



## DOES THE ART WORLD NEED TO RISE UP AGAINST CURATORS?

"Curationism", a play on the term "creationism" is meant to evoke a similar sense of religiosity and cultish fervor.<sup>1</sup> This is a fitting allusion, since renown curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Massimiliano Gioni have been the object of much reverence over the past few decades. It is also appropriate to the extent that some curators often seem to create value out of nothing. In some cases to such a degree that artists have even offered up prayers to them. One example is Bill Burns's 2013 Art Basel Miami Beach work in which a banner flown by a small propeller plane pleaded "Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us" while being trailed softly over the art fair. Everything from artisanal cheese to music festivals has been "curated." "Curatorial-studies" programs are offered in increasing numbers, and even the mainstream marketing industry is adopting "curation" as a means of adding value to content. In the art world however, the curator reigns supreme, sometimes even eclipsing the contributions of individual artists. But what is a curator, exactly?



Bill Burns, "Hans Ulrich Obrist Hear Us"

Today, curating as a profession means much more than arranging artworks within an exhibition.

A curator collects, cares for, researches, and interprets a collection. The curator's role intends to safeguard the heritage of art, for example, through the publication of books and speaking at discussion panels. Research is central to their work, but they might also attend a committee to decide on an object to be acquired, or answer inquiries from the public. Although much of their work takes place behind the scenes, curators have plenty of responsibility to the public and the art market, since they are now in charge of creating blockbuster museum shows, major gallery exhibitions, crowded *biennales*, and popular art fairs.

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<sup>1</sup>Term created by David Balzer, author of *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*. Carrigan, Margaret. "The Creation, and Re-creation, of the Curator." *Hyperallergic*. 9 Sept. 2015. Web. 6 Jan. 2016.



Curators have become powerful. "[The] curator has become one of the dominant forces in the contemporary art world", said Andrew Renton, speaking at an ICA panel in 2010.<sup>2</sup> For example, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist was considered, in 2009, the most powerful person in the art industry by *Art Review*. In the last 10 years, he has always been placed within the first 10 places in the list. In 2015, he was ranked fourth place, over Nicolas Serota, Director of the Tate Museum (fifth) and gallery owner Larry Gagosian (sixth).<sup>3</sup>

How have curators taken over the ship? For 5,000 years art survived perfectly well without curators. When speaking of Obrist, Georgina Adam says that "His prominence and influence would not have been possible even 20 years ago, when contemporary art had a much smaller place in the world, curators were generally linked to an institution and few people had heard of them anyway."<sup>4</sup> But the concept is not entirely new either. According to David Balzer, author of *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*, the etymology for the word "curator" comes from the Latin root *cura*, meaning "care". By the middle Ages, the noun "curate" described catholic priests who were charged with "the cure of souls" to ensure their entrance into heaven. The author notes that, even in the early incarnation of the word, "the curator is someone who insists on value, and who makes it, whether or not it actually exists."<sup>5</sup> In the XVIIth century, The French Academy had its own official art exhibition, known as the Paris Salon. First held in 1667, the Salon was the most prestigious art event in the world. Typically, each academy of art staged a number of exhibitions (salons) during the year, which attracted great interest from art buyers and collectors. In order for a painting to be accepted by the Salon, it first had to be approved by the Salon "jury" -a committee of academics who vetted each submission-. A successful showing at one of these displays was a guaranteed seal of approval for an aspiring artist. Several thousand paintings would usually be on display, hung from eye-level to the ceiling, and there was tremendous competition to secure a prime position from the "Hanging

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<sup>2</sup> Adam, Georgina. "Chapter 4: The Super Curators." *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-firstst Century*. Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2014. Print. p. 89

<sup>3</sup> "2015 Power 100." *Art Review*. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. <[http://artreview.com/power\\_100/](http://artreview.com/power_100/)>.

<sup>4</sup> Adam, Georgina. "Chapter 4: The Super Curators." *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-firstst Century*. Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2014. Print. p. 90

<sup>5</sup> Carrigan, Margaret. "The Creation, and Re-creation, of the Curator." *Hyperallergic*. 9 Sept. 2015. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. <<http://hyperallergic.com/235308/the-creation-and-re-creation-of-the-curator/>>.

Committee".<sup>6</sup> Since then, the curator, as an imparter of intangible value, has become the academic authority on the going rate of art prices in the market.

Some trace the emergence of the modern independent curator to 1969, when Swiss curator Harald Szeeman staged *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern, a controversial international exhibition of post-minimalism and *art povera*. It was roundly criticized by the authorities, causing Szeemann to leave the institution and become one of the first independent curators. A long career followed during which he organized some 200 exhibitions and travelled the world, but most importantly, he established the "thematic" style of curatorship, which grew into a separate category in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 20th century, the curator came to represent a broad class of exhibition makers, from museum employees who spent years working on modest, scrupulously researched displays of Sumerian pottery, to freelancers who approached large scale *biennales* of contemporary art as an opportunity to gain world-wide recognition. Now in the third millennium, the curator is a figure of ineffable gloss and international glitz, spreading "cultural glamour" across the



Drake curatorship at Sotheby's

globe. Curators have become stars, whose correct choices can ensure, for example, reputational and financial success. They have become famous in their own right: "Rober Storr's Venice Biennale" or "Carolyn Christov's Documenta". As the high priests of the art world, they have immense power over selecting which artists are, or are not, significant. But the pressures on museums and galleries in marketing to ever-wider audiences are growing a breed of celebrity-curator, which

is leading to some odd partnerships. Madonna uses celebrities as guest curators for her *Art for Freedom* initiative.<sup>8</sup> Pharrell Williams has been a busy "guest curator", appearing at a recent show in Design Exchange (a Canadian national design museum) called "This Is Not A Toy" which featured Japanese

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/academic-art.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Adam, Georgina. "Chapter 4: The Super Curators." *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-first Century*. Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2014. Print. p. 90

<sup>8</sup> Locker, Melissa. "Madonna Names Katy Perry As Next Art For Freedom Curator." *Time*. 9 Jan. 2014. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. <<http://entertainment.time.com/2014/01/09/madonna-names-katy-perry-as-next-art-for-freedom-curator/>>.

artist Takashi Murakami. In early summer 2015, the rapper Drake curated a show of African-American art at Sotheby's in New York.<sup>9</sup>

Too much emphasis on the curator has given them the control from within. Some curators have become so important that the artists that they represent and their work become just a prop in the curator's vision. As the curator sets the agenda, the danger is that art might turn into a secondary attraction, as happens with national pavilions at the Venice Biennale, where curators predominate. Inevitably, some artists have had serious fallouts with curators, who have misunderstood their art or have manipulated the artist's original message in order to privilege the curator's story. An example of this egocentric war is the *Curating Degree Zero Archive*, a traveling exhibition of curatorial research designed as a kind of artistic installation. Conceived by curators, the exhibition circulates through a network of public art institutions largely run by curators themselves. The issue is not whether the curators should have archives or open them to others, or to what degree this is interesting or not. Rather, the question is whether the people in charge of administering exhibitions of art should be using the spaces and funding available to art for exhibiting their own reading lists, references, and sources, as if they were art *per se*.<sup>10</sup>



*Curating Degree Zero Archive* exhibition

What might be more alarming is the empowerment that the curator has over the art market. Curators now influence values and are not satisfied with simply doing bucket-loads of art history research. In some ways, curators have become the counterpart to dealers: where the latter provide the inventory, the former make the works credible by putting them in exhibitions. If a work catches the eye of the right curator and gets included in a big show, it does wonders for its price and the standing of the artist. Potential conflicts of interest become obvious. Especially when rewards are high in galleries, in contrast to the mostly puny remunerations of public museums.

<sup>9</sup>Bennet, Oliver. "Celebrity Curators: Good for Publicity, but What Does It Say about Art?" *The Independent*. 31 Aug. 2015. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/celebrity-curators-good-for-publicity-but-what-does-it-say-about-art-10480269.html>>.

<sup>10</sup>Vidokle, Anton. "Art Without Artists?" *E-flux*. 2010. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-artists/>>.



A number of curators have migrated from institutional to commercial jobs. For example, the high profile curator Lisa Dennison left the Guggenheim Museum to join Sotheby's, and former Getty Museum's curator Scott Schaeffer also moved to Sotheby's. Josh Elderfield, curator at the Museum of Modern Art is now a consultant to Gagosian. In London, former curators Ben Tufnell and Emma Dexter joined the commercial world at the Timothy Taylor Gallery.<sup>11</sup> Most museums' bylaws disallow curators from posing as private agent-dealers and taking referral fees.<sup>12</sup> However, many highly educated, exceedingly powerful, revered museum curators are clandestine agents for wealthy collectors and earn substantial amounts of money for their advice. Curators are often asked to hunt and barter for art on behalf of wealthy patrons because the latter believe that they might be more knowledgeable than leading art dealers.

The role of the curator has evolved, considerably. Having arisen as a strictly academic role, it is now a pivotal factor in the commerce and even in the production of contemporary art. They have become intermediaries: it would seem that, as far as some modern curators know, art would not exist without the market, when in the past art was valuable on its own merits, especially to curators. That seems not to be the case anymore. They have become marketing agents: curators at present might appear to be more focused on creating a demand for certain kinds of art (preferably based on their own taste-making criteria or their clients' guidelines) and then helping satisfy such demand. They have become financiers and lobbyists: by overseeing the distribution of production funds, fees and prizes that artists compete for; as well as courting collectors, sponsors, and museum trustees; entertaining corporate executives; and collaborating with the press, politicians, and government bureaucrats. Curators have found a place between the producers of art and the power structure of our society. But should curators be allowed to manipulate art market prices, be on both the buy and sell sides of the same deal, and use art as mere props to illustrate curatorial concepts? Perhaps some might rise up against curators.

**By Giovana Edid and Federico León de la Vega**

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<sup>11</sup> Adam, Georgina. "Chapter 4: The Super Curators." *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-first Century*. Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2014. Print. p. 91

<sup>12</sup> Pierce, Patricia. "Beware the Illegitimate Art Agent." *Newsmax*. 11 Aug. 2014. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. <<http://www.newsmax.com/PatriciaPierce/Art-Forgeries/2014/08/11/id/588069/>>.



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