

WHO GETS TO BE A CURATOR?

SM

The answer really should be anyone who wants to, anyone who's interested, engaged, works hard. But often, the role of curator is – feels – inaccessible.

Do you have skills or life experiences that inform your approach to curating?

JS

In 2019, I graduated from the University of Brighton's Inclusive Arts Practice MA. I feel that this has impacted my curation work, as well as my lived experience of being neurodivergent, and passion for being inclusive. My background is working with young people, and I'm an artist. I did not know any curators growing up and I don't think I even heard of the word. I don't think of myself as a curator. I have an interest in curation, but I don't think it is or would be the main focus of my work. But maybe that's because the current outlook of a curator's role is part inaccessible to me.

SM

I definitely curate as an artist. I'm a painter with no "professional" curatorial experience. I haven't been an Assistant Curator or studied a specific Master's, but I am a curator. I'm interested in visual language and open interpretation in opposition to sometimes quite alienating jargon. And I'm really focused on opening up inaccessible private collections to the public. So far, that's involved attempting to answer questions and raise new ones about an internationally recognised British artist. And I've been working towards presenting previously unexhibited works for free. I'm a freelance curator, meaning that I approached an institution with a project, rather than being permanently employed by them. Although more precarious, this means I can continue to develop my own art practice, which continually then informs my curation.

PP

I had long been a visitor to museums, museums with both art and historical collections, but it took getting to know a curator for me to know how things actually worked. After a PhD in Byzantine History, I fell into museum work by accident, first as a Visitor Assistant at the Fitzwilliam Museum and then as Exhibitions and Programming Manager at a fledgling gallery at Downing College in Cambridge. When I started at the Heong Gallery, we knew that we wanted the gallery to succeed, to show important works of modern and contemporary art, but there were no precedents before us of a small college-based exhibition space with big ambitions.

Is academic or specialist language needed for curating?

JS

I feel like the museum, arts and heritage sector really loves big words, but it's not needed for curating. I think it's better to use words that are used in everyday language, so way more people can engage with your work.

SM

I think that institutional gatekeepers value Master's curating degrees, years of experience in specific fields, and often overly academic language. But at its root, curating is about centring art and artists, communicating stories and ideas. And surely then what makes for an interesting curator is a unique perspective, different ways of effectively communicating.

Have you ever been told or felt that you can't be a curator?

JS

I don't think I've ever been told that I can't be a curator. But I do feel like I can't be a "proper" curator, because there's too many big words.

LK

I think it's quite open in theory for anyone to engage with, but as we are aware it can be very tricky getting into curation. I think that it's a skill to be able to communicate effectively, and sometimes having to have experience of working in museums, or working with collections, or having a very niche expertise in an area can overshadow that.

SM

I think as a young woman working in Glasgow, it's very easy to be underestimated, particularly by the old guard of the museum world or by London-centric institutions. On my current project, it has felt that it's not been my place to curate this exhibition of a successful male artist, but really who gets to decide who curates what? And who gets to be a curator? I don't think you need to have studied Art History at private school or have a niche Master's. Really, more importantly, it's about being open to listening, challenging, communicating, celebrating, revising and understanding.

PP

At the Heong Gallery, I have curated or co-curated nine exhibitions over five years. I have worked on fifteen and there are nine more in the pipeline. Then why was it that I hesitated to call myself a curator until about a year ago? Was it the fact that I had entered the profession sideways, without an art historical or curatorial degree? Or was it just that I had never met a person like me?

What makes a curator?

LK

I would say the ability to communicate with others clearly, but also to bring people together in a space to have that dialogue, whether it's about artwork, whether it's about an idea, whether it's about people. Those are the key skills that I would say are key to being a curator, and, in my opinion, I think anyone can be a curator. I think that curation is about thinking, how do you communicate a set of ideas, conversations, between yourself and others? And that could include audiences, that could include artists, that could include researchers, that could include the general public.

JS

I personally feel it's important to have high empathy, good at listening and the ability to relate to others from different lived experiences to yours.

PP

Like all callings, the best curatorial experiences for me have been collaborative, object or artwork driven, inclusive, and rooted in place, time and context. If you use artworks and objects to make sense of the world for yourself and others, you are a curator. If you make exhibitions, interpret objects and present them to others, you are a curator. If you support artists in achieving their ambitions in presenting their works to the public, you are a curator. If you shed new light on artworks or objects through your research, which enhances the public's understanding or appreciation of them, you are curator.

JC

Until relatively recently, when I thought of the term “curator”, I visualised young, evenly featured, able-bodied white men and women – fresh out of the Courtauld, clutching degrees that gave them access to a closely guarded profession suffused with its own language, tradition and identity. But not anymore. More recently, curating has been democratised and anyone and everyone's at it – from curating what we wear, what we order online, what we plan to eat and how we arrange it on our plates, through to how we assemble our idea and how we express those ideas. From pulling down monuments of white supremacy to the dismantling of colonial mindsets, curating is no longer focused on specialised knowledge and the word of the few. Curatorial practice now insists on audience collaboration and interrogation, a curatorial gaze that interrogates, and a curatorial reach that far exceeds the limiting and excluding walls of the museum-gallery. Who would have thought that my social and community work background, steeped in the tradition of consciousness raising and anti-oppressive practice, would one day evolve into the perfect prerequisite for curatorial practice? I think, see, act, shout, react, object, challenge, invite, embrace, reject, revise, restate, rejoice, walk into a gallery, stand in front of an image, and by my very somatic presence have altered that image forever. Therefore, I get to be a curator.

Contributors

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