Curatorship: From Empire to Republic

It is the “Age of Curation” according to a recent wired.com posting which states that “curation is already fundamental to the way in which we view the world these days”.¹ How did this come to be and what are the implications for the art worlds of Asia? The 2010 Japan Foundation-India Foundation for the Arts Asian Museum Curator’s Conference seeks to address the expansion of curatorial activity and the role of the curator as well as the dialectical relationship between curators and spectators, who today are positioned as audiences and publics but also often participate as curators and consumers.

The conference, now in its sixth year, has seen since its inception, a shift in the function of curator. This shift has engendered intense scrutiny among art professionals about their work, function, training and the constituencies they address.² Such questioning is prevalent in art worlds where the institutional curator has been crucial to the creation of collections, ideas, careers and aesthetics and is now facing, in these financially precarious times, forced obsolescence. Yet, these art worlds also present a paradox: the transformation of the curator from institutional intellectual to global art superstar.

Spectator communities play a large role in this metamorphosis. Institutional and independent curators work in contexts where viewers are no longer just objects of pedagogy. At a minimum, curation must entertain audiences who wish to be part of global art scenes; at a maximum, it must politically engage audiences, even invite their participation. Spectators frequently recalibrate the transaction and challenge curatorial propositions and spaces and often become critical publics, even curators themselves.

Between the curator and the spectator is the display. At exhibitions, fairs, museums, galleries and online, spatial configuration and content design play a significant role in engendering the context for curatorial enunciation, content reception and viewer participation. From art school- like experiences to cultural bonanzas to guerilla and algorithm-driven curation, mainstream, alternative and sub-rosa practices appropriate and manipulate art and design for varied ideological struggles.

In this context, curation of art and other cultural production is a valued, if fraught, activity. The conference proposes to enter the polemical relationship between curatorial practice and spectatorship in Asia and investigate three specific areas. These include the

² http://newcurator.com/2010/03/you-are-not-a-curator/
politics of how curators today historicize collections, engage the mainstream and the alternative and navigate design as an embedded technology and an ideological apparatus. Throughout, the conference will raise the following question: is autonomous curation possible or is appropriation inevitable? Resource persons and participants will work together to develop possible answers to these and other related questions.

A. Curation Overview

Curatorial self-examination is current in art cultures of the developed world where the curator has played a pivotal role in institution building but now faces diminution. In Asia, the situation is more complex. Some institutions have established curatorial agendas, other are considering the addition of a curator while others have none. Star curators work independently and globally; they curate from the grandest art histories of the world to the sharpest of the new to the everyday products of living vernaculars. They function as keepers, as venture capitalist-entrepreneurs and as community organizers. Who are the beneficiaries of all this curatorial activity? How is spectatorship imagined given the region’s diverse economies, cultures and temporalities? The opening session will address the dialectic relationship between curatorial practice and spectatorship within the specific contexts of the presenters.

- Introduction and overviews
- Where are we
- How did we get here
- What might the future be in the present

B. Political Curation: Audiences vs. Publics

Critics of the recent turn to political curation argue that art and curation which make institutional critiques are sponsored and presented mostly by institutions. Any critical gesture can serve only the purpose of social affirmation and legitimation. This is the case in Asia too, linked as it is to global art circuits, along with a new kind of awareness among curators and spectator communities of the power of curation. Through specific participant presentations, this session will try to understand the complex institutional agendas behind political curation in Asia, especially how curatorial practices turn spectators who passively consume art events as audiences into publics of engaged citizens, who wish, even demand, involvement. A particular

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3 Peter Osborne, http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.16/living.contradictions.resignation.chris.gilbert.an
focus will be given to how institutions define access and measure the quality of participation as they formulate and assess curatorial practices and policies.

**What are the practices, possibilities and limits of political curation?**
- Describing institutional agendas and spectator communities
- New institutional models including participatory museums
- Assessing contexts for curation and reception
- Audiences and Publics: curatorial initiatives and audience responses
- Spectator engagement - documentation and assessment methodologies
- Autonomy and the appropriation of curatorial work

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**C. Historicizing Art Events, Archives and Collections**

Art collections in Asia have been formed in several ways and are held by religious organizations, princely patrimonial trusts, private collections, archaeological surveys, community associations and the state. Objects journey from personal and private to common spaces and vice versa. Many creations which are ephemeral are frequently left uncollected and un-archived. Simultaneously, collecting and archiving is being fostered and funded by the international art market, cultural activists and organizations and individuals as artists and collectors. The formation and curation of any collection or archive serves diverse theological, aesthetic, political and class interests. This session focuses on the curatorial politics of making, historicizing and exhibiting collections.

**Who is historicizing, archiving and collecting today and for whom?**
- What are the politics involved in the historicization and making of collections?
- How does a curator today contend with the historical archive?
- What are some possible curatorial interventions and what are their potential consequences for viewers?
- Collections have implicit narratives - how does the curator use or dislocate these narratives to create variant histories and multiple narratives?

**D. Design and the Spaces of Curation**
Built spaces for curatorial activities are limited so many arts groups are designing new forums for presenting and theorizing art, thus shifting the practice and site of curation. Simultaneously, governments are sponsoring the construction of iconic buildings to showcase visual blockbusters and create hegemonic cultural discourses. Curators are active mostly in major institutions and in metropolitan art events but the demand for curatorial expertise has increased exponentially, spreading into virtual space as well as regional areas. Designers and architects are functioning now as curators, using limited resources and content to narrate local histories and large ideas. Spectators are not the usual consumers of urbanized art and cultural production but are people with deep investments in regional identities and aesthetics. Design in these varied contexts is not just a neutral activity but an embedded technology and an ideological apparatus which allows art, aesthetics and thought to concretize and mutate. This segment of the conference will focus on design as a major component of curatorial activity and look at specific virtual and real designed spaces as presented by participants.

**Design as a part of curation**

- The “look” of analytical thought - what does design do for curation?
- How does curation engender hierarchies of design, content development and viewer participation?
- Design is an artistic process; curation is an exercise in creativity. How do design and curatorial agendas coincide and conflict?
- Professional expertise, disciplinary boundaries and curation
- Design imagines an ideal user while political curation seeks an engaged spectator. How do consumerism, usability, spectatorial pleasure and engaged participation connect?
- Design and the spaces of curation: iconic buildings and visual blockbusters
- New frontiers and guerilla curation: design on the go in virtual and the hinterland spaces

**E. Alternative Art and Curation**

In many contexts of creativity, it is clear that “the dominant not only appropriates the emergent, it facilitates its production as emergent, as the condition of its appropriation.” Art and curatorial activity proper are particularly susceptible to this. This final session provides an opportunity to reflect on the meanings, functions and audiences of alternative art and curation in Asia.

**What is alternative art space and curation in Asia?**
• Alternate, emergent and marginal – differences in form, representation, imagination, spectatorship
• How does one version of the alternative gain legitimacy over another?
• Are oppositional practices and positions possible?
• Mainstreaming the alternative – are there choices?
• Does stability and institutionalization contribute to vibrant alternative art and curation or does it hinder it?
• If ephemerality, portability and obsolescence are courted by alternative art movements in developed countries, what happens when these are the everyday conditions for art making and curating as they are in many parts of Asia?