

## Corinna Ghaznavi

### Thinking Through Curating

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I really wanted to specify and perhaps address some of the things that Anne-Marie was... oh, everyone's moved now... *[laughs]* was talking about in terms of talking about exactly what it is that we do, and I've attempted to try to explain that, which also of course means that there's going to be overlaps, because there's things in curatorial work that we all do. I'm going also to be showing you images, but I'm not going to be talking about the images at all. They're all from exhibitions that I have curated, and if people want, I could post a list of the images, but I won't be talking specifically to them. I've really tried to avoid doing a show-and-tell here, although that is most conducive to explaining how my shows work, because it's really sort of built up over the last eight years.

Anyways, I'm going to try something different. I emphasized my background in art history in my abstract, and again, you know, most of us have that background, and I emphasize it because for me that was a point, as a student, of realizing, especially in the context of university, where people were like, "Oh, art history, it must be nice, must be a nice subject", where, in a way, it's much more complex than other disciplines that are more specified, more specific, because what strikes me about art history is that it has to do with everything else. When you study art history you're studying politics, economics and empires and wars, and what constitutes Renaissance and the Golden Age and things like this.

There's two other things that I sort of insert now spontaneously, that I realized this morning, is that I come from a family of pedagogues, for one, and I have some kind of background in anthroposophy and Waldorf education, which I grew up with, so I didn't really think about much, and I have nothing to do with now, but I recently had a twentieth reunion, a Waldorf school reunion, and the kind of discussions we had there made me realize how influential that approach to education and to philosophy has been. It was quite striking to me that almost everyone in the class that I was in works either in education or in the arts. So, arts, art history—again,

when you study art history, for me, the arts are what remain as a way to understand different eras. Arts are—and I'm talking broadly—literature, philosophy, music—a way that we measure civilizations. The arts are what we look at in terms of what constituted an era. So what remains of a culture—artifacts and objects—these objects are evidence of cultural production; they are those things that we sift through in order to understand an era or a culture.

So, that being a strong influence in terms of how I think is combined with curating. Curating on the one hand for me, being interested in speaking from my body as a site of that which connects me to everything else, right? It's a subjective position, it's a physical position, and then, on the other hand, this idea of coming out of art history, and continuing with art history, so, entering into a broader contemporary and historical cultural discourse through curating: trying to, again, find out what it is that signifies this era that we're in, what's going on now, what kinds of mythologies are we developing, and where are we in our development as a culture, as individuals, and as a culture at large?

My curatorial process involves working, ideally, with two or more artists because, of course, that number gets you a very tight show. The themes of my shows began a lot with issues around the body. Again, the body is a primary site of experience and moving into identity, sex, touch, medicine, science, and all of those things. The early shows, I feel, were a little didactic and, the way one is, perhaps, with early work, I feel a little embarrassed about the didactic aspect of them. But although now the work is much less centred around the body, I kind of realize it still has to do with the same things, and what it has to do with is investigation in how it is that we make sense of things, and the way I try to do that is to investigate the intersections between art and science, research and fiction, ideas and constructs, and through that, to try to understand how mythologies come to be and why.

I briefly said before, my concern... I have a very large concern that we're in a time and an era where everything is flattening, where everything is mediated, consumer-driven, surface-oriented. I feel like we're in this era, you know, coming out of pop culture and globalization technology where there's a whole dumbing down that's occurring, that sort of has also to do with the loss of a matrix.

Returning to the process... as an independent, I don't have the restraints that many institutions have, so I have the fortune of being able to delve into topics that interest me primarily, without too much regard for mandates or audiences, although that of course comes into play when I start to pitch to institutions. My curatorial practice is really process- and dialogue-based, so I certainly have an idea, and I approach artists, but then it's from that point that the show starts to form, so that I don't go into an artist's studio and say "I want this and this and this piece." I say to them, "Here's my idea, here's what you're doing, here's what they're doing, this is why I think a tension could build up and it could be interesting", so that in some sense, the artist's process is also my process, and my investigation into how meaning is constructed is also an investigation into how they construct artwork within their studio. So in that sense I see myself less as a director than as a collaborator.

Alissa asked whether we were producers, and I think of the institution as a producer and the curator as a director/collaborator. I don't think I'm giving context to the work when I'm curating. I do that when I write essays or reviews. But in curating, I feel like I'm giving the artists a context to work within, and I think those two things are different. I choose the artists quite instinctually, intuitively, so that it's not artists that are in the same medium, or even the same topics. There's a certain similar intent, perhaps, but I'm interested to see what happens when I pull two artists together, where I think that something starts to resonate in the sense a third thing starts to happen through juxtaposing them in that way. By letting them be so involved in the process and dialogue, of course I have always the faith in the abilities of the artists to be able to work within that framework and, as most of us do, you watch the process of an artist for quite a long time and have a really good sense of where they're coming from, so that even if there is new work, you have the faith that they're going to understand the impetus of the curatorial thesis. So there's lots of room for experimentation.

The actual instillation with the artist present is a really important part of the exhibition for me. It's really exhausting, but it's very integral because I think that that's when a third thing starts to happen too. The artists often have never met or

seen each other's work, so there's a response between them to each other's work, and dialogues that happen during installation.

My curatorial intent is assessing contemporary culture. It's trying to make things more complex, and I do this by trying to build layers. Again, to somehow counter this fast-paced society that we're in... technology that is useful, on the one hand, but is leading people to more and more, you know, research on the web, which is a really different kind of way of getting information and working through information. It's a... this kind of surfaced, surfing, surface-mediated life, so that I try to counter, I try to get people to slow down and to rethink and to... I guess my own process is also to excavate, and I'm hoping that people that look at the work also try to excavate and get beneath the surface, so that they attain some depth versus simply consume. It is difficult, I'm sure. I think at lunch somebody mentioned the three seconds people look at work, and it's very difficult to get people to slow down and to think and stay within an exhibition space, so I try also to make the exhibition work on many layers so that you can come in and see it visually, have it be visually compelling—somehow or other, my aesthetic sensibility generally makes my shows look quite aesthetic or quite... there's kind of a beauty about the work that I like—but the longer one stays in the space, the more connections one can build.

I just briefly wanted to talk about working with artists and why I work with living artists. I think generally I'm quite pessimistic about the world and how the world functions, and, increasingly so, artists have a unique way of looking at the world. Their representations can open up alternate possibilities, I think, and for me, as someone that doesn't make work, I'm continually fascinated by looking at an object and completely understanding it, but realizing that I never would have come up with the idea to make it just so, and that gives me some kind of sense of optimism in what is mostly pessimism.

Forever, people and cultures and artists and scientists have been making models of the world and universe, making models as a way of making sense of things, trying to figure out how things work. Allison Norlen, who is an artist from... now in Saskatoon, she talked about not feeling like she was a sculptor, but building things

in order to figure out what they look liked, which I quite like, as opposed to trying to make a model of the world, trying to almost do the opposite, right? Take it apart and rebuild it in order to understand what it looks like.

They make models of the world in order to envision the world, and the artists that I work with work between the real and the abstraction, between the constructed world and the observed world. Models lead to mythologies, lead to histories, lead to theories, and I just want to read a citation by Terry Threadgold here, simply because I worked with this quote in an exhibition several years ago, but it's become something I reference continually in my work. She says that "if we have accepted, in the postmodern context in which we now work in the humanities, that science and modernist theory are stories told from somebody's position, stories that can be rewritten, then I think we must also accept that stories are theories, and that they always involve a metalinguistic critique of the stories they rewrite."

So the couple of things I want to highlight out of that is the idea of stories: stories as a way of revealing something, stories as a way of opening up different considerations. I think that amassing narratives—narratives that are open-ended—is a way of deconstructing and reconstructing stories, and when you get an accumulation like this, and multiple viewpoints and possibilities, perhaps one might find some sense of what is really going on in that mass.... Kind of like, if we really wanted to know what was going on in the world, we would have to read endless newspapers to get some kind of sense of what possibly is happening.

The idea of rewriting is important to me, constructing stories as a way of demonstrating a theory but then reworking and reinventing that theory, and reworking and reinventing histories which we know are fallible, blurring fiction and fact to uncover something of an essence.

And then the third thing, of course, is science... science and theory. Equations are a way that mathematicians understand the universe. Artists also work with models and ideas and equations to make ideas tangible and visible, and imagine—doing this is a way to imagine what is possible. The artists, again, that I work with, work in this intersection between the natural and the constructed world, between what

is observed and what is perceived, and in that process, of course, we find that, while the natural world or the observed world can be a starting point, nature is a metaphor and everything is more complex than that. And again, it's in that interstice between the real and abstraction that I think some kind of, maybe... truth comes to light.

And just as nature is this construct, so is culture. Culture is a really mediated space, and increasingly our experience within culture and communication is mediated rather than direct, so again, it's a concern that I have, so again, this work between science and art, nature and culture, fact and fiction, it's in that space that we enter into a larger, more inclusive, and more complex discourse. I think that curating is a process of moving through clutter. There's so much stuff out there, there's endless stuff. What stuff penetrates the surface and what stuff has staying power? What is it that signifies, in our culture? What is it that matters beyond the new and the young and the hot and the new new?

I see curating as collecting, as examining, as distilling. I think it's a process where it's important to look into the world as well as into the studio, and bring those two things together. Curating involves conversation, and conversations are about exchanging ideas, and exchanging ideas leads to new ideas. An exhibition, for me, is both a result of and the starting point of a conversation and an invitation to re-think givens. I try to re-examine histories and stories and experiences in order to generate a meaning that is different than is found in the mainstream, particularly in current pop culture, something that is a more complex kind of understanding of the world.

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