

Role Changes of the Artist and the Curator

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Abstract—In the light of recent changes to the traditional role of artists and curators, this essay seeks to consider how these changes have impacted on cultural institutions. The major reasons for implementation of the role changes are analyzed and summarized, together with an assessment of likely future institutional challenges.

Keywords—*artist; curator; relationship; change*

I. INTRODUCTION

Entering the 21st century, revolution changes in business, culture and museum environment will inevitably lead to the role challenge impact and fundamentally challenges the basic theory of relationship between artists and curators. This article proposes improvement measures from the impact of role changes on traditional museum models.

II. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CURATORS AND ARTISTS AND THE INFLUENCE OF THEIR ROLE CHANGES ON CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

A. *Traditional Relationship Between Artists and Curators*

Smith points out in *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012) that curating is no longer confined to the exhibition venue, and that curators serve more as intermediaries between artists and audiences to continuously interpret contemporary art for the public. Furthermore, Smith asserts that modern curators must be collaborative, working in close liaison with artists rather than confining their role to that of commissioning specific works of art. From the mid-20th century onwards, the passage of time has ensured that “curator” has become a synonym for some high-profile personages. These people curate, select and exhibit contemporary art, manipulate tastes, and promote the success of ‘their’ artists. Some say that curators have become celebrities in their own right. This chapter is concerned with examining the evolution of the artist-curator relationship and its concomitant effects on the cultural institutions and artwork exhibitions supported by modern-day curators. The relationship between traditional artists and curators can be divided into power relationship, partnership and conflict.

1) Power relationship: Has the relationship between artists and curators changed over the years? In the 1950s, curators were regarded as absolute arbiters of art, exhibition knowledge and truth in a role that was almost entirely bureaucratic. In modern times, the relationship between curators and artists has been diversified. Compared with the

bureaucratic role of the past, curators are now involved in a power relationship with artists. “The work of a curator is a kind of privilege, and the work process is not as simple as power distribution” (*Developing Exhibitions and Projects*). Particularly in some formal cultural institutions, the power relationship is contracted with salaries and tasks are clearly stipulated. Therefore, curators with the best artworks at their disposal are justified as being considered to be arbiters of taste. This seems to be a symbol of power and reflects the mainstream values of society. The broader expectation of curators often subjugates artists to some degree, resulting in curators adopting a high-profile and often celebrity status which carries a risk of mistrust and misunderstanding on both sides. When the power relationship exists in cultural exhibitions, artists, commentators and the public might feel frustrated about the cultural institutions’ professionalism and authoritativeness (Becky Shaw).

2) Partnership: In some senses, artists and curators coexist and seek cooperation with each other. As Noel Kelly said, “Curators can, to some artists, provide corresponding suggestions, necessary consulting services and support. Even when artists want to make a breakthrough, curators can consciously reflect such attempts and help them to prepare for future exhibitions so as to live up to the expectations of target audiences. These circumstances constitute a partnership between artists and curators.” (*Artists and Curators*, Noel Kelly) An exhibition is a continuous and long-term requirement for curators. Curators are good at different fields. This makes it possible for curators to form long-term partnership with artists, through which curators can update their exhibition concepts and operational methods. On the other hand, curators can help artists to broaden their horizons, endow their artworks with a new ideological connotation by combining specific cultural and historical backgrounds, create new possibilities of cooperation, forge new connections between different works and ideas, and coordinate between cultural institutions and artists (Mark Soo, *Multimedia Installation Artist*, and Canada). “A good curator should give artists confidence, encourage their adventurous spirit, provide valuable suggestions, and contribute to the development of artists and their artworks.” (Song-Ming Ang, *Artist*, Singapore) To cultural institutions, partnership between artists and curators is a positive, but rare, long-term interaction.

3) *Conflict*: Conflict between curators and artists is inevitable. Curators have the absolute authority of “knowing who is a part of the universe” (Bourdieu 1993 164) and who is not. Although art is a subject open to interpretation by artists, curators may feel it is their role to define art, leading to conflict about whose artistic viewpoint holds the ultimate merit and value. A case in point is the conflict between artists and curators of Tochigi Prefectural Museum (Masaaki Morishita: P97). Combinations of different professions might create some challenging surprises. The most interesting phenomenon in the independent investment and curating era is the combination of artists and curators into a single role. In the following part, the author focuses on two special relationships between contemporary artists and curators, namely “curator as artist” and “artist as curator”.

B. Curator as an Artist

One way for curators to become artists is to study and become familiar with the way artists work, and display their artworks in different categories. An exhibition curated by a curator is regarded as an art, and the public understands a curator to be a creator and artist. Artists and their works are just elements that constitute the artwork of a curator. “The rise of curator as creator has been a major factor influencing the contemporary art reform.” (Altshuler, B., 1994)

In considering the evolution of an exhibition, the curator should become more inter-active with what an artist has produced and actively respond to the artistic piece. (A possible explanation, in the opinion of the author, is that curators were previously expected to coordinate the placement of an artwork of a suitable size in a suitable place, but the need now is to learn more about the artworks, respond to the content and background, and make corresponding adjustments to ensure they are more in line with the exhibition theme). The role evolution has brought a dramatic change in the career of curators. Furthermore, curators are being enthused by their new opportunities and in the process, are becoming part of the art creation process rather than simply bystanders. Hans Ulrich Obrist points out that “a curator's role is no longer just to place different items in a space, but as a coordinator of different artworks, objects and ideas, who can “connect different cultural fields together” (Obrist, 2014: 24).

Exhibition space has created the possibility of new dialogue, which has influenced the way that exhibitions are displayed for the public and caused changes to the role of curator. As Daniel Buren points out from the perspective of institutional criticism, that cultural institutions (mainly referring to “museums”) add “frames” to things they exhibit in an “indelible” way. This triggers a series of criticisms about the ideological basis and the institutional framework of museums as well as a top-down self-investigation process. Finally, a new framework is shaped. Therefore, the internal structure and institutional changes of a cultural institution have influenced the activities of curators, thereby verifying the exhibition theory espoused by Luhmann. (Luhmann's exhibition theory mainly shows how a curator turns himself into an artist. The exhibition space of a museum and art

gallery serves as the curator's canvas. Artworks by different artists are his pigments. Through arrangement, modification and provision of art evidence, the curator conveys something to the public as if finishing an artwork). When artworks, objects or ideas are mixed together, the curator marks and proves his understanding of relics and their connections, and such connections are conveyed visually or non-orally. Exhibition has been a new potential space for dialogue, which can (or at least may) give full play to ideas, concepts and knowledge of curators during the whole realization and exhibition process (Curator as Artist as Curator, 2015).

The curator's personal style is usually evident in a modern exhibition, and will be critical in whether or not the public accept the artistic premise. Thus, to achieve success in the staging of an exhibition, a curator must display originality, creativity and clarity. (Style is similar to the signature of an artist or a creator. Jens Hoffman emphasizes the importance of curators seeking their rights as a writer.) All these points justify the evolution of curators from the previous art creation organizers and carriers to becoming active participants in the art creation process. They curate the exhibition with the mentality, and from the perspective, of an artist. As Deborah Pearson written, “Curating is a creative behavior” and increases the complexity of the relationship between artworks and the curator. Harald Szeemann is widely regarded as a pioneer and representative of the liberalization movement. He compares the role of curator to that of the conductor of a symphony orchestra (Obrist, H. U., 2008). Public exhibition has appeared as another form of artwork. The curator tries to build connections through collections of different depths and breadths, and allows visitors to consider new ideas about the creation and development of the visual arts in the 21st century through juxtaposition between the objects. An artwork is deliberately placed next to another to allow audiences to compare their differences and similarities.

A curator chooses artworks based on their aesthetic and historical value. These artworks can be considered as a role in the visual symphony. They can exist either independently or mutually coordinate with each other. However, the trend of “curator as artist” has also aroused opposition and some interesting results. The role transition of “artist as curator” has increased the hostility of many artists to curators. Some artists denounce curators, saying that “the original creator should be outside the exhibition organizers.”

The secondary creation rights of curators has disturbed the former role of artists as primary creators and has led to artists losing their autonomy (Ramirez, M. C 2001). Raluca Cerneip (33) cites the example of the “Site Santa Fe Biennale” in the US in which different curators were responsible for individual stations. The artists themselves, and their artworks which formed the displays, were relegated to a minor role, with curators at the forefront of exhibition advertising, articles and criticisms, to the extent that, rather than anticipating promotion of their art and ideas, the artists received little or no specific attention. Another example is from Hans Ulrich Obrist, the most authoritative curator in art circles as rated by Art Review, a British magazine. At the time, the British media reported, “He is a curator not an artist.

Now, curators are regarded as the real driving force and shakers of the art world” (Observer Staff, 2009: 2). Interviews with some artists show that they want to limit the influence of exhibition workers (curators) (Pip Laurenson, 2005). In fact, not only have artists responded to the negative influence of the phenomenon, some curators have also put forward their ideas. For example, the independent Austrian curator, Robert Fleck, said frankly, “A curator is not an artist” (Fleck, R. p200). Sue Spaid retorted with Ventzislavov's ideas, saying that “A curator contributes the cognition value instead of art value. There is a striking difference between a curator and an artist.” (Revisiting Ventzislavov's Thesis: “Curating Should Be Understood as a Fine Art”) “It is appropriate to say that we are more likely to remember curators and the concept completeness of exhibitions curated by them rather than artists participating in exhibitions, because artworks and artists are all subsumed by the identity of the whole curatorial endeavor. However, the whole curatorial endeavor cannot represent the importance of artworks. Without artworks, there will be no exhibitions” (O'Neill 2010: 255). Without artists and their concepts and strategies, there will be no emancipation of exhibitions. Jens Hoffmann suggests that curators learn from artists in order to remove them from the artistic scene almost entirely. It is fair to say that there will always be a dichotomy between curators and artists who should learn to cooperate but will always have areas of conflict. Different art fields are becoming more integrated and the connection between curators and artists has never been so intimate. Although the public admits the curator as artist or creator, it does not mean that curators should attempt to push artists away from the spotlight. Therefore, curators are playing an increasingly important role and taking on more and more responsibilities which is now become a common phenomenon. Through creative ideas, curators have made themselves into a part of the art and creative field, and won attention and reputation. At present, the curator confirms a theme or an idea first. The next step is to ask artists participating in the exhibition to prove the feasibility of the theme. Therefore, an increasing number of modern exhibitions pay more attention to satisfying curators rather than incorporating the ideas of artists or art studios. It is an open question yet to be answered definitively whether or not this aspect is positive or negative.

C. Artist as Curator

The above chapter discusses “curator as artist”, one of the two special relationships between artists and curators during the evolution process. Against the contemporary background, curating methods keep evolving, thus creating more opportunities for curators to enter the field formerly exclusive to artists. On the contrary, artists have also become curators. If “curator as artist” is a new fashion, then “artist as curator” is another. The radical self-curating scholar was regarded as a pioneer of “artist-curator” and “artist-curated exhibition”. In the early 20th century, the avant-garde movement organized many exhibitions without the help of any establishment institutions or curators. Many artists involved in the movement were despised by mainstream society. At the time, the role of curating was about taking

care of collections in museums in contrast to the creative work done by modern curators (Moment Ginza). Another more modern example of an artist-curated exhibition was held in the Magasin Art Centre in Grenoble, France. Prior to the formation of “curator” in the fully professional sense, artists tried to select the positions in which to display their artworks, organize scenarios, and design financing plans which endowed artists with better reception conditions. In the 20th century, there was a similar abnormal phenomenon. Artists not only quietly made exhibits in studios, but also planned channels for demonstration and communication of their works (Elena Filipovic). Apart from the above ancient (and inhumane) censorship, contempt from the mainstream social culture and artists' lack of adequate funding, the role change of artist as curator should also be attributed to friction between artists and curators. Some of the causes of the friction felt by artists included their perception of a gradual loss of autonomy over their own work, collaborative divergence of views and problematic working relationships. These perceptions prompted artists to curate exhibitions of their own. On the one hand, they personally coordinated the relationship with galleries and museums, and invited sellers of paintings and collectors to appreciate their works; on the other, they coped with sales, logistics, maintenance and other affairs (Raluca Cernei, p38). Artist-curators avoided curating based on preconceptions and explored exhibition rules for new works. This allowed them to enter the art market as an original entity instead of another color on the palette of curators. Furthermore, artists and curators may have very different perceptions of the appreciation of artworks. The artist-curators choose artworks for an exhibition not as an attempt to put these exhibits in a more magnificently themed background but to show uniqueness, aesthetics and the glory of the artwork. This divides artist-curators from general artists. History, age, nationality or even media or style are not their concerns, and artworks are connected in an extremely direct way (Laura Hoptman). They have more vigor and imagination, and exhibitions curated by them are thus more radical. As long as artist-curators are there, they do not have to worry that an exhibition will be turned into a stable set of regulations and systems set by impractical exhibition organizers (curators), or into one-dimensional and impractical art games. After all, artists are more likely to save a poorly-curated exhibition (Jens Hoffmann). Artists with galleries also think that they can do a better job than curators (Who's Driving? The Artist as Curator). This confidence might originate from their better knowledge of artists' demands (although many curators are also artists), but dissenting voices show no signs of this difficulty coming to an end. For example, many founders of modern art museums are also pioneering curators, ranging from Alfred Barr, first director in 1929 of the Museum of Modern Art of New York, to Hofmann, creator of Vienna's Museum des 20. It is true to say that most influential exhibitions are curated by art professionals rather than by artists (Henry Jackson Newcomb, The roles of the artist & curator, in relation to the exhibiting of art). An article points out that “due to their arrogance, curating might easily be out of control” (Anton Vidokle, 2010). In the history of art, exhibitions curated by artists are mentioned. For example, Inside the White Cube: Ideologies

of the Gallery Space by Brian O'Doherty and *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* by Bruce Altshuler, both pay attention to the curating behaviors of artists.

D. Potential Role Challenge of Future Curators, and the Relationship Between Future Curators, Artists and Cultural Institutions

After a thorough review of the historical role of curators and the evolution of the relationship between curators and artists, there remains an outstanding issue about the role changes of future curators. Will curating be a profession or can everyone be a curator? Will curating be orientated to more professional audiences or general audiences? How should curators curate through cultural institutions? Along with changes of art creations and perceptions, the concept about who can be a curator has become flexible. It originates from a clear-cut concept, that is, a curator must be engaged in historical research and work in a museum which, in later times, also covers artists. Recent years have seen a broadening of the concept, making it possible for anyone to become a curator, such as a community curator or a software curator in charge of iTunes collections. It seems that the art world has accepted the broadening concept of "curator" to include artists, cultural institutions and self-proclaimed curators (Raluca Cernei, 2014: 40) and that "everyone as curator" has become a ubiquitous slogan. However, the author does not agree that everyone can be a qualified curator. "Curating" your life concept is an excuse for high-end consumption (Kelvin Browne, 2011). To be a good curator relies on an in-depth understanding of the role positioning of curators, which means neither offside nor inaction. Diverse challenges await future curators, including: the changing role of cultural institutions (e.g. museums); the metamorphosis of public spaces into areas for social and/or educational activities; commercial demands; the popularity of art coupled with a lower threshold for entry (e.g. Fashion such as WeMedia, John Spear, 2011). Furthermore, there is increasing competition between cultural institutions, independent curators and artist curators. Apart from the point above, the introduction of new media art is a challenge to the traditional cultural institutions. The development of digital and information technology has also affected the property and structure of cultural institutions in the last few years and has extensively changed the role of cultural institutions. If traditional cultural institutions are to adapt to new media art, they must transform themselves. Curator should cooperate with artists, develop and display artistic work and demonstrate cooperative behavior. In general, the influence of the new media art on cultural institutions is considerably positive. It constitutes contemporary art practices and also expands the artistic concept. With progress in art form, the use of new media from dynamic to metaphor art may expand the public's comprehension of art history. (Christiane Paul 2015:84)

III. CONCLUSION

The art world is ever-changing with different roles blending with each other, adjusting themselves and seeking

for development. Therefore, curators should not just be administrators and organizers, and artists should not confine themselves to art creations. In terms of contemporary art, there is no distinct boundary between the roles of artists and curators. Instead, the boundary is integrating and blurring. No matter in which curating practices, "curators", "artists" "artists as curators" and "curators as artists" — all these relationships are not concrete but frequently reinterpreted and transformed. As curators and artists become involved in each other's work, they are invading each other's field. Causes behind the role changes are diversified and keep changing. Response to the issues ranges from approval through to harsh criticism. However, the mixed activities seem to be burgeoning and evolving into things which will appear in the future. There is a dichotomy between "curators as artists" and "artists as curators". To comprehend the separation, one should recognize and become familiar with the definition of "artists" and "curators" so as to better grasp these mixed roles. "Artist-curator" properly describes an artist performing temporarily as a curator, but "curator as artist" mistakenly indicates engagement of a curator in the creation of the artistic process. The concept of 'art' describes a creative field but is not prescriptive and may include the artist-curator although a clear definition of this role has yet to emerge. Furthermore, as perception modes change dramatically, art is not the only field which is being influenced. In fact, the public is also often influenced and therefore the concept of exactly who can be a curator has been changed irrevocably.

Based on the above discussion and analysis, the following conclusions are reached:

Firstly, the public and the cultural institutions still need an intermediary to connect them with artworks. From ancient times to the present, curators have continued to change their role. Their newly-defined role incorporates the concept of creativity - exhibition design founded on ideas, emotions, and so on in addition to (or instead of) administrative and managerial tasks. As such, they have a major role to play in changing public opinion and public ideas about art and its place in the world. Thanks to the role, they can share their agendas and ideas with the public. Curators turn artworks recognized by them into their unique brand. Their work thus becomes more comprehensive and equally important to that of the artists.

The second conclusion is about how different types of curators have emerged in recent years. Previously, curators in cultural institutions were restricted by administration regulations imposed by the museums' management. Currently, curators in these institutions have turned to a role which permits more freedom and communication with the public. Furthermore, the author has noticed another important development, that is, the emergence of independent curators. The concept first appeared in the 1970s but has now become an important part of the art world. By definition, independent curators are professionals working outside institutions and with the freedom to choose their own artists.

Thirdly, the author believes that the public and cultural institutions are the greatest beneficiaries of this ever-changing relationship. An increasing number of artists are becoming curators in their own right due to a much freer environment in the cultural and artistic fields. This freedom allows them to extend their range of skills into mounting exhibitions that showcase the concepts and significance behind their art works on a personal level rather than the former reliance on the artistic concept promoted by an institution. However, it is an indisputable fact that curators are now major performers in terms of an exhibition. As previously mentioned, there is no clear boundary between artists and curator. The two both have proponents and opponents resulting in a stalemate. However, such competition is a benign one, which can lift the art to a new level. The benign competition has created many advanced techniques and creative artworks, thus gaining recognition from the public and winning more job opportunities from cultural institutions.

Finally, the author recommends that the tremendous contributions from curators to the art world should be fully recognized by the public. In future, curators may well be leaders of the art world. However, without the hardworking creations of artists and the coordination efforts of cultural institutions, curators cannot find meaning for their activities and existence. Different elements in the art world are closely connected and rely on each other. No single role, curator and/or artist, is more important than the other.

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