

## On the Present and Future of Curatorial Education: An Introduction

Julian Myers-Szupinska with María del Carmen Carrion, Maeva Connolly, Sinead Hogan, Kit Hammonds, Salwa Mikdadi, and Estelle Nabeyrat

The discussion that follows presents an exchange among several leading voices engaged, in some way, in projects devoted in part or in whole to teaching curators, and to curatorial practice. As faculty in the Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts, the hosting institution, I introduced and moderated the discussion, which aimed to think together, and critically, about the project of curatorial education, from our distinct perspectives and institutional situations.

As I thought about these premises in the weeks leading up to our exchange, my mind often drifted to a piece of writing by Jessica Morgan that was published in the 2013 book *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*. When she wrote it, Morgan was a curator at Tate Modern, London; she was subsequently appointed the director of Dia Art Foundation in New York. The question her essay meant to answer was, what is a curator? Morgan's essay answers this question disarmingly. For her part, she feels like an impostor. "In answer to the question of our age, 'What do you do?' my reply, curator, has always felt somewhat illegitimate. Fraudulent, even."<sup>1</sup>

Morgan then sets out her first impressions of what a curator was. She describes two people she encountered in her student days in London in the 1980s. The first is a female curator at the Tate who lends young Morgan a copy of her doctoral thesis. Recalling the sound of this curator's heels on the Tate's floor, Morgan describes her as an art historian "indistinguishable in attire from the cliché librarian."<sup>2</sup> Then she describes a second encounter, with the art

historian's male counterpart: "a uniquely British breed of man largely devoid of sexuality, occasionally displaying an incredible breadth of arcane knowledge."<sup>3</sup> This figure came to curating "through ownership and connoisseurship" and embodied "the continuation of a collecting/curating tradition that arguably began with the first curatorial enterprise, the Cabinet of Curiosities."<sup>4</sup>

These figures neatly introduce two historic types of curator (both of whom of course still exist). We might call these types the (academic) scholar and the (aristocratic) connoisseur. For Morgan they are remote, peculiar. To identify with either of them "was out of the question."<sup>5</sup> Morgan identifies herself instead with a third lineage—one aligned with contemporaneous artistic movements, and committed to radicalizing what exhibitions can do and what publics they might address. This type includes the iconic inventors who began to appear in the 1950s and '60s, like Walter Hopps, Pontus Hultén, Kynaston McShine, and Marcia Tucker, figures who will be familiar to many of us.

The oversized personalities and imaginations of this third lineage, Morgan makes clear, set the table for the enlarged status of curators in the contemporary art world. But mapping out this third type also occasions Morgan to worry about the generations of curators who follow them, and who see curating courses as the way to do so. Those most celebrated for their contributions to the field, like Harald Szeemann, Jean Leering, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Carlos Basualdo, or Okwui Enwezor, she cautions, were either self-taught or migrated into exhibition making from

other fields of study entirely, such as theater, architecture, film, politics, or poetry. The great curators did not study curating.<sup>6</sup>

In this light, Morgan ventures, a course of study in curating is likely "a complete waste of time," since it isn't how the great inventors did what they did.<sup>7</sup> And (though this point doesn't quite follow the first) Morgan worries that such courses populate an expanding field of art with a fourth curatorial type: blank-minded professionals clutching newly minted masters degrees. This in turn has had a dulling effect on art and exhibitions. She writes, "With this narrowing of the field of those considered 'qualified' comes the concomitant narrowing of new approaches, non-hierarchical thinking, and attempts to unravel the limited categorizations of art, art history, and exhibition making."<sup>8</sup>

Even a sympathetic reader (which I am) may detect in Morgan's doubts something of a familiar generational complaint: *après moi la merde*. Having taught curatorial practice for the past decade, I would question whether such narrowed "professionalism" is actually what our curriculum offers, or what most of the students I've worked with have aimed to achieve.

Furthermore: does it necessarily follow that however the most famous curators of the previous generation were educated is how the next generations should be? There is a sort of time paradox here, inasmuch as these earlier curators could hardly have attended a course that only came to be later, and which resulted more or less directly from what they achieved.

And: are the possibilities available to that generation—possibilities specific to their lives, institutional contexts, and historical moments—open to, or imaginable for, our students now? Alexander Dörner became director of the Landesmuseum in Hannover at age thirty-two; Harald Szeemann was appointed director of the Kunsthalle Bern at twenty-eight. This speaks to the precociousness of these two men, but also to a somewhat unrecognizable institutional world.

I recoil most from the aspect of Morgan's worries that flattens into caricature a group of students that are internally divided and classed. Perhaps some aim to become fourth-type automatons. Most don't. Some have trust funds. Others don't have two nickels to rub together. They are a differentiated group of individuals with distinct ambitions, attitudes, self-images, ways of talking, bodies of knowledge, geographical origins, and so on, who may share little with one another except the fact that each applied to, and chose to attend, a curating program—not that this, a shared aspiration, is nothing. A serious accounting of such programs would need to begin from these differences.

Despite these criticisms, I find that Morgan's misgivings open up usefully onto other questions. If not "professionalism," or connoisseurship, or art history, then what? I often find myself making contradictory claims about this: on the one hand, arguing that curating is a naturally interdisciplinary practice; on the other, that it embodies a distinct history and an emergent, self-conscious disciplinarity. Can both be the case? Similarly I wonder about the role of

knowledge, research, and technique: what is it useful for our students to "know"?

Beyond the (for me) tainted duo of building a professional network and acclimatizing students to existing discourses and standard practices—the implicit promise of many such programs, I think—what, exactly, should our students learn? What might allow them to continue a project of inventing "new approaches, non-hierarchical thinking, and attempts to unravel the limited categorizations of art, art history, and exhibition making"? What sort of educational scenarios and practices might help put *that* across?

Our group set out to address these questions. The panel participants were Sinéad Hogan and Maeve Connolly, who coordinate the MA in Art and Research Collaboration (ARC) at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology (IADT), Dublin, Ireland; Salwa Mikdadi, who created the educational programs for the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority for museum professionals in the United Arab Emirates; Kit Hammonds, longtime tutor on, and graduate of, the Curating Contemporary Art masters program at the Royal College of Art, London, England; Estelle Nabeyrat, coordinator of L'École du Magasin in Grenoble, France; and María del Carmen Carrión, who organizes Independent Curators International's (ICI) Curatorial Intensives in various cities worldwide.

We began with each participant introducing his or her respective curriculum; these range from short curatorial intensives and occasional courses to formal two-year degree-granting programs. Despite their different

constitutions and contexts, it was striking that most were engaged in an active process of rethinking or modernizing their program—responding to major shifts in the curatorial field, or revising curricula that had become somewhat out of date. The conversation that followed is documented below. Although its three main themes—public address, translation, and spatio-temporal arrangement—answer in only incomplete and introductory ways my more fundamental questions, they nevertheless propose crucial terms on which the future of curatorial education might be staked.

**Julian Myers-Szupinska (JMS)** Often, as we plan curatorial students' final thesis exhibition, which at California College of the Arts is a single, collectively curated exhibition, I ask my students, "To whom will this exhibition be important? How do we engage not only audiences that exist, but call into being publics that might not exist already?" It seems to me that discussions around audience and the public remain too simplistic. We need to think about multiple publics, and the way that forms of address call publics into being, rather than the more conventional language about serving existing communities. So I want to think with all of you about this question: not just about curating, but curating *for whom*, towards which public, and in the process give the idea of the public more texture. I don't see art or exhibitions as absolute values, except inasmuch as they work to say something about the world, and generate a public that can speak from their perspective and position.

**María del Carmen Carrión (MDCC)** These are questions we ask often as well at ICI: who is this exhibition for, and why is it relevant? And so I also want to pose the issue of time—why an exhibition needs to happen now. When we ask it, it's not a question of resources, whether or not there is money to do something, or whether a project will generate a big audience, but whether there is someone who needs to see this, and needs to see it now. In this process the audience is imagined in different ways, often starting with an artistic community. And the public element is very important, and it involves civic responsibility. It's also important not to generalize about how our participants approach this question—more than three hundred people have taken part in ICI's Curatorial Intensives, and each one has approached the experience differently.

**Kit Hammonds (KH)** My own work in the Royal College of Art program often looks at the constitution of a public through an exhibition—this is a primary goal of publication and exhibition, as we imagine them. Or, more importantly, constituting multiple publics: there is the audience, just the sheer number of people who attend a show, but also other, more discrete publics and counter-publics created by that project. It's a strong, if implicit, thread in our program. In the UK, where many programs are funded through the Arts Council, the predominant emphasis in applying for funding is on attending to who the public is and how it benefits from an exhibition. We use that as a tool to open up this discourse. And to think creatively about what that public is, when we are working on our

second-year exhibition, I start by saying it can be *any* public. It's okay to do a project that is for young artists. That's a completely valid, key public. But if you're not aware of what you are doing, if you're not able to think about the relationship between what is in the gallery and who is actually viewing it, then the project is incomplete, effectively and curatorially.

**Salwa Mikdadi (SM)** The question of addressing the public is more holistic than just curatorial work. I'd like to introduce the matter of programming as well. All kinds of programming can reach different publics. This is often left to education departments, but I think it needs to be integrated into curatorial strategy from the beginning.

**JMS** Salwa, one of the things I find inspiring about the work you've done is that you mark out networks of art making, but also work to generate new forms of public life for that work. It's an essential part of your practice.

**SM** It's true. When I started curating artists from the Arab world in the United States, the public was not actually aware that Arabs have contributed substantially to world aesthetics, or even that they do actually have contemporary art. So where do you start? You put the artwork together in an exhibition, and it is the educational program that supports it, rather than didactic material in the gallery.

**Maeve Connolly (MC)** With the MA in Visual Art Practices (MAVIS) course at IADT, which was the precursor to ARC,

our current program, there was an interest in artists, critics, and curators becoming a public themselves. We were creating a discursive space that was performed in public, and that would be open to those beyond the art ecology—but we were most focused on opening up forms of dialogue and exchange that previously hadn't been happening between those practitioners. Towards the end of MAVIS we began to have shows, which were called *Public Gesture*, at Dublin City Council's exhibition space. These were responding to the fact that the City Council had a civic mission and an orientation towards the city that needed to be explored. The students did a lot to think that relationship through, but it was very challenging. With the new ARC program, there's a different frame. We collaborate with the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), which holds a public collection. IMMA will celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding next year, and it will also be the centenary of the Easter Rising, which is a historical moment of origin for the Irish Republic. And so we are reaching out to the Dublin public in a more fundamental way.

**Sinéad Hogan (SH)** I have a different approach to this. I'm always a bit wary of discussion around publics, because, from my point of view, it's important not to determine who, or what, a public is. While the public is important, I don't think there is a public or *the* public. I'm also wary of words like "community"—as if there is the art world, or the artists, or the artwork, and then something completely separate called the public. I like that the French word for "exhibition"

is *exposition*, because one can translate it as, simply, exposing something. I prefer to talk about "making-open," and seeing what happens.

**Estelle Nabeyrat (EN)** I totally agree. Our program is located in Grenoble, a very small city. We more or less know what kind of public we have. Nevertheless, our students work closely with the *service du public* of Le Magasin when organizing their final exhibition project, always bearing in mind the idea of how to constitute a potential new public through the specificity of their project.

**Kitty Scott (from the audience)** This has seemed to me so far a very naïve discussion. I work in a big museum; people pay twenty-dollar entry fees. We have a remit to make successful, blockbuster shows. Our environment and way of thinking is completely risk-averse, unlike school. I'm curious if you talk with your students about audience in this real-world museum environment.

**mc** In our specific case, we're working with IMMA, which doesn't at the moment generate its income from entrance fees. Their exhibitions are free to the public. But IMMA is under significant pressure from its funders to demonstrate that it has a broad demographic reach, that it has engagement and support from a community that is not just composed of tourists but also a wider public. There has to be a depth of support for a public contemporary art institution. Although this may be a familiar situation, it is specific

in Ireland. After the economic crash in 2008 there was a backlash against the relationship between art, design, architecture, and property. It did have an impact on public—by which I mean taxpayer—support for public institutions. Our program is under no direct pressure to respond to that, but one of the things the ARC program brings into the institution is the possibility of talking and thinking about the implications. Our presence in the museum brings something important to their understanding of what the museum can be and do. It supports the institution in other ways than bringing lots of footfall through the exhibitions.

**JMS** Kitty, your challenge calls up for me some questions I had in regard to Reesa Greenberg's presentation. The presentation of the money situation in these sorts of collections and institutions, for me, risks totalization. Auction houses and blockbuster exhibitions are just one part of the art world, admittedly a very visible part. But there are many contexts in which people encounter art and exhibition, and the situation you describe is not where every one of our students intends to be, and not where many of them end up. That said, I think we could approach this question differently. As I was watching the presentations today, it occurred to me that the exhibitions produced by these programs had something like a particular, shared style. They definitely *aren't* blockbuster exhibitions. Might programs in curatorial education foster a certain peculiar style of exhibition, and their students gravitate to a certain sort of artist? Raqs Media Collective seems to be a recurring

inclusion, or Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries. Obviously these highly specialized practices and styles are not wholly accessible to the sort of public Kitty is talking about.

KH I agree—to an extent. The stylistic element you refer to also spreads through the whole art world. These artists are the popular people; it's not surprising that young curators would look towards them. To go back to the context of populism—Kitty, I presume you work in an institution that doesn't just program blockbusters, but also organizes community engagement projects with artists, school visits, and so on. We're interested in building a whole ecology. Our projects aren't simply for that fee-paying audience. If you are seeking that out, you're going to be working with Maurizio Cattelan, or somebody who is a guaranteed draw, whose work is exciting and fun—someone who, as a curator, you know has popular appeal. But you don't do that project and only take account of that attendant audience. You also look to build other publics. And that should be the case whatever scale you're working on, even if it's an artist-run project. It's not about "community engagement," necessarily, to think that the person in the space next to your non-profit art space may actually want to come to your shows, that meeting your neighbor might not be a bad idea. That's not policy driven, it's about human contact.

Kristina Lee Podesva (from the audience) I have a question about language. Obviously many of you are from places where people speak languages besides English, and so, often,

are our students. In my personal practice I've tried to grapple with using different languages, or working to translate important texts from other languages into English. But in the classroom—where I teach writing—I've found it very difficult. I try to bring in writers who originally wrote in other languages or who are bi- or multi-lingual. Sometimes I ask the students to give me foreign language terms appropriate to an art-critical context that cannot be translated into English. But there isn't enough time in the classroom to grapple with another language. So what I'm looking for is strategies. How, as teachers, have you dealt with this? As Salwa said, her students are reading in English, and there are words that have no corresponding term in Arabic—that is a problem. We say this is a global art system, but is this true only in a financial sense, not in a cultural sense?

SM I don't have an answer for the classroom, unfortunately, just a story. The British Museum's exhibition *A History of the World in 100 Objects* traveled to Manarat Al Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi last year. The title was translated into Arabic almost word for word, without thinking about what "object" would mean when translated. In Arabic the word for an object in a museum is generally *قطعة*; the root of that word is "to snatch," or "tear away." When you think about it—when you think about where that piece was, before it was torn away from its origin—then the whole meaning of the exhibition's title, which in English is completely generic, is totally changed. If the curator takes time to understand the relevance of these words in different cultures, it may

change the meaning of, and even enrich, their educational program.

**SH** I think translation is an important practice—most obviously between different cultures and languages, but also because the art object is itself predominantly non-linguistic. So translation happens immediately: the work of art is taken out of place, interpreted, positioned. Thinking about this fact within the curatorial might be a way of opening a more literal approach to different languages.

**MDC** I can say two things. The first is more pragmatic, or literal. When we've held curatorial intensives in Latin America, we could have conducted them in English, but we would have attracted a very specific kind of applicant. I refused to do that, because that would have determined the participating curators by class and access. They would have had to come from private schools and would have learned English when they were growing up. We decided to do it the other way around, and to teach in Spanish. But when we began to compile a reader, we discovered that there were very few appropriate texts in Spanish. So we had to translate a reader into Spanish, which we are still in the process of editing, because translation is not so simple. That's one element. The other thing to say about translation is that we invite curators to programs in multiple locations, and we see curators who are multi-lingual present the same projects in different languages. They present the same project, but they sound completely different! In Spanish they

might speak faster, more passionately or poetically. English gives you a different structure so you can deliver a different kind of thinking. So translation helps, but there is a lot that goes missing. The beauty of having people come from different backgrounds and languages is when you can't find a word because the concept doesn't exist in a particular language, you have to re-create it, introducing a whole new understanding. A great example is when we talk about finances, we talk about the "financial landscape"—but even if these words have equivalents in another language, their combination might be nonsensical. Translation happens whenever you put people from different places and backgrounds in conversation. It's part of the trade. You have to embrace it, and to risk failure. That's also the beauty of it.

**JMS** If we are making propositions for the future, this might be one: to resolve to expand beyond the English language, to work intently on the process of translation. If the project of internationalizing curatorial practice and building connections among places is to be anything other than empire by other means, this has to be a central premise.

**MDC** We have to be very careful about this, though. I get nervous whenever we start talking about "globalizing the discourse." It has a neo-colonialist undertone that worries me. While ICI has a global reach, because we go to many different places, we really care about the specificity of the discourse in those places. By traveling to many places, we are not trying to globalize, we're trying to be more specific.



**SM** It's not just an issue of translation but of working language. What is happening to the actual discipline when it is taught in a second language—teaching in English to students who primarily speak Arabic, for example—and not the student's primary language? If not using a working language, the student may not develop, may not come up with the right words or interpretations. This is another facet of the issue. How do you explain theories and concepts? When we translate into Arabic, we often realize that the words are outdated, because Arabic has not been a working language in this discipline.

**Nontobeko Ntombela (from the audience)** It's something we reflect on in the context of South Africa: the fact that there are "many Englishes." Understanding is multi-faceted, and we should think as well of the many accents *within* English. There is not just one type of English and not one type of understanding.

**JMS** Can I add to this conversation a worry? I worry that we increasingly conceive of curatorial education and practice as primarily a linguistic and administrative practice, and that what this emphasis leaves out is the important sense of exhibitions as spatial and visual production. I've had a proposition knocking around in my head for a while that we should start to think of spatio-temporal production as a central component of curatorial education. It's not a part of any curatorial curriculum I know, and I think it should be.

**MBCC** How would you *teach* spatio-temporal arrangement, though? Maybe we need someone to develop an app that allows us to imagine and arrange things in three dimensions [laughter]? We at ICI do think about time and space in a certain way, by using the cities where we stage intensives as training tools. It's not just about museums and exhibitions: we use the city, we try to understand how it is laid out, and how this layout informs its social aspects. We invite architectural historians and urban planners to lecture. And we also do the classic exhibition walkthroughs and discussions, asking what the students would change: "If you had to remove two objects in this room, how would that affect the space? What other sort of exhibition would this become?" But I think you are talking about something else. I am curious to know if any of you have other tricks.

**SH** One of the things we do is ask undergraduate art students to make a work in response to a proposed IMMA exhibition theme or to works selected by one of the museum's curators. The ARC curators then select works made by the students, which in turn become part of an exhibition. Currently they're devising a furniture display in response to an unrealized work by Sol LeWitt. IMMA will never be able to realize the LeWitt drawing, because of the nature of the space for which it was proposed. So the students have devised a different project in response to the work, which will eventually be exhibited. To speak to Julian's point, the discourse we're facilitating through this collaboration, though it creates a public discourse, is not

a *linguistic* discourse. It's responding to sets of objects, circumstances, and sites. But these are not linguistic styles related to operating within space, and neither are they a lingua franca. There is no neutral, global, international style—of anything.

KH What María del Carmen has described is something we might do as well, which is to see the exhibition in a spatio-temporal context. But that's still a linguistic discourse—you end up having a conversation. I'll give an example drawn from the curatorial workshops I run with artists, which become about placing objects in a space and temporarily moving them around, not to see what "looks good," but to see how different forms of arrangement, taxonomies, and classification systems can be represented in a spatio-temporal form. We have the curatorial students do test cases, if you like, but never this hands-on moving things around. Maybe there's another side of curatorial education outside of a curatorial program, working with artists and designers, where there seems to be more freedom to take a room and turn it into a temporary exhibition, for the sake of finding out what those arrangements might be. It will still be discussed in the end, but the hands-on nature might be more important than the virtual, SketchUp version, which remains a proposal stage.

JMS "Hands-on moving things around" is more or less what I have in mind. We all know it is a crucial part of what curators do, and what they value. And we know it is an essential

part of how exhibitions construct meaning for the people who engage with them. Spatial arrangement is one way that curatorial practice, at its best, thinks. And so the fact that our students encounter this aspect of the job only in happenstance ways—suddenly and with little groundwork while installing their final shows, for example—seems to me a shocking absence. I think that emphasizing this aspect of curatorial work would have certain useful effects as well. It might distinguish what the discipline does from the sort of gatekeeping and tastemaking with which it is frequently associated. Curating is a lot more than building a checklist. And as Kit suggests, emphasizing this visual and spatial nature of exhibition making might reconnect curating with its long prehistory in artistic practice or design and their forms of education. That, I think, would be a future worth pursuing.

This discussion was transcribed and edited by Julian Myers-Szupinska.

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|---|---|---|-----------------------|
| 1 | Jessica Morgan, "What Is a Curator?,"             | 4 | <i>Ibid.</i>          |
|   | in <i>Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating</i> , | 5 | <i>Ibid.</i>          |
|   | ed. Jens Hoffmann (Milan: Mousse                  | 6 | <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 24. |
|   | Publishing, 2013), p. 21.                         | 7 | <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 27. |
| 2 | <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 22.                             | 8 | <i>Ibid.</i>          |
| 3 | <i>Ibid.</i>                                      |   |                       |

**Great Expectations:  
Prospects for the Future of Curatorial  
Education**

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