

Who's Driving? The Artist as Curator

Every self-respecting young artist at some point or other takes the wheel and organises a project or group show that involves others. Curation is now a multi-functional word expressing the role of the person who looks after a collection of artworks, the person who decides which objects sit next to each other in an exhibition, the person who works closely with the artist to develop a new project, to the person who displays their colleagues' or friends' work in an empty warehouse. The Taxi Gallery is led by an artist, Kirsten Lavers, and it is interesting to ask whether an artist working as curator represents any significant development from established curatorial practices. By exploring the role of the curator, then focusing on the relationship between artist and curator, the following text will ask whether artist-curator models maintain conventional artist-curator relationships (whatever these are) or offer something different. To explore the subtleties, a small number of different curators/artists were asked to describe their aspects of their practice.

We often talk of curators (and writers, critics etc) as gatekeepers to visibility in the artworld. Opportunities to work with reputable organisations normally happen through a process of endorsement, when artists are validated by working with other recognised establishments. As the person who has some control over what represents art of the highest quality, the curator is an arbiter of taste, appearing to have the authority to represent a society's values. As a result of this, artists, and theorists etc, are often critical of, and frustrated by, this power relationship. However, the curator's role and control over artistic visibility is complex. The (good) curator is the intersection between artist and audience, a go-between looking to ensure the audience is given the best possible opportunity to engage with an artist's work, and that the artist has the best possible chance of communicating to an audience. Artists seek to occupy this territory by running galleries etc, but there is also a gradual movement towards artists taking control and delighting in this relationship with an audience, through practices deemed 'relational' or 'engaged'. So where does this leave the role of the curator? Not redundant of course, as when institutions become involved with these kind of practices they still need someone to mediate the relationship between the artist and the institution and to make sure the project is a success. However, the advent of these practices, plus 1970s onwards practices of institutional critique, and a general critique of cultural authority have all led to a decline in confidence or belief in the power of curators.

One contemporary debate about museum collections, reveals this uncertainty. Many museums have been getting rid of their collections, concerned that the objects will reveal their own vision and connoisseurship. They doubt their authority, concerned that their vision of the past/present might be wrong and that it ought not shape the future so heavily. Rather than being the gatekeepers of culture they have become nervous of imposing any views whatsoever. This 'hands off' approach has worrying implications for the future, leading to empty or

safe museum collections¹. Perhaps the current artist-led projects or other curatorial practices which seek to 'give space' to artists also fall into the same trap, forgetting that the battle between two conflicting visions might actually generate something exciting.

Artists operating as curator generally adopt the same practices as used by their salaried colleagues, but their reasons for taking this action may be different. Artists function as curators in an attempt to gain visibility for practices they respect, including their own. It is an attempt to own the process of distribution rather than be subject to it. Martha Rosler indicates the conventional differences in the roles of artist and curator or distributor:

*'Artists may channel mysterious energies, but others get to make the choices. Choice trumps creation, and choice is linked to all rewards, including an enlarged audience for the chosen artists' work*²

Artists who set up galleries also do it because they believe they may be able to do it better than curators. This belief may be because they feel they understand the needs of artists better (although many curators have also been artists) or because they think they are free from institutional conventions or pressures. Some believe they can do it in a way which does not involve the repetition of what is perceived to be conventional hierarchies. If novel structures are found this is exciting, but many repeat the same structures but claim to be different simply on the grounds of being artist-led, as Liam Gillick suggests,

*'the idea that a show organised by an artist is essentially more worthy than a show put together by a gallery works against a pointed and radical reassessment of how art could now be in the sense that it reinforces the idea that artists are fundamentally interesting and operating under a different (read higher) moral code than anyone else, especially art dealers'*³

While the product of an artist curating may not look different, there can be different social outcomes. One reason for artists setting up galleries or curatorial projects is the desire to energise their locality by providing a focus for artistic activity and dialogue. Artist Ricardo Basbaum believes that 'etc-artists'⁴, or artists

¹ Jenkins T (2004) 'Use it or lose it' *The Spectator*, 7 February. p.35.

² Rosler M (2003) *Someone Says...*
The Next Documenta Should Be Curated By an Artist. Copyrights Jens Hoffmann and Electronic Flux Corporation. http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/cover.html.

³ Gillick, L (1993) *Curating for Pleasure and Profit*. *Art Monthly*. June. P.15-18.

⁴ Basbaum, R "I love 'Etc Artists'" *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated By an Artist*. Copyrights Jens Hoffmann and Electronic Flux Corporation. http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/cover.html

that curate, write etc, do create something qualitatively different, activating a series of networks, which enable the circulation of practice through non-institutionalised structures. It is the actual affect on relationships which is different, above and beyond what is achieved in the art work itself,

*'When artists curate, they cannot avoid mixing their artistic investigations with the proposed curatorial project: for me, this is the strength and singularity they bring to curating. The event can have a chance to become clearly embedded in a network of proximate knots, enhancing the circulation of "sensorial" and "affective" energy - a flow which the field of art has managed to comprehend in terms of its economy and circulation.'*⁵

Liam Gillick also testifies to artist-led activity as a force for generating communication between artists, to a greater extent than in institutional practices:

*'not to say that artists are resistant to being represented by that system, more that they have developed their own proven means by which a dynamic discourse can take place'*⁶

Most importantly, some artists curate because, like some curators, they are deeply interested in and committed to the practices of others, or the discursive process involved in forming a new work, for example, Robin Klassnik and Matt's Gallery.

The only time artist as curator (or indeed curator as curator) changes the conventional structure of 'worker' and 'owner of the means of production' is when they find a different structure of operation and the definitions become irrelevant:

*'a curator has become just another individual in the complex web of cultural production that defines how we contextualise current activities and therefore the whole process is open to flux and change'*⁷

As Nicolas Bourriaud describes in 'Postproduction', there are a range of practitioners who are working as 'producers'. This word describes most effectively a process which involves creating a 'production' from beginning to end. The distribution is incorporated, like any commodity, in its conception. Bourriaud discusses this as the territory of artists, seldom mentioning curators,

⁵ Basbaum, R. "I love 'Etc Artists'" *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated By an Artist*. Copyrights Jens Hoffmann and Electronic Flux Corporation. http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/cover.html.

⁶ Gillick, L (1993) Curating for Pleasure and Profit. *Art Monthly*. June. P.15-18.

⁷ Gillick, L (1993) Curating for Pleasure and Profit. *Art Monthly*. June. P.15-18.

and yet these practices are the terrain of both, and perhaps the arena where both can work together without distinction. However, many of the projects Bourriaud describes still take place in large institutions. The curator is never mentioned but I suspect they are still involved. Some might argue that such a fluid world of 'producers' would lead to a loss of unique skills and important distinctions. However, perhaps in reality the skills are not unique, but simply a socially created distinction serving the needs of institutions.

Throughout the range of practices encompassed in curating there is always a relationship between an artist and a curator, and this relationship is rarely discussed and is not intended to be visible in the resulting work. In a formal gallery context the relationship is contracted, to clarify conditions of pay and tasks, whereas in the situation of an artist curating a show with artist friends there is no desire for contracts. However, neither the paper, or social, contract accounts fully for the unique environment, atmosphere and expectations created by an individual curator, and then the form of the relationship that is developed with the artist. It seems that this relationship, which normally has a power structure purely because one person is in charge of the distribution of the work (or the purse strings) is never black or white, and has enormous potential to be explored.

In order to understand whether Kirsten Laver's role as artist-curator of Taxi Gallery is different to role of a curator, three questions were put to Kirsten and also to Ceri Hand, Senior Curator at FACT, Liverpool. The same questions were also put to Kelly Large, an artist who uses curatorial processes to form her work, for example in the project QSL, where artists and writers are commissioned to interpret an audio playlist (built by Large herself) resulting in a radio broadcast work.

'Is the relationship between you and the artists you work with 'equal'?'

Kirsten sees the process of working with an artist as an 'exchange', a moment when either artist and curator initiate a working relationship, leading to joint working,

'Each relationship is a conversation, a series of stages/steps in which at different times, either the artist or myself as project initiator takes the lead to propose, suggest, draft, time-table, imagine, experiment and make remaining open to response or suggestions from the other – working towards a sense of shared agreement on how to proceed.'

Kirsten does seem to consider equality as desirable, but it is interesting that equality is not something that is in place from the outset, but is something that is strived for and built, strangely parallel to the construction of the work.

'Each project is very different – but generally, equality - based on agreement upon, and respect for, demarcated areas of control - is what 'we' (artist and curator) attempt to arrive at as the project develops towards exhibition.'

When asked about equality Kirsten seems to see it as something worth pursuing, although based on separate areas of expertise. Ceri Hand sees the term as a misnomer,

'Equality somehow infers that there would be a level that you would reach, a sameness...I don't think this is necessary or even desirable - I don't want to be an artist & I presume the artist is happy doing what they are doing, however there are levels of shared experience & understanding from both parties, presumably with a similar desire in mind - that of finding the best way of communicating the artists work to a wider audience (however big or small that may be).... For me the role of the artist is totally dependent on who that artist is and how they like to work..'

The relationship between artist and curator (or organisation) at a large organisation will be subject to contract, and therefore perhaps it might be expected to be more rigid. However, Ceri Hand, also describes a fluid relationship,

'In my experience a good working relationship with an artist means that you both respect each others strengths & ideas, recognising that together you can make something new & hopefully exciting, that perhaps either one of you wouldn't come to by yourselves or with anybody else...the 'power' balance shifts all the time throughout the creative process...if you have set off on the right foot then this is an interesting process...

In contrast, when asked if the relationship between artists and herself is 'equal', Kelly Large says,

'No? Usually I ask participants to operate within or contribute to a framework I have set up. Although I create the situation, the manner in which the participant engages help shape the project development and outcomes. So I would say that the ability to affect the circumstances that have been set up shifts between me and the contributors at different stages in a project'

All three- the 'curator', the 'artist-curator' and the 'artist who uses curation'- have a different opinion of equality. However all describe a relationship that is never concrete but always shifts, each person in the equation responding to the other. However, in all three relationships the curator remains the broker of visibility. In the Taxi Gallery, decisions regarding timing, situation in the gallery programme, archiving and documenting and *'the paratext of the exhibition (its framing through publicity, associated event opening, talk, performance etc)'*, are Kirsten's

responsibility, although the artist is given space to suggest alternatives etc. The installation is the task left to the artist with Kirsten's support where necessary. Similarly, Kelly Large indicates,

'ultimately I decide how the participants contributions are 'played out' in the world – I use the contributions to mediate an idea (rather than find an idea/theme to mediate a group of works) so the project as a whole is privileged over the individual works. So the final 'orchestration' is my 'voice' and this personal contextualisation of the works means I have the 'final say'..'

The Successful Relationship

When asked what qualities lead to successful or unsuccessful curatorial relationships Kirsten points out that prior knowledge and trust are significant factors. However, Kirsten also indicates that working with friends makes the dynamic *'harder to negotiate and unravel equitably'*. It seems too much intimacy can lead to a struggle for power rather than more equalness. Kirsten notes that one experiment in working with an artist who she shared no common values with was difficult, but not necessarily unsuccessful artistically. Ceri Hand also indicates that difficult relationships can be fruitful,

'Sometimes it's exciting & challenging to work with people that you have very different ideas/morals/belief systems/politics/sense of timing/sense of humour etc. from & it can add something to your practice, develop you in some way & sometimes you should just trust your gut & steer clear!'

Trust, honesty and being prepared to pursue the dialogue are important to Ceri,

'...or at least establish a set of guidelines (that can often be kind of unspoken) with which to embark on that relationship...'

Unwritten or unspoken guidelines can often be a recipe for disaster, but it seems that in these contexts, it works if both parties are prepared to 'go the distance' in negotiation.

Definition of Roles

When asked how roles and responsibilities are defined, Kirsten indicates that they are deliberately left undefined,

'Roles of artist and curator are deliberately not clearly defined beyond the brief sketching out of what I can offer as project initiator in the "info for artists" section of the website..... Whilst retaining core features my role shifts in response to the particular needs and personality of the artist involved in each exhibiting

project.’

Likewise, Ceri Hand says that *‘all relationships are about defining them when you are embarking on them or in them to an extent’*. Kelly Large indicates that some of her curatorial relationships, such as the use of an existing material are very clear but then both her and Kirsten note how sometimes the very basis of roles can shift:

‘certain approaches to curatorial activity and artistic production are very similar – both practices can involve research, posing questions, reusing existing forms etc. Many of the people I work with operate as both artists and curators on a daily basis anyway. When these kinds of dialogue are created the roles of curator and artist can be very hard to distinguish and the separating of the roles becomes defunct. I am interested in this shifting of position and the issues of status, ownership, authorship, transmission and reception it produces which is probably why I work in the way I do.’

Kelly Large

‘I blur these roles within all aspects of my practice so within the context of the gallery the exact nature/remit of our roles is negotiated and arrived at, for each relationship, through the conversation and exchange process described above.’

Kirsten Lavers

Ceri Hand does not describe the same shifting boundaries between roles of artist and curator, however, beyond this the description of the fluid process of negotiation is remarkably similar.

Who’s Driving?

It seems that whatever the kind of practice- ‘curator’, ‘artist-curator’ or ‘artist using curatorial activities’- the relationship is never concrete but is constantly re-interpreted and shifting. It seems though, that in all examples, the curator, by definition, holds the strings of distribution so this power basis is rarely dismantled.

‘issues of connoisseurship and validation are still problematic when a organisation/individual selects artists to work with, regardless of whether they are an artist-curator/artist-led-organisation. The relationship between those who control the mediation/ distribution/ visibility mechanisms and those who don’t naturally creates positions of more power or less power’

Kelly Large

However, perhaps this power relationship isn’t a bad thing. ‘Equality’ probably is, as Ceri Hand indicated, irrelevant, or impossible bearing in mind the significance of distribution and visibility structures. All three examples here indicate that

harmony is also not vital and in fact a certain amount of control and knowledge is important, otherwise *'no one is driving'* and the project may lack direction or structure. A difficult relationship doesn't necessarily lead to a bad project, but a preparedness to dialogue is seen to maximise the opportunity to communicate, for both artist and curator. Perhaps, indeed, seeing the relationship as a colliding of views (although not *'colliding of drivers'!*), rather than any dissolution can lead to exciting results. None of these 'curators' thought they were simply working to give space or opportunity for artists- all described a far more robust and active relationship where their own input mattered to the outcome. Perhaps having people who are prepared to justify their own beliefs and use their power to communicate work they believe to be significant is also important.

It seems that the processes and artist relationships of an 'artist working as curator' (like Kirsten) do not represent any significant departure from the activities of a salaried curator like Ceri Hand. Kelly Large's activities differ more, being less about a negotiation. Issues of 'gatekeeping' or 'quality arbitration' remain in place for all three 'curators' although to different degrees. Where activities differ is perhaps their impact on artist's and community networks, as Basbaum indicated at the outset. However, perhaps measuring Kirsten's or indeed Ceri's or Kelly's activities in relation to a norm is irrelevant anyway, when what is of interest is the dynamic relationship that can develop, leading to a new work shaped by the curator as well as the artist. Perhaps we are moving closer, finally, to the recognition that art is never produced by one person⁸. In a discussion at Static, Liverpool, Pete Clark⁹ pointed out that 'the tail wags the dog too much'- ie that we give curators, writers etc too much authority and responsibility for creating the artist's work in the social realm. It was commented that artists can do without curators and writers etc, but not vice versa. Of course power structures are problematic but it is ridiculous to even speak of art today without recognising that visibility structures produce the work we examine. Art as we know it is produced by a complex web of actors and the further we go towards recognising and utilising this the better.

For the Taxi Gallery, the quality of the relationship with artists seems to occupy as much, if not more significance than the work itself. This might be because there is a greater emphasis on the cab's relationship with the community, or because the relationship is only ever between two people- as there is no institution to mediate the relationship, as at FACT. However, further than that, it seems that the very relationship and its nuances are a process of construction akin to the artwork. It would be interesting to view each Taxi Gallery show as an articulation of a different relationship, the cab literally providing a structure that the artist can choose to inhabit, dominate or do battle with. It seems that, within the context of Bourriaud's 'production'-based practices there is a real opportunity

⁸ See Wolff, J (1981) *The Social Production of Art*. Macmillan, London.

⁹ Pete Clark in (eds Shaw B and Sullivan P) (2003) *EXIT REVIEW*. Static, Liverpool.

for the curator-artist relationship and its' power relationship to become recognised and critically articulated as part of the work's context.

Bourriaud N (2001) Postproduction. Lukas & Sternberg.

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Becky Shaw is an artist and co-director of Static, Liverpool.

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