

Milena Placentile

By the Time I Decide What to Call This Paper, the World Will Be Different

We all know how few venues there are in Canada to discuss curatorial practice and how there are even fewer that allow us to speak candidly. I'm very excited to be a part of this symposium, and I appreciate that OAAG and ARCCO have assembled a group of practitioners that represent various interests, motivation, and levels of experience, not to mention different ways of thinking about curating, from practical and experience-based to philosophical and theoretical.

The proposal I submitted in January responded to the topic of "curating as resistance", but when the theme of the symposium changed, I welcomed the opportunity to think about unspoken assumptions instead. I am interested in the ongoing efforts to define curating, particularly with regard to how it might help fulfil social needs. Also, I find it a valuable exercise when considered in light of observations made from different strategies in action.

I am an emerging curator. All the ideas I have about curating come from the art and exhibitions I have looked at, the books and articles I have read, the conversations I have had, and the experience of feeling my way through the process of curating contemporary art, sometimes without rules of any kind to suggest what I should do. Owing to this background, I have come to assume that curating involves presenting ideas so they can continue to develop and circulate as cultural knowledge and experience.

Since I believe personal histories inform ideology and behaviour, I've pondered my early experiences with art and the world in general to consider how they frame my motivations and work. Just for some context, here's a quick story. When I was fourteen years old, I had no idea how little visual art I'd experienced in my lifetime. That is to say: I didn't realize anything existed beyond landscape-painting, portraits, and decorative figurines. One day I discovered a stash of records under my grandparents' sofa. They were long forgotten by my uncle, who had stored them there around the '80s. Supertramp, Rush, David Bowie, Led Zeppelin. I spent quite

a long time contemplating the sleeve of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*, which featured mysterious images credited to the strange name Hipgnosis. I decided to keep the album on a long-term loan.

Prior to that moment, none of the things I saw growing up that were called “art” ever demanded that I think about the world around me. This experience was what first prompted me to use visual imagery as a way to search for alternatives to my conservative reality. Art became my link to the outside world, and I wanted to know more. It eventually led me to challenge assumptions about issues affecting my life, such as codes of behaviour, social justice, and the media. It also encouraged me to seek out people with whom I could have these kinds of conversations. Since that time, I've developed a strong belief in the power of images to encourage critical thinking about spheres of human interaction that go well beyond the theoretical concerns of the art world. This is what I would like to harness through curating.

I view curating as something I do with and for others. As such, I aim to create exhibitions and public programmes that investigate social aspects of cultural production in ways that encourage alternative modes of thinking, foster new relationships, and inspire increased ownership in the development and articulation of culture. I believe in the capacity for the arts to affect positive change by expanding perceptions of day-to-day experience, and I am enthusiastic about the role artists play in the building of sustainable and equitable communities. I am interested in visual art, but not solely—I tend to take a holistic approach when attempting to make sense of the world around me, so I endeavour to apply this value to working with as many cultural forms as possible. I also endeavour to be pragmatic by seeking a careful balance between defining issues, on one hand, and testing theories, observing results, and making changes to better suit real-world situations on the other.

I honestly think that every single person should try to make the world a more just and compassionate place. My concern with the idea for responsibility stems from this. I describe “acting responsibly” as acting with consideration for others. In some small way, I imagine curating exhibitions that foster critical thinking about the nature of society as a contribution. The fact that curators generally use pub-

lic dollars to fund projects also motivates me to think in these terms. It is not an unspoken assumption that curators have responsibilities—the term arises in writing and discussion about curating all the time; however, the meaning and consequence of those responsibilities are rarely elaborated upon in practical ways for the very reason that they are assumed. That being said, there are often a myriad of definitions for any idea at any given time; the one thing we can count on is that definitions we have now will not necessarily be applicable in the future.

I am concerned about outdated responses to circumstances that no longer exist because reality changes faster than terminology. Will establishing a firm language of curating make it more difficult for curators to respond to change quickly? Will it prevent new practitioners with different perspectives from entering the field? I don't know. It is true that there are more people than ever calling themselves curators, but I don't think that will water down the contribution of curators who pursue their work with integrity, consideration, and passion. If anything, this influx will probably motivate practicing curators to become more innovative and self-reflective. All of this being said, I'm not overly concerned with defining "responsible curating" in terms of words; I prefer to go with what I know and trust: thoughtful and sincere interactions.

Given that my interpretation of curating is based on the social aspects that make exhibitions possible, and the ones that arise once exhibitions are on display, I felt it necessary to enter this conversation with that in mind. I couldn't imagine discussing responsibility to the language of curating without emphasizing the importance of curators' responsibilities to people. To help me organize my ideas, I've divided "people" into three intersecting categories: artists, audiences, and colleagues. I am reminded of a statement Mary Jane Jacob made in a 2003 interview: "If we can't work across social boundaries within the presentation, production, and discussion of art, then we have no hope in actual life."

This is a very interesting and important point, and I feel that art galleries can participate in the dissolution of these boundaries if they are used as accessible sites for dialogue about personal histories and perceptions. Challenging conventional curatorial strategies and tools by experimenting with different techniques and for-

mats can contribute to improved interactions between audiences, artists, and curators. The first step is demonstrating an enthusiastic willingness to find out.

So what kind of things can we do to demonstrate responsibility to audiences? The first thing that comes to mind for many gallery workers when considering audience is the word “outreach”. The more I think about that word, the more it troubles me. Although I have used it in the past, I’ve come to feel that it has a slightly condescending and maybe even a missionary tone. I switched to thinking about exhibitions and events in terms of welcoming new and returning audiences. I feel that we can communicate greater respect for the ideas and experiences of audiences of different racial, national, sexual, and social backgrounds by programming interesting and challenging works of art through contexts derived from actual lived experiences, politics, and other contemporary issues. If exhibitions are presented as open dialogues that leave room for audiences to form their own opinions and do not direct experiential outcomes, then opportunities for discussion about different ways of thinking can be open to potentially anyone.

Over the years, I’ve noticed that people don’t really need contemporary art to be explained to them; they just need encouragement to use their own interpretive skills to think independently and to enter conversation with confidence. Audiences can and will reach their own intelligent conclusions about the images and ideas presented to them, particularly if points of entry resonate on a personal level. Art is not an end in itself, but a means in the sense that it is part of an ongoing dialogue about what matters to people. It is the product of human interest, and contemporary art especially is generally produced with awareness that it will be encountered and interpreted by diverse individuals with unique personal histories. For far too long in the past, galleries have been viewed as places to escape reality, to look at uplifting, pretty things. But, really, I think a far greater sense of fulfilment can come from exhibitions that offer space to think, as well as to become motivated, inspired, and empowered. This is not a new idea—nor are the others that I’m about to mention—but I think considering them simultaneously, or maybe even applying them simultaneously, can communicate curators’ interest in their responsibilities to audience.

Here are a few more ideas that I like.

The first one is: incorporating a range of media in exhibitions, not only to cross traditional boundaries between artistic disciplines, but also between art and archive, and art and artifact. This reinforces the notion that culture is everywhere and manifests in many forms. Furthermore, it reinforces that culture isn't something people go out and get; it's something they already have.

Another idea is: integrating event programming directly into the concept and delivery of exhibitions, to enable different levels of participation for audiences with different interests and experiences by emphasizing social and interrelational aspects of art. When this really works, it can catalyze dialogue between artists, audiences, and gallery staff, simply by way of context and situation.

Also on the note of conversation: encouraging critique and discussion about what curators do and why enables audiences to reflect on the role of curators while clearing misconceptions that their work is not relevant to the real world. Formal talks that raise these questions, informal and spontaneous conversations with visitors at exhibition sites, and communications by email, can offer valuable opportunities to discuss motivations, objectives, decision-making issues, challenges, and maybe even future ideas.

If transparent practices and human interaction are harnessed as demonstrations of responsibility to publics by a wide range of businesses and other organizations, I think it's safe to say that it will work for curators as well.

Moving on now to artists—what kind of things can we do to demonstrate responsibility to them? One of the most important things we can do is to partner in ways that make their jobs easier. By this I mean communicating the social, cultural, political, economic, emotional, and research-based value of their work in real-world terms in order to enhance support from government, the media, and publics. Continually searching for ways to increase audience diversity is not just great for non-artists, but of course artists as well, because the more people care about the arts, the more opportunities artists will have to continue producing meaningful work.

Another important responsibility curators have to artists is to encourage them to be ever-more critical and reflective. Curating thematic group exhibitions can foster dialogue and practices and ideas in ways that are not possible, necessarily, through solo retrospectives. Combining the work of emerging with established artists can also invest work with additional cultural significance. A lesser but still relevant benefit of group exhibitions is that they offer wider social contexts that can help resist the stereotypes of artists as lone geniuses who work in isolation or who don't have normal interactions and real-world concerns.

Curators also have a responsibility to inform artists of the creative and cultural contributions of curating. Some artists want curators to serve simply as administrators, but, in the end, that serves no one. Working relationships must allow for mutual respect and trust. Curators also need to make sure artists understand that they have to look out for another range of interests. Facilitating artists' relationships with audiences, institutions, and other artists is an important way of demonstrating this.

Now for curators' responsibilities to each other. Curators wear many hats: we're ambitious and creative thinkers, problem-solvers, and diplomats. This is why I think we have everything it takes to fulfil our primary responsibility to each other, which I believe is pushing the envelope on what is expected of exhibitions and art galleries. Part of this can take the form of critiquing what is held up as professional standards to determine whom they serve, why, and how. The results of a survey I conducted last year revealed that what often prevents the production of experimental, audience-centred curatorial practices are the networks of curators, academics, gallery workers, and artists who each contribute to the formation and maintenance of fixed, exclusive standards. The personal objectives of many curators who contribute to scholarly discourse are believed to conflict with a desire to engage non-art world audiences. Worse, demonstrating too much interest in non-art audiences can be considered a hindrance to the conceptual advancement of theoretical interests.

To mediate between curators' personal objectives, their sense of responsibility towards audiences, and the expectations of institutions, curators must work to

demonstrate that elitism and intellectual practice are not synonymous. We need to infuse the academy with new perspectives and ideas, while offering exhibitions that have the potential to challenge and enrich. Again, the more people are offered reasons to care about contemporary art, the more support there will be for it as a medium for the exchange of ideas.

I have placed this thought in the section about curators' responsibilities to each other because I believe we must all work to make this happen. We can't wait for our colleagues to do things first. We need to just make leaps and try ourselves. This is to say, we need to continue challenging the idea of what it is to be a curator by actually going out and doing it. We need to experiment with new and concrete ways of communicating the notion of art in culture. It almost seems, in some ways, that it doesn't really matter what we call it until we've gone out and produced enough variations to take a reading of what is relevant to which communities and which environments. As part of this, we need to trust each other to take risks, and I think we can do so by creating supportive networks, not just within our own institutions, but with a sense of professional community that transcends geography. I'm not just talking about more experienced curators mentoring younger ones, but communication that moves in every direction and involves sharing social and personal knowledge as opposed to merely academic and fact-based knowledge. Maintaining a strong professional community will also allow us to collaborate better with workers in other disciplines. Art and culture shouldn't be a competition, and with limited funds, sometimes it feels that way, although it's not intentional.

In the last few minutes, I'd like to share some details of the two most recent exhibitions I've curated, as well as the public programming that accompanied them. I've endeavoured to incorporate the various ideas I raised here today, but I look forward to experimenting a lot more. From April 7th to June 5th, the Ottawa Art Gallery presented an exhibition I co-curated with Emily Falvey called *Off Grid*, which was a programme of local, national, and international performance, visual, and media art dedicated to exploring alternatives to and subversions of mainstream culture. One of our objectives was to invite audiences to negotiate ideas of inclusion, exclusion, collaboration, and intervention in the context of public space and

community. The exhibition featured over thirty artists in on-site, off-site, on-air and online projects that were facilitated through first-time collaborations with a range of local organizations. We also explored blogging and zines as a way to engage in more direct conversations.

The series of public programmes for this exhibition was the most ambitious that the gallery had ever undertaken. It involved participatory performances and interventions, a film screening, a six-part youth workshop, a panel discussion, a zine fair, and even a few talks. I'll take a moment to describe the zine fair and panel discussion in more detail, as they were slightly unconventional for OAG, but were both well attended and resulted in return visitors.

The zine fair welcomed 180 visitors to the gallery in a three-hour period. We featured zines by twelve local makers that pertained to the experience of living in and visiting urban centres and thus were thematically related to the exhibition. I posted myself near the entrance in order to welcome people to the gallery and event. I took the opportunity to tell them about what was going on, to give them a copy of the zine published in conjunction with the exhibition, and to invite them to browse the galleries. I had detailed conversations with at least twenty individuals about such things as the content of the exhibition, the political nature of zines, urban communication strategies, and the use of galleries as public forums. The event was widely appreciated as a bridge between visual arts and the Ottawa literary scene. The one thing that I regret about the zine itself is that I didn't have enough time to solicit contributions from nonartists living in the Ottawa area. Hopefully, if there is a chance, I will get to do that again.

I have left a couple of copies of the zine on the table over there if anyone would like to grab one. And I have some more if we run out.

The panel discussion took place on the first truly sunny day in Ottawa in a long time, yet we managed to draw an audience of over forty people to chat with three "anonymous" guest speakers: Other, Leeny, and Snail, graffiti artists from Montreal and Ottawa. I collaborated with the moderator to frame the course of discussion with questions about the nature of public space, mainstream commodi-

fication of street culture, and the perceived gender inequity in a male-dominated art form. The panelists communicated their motivations and methods, as well as their thoughts about the meaning behind the changing face of graffiti. Especially interesting were the speakers' various anecdotes about painting in the streets of their hometowns and around the world. To keep their identities concealed, the speakers communicated from behind a screen upon which we projected a slide show of images, culled from the Internet, of graffiti art from around the world. It accomplished the double duty of providing some really great eye candy for everyone. There were many great questions and some joking around too. The conversation continued for an hour and a half, but the time just seemed to fly by.

My latest exhibition is currently on display at OAG. Featuring the work of sixteen artists with ties to the Ottawa region, *My Culture Includes My Scene* examines the construction and communication of self in a way that understands ethnicity as only one part of the identity equation. Using crosscultural and multidisciplinary means, the artists have explored the categories of culture and subculture by acknowledging the influence of popular and consumer culture, politics, and technology on how we determine and present individual values.

The exhibition invites audiences to think about the personal decision-making process that comes with contemplating and re-interpreting ideas from the outside world while attempting to locate oneself within culture at large. The overall budget for this exhibition was about a third of the size allocated to *Off Grid*, but I still managed to establish a range of events that engaged different types of audiences.

The first event of the exhibition was a launch party designed to welcome new audiences to the gallery. For a show about the social aspects of art and culture, a party just made sense. Events taking place throughout the night included performances and interventions by five participating artists, and a performance by three artist/musicians (who were also featured in the exhibition), who have a cross-genre art band known for the political content of their lyrics. I also invited two local DJs to play mash-up sets that related to the aspects of the exhibition that addressed the hybridized nature of contemporary cultural practices. I think one of the highlights was the smashing of a piñata in the shape of a white cube.

From 8:30 PM to midnight, OAG welcomed approximately five hundred people into the gallery and onto the Arts Court lawn. I couldn't even begin to imagine how many other people were standing on the sidewalk as observers. People were dancing, talking, participating in performances, asking questions, taking photos, and calling friends on their phones to come down and check out the art gallery.

In the absence of funds to host film screenings, I established a "recommended viewing" programme with a local independent video store in order to offer a sense of how the themes of the exhibition have been explored in other media. I invited the co-owners, who are both artists in their own right, to select ten films that address the challenging process of establishing and asserting personal cultural identity. Some of the films include Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, Lucy Walker's *Devil's Playground*, and Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. This past week, OAG hosted a workshop for youth ages thirteen to seventeen, called Characters In Space, which was led by two artists featured in the exhibition. By working in teams to combine hand-drawn character designs with current VJ techniques and software, participants had the opportunity to think and talk about collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and the effect of remixing images from the outside world as a way to express new, individual ideas. At the end of the day, the students completed an experimental video that will soon be available for viewing on OAG's website.

In addition to these programmes, there will be four talks, the most notable of which will be given by a professor of sociology who will address identity and globalization in more theoretical terms in order to appeal to older audiences who have an impression that *My Culture Includes My Scene* is an exhibition only relevant to youth. I think that identity—and the changing nature of it—is something that applies to all of us... it is only if we stop thinking about our place in the world that we become stagnant. I would like to believe we're encountering new things every day that encourage us to think about who we are and why we have the values that we do, so I really do hope the show can communicate with many people of different age groups.

I will also be hosting a tour [of the exhibition] at the end of the schedule so I can address questions and comments that have arrived up until that point. Through

blogging for the exhibition, I've gained some interesting insights into how the exhibition has been received. I'm definitely going to be continuing with this option as a way of communicating with audiences in the future.

I want to wrap up by saying that it's been almost a decade since Matthew Teitelbaum described curating as "learning in public." I truly feel that adopting this attitude and taking the freedom necessary to try new approaches will result in new forms of curating that are timely, responsive, and flexible. Curators should not feel limited by expectations or standards. We should push for the implementation of ideas we feel passionate about. We should try new things, break new ground, and strive to surprise our many audiences with just how much we think about them and want to work for them.

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