public speaking, as well as communication, diplomacy, negotiation. With those skills, what does a curator do? Researching, mediating, connecting, facilitating dialogues, interpreting, reframing, presenting, advocating. At its core, curating is about building relationships and creating meaning.

The word curating is rooted in the notion of care², and indeed the curatorial role consists mainly of caring and taking care of. Not only of artworks, but also of people, from artists to audiences. Curators often establish long-lasting relationships with artists, supporting them throughout their careers. This can entail professional advice in decision making, emotional support, and assistance in the case of conflict with third parties. Of course, a relationship works both ways, and curators also benefit greatly from exchange with artists, who are often a source of creative inspiration that feeds into their practice. Besides, it is often through these informal networks that artistic and curatorial projects are communicated and promoted.

As in many cultural professions, acquiring a solid curatorial know-how requires many years of professional practice and experience. The fundamental grounds of curatorial work are built on the condensed knowledge resulting from years of research, of travelling and visiting exhibitions, meeting artists and having studio visits, discussing with other thinkers and cultural workers, following the developments of contemporary thinking and artistic creation. “Curating often involves capturing the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time, or even getting ahead of it, to formalise artistic discourses in the assigned institutional frameworks – be they museums, the white cubes of galleries and kunsthalle, or heritage spaces”, says independent curator Rosa Martínez.³

These groundworks can often go unnoticed, and their lack of visibility is possibly at the root of the misunderstanding –and the mystification– of what a curator does. This idealisation might derive from the fact that curating is sometimes perceived as a profession that involves navigating complex concepts and having the skills and the power to interpret them. As Cuban curator and art historian Gerardo Mosquera puts it, “the reinforcement of the role of the curator as author of exhibitions has been very convenient, mainly because of the acknowledgement that every exhibition is a discursive construction; and because of the transparency to act under the explicit position and responsibility of a subject. But it has led to a sometimes subconscious pedantry about the abilities and possibilities of the curator.”⁴

2. The etymological origin of curating derives from the Latin word “curare”, meaning “to take care”.

3. Rosa Martínez, personal communication, December 2022.

4. “El reforzamiento del papel del curador como autor de exposiciones ha sido muy conveniente, sobre todo por el reconocimiento de que toda exposición es una construcción discursiva, y por la transparencia para actuar bajo la explícita posición y responsabilidad de un sujeto. Pero ha conducido a una pedantería -a veces inconsciente- de las capacidades y posibilidades del curador.” Gerardo Mosquera, “Poder y curaduría intercultural”, article published in the first edition of the magazine TRANS>arts.cultures.media, 1995.

Brief history of curating: origins, consolidation, and developments of the curatorial profession

The origins of the curatorial role date back to the **16th and 17th centuries** when it became a trend among wealthy European families to collect items and display them in so-called *wunderkammer* or cabinets of curiosity. The collections included rare objects and natural specimens and were taken care of by members of the household staff. The collections were presented as a source of entertainment, but they were also a display of power and knowledge on the part of aristocratic families. To maximise this effect, scholars and experts became engaged in cataloguing and organising these collections.

As the field of art history developed and museums began to emerge in the **18th and 19th centuries** in connection with flourishing apparatus of the nation-state, curators took on a more formal role in organising and presenting art to the public. In addition to preserving a nation's cultural heritage and selecting the objects that configure it, curators were responsible for researching and writing about the artworks in their collections, as well as for creating exhibitions that would educate the public. Therefore, the role performed four main functions: preserving, selecting, contributing to art history, and displaying.⁵

Throughout the 20th century, the curatorial profession evolved in response to the emergence of modern and contemporary art. The role of the curator expanded to include not only the preservation and display of art, but also the interpretation and critical engagement with artworks and audiences, as well as an understanding of the intrinsic value of the exhibition space as a platform for critical questioning. In the 1910s and 1920s, as the artistic avantgardes were flourishing, prominent artist Marcel Duchamp developed a practice that incorporated many elements of what is today considered curatorial and that is widely accepted as game-changing in art history. His ready-mades, first spearheaded by the well-known *Fountain* (1917), introduced the idea that an ordinary object could become a work of art through the intentional acts of selecting and displaying – two gestures at the core of curatorial practice.⁶

During the 1960s and 70s there was another major shift: the emergence of the figure known as the independent curator. As art historian Claire Bishop points out, the years 1968–72 were a particularly remarkable period in the crystallisation of the contemporary understanding of curating.⁷ A turning point in this process was the 1969 exhibition “Live In Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form”, presented by Harald Szeemann at Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. This seminal exhibition generated significant debate over the weight

5. Tony Bennett has written about this transformation in his text ‘The exhibitionary complex’, published in the anthology *Thinking about Exhibitions*. Eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, New York, Routledge, 1996.

6. Duchamp also organised exhibitions with other artists and was actively engaged in rethinking the aim of museological institutions, for instance through the founding of the Société Anonyme, Inc. in 1920 together with Katherine Dreier and Man Ray.

7. Claire Bishop, “What is a curator?”, paper presented at *Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles: Artists' Installations and the Museum*, London, Tate Modern, 2007.

of the curator's authorship, which some considered to be excessive.⁸ Regardless of these debates, it is undeniable today that Szeemann's proposal marked a shift in exhibition-making and transformed the understanding of the curator as conceptual author of exhibitions.

In Sweden, when it comes to establishing the contemporary curatorial role, an equally celebrated figure is Pontus Hultén, who was director of Moderna Museet 1958–1973. Hultén advocated an understanding of the institution that placed equal focus on presenting exhibitions as well as public programmes, including talks, debates, screenings and events. After contributing to the aim and vision for Kulturhuset in Stockholm, he went on to establish the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Curators Elisabeth Haglund and Gunilla Lundahl were also key figures in the Swedish curatorial landscape. Amongst a range of innovative projects, Gunilla Lundahl was involved in two groundbreaking exhibitions at Stockholm's Moderna Museet: "Modellen, En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle" ("The Model, A Model for a Qualitative Society") in 1968, and "ARARAT" in 1976. Elisabeth Haglund was curator at Kulturhuset in Stockholm 1986–1995, and during those years she "chose to explore indigenous art, comics, and craft over the reproduction of mainstream narratives (...) interweaving art historical research with an interest in art and culture beyond the Western hemisphere and its traditional artistic hierarchies", as Maria Lind writes.⁹ Maria Lind is also a notable figure, as one of the first Swedish curators to be internationally known; throughout her career she has worked in renowned institutions both in Sweden (she was curator at Moderna Museet 1997–2001, director at IASPIS 2005–2007, and director for Tensta konsthall 2011–2018) and internationally (taking part in the biennials Manifesta 2 in 1998; São Paulo in 1998 and 2002; Gwangju 2016, amongst others).

The 1990s marked the beginning of another era where professionalisation of the curatorial field was in focus. This included attempts to critically review the history of curating, as well as the emergence of curatorial academic programmes, such as the ones at Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (New York) and de Appel in Amsterdam, both established in 1994. The first programme of this kind in Sweden was CuratorLab, originally called *Internationella curatorprogrammet*, which was initiated by artist and professor Måns Wrangé at Konstfack in 1999 and was followed in 2003 by the international master's programme in Curating Art at Stockholm University. Sweden's position as the first among the Nordic countries to have educational programmes in curatorial studies created in its wake a wave of young curators who are active in the Swedish arts ecosystem.¹⁰

The end of the decade also saw the significant emergence of well-known curatorial figures in an increasingly internationalised art field. In the wake of

8. Beatrice von Bismarck writes about this exhibition: "*When Attitudes Become Form* has come to be celebrated as the most important of these shows devoted to what at the time was considered the "new" art. This involved approaches based on conceptuality, ephemerality, and processuality, in terms of both materials and modes of production and presentation. Accordingly, the works could consist of air, electricity, or ice, they could be developed for or even during the exhibition, and they were often designed in such a way that the end of the show also marked the end of their existence. The scandal surrounding *When Attitudes Become Form* coincided with Szeemann's decision to leave Kunsthalle Bern, where he had been director since 1961, and to sever all institutional ties (at least officially) in order to work as an independent curator." Von Bismarck, Beatrice, "The Devil Wears Historicity or, The Look of Provocation: *When Attitudes Become Form*–Bern 1969/Venice 2013" *Documenta studies* 7, July 2019. Source: https://documenta-studien.de/media/1/documenta_studien_7_en_Beatrice_von_Bismarck_2.pdf.

9. Maria Lind in *Curating Beyond the Mainstream. The Practices of Carlos Capelán, Elisabet Haglund, Gunilla Lundahl, and Jan-Erik Lundström*, Edited by CuratorLab 2020/21, (Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm.) London, Sternberg Press & Konstfack Collection, 2022.

10. At the time of writing this text, several other initiatives for curatorial residencies are in the process of taking shape, such as CER (Curatorial Exhibition Residency Programme), <https://www.curexres.org/about>.

Harald Szeemann's singular imprint, several curators gained in popularity, often through their participation in international art events such as the rapidly growing phenomenon of biennials. Sometimes referred to as 'star curators', they often collaborated in the making of exhibitions, forming temporary teams. This was true in the case of Manifesta 1 in Rotterdam (1996), curated by Katalyn Neray, Rosa Martinez, Viktor Misiano, Andrew Renton and Hans Ulrich Obrist; and Documenta 11 (2002), led by curator Okwui Enwezor who assembled a team of curators formed by Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash and Octavio Zaya.¹¹ Further examples include the 50th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2003, where artistic director Francesco Bonami invited a dozen curators (including several artists) to curate ten different shows within the general conceptual frame "Dreams and Conflicts. The Dictatorship of the Viewer"¹²; and Documenta 13 in 2012, where artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev teamed up with several advisors and artists under the role of 'Agents'.¹³

As an outcome of these collaborative practices, approximately fifty curators gathered under the digital platform VOTI (Union of the Imaginary), which was established by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Carlos Basualdo in 1998 and remained active until the year 2000. VOTI was "a permanent forum for the discussion of issues pertaining to curatorial practice in the context of contemporary society", aiming "to promote discussion and collaboration among curators; to develop a progressive understanding of the role of curatorial practice; and to fight homogenization and instrumentalization at every level of culture."¹⁴ The group became an arena to discuss and confront the challenges that curators had to face, already at that time, when performing their role.

Today, the profession continues to experience shifts in connection to the myriad developments in the contemporary art field. As such, the role has ramified in multiple directions: independent curators, institutional curators, artist-curators, curators with focus on a historical period or a particular media, commissioners of new artworks or public art, curators of learning and public programming, curators at commercial galleries and so on.

11. For more information on the team and the program of Documenta 11: <https://www.documenta11.de>.

12. The constellation of ten exhibitions was curated by Gilane Tawardos, Hou Hanru, Carlos Basualdo, Catherine David, Gabriel Orozco, Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija, Igor Zabel, Massimiliano Gioni, Daniel Birnbaum and Francesco Bonami. For more information, see <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history/recent-years> and <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/e-dreams-conflicts.htm>.

13. For more on the curatorial process behind Documenta 13, see: https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_13#.

14. VOTI. Union of the Imaginary, published by Koenig Books in collaboration with SALT, Istanbul. P. 41.

Here and now: challenges and future perspectives for curators in Sweden

However varied its manifestations, the curatorial profession still faces many challenges. Beyond the professional field of art –and sometimes within it too– there is often a misunderstanding or a lack of information about the role of a curator. The groundworks of curatorial work often lack visibility, and this has consequences in the art ecosystem, limiting the possibilities for the curatorial profession to develop within a fertile framework, as curator and chairperson of The Swedish Curators' Association Marianna Garin points out in a 2022 interview about the Swedish context.¹⁵ Concrete examples of key issues lacking in the curatorial field in the Nordic region include juridical acknowledgment of curatorial authorship in Sweden and the relatively limited offer of curatorial grants and residencies. There are, however, notable exceptions such as the curatorial residencies offered by Office for Contemporary Art in Norway or the Curatorial Residency in Stockholm (CRIS) initiated in 2015 by curator Jonatan Habib Engqvist in collaboration with the Nordic Art Association (NKF) in Sweden.

Magdalena Malm, curator and general secretary of Bildkonst Sverige, describes the situation thus: “the curatorial profession has been established in Sweden for over 30 years, but the support systems have been very slow in adapting. Curators create a lot of value for the art scene; possibilities for artists to exhibit, for the audience to see work, international exchange as well as development of the scene and its contexts.”¹⁶ Martí Manen, curator and director of Index Foundation since 2018, adds that “Sweden has historically been a place where experimentation with the exhibitional has been important. Paradoxically, the role of the curator as a professional figure hasn't been part of many cultural plans.”¹⁷ As can be seen in contemporary practice, and as has been elaborated in this text, curatorial work demands skill, work, time and contextual readings; it is a complex and demanding endeavour. The field of contemporary art calls for curators to continue expanding its critical and creative potential. Therefore, strategic support structures are also needed in order to underpin and facilitate the continued existence of a spectrum of curatorial roles.

15. Interview with Magdalena Malm on The Swedish Curators' Association's website (<https://www.svenskcuratorforening.se/marianna>).

16. Interview with Magdalena Malm on The Swedish Curators' Association's website (<https://www.svenskcuratorforening.se/magdalena>).

17. Interview with Martí Manen on The Swedish Curators' Association's website (<https://www.svenskcuratorforening.se/marti>).