

## Xandra Eden

### Curators Are So Over

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I just wanted to say, so far, with the three speakers—or four speakers—actually, that we’ve had, I already feel like I’ve gained a lot through being here at this conference, and just want to say thanks, and I’m looking forward to what’s to come. The last three speakers—Anne-Marie, who basically talked about exhibitions in terms of the sincerity and honesty of the curator, and an acknowledgment of the personal reflection or realization that is part of exhibition presentation, and Jan Allen’s discussion of public reception and the attempt to reach that “sweet spot” in exhibitions, and Melanie’s re-evaluation of exhibition as a place of discourse, and the exhibition and the artworks can be considered part of a text in the re-evaluation of those definitions... I think all of those are really important. My talk is, in comparison, maybe a little surface-y...

The title of it is “Curators Are So Over”.

The curator: a well-educated stuffy sort, dedicated to the meticulous observation and care of our prized artifacts—as you can see he’s doing [*referring to slide*]. Or a mobile phone–slinging, young hot artist–lassoing, maverick of the globe.

But from whence does the elevated status of curators arise, really? Knowledge, expertise, creativity, ego, charisma... what is the source of this? And maybe, just like Christina Aguilera and reality TV, the age of the curator is over. Maybe we’ve taken it as far as it is going to go. I heard that critics were over too, by the way, but this happened a while back. According to some, it was a casualty of the pod-people-like behaviour of curators who contributed a bit too heavily to art magazines and placed such an increased emphasis on publishing and discussion in their exhibition practices that art critics became backwoods fodder.

This is a photograph of Catherine David. It was Catherine David’s *Documenta X* that was perhaps the first major international exhibition that gave equal weight to the exhibition and to the discourse, with a series of talks and lectures called “100

Days - 100 Guests”, also produced an 800-page book, a very complex website, and mountains of lecture and symposia transcripts that followed. But, of course, we’re in denial if you think that critics really are obsolete...

They still generate the majority of public discussion and produce the bulk of printed documentation on artists and exhibitions that survive long after, nesting as they do in library archives for generations to come. As Alex Farquharson writes in a recent issue of *Frieze*, quote, “Although critics may not dominate the discourse in the way they once did, there’s little doubt we still need an independent forum within which the ideas of artists—and curators—can be analysed and evaluated. Otherwise, art’s archive will consist entirely of producers’ accounts of their own activities.” End quote. So that’s the case for critics, but let’s get back to curators.

Sorry... that image before was Rosa Martinez, who has played a pretty central role in biennial curating over the years, including being co-curator of this year’s Venice Biennale. So, my question: is the reign of the contemporary art curator winding down, or has it just begun? This is Kirk Varnedoe [*referring to slide*]. When the late Kirk Varnedoe, in 2002, on a lecture tour at US institutions in the Midwest, wrote that museum curators that he met were, quote, “the embodiment of demoralization, resentment, anxiety, stress, and alienation over what was happening to his or her museum,” it does seem we’re due for a bit of a checkup.

The source of this malaise for the curators Varnedoe met seemed to stem from the museums’ boards and the directors’ ambitious plans to expand the size and audience for their institutions. To do so, they had focused their attention away from the curators, away from the collections and artwork, and towards business expertise of their board, along with the marketing, development, and education departments, which were growing exponentially in size. Philippe de Montebello, who is the director of the Metropolitan Museum, thinks the solution is to develop curators who can be directors and thus win the battle—this is a quote—“win the battle of the ‘curator/director’ over the ‘administrator/director’.”

But the supposed improved circumstance of the curator/director’s situation can do everything for the curator, but next to nothing for the curators at those

institutions. If this is the direction we are headed, with the curator giving way to the super-director/curator, the traditional curator will either need to plan on becoming a director, work independently, or work at a smaller institution that's not as concerned with expansion and audience numbers.

Other alternatives to this include developing a practice that is understood to be along the lines of the artist—that of the curator/artist or artist/curator—and carries implications of... we know these titles carry such implications of creativity, performance, authority, all at once, and also community.

For example, Denmark's Jacob Fabricius, whose *Sandwich Board Projects*—that's Philippe, by the way, with two members of... I think it's the director of the National Gallery in Washington, DC [*referring to slide*].

This is Jacob, a piece he did in Brooklyn for the Public Art Fund a few years ago, where he invited artists to create work to put on these sandwich boards, and so he would go out into the... I think it was mainly Park Slope area of Brooklyn with the sandwich boards. This is kind of a new take on the artist-as-commodity concept that Daniel Buren put forward back in 1968, but with a different take, where the curator becomes commodity.

I'm getting ahead of myself here. Let's get back to what curating is, or perhaps was. This is Robert Storr, who's the former curator of the Museum of Modern Art and now is the... I believe his title is Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Curatorial Studies at NYU, or maybe it's the Institute of Art... I forget the title. Anyway, the curatorial role has a long history, but it's only recently that this history has really begun to be explored and evaluated. Since the Paris salons opened to the public in the late eighteenth century, curators have been fundamental to the presentation and public reception of new art. They have proven to have the potential to serve as catalysts towards the progression of art history. Even our conception of art history, what is important in the arts, has been deeply affected by our understanding of artists as they have been presented in past exhibitions.

Curators, for the most part, worked discreetly behind the scenes for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but, by the late '60s, there were some excep-

tions—in particular, Harald Szeemann. There's Harald busy at work [*referring to slide*]. His groundbreaking 1968 exhibition *When Attitude Becomes Form* made a really important contribution to curatorial practice.

Szeemann passed away earlier this year at the age of seventy-one, but several of his contemporaries based in Europe are still heavy hitters when it comes to international exhibitions—there's another picture [*referring to slide*]—including the next Münster Skulptur Projekte curator, Kaspar König, who is also the director of Museum Ludwig in Cologne, and Germano Celant, who is best known for his introduction of Arte Povera to the world in 1967 and is the senior curator for the Guggenheim.

But the identity politics of the 1980s, coupled with an increased need for curators to play a role in fundraising, following budget cuts to arts funding, paved the way for more transparency within art institutions and museums. The identity of curators become much more public; in turn, their claim to authority more openly contested. One of the most notable curators to come out of this was Marcia Tucker... Marcia Tucker, who was fired in a brouhaha over a Richard Tuttle show she curated for the Whitney. She went on to found the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, which became really important in terms of positioning the curator as having a responsibility to the communities within which within they worked.

In the '90s, there was a huge rise of interest in contemporary art, as we all know, largely due to a bull market and a series of well-publicized and controversial exhibitions... particularly the Mapplethorpe show in the late '80s at the Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, and later at the Corcoran in DC, and Thelma Golden, for her *Black Male* show at the Whitney in 1994. But it's really the last ten years that's brought curators into the spotlight, with a new global economy and a slew of international biennials that went with them.

Enter the global curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. Curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist, along with a core group of other mostly European curators, have become very well-known in the last ten years, by comparison. This is another curator that has particularly a lot of public presence: Lynne Cooke.

And as Lawrence Rinder writes, in one of the many navel-gazing publications that came out between 1999 and 2001—this one’s called *Words of Wisdom*, published by ICI—Lawrence Rinder is quoted as saying “curator has become cool”. End quote.

But not only... [*audience laughter*] But not only has it become cool, it’s become fashionable. This is a recent photograph of Thelma Golden from *New York Magazine*. And maybe, you know, this coolness is a good thing. I think it’s a good thing sometimes. It certainly makes it a little easier to engage the public, or at least the patrons of contemporary art in terms of funding or helping with specific projects, but something else that’s happened along with this is that a lot of commercial dealers, art critics, and collectors have also begun to tout the label of curator, and of course these individuals have always, always played a really important role in presenting exhibitions, but now the term “curator” is being used a lot more often. You see it a lot more often, appearing on exhibition invitations and on title walls. I recently got an invitation mailed to me for an MFA student exhibition, with the curator’s name listed really prominently, more prominently than the MFA students that were graduating. But, of course, all the MFA students are being shown, and they’re going to show all of their work. It’s just, you know... what is the difference between those two things, and why has it become so important to put that label in so many different places?

At the same time, it seems like curators are getting it from all sides, so they’re having their title hijacked by a lot of different people and a lot of different varied professions, and then they’re also being accused of being too powerful, whether they flex their curatorial muscle or not, as you can see in these two quotes, examples of two types of criticism.

That’s the *Documenta* crew, the *Documenta* that was headed up by Okwui Enwezor [*referring to slide*]. Christian Viveros-Faune wrote in a recent article in the *New York Press*, that, quote, “few roles in the art world command as much power and prestige today as that of the global curator. Virtually unchallenged power-brokers and tastemakers, curators spin big-time international contacts and frequent flyer miles into an endless number of grandiose, important-seeming phenomena. How did curators”—I love this part—“once little more than mere hangers,

or organizers of group shows, rise to occupy such an exalted place in the art world's rigid hierarchy?"

This is a photograph of Francesco Bonami. [*referring to slide*]

Marcia E. Vetrocq... this is the other side of it. Marcia E. Vetrocq writes, on the 2003 Biennial—this is from *Art in America*—quote, “it just might be that popular success and a dependable budget are coming to count for more in Venice than critical approbation, though they need not be mutually exclusive. Whatever the specific shortcomings of previous editions of the Biennale”—this is after she's just basically been really critical of Bonami's Biennial—“whatever the specific shortcomings of the previous editions of the Biennale, it is particularly disheartening this year to see organizational structure masquerade as content, and the director”—which was Francesco Bonami—“trade in his prerogative of authorship for the role of an executive.”

Such hostility towards curators and the authority they do or don't assume. How can one explain the increased popularity in the term “curator”, the emergence of curator positions at commercial galleries and curator of education positions at many museums, when the position and status of curators seems at such peril? And then there is the use of the term “curator” as part of the new “mass class”, which is a new marketing and retailer's technique related to the move from our service economy into an experience economy. Marketers and trend-trackers alike encourage retailers to develop roles that use the term “curator”. New professionals, they're sort of curators of consumption, who attempt to—and this is a quote from a Trendwatchers website—“dynamically personalize products, styles and events, according to the needs and response and behavioral traits of consumers”... but they're not called consumers any more. They're called guests.

It sounds a lot, to me, like the mentality behind the blockbuster. So, this widespread use of the term “curator” makes it interesting, increasingly problematic—at least for me—to define the profession, as it is increasingly used to validate and provide status to a much more varied field of products, just like Melanie stated in her talk, that “curator” has turned into this verb, this idea of the “curated” show

and “curating”. You know, I’ve never had someone call me, interrupting me from my work and had to say, “Oh, I’m right in the middle of curating. I’ll call you back later.” *[audience laughter]*

You know, it’s just such a funny thing—or maybe I’ll say, “I’ll call you in six months when I’m done”. It’s just so... it’s a really strange idea. I’m not sure where it’s coming from and how it connects to what’s happening culturally in North American culture and European culture—not only in the arts, but in other fields. And, of course, as most of us are aware, the benefits of high status in the curatorial field are not connected to wealth. They’re connected to respect, they’re connected to acknowledgment. So my question remains: is there a system of accreditation and hierarchy based on knowledge in place for curators? How does it work? Who makes those distinctions? And I also wonder how closely the art market and the press tie into status-making, not to mention artists, patrons, board members, and your fellow colleagues. So this discussion is not really intended to vaunt particular practices or exclude others, but just to develop a better language of critique around what we are and what we represent in society.

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Presented at *Unspoken Assumptions: Visual Art Curators in Context*, “Thinking Through Curating”  
July 16, 2005, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta