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*THE ROLE OF THE CURATOR IN THE CONTEXT OF
CONTEMPORARY ART*

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The role of the curator in the context of contemporary art

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Abstract

The art world has suffered a lot of changes and alterations in the last century, the result providing us with the current way of creating and perceiving art, a way that is unique and may prove disconcerting for some. Art is no longer defined by rules and definitions, and has grown and evolved so much as to include works of art such as happenings, digital art, street art and installations among others. It has moved from the walls of museums to the streets, computers and everyday objects and activities. This change has, of course, had a big influence on all the participants of the creative world. They had to accommodate, evolve and change, becoming these flexible entities that no longer had clearly defined positions, but were involved in different spheres of art, taking on responsibilities and activities that until then did not belong to them. This was also the fate of the curator that until this revolution in art had the function of managing and exhibiting objects of art in the confines of a gallery or a museum.

The aim of the present study is to identify the role of the curator in the context of contemporary art. Particularly this paper will consider the changes in recent art history that have at the center the curator and its function. It will research the many characteristics of the curator, its performance and the impact it has on the bigger picture that is represented by the art world.

The first chapter does an incursion into the history of curating, from ancient times till the present, offering a context for the research, as well as an introduction into the subject.

The second chapter focuses on the different types of curators, defining and analyzing the role of the contemporary institutional curator, since this is the oldest type of curatorship, it is interesting to see the changes that have occurred and the innovation that have been introduced into the job. It also examines the independent curator, the recent addition to the curatorial practices, as well as the curator as artist versus the artist as curator, a novelty brought on by the introduction of creativity in the curator's activity. Lastly, the chapter studies the phenomenon of curating in daily life and by everyone, a thing particularly popular on the internet.

The third chapter researches the life and activity of two great curators, Harald Szeemann and Hans Ulrich Obrist. It offers a clear example of the contemporary curator and the changes that have happened in the profession in recent years.

Resumo

O mundo da arte sofreu uma série de mudanças e alterações no último século que teve como resultado a atual forma de criar e perceber a arte, uma forma que é única e um tanto desconcertante para alguns. A arte deixou de estar limitada por regras e definições, crescendo e evoluindo para obras de arte como happenings, arte digital, street art e instalações, entre outros. A arte saiu das paredes de museus para as ruas, computadores, objetos e atividades quotidianas. Esta mudança teve uma grande influência sobre todos os participantes do mundo criativo. Eles tiveram que acomodar, evoluir e mudar, tornando-se em entidades flexíveis que deixaram de ter posições bem definidas, passando a envolver-se em diferentes esferas da arte, assumindo responsabilidades e atividades que até então não lhes pertenciam. Este foi também o destino do curador que até esta revolução na arte tinha como função gerenciar e exibir objetos de arte nos limites de uma galeria ou um museu.

O objetivo do presente estudo é identificar o papel do curador no contexto da arte contemporânea. Particularmente este trabalho irá considerar as mudanças na história da arte recente que têm no centro o curador e a sua função. Este trabalho centra-se nas características do curador, o seu desempenho e o impacto que este tem sobre o mundo da arte.

O primeiro capítulo faz uma incursão na história da curadoria, desde os tempos antigos até o presente, oferecendo um contexto para a investigação, bem como uma introdução ao assunto.

O segundo capítulo centra-se nos diferentes tipos de curadores, na definição e análise do papel do curador contemporâneo, uma vez que este é o mais antigo tipo de curadoria, é interessante ver as mudanças ocorridas e as inovações que foram introduzidas no trabalho. Também se examina o curador independente, a recente adição às práticas curatoriais, bem como o curador como artista versus o artista como curador, uma novidade trazida pela introdução de criatividade na atividade do curador. Por fim, o capítulo estuda ainda o fenómeno da curadoria na vida diária de todos, uma coisa particularmente popular na internet.

O terceiro e último capítulo explora a vida e a atividade de dois grandes curadores, Harald Szeemann e Hans Ulrich Obrist. Este capítulo apresenta um exemplo claro do curador contemporâneo e as mudanças que têm acontecido na profissão nos últimos anos.

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Introduction

In the last century, art has undergone a great number of significant changes while evolving into its contemporary structure, a far cry from the classical art or the conservative way of viewing it. In our days art constitutes everything from painting, collage, graffiti, to new media such as video, sound, digital, to installations and happenings. Art has moved from the walls of museums to the street, and is experienced directly by people, where the influence of a mediator is at times unnecessary. It changed from an elitist world to one that is close to people, can be found among them, becoming an everyday occurrence that is not constricted to special events or places. So in the context of contemporary art, I wondered what happened to curator, the personage whose original role was to work in an institution such as a gallery or a museum and acquire, maintain and exhibit objects of art following certain rules and parameters while doing it, such as chronological order or thematic grouping. Since art is no longer confined to museums, or to certain rules of being, many declaring that contemporary art is anything that is said to be art by the artist, without following a rigorous set of defining elements, I asked myself what happened to the curator, whose whole existence depended on said standard art. So I have decided to research the subject, the result ending in the following thesis.

I was looking for answers to questions like: What is the role of the contemporary curator? What are its functions and responsibilities? Is the job of curating still a necessary element in the current art world? What are the changes that occurred in its role? When dealing with research questions like this, that cover such and extended area, where the answers are potentially also broad, it is important to focus not only on the big picture, but also on the details and smaller elements that it is composed of. The methodology used is mainly qualitative, offering an insight into the subject based on interpretation by authors, curators and specialists in art, as well as my own opinion and position regarding the subject, providing an analysis of the morphed role of the curator in the current art world.

The thesis will also include the curator's relationship with all the other important actors of the art world, such as artists. Their roles are always intertwined, and they both play important parts in both each other's activities and lives and in the general picture of art, considering that contemporary art is produced by a complex web of actors.

Since the 1960s the curator's role has begun to experience changes, gaining more and more significance not only in the selection and presentation of art, as the role always demanded,

but also in discovering and developing new territory on the aesthetic and cultural front. Some have even called this the era of curators, showing that not only have curators not disappeared with the change in creating and exhibiting art, but they have thrived, becoming important, if not central, figures of the art world. The practice of curating has been redefined, becoming in some people's opinion an art on its own. This rise to the top of the curators happened thanks to a complex array of reasons, among which was the passage from a chronological perception to a spatial understanding of art. Therefore, curators have been put in the situation where the need to reexamine and reevaluate their practices appeared. Another factor that contributed to this change in curatorial practices was the already mentioned objects of art or what art is considered nowadays, since it challenges the traditional exhibition space and audience engagement, both essential elements to a curators work. This research examines all the factors involved in the curators development, as well as their effect on his current work activities and position.

The first chapter is an introduction into curating, offering an incursion into the history of curatorial practices till present day, and taking it from there as it offers a view of what this new science is about, presenting two of its important elements: biennales and professional studies of the subject. It is the chapter that offers a general view on the situation, so that the following ones can offer a more in depth information about the phenomenon that curating has become in the context of contemporary art. It allows an interesting observation, of a profession that in the past has been neither famous nor very necessary and that has become one of the pillars of the current art world.

The analysis of the different roles of the contemporary curator, the difference and resemblances of said roles is done in the second chapter. It offers the significant distinctness between the institutional curator, the one hired and practicing between the walls of an institution such as a museum or a gallery, and the independent one. As well as the overlapping areas of these two categories, since the practice of museums of hiring independent curators for special events or to offer a new and original perspective on exhibition is becoming increasingly popular.

This chapter will also deal with two important phenomenon's that have evolved with the progression of art, that of the curator as artist and the artist as curator. The first group refers to the upgrading of the curator to the stature of artist, one whose object of art are the exhibitions that are created and set up according to his ideas and creative incentive. The

second is the artist taking on more and more roles, including that of curating his own, and others, work of art. It is a way of keeping control over their creation, that normally leaves their custody after it is finished, as well as offering more financial benefits, such as not having to pay commission.

Another researched point is the expansion and over popularity of new media technologies that led to the development of the idea that anyone can be a curator. With the constant assault of information that happens daily and hourly through the internet, the need for people that would sort and organize it all appeared. And that is how the notion of curated content and curation on the web, and afterwards, in all spaces of life, arose. Now everyone that wants to be a curator can easily become one by doing things as mundane as creating playlists, organizing spice racks and choosing outfits.

The third chapter does an incursion into the lives and activities of two great curators of this century that change the face of art and with it the role of the curator. I researched Harald Szeemann's life and his two greatest exhibitions, wanting to understand how this person created exhibitions that defied the established rules, making the process one of creation and organized chaos, and putting a clear signature on all his work. He is also the first independent curator, putting the foundation for the industry that came after him. The Swiss curator was revolutionary for the world of art.

The second curator that I studied for this thesis is Hans Ulrich Obrist, the person that followed on Szeemann's footsteps, carrying on his legacy and creating a new one for himself. Obrist is the epitome of the superstar curator that puts on a few shows at the same time, in different corners of the world, while managing to surprise and interest with each one of them. His name is on everybody's lips, while he continues with projects that are unique and revolutionary.

The fourth and last chapter comprises the conclusions that I reached during this research. It answered the questions that I posed at the beginning of the thesis, defining the curator in this contemporary art setting and detailing its current characteristics. It offers a brief and resumed description of the types of contemporary curators and the changes that occurred to each of them with the development of art and its surroundings. Also giving the above mentioned examples of Harald Szeeman and Hans Ulrich Obrist as the names of personages that were a turning point in the evolution of curating and the way we experience and practice it in our days.

This chapter is also the one that takes into account the fact that curating has morphed and extended itself outside of the art world, entering the lives of common people and, in the opinion of some, has offered the possibility of being a curator to almost everyone without the need of a specialized education or years of experience.

CHAPTER ONE. Context and overview of curating

1.1 History of curating

Often, when starting to analyze curating, the emphasis is put on the semantics, particularly on the significance of its Latin root. I would also like to start by going back in history and look at it from that perspective, particularly the relationship between care and control, as argued by Kate Fowle.¹ Through the years and centuries, there have been several underlying premises to the varied ways in which curators do their work, and these impacts on both the practice and the result.

The curatorial role has a long history, but it is only recently that this history has begun to be explored and evaluated. Since the Paris Salons opened in the 18th century, curators have been fundamental to the presentation and public reception of new art. They have proven to have the potential to serve as catalysts towards the progression of art history. Our conception of art history is affected by our understanding of artists as they have been presented in past exhibitions by curators. Curators, for the most part, worked discretely behind the scenes for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, but the identity politics of the 1980s, coupled with an increased need for curators to play a role in fundraising opened the way for more transparency within art institutions and museums.

But going back to the Latin significance of the word, since this is a popular starting point when defining and characterizing curators, it used to mean one who manages or oversees, as the administrative director of a museum collection or a library, derived from the curator, overseer, from curatus, past participle of curare, to take care of. In Ancient Rome, curatores were senior civil servants in charge of various departments of public works, overseeing the Empire's aqueducts, bathhouses and sewers. It evolved to the medieval period, where we encounter the curatus, a priest devoted to the care of souls. It is possible that this is where Bruce Phillips was inspired when he summarized the role of the curator into caretaker and priest, facilitator, and exhibition-maker.² Caretaker and priest is the traditional position of the curator, and it still reflects how curators are widely seen today. This is a particularly evocative description of the actions of the contemporary curator, as one that cares of our cultural products and their significance. This is the curator that makes

¹ Fowle, K. (2007). Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today, in: Steven Rand and Heather Kouris (eds), *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, New York.

² Phillips, B. (2009). *Revised Thesis Proposal*, Wellington: Victoria University.

culture, who through their experience and work defines valuable or unimportant art, whose decisions make the rules. This role also allows, supported by their institution, to experiment with objects and artworks and discovering something new. He helps the artist and creates opportunities for him, also organizing, managing, and developing a productive relationship with them. In this role, the curator “shares, rather than represents, authority”³.

But the basis of art exhibiting as we know it was put in the 19th century, before that art existed mainly for the pleasure, especially in house decorating, of the rich and powerful. But the wars, revolutions and the spread of imperial practices and conquests that were characteristic for that period led to the creation of the first real art museum, and therefore to the establishment of curating. The appropriation of foreign and completely unfamiliar to Europe objects from the imperialistic invasions creating the necessity of a person that would decide what, how and where to display these objects of art, in other words, it needed a curator. And so, the position of tending, exhibiting, as well as organizing and cataloging for a multiple and disparate collection of objects was created.

Another important stepping stone in curatorial practices of the 19th century were Winckelmann’s theories that would shape the institutional framework of the Louvre as the first real public art museum.⁴ One that would be set as an example to follow and replicate for a great number of curators from museums from all over the world. His idea of organizing a gallery or a museum represented a very strict classification based on hierarchy and history of the exhibited objects of art. This system created a curatorial narrative, and consisted in the idea that each culture, existing or disappeared, has a unique personality that goes through cycles of growth and decay. And that each one of them has to be looked as a particular case that has to be differentiated from the others. He developed a process of categorizing artwork by dividing them up into a hierarchy of period styles rather than as a sequence of artists. Before Winckelmann, curators would display works of art by different artists and of different genres side by side, using the theory that “a painting contained the four elements of color, design, composition, and expression and that one could best study

³ Nicks, T. (2003). *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, Oxon: Routledge.

⁴ Manasseh, C. (2008-2009). *The Art Museum in the 19th Century J. J. Winckelmann’s Influence on the Establishing of the Classical Paradigm of the Art Museum*, Anistoriton Journal Vol.11

painting by comparing each individual element”.⁵ Afterwards, this method was replaced by that of displaying art according to the historical evolution within national schools.

And so, curators started organizing the Louvre, according to Winckelmann’s indications, so that it would form a narrative, the sequential order of the artwork presenting not only art, as was the case until then, but a historical evolution of human achievement represented in the development of the different styles of art throughout history. The exhibit begins with classical art, the authors’ definition of perfect art, so that it represents the standard of quality for all the art to be seen afterward. It offers the viewer the opportunity to see the story of artistic accomplishments of various civilizations around the world from beginning to end. Curators were given the opportunity to use the exhibition space “as the symbol of Western culture in this way, and the Louvre would construct its narratives of legitimacy.”⁶ By situating classical art at the beginning of its curatorial narrative the Louvre would modify the way curators operate, creating the traditional art museum model.

But the situation in the world in general, and in the art world in particular changed after the two world wars shook humanity, and with them the advances made in technology and those of the industrial revolution. People were no longer content to visit those mausoleums for effete (fine) art, as Friedrich Nietzsche called the nineteenth century museums. And so, a progressive change in the curatorial happened

“from shows revolving mostly around conservation, interpretation and display into a creative vehicle used to express curators’ subjectivity, curatorial experiments, and the creation of a dialogue between different cultures.”⁷

Thus, the curators that have been changed by the artistic practices of the 1950s appeared as a result. Part of this mutation were the consequences of artists who sought to reverse the usual power dynamic that made the curator the middle man between them and the art display. Some decided to operate outside the usual institutions, such as museums and

⁵ Einreinhofer, N. (1997). *The American Art Museum, Elitism and Democracy*, Leicester University Press: London and Washington.

⁶ Manasseh, C. (2008-2009). *The Art Museum in the 19th Century J. J. Winckelmann’s Influence on the Establishing of the Classical Paradigm of the Art Museum*, Anistoriton Journal Vol.11.

⁷ Hoffmann, J. (2014). *Show Time: The 50 Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, D.A.P/Distributed Art Publishers, Inc: New York.

galleries, while others changed them from inside. This subject will be thoroughly described and analyzed in a later chapter of this thesis. It is a common occurrence that many of these curators have become artists themselves, or at least they are considered such by a part of the art world, working in a way they see as supportive of their own practice.⁸

Starting with the middle of the 20th century and evolving to our days, the curator has become a big figure and occupies a distinct role who uses the position of curating exhibitions, selecting and presenting contemporary art, to manipulate taste, push careers of artists into success and, some would say, become as much of a star as the artists themselves. At its best, curating is an art of juxtaposition, scholarship and display that brings old art to life and makes new art surprise the public. At its worst, the curator stands between the people and the art.⁹

The contemporary curator began to change with Aleksander Dorner, who promoted the idea of museums as Kraftwerke (power plants) with an ability for spontaneous change and El Lissitzky that believed the most important work as artist begins with the creation of exhibitions. The actual term of curator as we know it appeared on the artistic and cultural not so long ago, something that seems incredible at this moment in time, when the word has gained such a large popularity and usage. It was in the late sixties that, at the same time with the rise of conceptual work, contemporary curators seem to see the light of day. It was a personage that was the mediator between artists and galleries, the context and the public, it was important for the curator in those early days and for artists as well, to develop new ways of exhibiting art.

During those years the impulse towards finding new spaces and devices for art display was not born out of a critical challenge of the status quo, but as the outcome of a wider range of possibilities, in an age of economic and technical growth. Central to this movement were the developments within the media, such as the increase of television viewership and its revolutionary impact on society's perception of reality. And the role of the curator began to take shape in this context of interplay between object and space that transformed into the conceptualization of the modern gallery space. Nineteenth century art museums, as described earlier, and of which the Louvre is a great example, were usually vast, labyrinthine, and built to assume the shape of a comprehensive art historical narrative. But

⁸ Hogg, M. (2005). *Enjoy Five Year Retrospective Catalogue*, Enjoy Trust: Wellington.

⁹ Sylvester, D. (1999). *Curator and Critic* London, *Sydney Morning Herald*.

as art changed during the after war period, so did the way of curating and displaying it, and so did the space that was used for exhibiting. The new method required the curator to showcase each work of art with plenty of space around them. And so, the model of the Louvre was replaced by smaller and new museums, like the 1959 Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan. During these changes in exhibiting, where the context of display to a site-specific artwork became crucial, as is proven by the 1968 *Splashing and Prop* of Richard Serra, the role of the curator in these affairs became essential. It is in this context that curators stepped out Winckelmann's strict historical narrative, displaying multiple alternative art histories drawing and contemporary ones based no longer on strict criteria's but on subjective opinions, this way offering the visitors not only the curators view, but a possibility to form and discover its own.

Another important moment in the history of curating of that time, were the start of what will continue in the future as the big, international shows in which a specific curatorial perspective shaped contemporaneous discourse and stimulated competitive curatorial disputes. Great examples of that, and the ones that put the basis for this are the documenta series, especially the 1972 "Questioning Reality – Pictorial Worlds Today" that generated a lot of international feedback, or the 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la Terre," organized by the Centre Georges Pompidou and La Grande Halle de la Vilette in Paris. These are the events that, more than any other, revolve around curators as much as around artists and their work. And they are the ones that were used as launching pads for the star curators that appeared in that period and that are still a phenomenon in our days.

One of the main elements of this new era was the development of publications specifically examining the histories of curatorial innovations and models, as well as their potential links to an evolving practice. Individual curators became the main subject of discussion at the same time as major transformations were realized in contemporary curatorial practice. This, as well as the numerous curatorial studies programs that appeared in the late 20th century were a reflection of the evolution and dramatic changes that had happened to curators and their practice.

“In a sense they required a knowledge of their object of study in order to construct it in the first place. To put it differently: the professionalization and

subsequent formalization of the curatorial field presupposed a sense of its own history.”¹⁰

1.2 Definition and characterization of the contemporary curator

The presence of the curator within visual arts context has increased dramatically in the last years. The roles, the functions, the positions, and the influence that they exert has changed both their own careers and also has created a new form of relationship between the general audience, the artist and art institution. Art critic and curator, Michael Brenson names the following as potential key characteristics of contemporary curators: “aesthete, diplomat, economist, critic, historian, politician, audience developer, and promoter.”¹¹ In the same context, the necessary characteristics for the contemporary curator are thought to require "curating to be a flexible platform-building practice - tied to the specifics of place as well as appropriate international and regional factors."¹² Within this platform curators are described as “process shapers” and “program builders” and are required to simultaneously move between the resources that an institution offers, and yet also find freedom in public spaces and places, the virtual domain and other institutional infrastructures not typically associated with art. The author has named these curators "infrastructural activists"¹³, an interesting term, that focuses on the curator as an actor in the art world that holds a great power in its hands, one that can be used in all locations of art display, from museums to the internet, and trying to reach all types of audiences.

Paul O’Neill discusses the ascendancy of curatorial criticism, describing the transfer from the objects of art, to a critique of the space of exhibition. He talks about the elevation of the curatorial gesture in the 1990s and how this “began to establish curating as a potential nexus for discussion, critique and debate.”¹⁴ The rise of the curator can therefore be tracked through critical requirement. The role has adapted according to paradigm shifts, movements, cultural perspectives, and through the requirements of the work it chooses to curate.

¹⁰ Vogel, F. (2013). *Notes on exhibition history in curatorial discourse*, ONCURATING.ORG Issue 21.

¹¹ Brenson, M. (1998). *The Curator’s Choice*, *Art Journal* Vol. 57.

¹² Smith, T. (2012). *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, ICI: New York.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ O’Neill, P. (2007). *The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse*, in J. Rugg and M. Sedgwick (eds.), *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, Intellect: Bristol

We have now seen the curator and confidante, advisor and facilitator. We have also seen the curator constantly researching and providing opportunities both in and out of established consensus. Curators may choose to work with artists and audiences in a provocative and courageous manner. But they do so in the context of the continuously changing art world and the rules it goes by. Because, in the end, all a curator wants is to show, educate and intrigue the public with the art it curated and exhibited. As we have observed earlier, curating has evolved considerably from the model of arranging objects to now include performative, virtual and interventionist strategies. While curating as a discourse of art, objects remain important, the expanded cultural practice of curating not only produces exhibitions for audiences to view, but also plays a role in redefining aesthetic experience, framing cultural conditions in institutions and communities, and inquiring into constructions of knowledge and ideology.¹⁵ The focus of the curatorial role has evolved from being that of a

“behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter to a centralized position on a broader stage, with a creative, political and active part to play in the production, mediation and dissemination of art itself.”¹⁶

In our days, there are more requirements for a mediator to assemble, contextualize, and translate to a public the works shown in an exhibition. Therefore, contemporary curatorial practice has become much more comprehensive, dealing with the whole of the process as opposed to an element, as it used to be at the begging of curatorship in history. Today’s curators are about authorship and agency, rather than the “reproductive processes of institutional power structures.”¹⁷ This may be why the curatorial role has risen to the front of modern exhibitions, such as the increasing number of group shows from the 1980s onwards, the rise of Biennials and Art Fairs, and the general expansion, complexity, diversity and collaborative nature of art practices.

And yet, the actions of curating mean different things to different curators, who work in different contexts and situations, locations and sites. It is very much a cultural and artistic role, experimental and responsive to socio-political and artistic shifts in such a changing and fluid culture. The evolving curatorial dialogue seeks to represent movement and continuation, and make visible and transparent the links and networks between meanings. I

¹⁵ *Journal of Curatorial Studies* Vol. 2, (2012).

¹⁶ O’Neill, P. (2007). *Curating Subjects*, Open Editions: London.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

believe that curating is about the creation of new contexts through the bringing together of artworks, artists, private intentions, space, etc, but also responding to the contexts of the artworks and opening up a discourse.¹⁸ But it is also a lot about management and marketing, about creating a popular and successful exhibition, one that gets more audience, sponsors and fame, so that the next one is even more successful. The expanded role of the curator is inseparable from the promotional productions of the culture industry.

So, to resume, the contemporary curator is an actor that is involved with almost every element and area of art, culture, production, financing, research, administration and publication. Contemporary curating is a form of cultural production, a practice that increasingly exhibits the ability and desire to expand into more experimental and collaborative models. The curator is no longer a passive facilitator, as the boundaries between curators, artists and managers becomes more and more flexible and blurry. The narrow definition of the curator as an individual responsible for the selection and placement of artworks in a gallery space is clearly too restrictive.

1.3 Biennales

This curatorial metamorphosis has been the catalyst for a large number of innovations which contest the dominant culture across a number of institutional sites and practices – art education, art museums, galleries, art publishing and biennales. Because the curators rise in the art world had truly happened only with the emergence of biennials, organized international meetings and curatorial summits in the 1990s.

“After listening to heads of international biennials and triennials speak to one another for three days about their hopes and concerns, it was clear to me that the era of the curator has begun. The organizers of these exhibitions, as well as other curators around the world who work across cultures and are able to think imaginatively about the points of compatibility and conflict among them, must be at once aestheticians, diplomats, economists, critics, historians, politicians, audience developers, and promoters.”¹⁹

¹⁸ ONCurating.org Issue 1, (2008).

¹⁹ Brenson, M. (1998). The Curator's Moment – Trends in the Field of International Contemporary Art Exhibitions, *Art Journal*.

In recent decades, biennales, triennials and other cyclical contemporary art exhibitions have expanded exponentially. There are now hundreds of biennales across the world, each fighting for its place on the global art world map. Each contemporary art biennales takes place in a specific region and it has two main goals: to reflect to the local context and to an impact within the international art scene during the exhibition. It has a certain responsibility of presenting the local art production and add to the contemporary artistic and cultural discussions. “There is the demand for more biennales. Here I’m referring to the governments, institutions, the powers that-be who want them, and therefore organize them.”²⁰ Therefore these types of exhibitions are on demand not only by curators and artists, but as well by governments, because money, tourists and rejuvenation of the locality they bring. The rises of the biennales throughout the globe, and the curatorial turn in 1990s are geo-political strategies and globalization. “I see the most significant development of biennales culture as creating platforms to decentralize the art world,” says curator Hou Hanru “The subject or topic of the biennales has to help us re-understand local conditions: in terms of history, or maybe political and cultural conditions.”²¹

Biennales today are institutions in themselves. The authorship of the curatorial team, the visibility of the sponsor, the festival spirit of the event-exhibition format and the potential speculations by media are all elements of a this phenomenon. Each curatorial work focuses on different issues and tends to provide a space for discussions through exhibition. This type of multi level structured exhibitions created the global biennial phenomenon. It usually starts with the event in Venice and continues to biennales in Folkestone, Yokohama, Gothenburg, Lyon, Istanbul, Moscow, Athens, Porto Alegre and Curitiba, only to name a few. And they have become a very big part of the curator of contemporary arts lifestyle and work:

“this is what curators are doing: they are flying around to national capitals, taking government-paid tours to look at government-approved artists that are biennial-friendly.”²²

The contemporary curator in the era of biennales is an exact opposite to the classical curator that used to activate in museums before the 1960s. Their role in the biennales is to

²⁰Choy L.W. (2008). Biennial Demand, *Asia Art Archive*.

²¹Hanru H. in Luke B. (2011). Biennial or bust, *The Art Newspaper*.

²²Elkins J. and Newman M. (2008). *The State of Art Criticism*, Routledge: London and New York.

provide context, time and place for the art as opposed to the simple preservation and exhibition of artworks. They do not justify their choices in the same way that a museum curator or art historian must because they are operating within a living, incredibly dense and constantly shifting contemporary art production. Curators make choices and provide readings and manipulate space so that it becomes private, just as individuals are invited into it. A biennale is like stepping into someone's world, despite the massive scale.

“Biennales are temporary spaces of meditation, usually allocated to invite curators with support from a local socio-cultural network. They are interface between art and larger publics – publics which are at once local and global, resident and nomadic, non-specialist and art-worldly.”²³

Currently, hundreds of biennales are active all around the world, designed specifically to draw the attention of international audience. The most famous and prominent of them are:

The Venice Biennale - founded in 1895, its focus on new art a novel twist on the phenomenon of the great exhibition and world's fair culture so prominent in the 19th century. The art from various nations were showcased in the Giardini, host to several national pavilions, each with its own unique history of architectural development. Lately the huge exhibition has expanded in size throughout the city of Venice, with new pavilions and exhibition sites being added each time.

The Biennial de São Paulo - initiated in 1951 and is the biggest and oldest biennale in the Americas and it features Brazilian, Latin American and international contemporary art in its curated thematic exhibitions. The Biennial's initial aims are to make contemporary art known in Brazil, push the country's access to the art scene in other metropolises and further establish São Paulo as an international art centre. The biennial serves to bring Brazilian art closer to an international audience, and vice-versa. The international exhibitions are held under the direction of rotating chief curators.

documenta - initiated in 1955 in Kassel, Germany is not a biennale, since it is held every 5 years but it is regarded as one of the most important art exhibitions in the world, the *documenta* showcases the latest trends in modern and contemporary art. For 100 days, over 150 artists from 55 countries present everything from paintings, and photographs, to video

²³ O'Neill, P. (2007). *The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse*, in J. Rugg and M. Sedgwick (eds.), *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, Intellect: Bristol

and performance art. The singular character of the exhibition has been preserved and since the fifth documenta (1972), every five years, a new artistic director is chosen and the exhibition is reinvented.

1.4 Curatorial studies

The expansion of contemporary curating was also accompanied by the development of curatorial training programs in the early 1990s. Students and professors started examining existing exhibition models and established curatorial precedents, focusing on exhibition history and analyzing the curatorial component instead of the artwork.

The formalized study of curating appeared in Grenoble, France, in 1987 at the *École du Magasin* that featured a 10-month course. And only in 1992, at the Royal College of Art in London did it emerge a permanent two-year masters degree course, the first in Britain to specialize in curating with a particular focus on contemporary art. It was followed by the Bard center's doctoral program, in 1993, which focused on curating.

What these courses did was recognize the growing importance of curatorship and its new role in the art world, one of great importance in the creation of an exhibition or display. Currently, curatorial studies are flourishing around the world, a clear side effect of the growing popularity of the job it teaches. Broadly speaking, existing curatorial-studies programs are of two types: one designed to train curators the specialized curators and directors of museum and the other for contemporary-art positions. The first type is designed as a complement to the MA or PhD in art history; frequently it is offered as a certificate program. Such programs usually consist of courses on materials, media, and techniques, classes devoted to research methodologies, and training in connoisseurship and in the organization of exhibitions and exhibition design.

The second type is designed for students who expect to work in the contemporary-art field. They teach current trends in practice and criticism and provide opportunities to organize exhibitions. Students make studio and gallery visits, learn installation work, exhibition and graphics design, and write catalogue essays, wall texts, and publicity materials. Hands-on experience in every aspect of the curator's responsibility is important because staffs of contemporary-art centers tend to be small and every person working there is thoroughly involved in all the work that is done. And even if students may concentrate on art developments since 1980, the study of twentieth-century art is still essential. Thus, art

history is at the core of all training in curatorial studies. In the current competitive job market in academe and in art museums, employers tend to prefer candidates with a degree. On the other hand, commercial galleries frequently seek candidates with an e-portfolio and some business background.²⁴

In the profession of teaching and educating curators, side by side with the university and college studies there are specialized independent institutions like the Independent Curators International, which started a curatorial hub in 2011, focused on professional curators hoping to strengthen their skills. The New York organization, which was created in 1975, sets up programs around the world where a jury selects 14 international curators and then works intensively with them over seven days. The course is spent presenting personal projects and answering questions on specific issues. The organization's executive director, Kate Fowle, said that an increasingly global art world has meant that curators must be able to adapt displays from country to country and for "different spaces and institutions."²⁵

In our days, dedicated programs in curating studies are flourishing around the world. And even if we find some negative reactions to them, in an era where personal web sites and blogs has made everyone a curator, these increasingly specialized degrees are becoming an element that can give those who wish to pursue a career in curating an advantage over everyone else.

²⁴ Guidelines for curatorial-studies programs. (2009). College Art Association: New York

²⁵ Fowle K. (2012). in Pfeiffer A. Who wants to be a curator? *The New York Times*

CHAPTER TWO. Typology of curators

2.1 Institutional curators

So what is the role of the museum curators in this constantly changing artistic world? Do they lose their places, do they change, do they disappear, and are they needed anyway in the context of all these independent curators and artists that fill the place by themselves?

In the old times, the role of a curator working in a museum was mainly involved in knowing and working with art and artifacts. It was a bureaucratic function, which allowed quite little, compared to modern standards and practices, for artistry, creation and interaction. Between 1890, the great period of expansion and collecting (not just in museums) and the 1950's was created the classic curator in Europe. During this period, the curator was seen as an unquestionable arbiter of knowledge and truths regarding art and objects related to it. Then, between 1960 and 1980, came the change in society and with it the rethinking of the museum's role in society, and things have never been the same since. And as the art world changed, so did the space around it, including museum curators. Now, it is mostly about the people, the visitors and the spectators. Curators decide what to expose to the public and manage how spectators and visitors will experience art. They are the ones who decide which artworks will be presented and how it will be done, but engaging visitors no longer stops with choosing which painting to hang on the wall. Curators become increasingly involved in the bridge-building process between the art and the public.

But to understand what the role of curators in museums is, we must also understand what museums and galleries owe their audiences. It is here that we enter the sphere of the museum as an educator, as a player with an important role in influencing and educating society through its visitors. Richard Sandell defends the point that museums are cultural creators and filters that have an influence on the political and social scene, not just the artistic one, therefore it is their duty to act positively as social agents. The author also says that if museums do not join other social institutions that are changing to meet the desire for equality among their public, they will be judged irrelevant and abandoned.²⁶

Danielle Rice mentions that museums are self-critical and more self-aware that it is considered. Museum professionals are more critical of themselves and their institutions

²⁶ Sandell, R. (2002). *Museums, Society, Inequality*. Routledge: London and New York.

than are their visitors and “even the most conservative art museums offer information-filled websites, audio tours, and social evenings in an attempt to attract increasing and increasingly diverse audiences.”²⁷

At the same time we have the idea that museums have developed from the modernistic place that they were into a postmodern institution. He sees it as a reflexive institution, something that has already changed in response to many needs and wants placed upon it. The new way of exhibiting allows for the extension of acceptable exhibition techniques that offer the possibility for double-coding, the use of multiple messaging techniques to reach people with different perspectives and needs. A museum’s collection holds the same importance as an audience’s frame of reference to a museum’s curatorial authority.²⁸

Tony Bennett argues that the curator had to generate exhibitions that would encourage order through self-surveillance. His role was one of an enforcer, subject to the power of the institution, and had to create an ideal model of behavior that could be followed, or at least, seek to follow, by the visitors of the museum. The lack of feedback from their audience means they cannot judge their own effectiveness.²⁹ This idea holds some truth, but it is not completely right because it puts the curator in a position of blind obedience and a complete lack of freedom and artistry.

But the way curating is done in museums has changed from that image of an old style, stiff collar bureaucratic employee. Nancy Villa Bryk, a contemporary museum curator, agrees that those traditional aspects were the job before, but emphasizes that being a curator is so much more now. She offers us a view into a world where the curator is a flexible personage, adaptable and able to transfer and use their skills in new areas and for whatever case necessary. Therefore part of the role of the curator is to change the role, an innovative thought that could not be found in the other sources consulted.³⁰

Contemporary art plays an important role in museums by rounding out a narrative survey of the history of art, and exposing the audiences to more recent developments in the visual

²⁷ Rice, D. (2003). *Museums: Theory, Practice and Illusion*, in McClellan A. (ed.) *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*. Blackwell: Malden.

²⁸ Prior, N. (2003). *Having One's Tate and Eating It: Transformations of the Museum in a Hypermodern Era* in McClellan A. (ed.) *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*. Blackwell: Malden.

²⁹ Bennett, T. (1994). *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Routledge: London.

³⁰ Schllater, E. (2010). *A New Spin: Are DJs, rappers and bloggers ‘curators’?* *Museum*

arts. Today's art both reflects and shapes the moment in which it is produced. By addressing issues and ideas that may be particularly relevant or familiar to the audiences, or may expand and enrich their knowledge and range of experiences, the contemporary art displayed should challenge and inspire the viewers.

Yet, the role of the contemporary curator in museum is not shaped only by its relationship with the viewers. An important element is the communication with the artist. Curators initiate contact with the artist to establish standards for display and conservation, and they communicate and negotiate trying to find ways to respect the integrity of the work and showcase it as well as possible within a diverse set of museum constraints and rules like budget, visitor safety and the need to preserve the acquired objects.

In the context of contemporary art, it is particularly interesting the role of displaying the art in museums, because a lot of it grew out of a movement toward ephemeral art that was mainly anti-institutional in orientation. Yet, in nowadays, and in a large part thanks to museum curators, is now thoroughly integrated into the institutional context that they play a role in the determination of their features. Curators have managed to change, and even be intertwined with the evolution of art, and therefore have also influenced it, becoming as flexible as working with installations, digital art and street art. Art that traditionally would not find its place in a museum, but has done so, because of the curators need to survive and maintain its role as an art intermediary and displayer.

This is why, while the traditional curator maintains a collection of art by preserving, exhibiting and studying those objects, the contemporary curator may not work with a collection or objects at all, and instead engages with cultural meaning and production, often from a position of development that is shared with the artist. This requires sensitivity to the interests and intentions of the artist. Developing an interdependency between the artist, the curator and the public.

Museums are often the sites for critical inquiry, where the activities of artists, writers, researchers and other cultural practitioners are supported by curators to shape and share debate and new ideas. Museum curators add to the development of reflexive practice, art theory and new models of production and presentation.

An example could come from Fred Wilson that created the Mining the Museum exhibition at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992. Even if he was not the first artist

to critique the institutional context of a museum, his project used standard curatorial procedures to showcase an American history from the racial discrimination point of view. As Holland Cotter observed

“because museums tend to be conservative places, the stories are frequently soft and predictable, telling us things we basically already know and like to hear. Mr. Wilson, however, chose unusual, often unpretty things, and made them even more unusual by the way he combined them. The results were, in their undemonstrative way, eye-opening. In one vitrine, labeled "Metalwork 1793-1880," he placed ornate silver goblets and pitchers and iron slave shackles side by side. Elsewhere, he tucked a vintage Ku Klux Klan mask into an antique baby buggy. And in an installation titled "Cabinetmaking 1820-1960" – reconstituted at the Studio Museum – he had four fancy parlor chairs attentively facing a cruciform wooden whipping post once used at a Maryland jail.”³¹

It is important to note that the process of acquiring and exhibiting contemporary art is also a crucial element of the role of the museum curator. Without the benefit of historical hindsight, it can be difficult for curators working in museums to assess the enduring significance of a contemporary art movement or style, or the longevity of an artist's reputation. Aesthetic judgments are inherently subjective, and are also subject to the prevailing cultural trends of a given period. Contemporary art that is institutionally validated today may fall out of favor tomorrow, while art that is ignored by critics and the public during an artist's lifetime may be celebrated after his or her death.

Still, the museum curator holds an important role in the world art, both historically and in our days, mainly because museums still play a very important part in the way people see and experience art. The museum acquires social authority by controlling the way in which art and art objects are perceived, the objects gathering meaning from their context within the museum. In *Museum Without Walls*, Malraux describes the museum effect where the very placement of the object within the museum creates its importance and validity.³² At the same time anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett declares that: “in the museum objects are not found, they are made.” Museums do not just gather valuable objects but

³¹ Cotter, H. (2004). Pumping Air Into the Museum, So It's as Big as the World Outside. *New York Times*.

³² Malraux, A. (1967). *Museum Without Walls*. Doubleday: New York.

make objects valuable by gathering them. The museum is able to produce cultural knowledge by organizing how the materials it authorizes are seen. And the curators are the ones that stand behind this.³³ But, as curators in museum have to work on contemporary art it is important to understand how the environment and tools of the museum serve the kind of objects with which they work. According to Hilde Hein “objects have been reconstructed as sites of experience.”³⁴ In other words what has happened to objects in museum in recent decades is a shift from ontological to phenomenological value.

Museums today are expected to fabricate experiences, to provide something different from the public’s daily life and sometimes beyond the ways in which art is experienced in non-museum environments. To accomplish this, museum curators use a range of interpretive devices to connect audiences with objects on view – from guided tours to lectures, wall panels, catalogs, hands-on activities to demonstrations, websites, YouTube videos and workshops – all are designed to provide visitors with a deeper understanding of the artist and his artwork on view. As educating the public continues to be as important as collecting itself, museum curators seek creative ways to provide visitors with experiences around objects while simultaneously protecting work for future generations.

Although museum curators are trained to exhibit work in particular ways, the individual missions and focus of each kind of museum require different kinds of exhibition practices. In other words, museums are not all alike and they can’t – nor should they – each present work in the same way. Each institution serves a vital role in the diverse ecosystem of the visual arts. And curators in these institutions have been able to actively shape the way contemporary art is exhibited within the institutional context of museums.

Therefore, a museum curator is one that understands its collections and uses this knowledge to improve the impact, value and sustainability of all of the outward-facing functions of the museum. They strive towards the museums as open, participatory places. They add to the development of reflexive practice, art theory and new models of production and presentation. The role of curators and curatorship in making museums and their collections useful, relevant and sustainable for the public benefit is crucial.

³³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1998). *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. University of California Press: Berkeley.

³⁴ Hein, H. (2000). *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective*. Smithsonian Books: Washington, D.C.

2.1.1. New Museology

With the development of contemporary art and the shift in the job of the contemporary curator, a new phenomenon called New Museology enters the scene. It focused on the visitor and elevated its status, a move that influenced and made a large impact on the role of the curator in a museum.

In 1980 the French André Devallées wrote a piece for the Encyclopedia Universalis promoting this new social development for museums called Nouvelle Muséologie. This is where the term appeared first, being adopted into Spanish and Portuguese, and afterwards in English. So in much of the world this is what is meant by new museology – the theory and practice of museums linked to the development of accepted practices of curatorship, conservation, documentation and education which are still implemented in our days. It was followed by a reevaluation of the purpose of museums.

New Museology puts at the center of the museum not objects, but people, therefore inverting the power structures in this institution.

“Museums must come to terms with a plurality of pasts, sometimes in conflict with each other. As one of the principal means by which people gain access to their history, museums must dismantle the cultural barriers that impeded widespread participation in their activities. They must become more community focused, and museum people must look at the people they serve, rather than their peers for approval”³⁵

The widespread expansion in the social range of the material culture that museums collect and display has come to represent not just the world views of ruling classes, but also popular culture. Museums have become more accessible - the old atmosphere of exclusiveness and intellectual asceticism has largely given way to a more democratic climate.

Accordingly, a significant number of museums changed the way they work with the material culture. They shifted, through the work done by curators, from a traditional approach of passive display to an approach which involves engagement with the people and where there is mutual benefit arising from the engagement of the museum with them.

³⁵ Lawley, I. (1992) For whom we serve, in *The New Statesman and Society*.

“The museum, for us, is or rather should be one of the most highly perfected tools that society has available to prepare and accompany its own transformation.”³⁶ Until the 20th century, visitors in museums were not allowed to engage with art in any other way but to see it from a distance and read information about it. As new technologies started to penetrate our lives in the 21st century, the viewers started expecting more from the museums. The idea of art on the pedestals and walls was no longer the only way viewers wanted to experience and understand art. Thus museums had to develop ways to bring the viewers back to the museum and engage them in different way. Today the museum curators’ attitudes have changed and introduction of interactive devices as a means of interaction and engagement with the art has become a major educational effort of many museums.

2.2 Independent curators

In today’s world the notion that contemporary art curators fit within museums is an idea that is being overturned more and more. In fact, Paul Schimmel, the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, said at a symposium that recent developments had changed the standard definition of what a curator is. “The most important change in curatorial practice today,” he said, is “the role of the independent curator - a kind of journeyman curator or wandering global nomad”³⁷ that does not have the shell of a museum for protection.

It could be said that the independence and autonomy surrounding the freelance curatorial practice is as an answer to the critique of established art institutions and bureaucratization of aesthetics. Independent curators usually begin to organize independent projects to free themselves from disciplinary regimes of art institutions, boredom of routine work arrangements and constraints related to cultural bureaucracies.

But independent curatorial practice is not only an intellectual discourse, but also the ability to recognize good artwork, to conceive an exhibition and organize it. The curator also has to find sponsors, and looking for money.³⁸ Because with the freedom with which it comes,

³⁶ Varine, H. (1985) Notes en forme d'avant-propos in Nicolas, A. (ed.) *Nouvelles muséologies*. Association Museologie Nouvelle et Experimentation Sociale: Marseille.

³⁷ Schimmel, P. (2000) In Marincola P. *Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility*. Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative: Philadelphia.

³⁸ Kuoni, C. (2001). *Words of Wisdom: A curator's vade mecum on Contemporary Art*. Independent Curators International: New York.

working independently also carries new responsibilities, France Morin mentioned “As an independent curator, I am ultimately responsible for all the aspects of each project, including fund-raising, research, and administration, and I must also work with extremely limited financial constraints”.³⁹

But the truth of this newly established way of curating outside of an institution is that the supply of independent curators greatly exceeds demand. It is an open, unregulated market and, like artists, few independent curators make a living without complimenting their curatorial work with other art world activity such as teaching, writing or project management.

Today we see curator in a much broader context. The presence of the curator within visual arts in the international context has increased in the last 10 years. The roles, the functions, the positions, and the influence that they exert have changed both their own careers and also have created a new form of relationship between the general audience, the artist and art institution. Art critic and curator, Michael Brenson, as mentioned before, posits the following as potential key characteristics of contemporary curators: “aesthete, diplomat, economist, critic, historian, politician, audience developer, and promoter.”⁴⁰ Also, the independent curator is often the generator of projects that are interrelated to other projects originated by that same curator. They may be working without a clear programming policy or strategy in institutional terms but are also capable of interfacing with authorities and organizations in the development and realization of projects.

But even if they work independently, the rupture from institutions is not as big as it looks at first, since it is a common concept for institutions and museums to contract independent curators for either an outside view, a fresh eye or, sometimes, a cheaper option of organizing an exhibition. Directors at many institutions argue that independent curators’ specialized voices are crucial. For example, the contemporary art gallery The Serpentine has freelancers curate annual group shows. “I think it’s very important for institutions to bring in outside curators,”⁴¹ said Hans Ulrich Obrist, the co-director of exhibitions and programs and director of international projects. He applauded the “completely new view” offered by the German designer Konstantin Grcic, who structured the museum’s first-ever design show.

³⁹ Ibid 122

⁴⁰ Art Journal, (1998) Vol. 57

⁴¹ Armin, J. (2010) The Creative Landscape of Independent Curators. *The New York Times*

So independent curators offer a new way of operating when organizing an exhibition and choosing ways of curating shows. A museum will have a dual job of supporting artists, managing clients and keeping the bank happy. They should have a very particular angle that differentiates them from the crowd and the curator will be in part directed by the clients' ambitions. Compared to this a freelance curator is funded from different sources (curating fees, teaching, research, writing) as well as through project based funding. An exhibition can take a while to get underway, because of the time it can take for funding to be in place. Another distinction is that freelance curators have a particular direction and interests, sometimes specific like digital media, but will most definitely know what they like or don't like very quickly. So the main difference between museum curated shows and those by done an independent curator is one of perspective. Where an institutionalized curator is constrained by the fixed group of people he represents continually, independent curators have a kind of mobility that allows them to move around. "The museums aren't doing enough," says Brian Wallis, an editor at Art in America and a former staff curator at the New Museum in New York. "They've fallen back on one-man shows, leaving the galleries to tackle the big ideas in contemporary art."⁴²

The practice of exhibition curatorship is a process classifying, structuring and imposing some form of sense-making on the art chosen for display. It is a mix between creativity and politics. Creativity apply to presentation, display and exhibition strategies, while politics refer to the underlying power relations and social conditions influencing ways in which exhibitions are developed, presented and interpreted.⁴³

Institutions are often essential in facilitating the types of projects that independent curators are involved in, yet, for the majority of them, it is important to maintain their independence. Not being tied to a particular museum or gallery allows them the leverage to work only with the artists that interest them in settings of their own choosing. Yet, while curating these shows, their relationship with institutions continue to grow and develop as more and more projects are successfully realized.

⁴² Alexander, M. (1989) ART; Now on View, New Work by Freelance Curators, *The New York Times*

⁴³ Weil, S. (1990). Rethinking the Museum: An Emerging New Paradigm in Anderson G. *Reinventing the museum: historical and contemporary perspectives on the paradigm shift*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Some independent curators work in museums, and some work out of commercial galleries. Many double as writers or artists. And some have become successful entrepreneurs whose names often are larger on show announcements than those of the artists. The most popular independent curators are known to be constantly flying around the globe, producing new exhibitions, and reaching a celebrity status equal or even bigger to that of an artist. And yet, this way of curating has its dark side, as declared by Nancy Spector, the chief curator at the Guggenheim, that talked about the dangers of the “helicopter model of international curating,”⁴⁴ which too often leads to superficial understanding of cultures and their art and as a result, to badly curated shows.

And then, there are also those that believe that the job of an independent curator is no longer something necessary. According to Jens Hoffmann, director of the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco, in the 1990s

“freelance curating was considered something that had fresh ideas and was in some way revolutionary. All those ideas are now completely part of the mainstream system, so that you don’t actually need freelance curators anymore in order to make radical statements.”⁴⁵

2.2.1 Institutional Curator versus Independent Curator

The roles discussed earlier differ between independent and museum curating. Independent curating is about an explicit relationship between curator and artist, as well as their own vision on the art and exhibitions. There is more freedom in choosing and producing, albeit cut down by financial problems and sometimes, the institutions they are collaborating with. In museums the role is more tied to the audience, whether the goal is to control them, offer them something, or allow them a voice. This curator is more dependent on the institution that he is working for, needing to follow a certain set of rules and expectations. These roles are clearly well derived from practice, and provide guidance for further work.

Traditionally, most major Western art museums have positioned themselves as cultural institutions of the dominant culture, whose curatorial decisions, inclusions, exclusions and interpretations of objects on display, have constructed authoritative versions of art history and various practitioners’ places within it. Over the past twenty to thirty years, critiques

⁴⁴ Kennedy, R. (2012). The fine art of being a curator in *The New York Times*.

⁴⁵ Armin, J. (2010) The Creative Landscape of Independent Curators. *The New York Times*

have influenced many art museums to adopt a more inclusive approach in the development and presentation of exhibitions. As a result, curators have frequently been striving for greater plurality in the presentation of exhibitions of work from differing cultures.

Independent curators, unlike institutional curators have more freedom to travel, see works and organize shows without being tied down to office hours or other institutional commitments. This role however can lack engagement with the locality of exhibitions and risk losing relevance for different audiences. Despite their freedom, independent curators are generally dependent on institutions to host work and support their projects. Independent curators working with a variety of organizations and specializations are increasingly common.

But in the end, as said by independent curator Britton Bertran “ultimately whether you are a curator or a gallerist, you are beholden to the same set of standards: to work with an artist or group of artists to create a moment, however fleeting, that takes an idea and allows people to react to it.”⁴⁶ The role of curators, whether independent or institutionalized, is to offer a good exhibition and that is what they should all be striving towards.

2.3 Curator as artist

The “rise of curator as creator”⁴⁷ has become one of the effects of the transformations in contemporary art. In the evolution of art practices, the work of the curator has developed so as to accept them and even react to them. Accordingly a curator’s career changed so as to become actively involved in its development. In the contemporary context the role of the curator is often to research and familiarize himself with artists, known and unknown to the public, so as to be able to successfully select and present their art on a platform according to a chosen thematic idea. This can go two ways, the curator can either do a good job of allowing the artists and works to convey that idea; or the curator can end up stealing the show from the artists they are presenting. This is where the curator becomes an artist whose work is considered art itself and is seen by the public as the creator and auteur, where the artists and their work are only elements that constitute the curators artwork. Artists then become the curator’s “objects” to display, and the artist’s message can become obscured or even lost, in the spotlight entering the curator’s message and meaning. This

⁴⁶ Foumberg, J. (2010) *Eye Exam: What Is a Curator?* *New City Art*

⁴⁷ Altshuler, B. (1994) *The Avant-garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Harry N. Abrams: New York.

drastic change in the role of the curator could be explained by the dematerialization of the art object that provoked the redefinition of art itself.

The curated exhibition has began to be seen as a cohesive cultural text and it could be argued that the curators no longer operate in the interests of the artist, but in the interest of art itself, using all at their disposition, both old practices such as exposition techniques and new ones such as the use of the gallery or museum as a white canvas where the curator arranges, modifies, puts into evidence the art so as to convey something to the public, in some cases a different meaning than that intended by the original author. This idea is supported by a number of curators and art world participants that declare that “as a writer, I equate curating with choosing the illustrations for a book. This won’t please artists, but most exhibitions do in fact illustrate some curator’s ideas”⁴⁸ and even direct and bold approaches such as “curating, broadly defined, is an art.”⁴⁹

Thanks to curating, the exhibition space has opened up to new possibilities for dialogue and exchange, factors that greatly influenced the way exhibition is perceived by the public. The activity, or in this case the artwork, of the curator is the exhibition and all of its associated processes, therefore confirming Luhmann’s theory of the exhibition raising questions about itself and its environment,⁵⁰ hence supporting the idea of the curator becoming the artist, with the exhibition space as the canvas for the artwork.

Supporting this theory is also the fact that in our days, each curator has a specific signature that defines his work and from which he is recognized by the public and fellow art actors. It brings the exhibition he curated a certain style and notoriety, that in has become more and more important for an exhibition to be considered successful. This is why it is essential for the new curator to obtain an unmistakable, original, and innovative handwriting if he is to position himself in the increasingly competitive curator market and become successful. This element of the art life used to be true for artists, just as the fact that everything that was, until recently, a typical strategy for the artist, especially striving for an unmistakable and innovative style that attracts attention and lets people know, even without a signature, who is the author. That means that typical strategies of artistic work have now shifted to

⁴⁸ Hasegawa, Y. (2001) Art in (a New) Context in Kuoni, C. (ed.) *Words of Wisdom: A Curator’s Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ICI: New York.

⁴⁹ Lippard, L. (2001) Other Walls in Kuoni, C. (ed.) *Words of Wisdom: A Curator’s Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ICI: New York.

⁵⁰ Luhmann, N. (2000) *Art as a Social System*, Stanford University Press: California.

include the curator as one actor that occupies a number of different functions, including that of the artist itself. “It is apparent that curatorial discourse is in the midst of its own production. Curating is ‘becoming discourse’ where curators are willing themselves to be the key subject and producer of this discourse.”⁵¹ He is now not only the producer of the exhibition, but the producer of discourse, and artistic communication with the public, one that has the curator in the midst of it all.

The pioneers of this movement of authorial autonomy are quite clearly Harald Szeemann and Walter Hopps. Szeemann’s career marked the change from the curator working at a distance from the processes of art production, to becoming actively involved in its development and he saw himself as “more conjuror than curator”, while Hopps compared the role of the curator to that of the conductor of an orchestra.⁵² They had changed the curating practices by putting the focus on exhibitions structured around new ideas and creation of new forms and experiences using the raw material of art rather than the usual presentation of collections and art history.⁵³ Thanks to them, curators have become something akin to “free agent, capable of almost anything”⁵⁴ and that the curator and the artist are a single entity.⁵⁵

An interesting consequence of the rise of the curator as artist is the decline of the manifesto originally written by artists and considered to be the imprint of the avant-garde art.⁵⁶ And yet, in the context of contemporary art, the manifesto is written and enacted by the curator. Curation has become a form of artistic authorship. A modern day example of this is the Site Santa Fe Biennale in the States. Each of Site’s biennales features a different curator, but still most of the post exhibition publicity, articles and criticism in the past were centered around these curators, often leaving the artists and their work unmentioned.

Curators and artists are now so close in their endeavors, that all areas of art are intertwined with each other. And yet, we have those that either do not agree with this tendency of the

⁵¹ O’Neill, P. (2007) *Curating Subjects*, Open Editions: London.

⁵² Obrist, H. U. (2008) *A brief history of curating*, JRP|Ringier: Zurich.

⁵³ Levi Strauss, D. (2006) The bias of the world: Curating after Szeemann & Hopps. *The Brooklyn Rail*

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Groys, B (2006) Multiple Authorship in Vanderlinden B. and Filipovic E. (eds.) *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Exhibitions and Biennials*, MIT Press: Cambridge.

⁵⁶ Puchner, M. (2006) Art and Manifesto in the Neo-Avant-Garde, *Edinburgh Seminar*.

curator of stealing the spotlight from the artist, or completely denying the curators new role as author.

This transformation of the curator in artist caused a hostile reaction among the majority of the artists' community, even from the beginning of this process. Ten artists signed a letter to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*⁵⁷ complaining about Szeemann's curatorial vision, while Daniel Buren published the following response in the *Documenta 5* catalogue:

“These sections (castrations), themselves carefully chosen 'touches of color' in the tableau that makes up the exhibition as a whole and in its very principle, only appear by placing themselves under the wing of the organizer, who reunifies art by rendering it equivalent everywhere in the case/screen that he prepares for it.“

So he accuses the curator that the “author is none other than the exhibition organizer“.⁵⁸ The secondary authorship of the curator disturbed the primary authorship of the artist and he suffered a loss of autonomy when this happened.

But it is not only artists that reacted negatively to this phenomenon, curators themselves warn against misunderstandings, American curator Mari Carmen Ramirez declared that “curatorial practice entails a creative and imaginative dimension” that is parallel to that of the artists, but she thinks it's naïve to think that the curator can take the artist's place⁵⁹, while the Austrian independent curator and writer Robert Fleck goes as far as saying it straight in the face “a curator is not an artist.”⁶⁰ So it is quite clear that part of the caste of curators want to continue with tradition, and although they don't deny the evolution of contemporary art and curation with it, they don't agree with this process of the curator as more than an exhibition-maker. They are deeply critical of curators' attempts to claim the

⁵⁷ Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Donald Judd, Barry Le Va, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Dorothea Rockburne, Fred Sandback, Richard Serra and Robert Smithson (1972) Letter to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Archive in Motion*.

⁵⁸ Buren, D. (1972). Exposition d'une exposition in *Documenta 5*. http://www.e-flux.com/projects/next_doc/index.html.

⁵⁹ Ramirez, M. C. (2001). The Creative Curator in Kuoni, C. (ed.) *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ICI: New York.

⁶⁰ Fleck, R. (2001). A Visual Medium in Kuoni, C. (ed.) *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ICI: New York.

creative position of generating experiences themselves, as their role as assemblers and contextualizers is destabilized.

Either way, it seems that curators are increasingly stepping into artistic and creative areas and their role is in constant development. They can gain a reputation for creating unusual, attention getting ideas. Now curators come up with the idea first, then seek exhibiting artists to validate their idea. Current exhibitions, therefore, comment more on what curators are thinking, rather than ideas originating in an artists studio. Whether this is right or wrong, and should they step back and give back the authorship to the artists is a discussion that doesn't seem that will come to a common conclusion soon.

2.4 Artist as curator

But this constant evolution of the practices of curating in the context of contemporary art has not only allowed the overspill of curators into the realm of artists, but also the other way around. Artists have become curators as well. The constant transformation of art and exhibition has offered artists the possibility of working with their art after it is done, a thing that until recently was not possible, the role of the artist ending when the creative part of it was finished. In our days, artist have decided to take control, and part of that is becoming curators themselves, both for their art, as well as for the exhibition of other artists as well.

It started with the artist-run spaces in the 1970s and 80s, where a new type of artist as curator emerges. A clear example of this is the 1969 Project in Dublin that placed artists at the centre of their exhibition. They were the ones that selected the work and the exhibitions were in a 2-3 week rotations compared to the usual 6-8 week shows. It was an experiment in flexibility and support of new and unknown artists that went against both the institutional framework of the museum and the commercial agenda of the gallery. And this practice continues till our days, a great number of art exhibitions assign the role of artist as curator at the core of their activities. The process of planning and curating exhibitions falls upon a committee of individual artists who work together on all its aspects, including fund-raising, administration and governance, and future planning. Self-organizing can also involve the artist as curator as the generator of events that expand beyond the exhibition and its venue – to off-site events, public gatherings, performances and screenings.

Some museums have embraced this practice of having the artist become the curator, inviting them in for short term exhibitions. The *Artist's Choice* is an ongoing series in which a contemporary artist is asked to create an exhibition from the American Museum of Modern Art's collection. The idea behind this is to offer the public a different view on their art, since artists working as curators are different. They "can operate outside of convention or orthodoxy"⁶¹ not being bound to the general rules of display that curators have, like hanging all works in a particular gallery on the same center line. It exhibits art through creation, the specialty of the artist.

The reason behind this process of artists occupying curatorial territory by running galleries and curating exhibitions is a way of taking control over what happens to their art after it leaves their care as well as a new way of relating and engaging the audience. In the artist circle it is believed that curators have too much authority and responsibility for creating the artist's work in the social field. "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."⁶² Artists function as curators in an attempt to gain visibility and own the process of distribution rather than be subject to it. It offers them the possibility to show their own work in the context of their choosing. An artist can round up other artists work based around similar themes and directions to their own, and then submit this as a proposal for a group show to museums and galleries. It is a solution for an emerging or young artist to get their work into the appropriate show and location.

The other side of the coin when treating the subject of the artist-curator is the fact that the belief of the artist in being a better curator does not necessarily make him so. It is thought that the freedom from institutional conventional and a better understanding of the needs of the artist allows them a better process of curating, one that does not involve the repetition of what is perceived to be conventional hierarchies.

"The idea that a show organized 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

⁶¹ Higgs, M. (2006) interview by Paul O'Neil, *North Drive Press #3*

⁶² Rosler, M. (2003) Someone Says... in Hoffmann J. (ed.) *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated By an Artist*.

idea that artists are fundamentally interesting and operating under a different (higher) moral code than anyone else, especially art dealers”⁶³

And yet, many repeat the same structures but claim to be different simply on the grounds of being artist-led.

Another problem is the friction and dissatisfaction that this, no doubt, causes between the curators. It is expected that these will react negatively when shoved aside and said to be doing their job in a dissatisfactory manner. It is also a stretch for the artists that now have to take on audience, collectors, patrons and gallerists to attend their show, while also dealing with the physical, marketing and financial logistics of producing the exhibition.

2.4.1. Curator as Artist versus Artist as Curator

In the midst of all this evolution and change in the art world, the roles of the actors have also started to mix, adjust and develop. Therefore the curator is no longer just a manager and an organizer, and neither is the artist limited to creating the art while leaving all the other details of showcasing it to the curator and museum professionals. In the context of contemporary art there is no clearly defined role for neither the artist nor the curator, both of them doing the others job, trespassing without a doubt into the others territory. The reasons for this are numerous and constantly changing and the reactions regarding this subject range from approving to harsh criticism. And yet, this mixed and intertwined activity seems to be thriving and evolving into something that only the future will show.

The collapsing definitions of curator into artist and the other way around expose art and curatorial practices to be constantly evolving into a territorial overlap. Contemporary curating posits the curator in a position sometimes parallel to that of conceptual artist, as well as the other way around, offering a way into curating for the artist. The text above described both types of curators, mentioning both positive and negative elements of this evolution in contemporary art. I believe that it is important to continually negotiate a balance between the creative authorship, the needs of artists and the struggle to develop new avenues and audiences. But most of all, it doesn't really matter who is doing the curating, but how it is done, because some artists, like some curators, are deeply interested in and committed to the practices of others and the discursive process in forming art. And

⁶³ Gillick, L. (1993) Curating for Pleasure and Profit, *Art Monthly*.

some curators take on artistic authorship because they want to create and transmit something to the public. So, as long as the audience gets new and improved art at every exhibition, the job is done well, no matter who is doing it.

2.5. Everyone is a curator

With this constant and drastic change in the way art both works and is perceived, the fields that have been affected are not only those of the artist and curator in the conservative sense of it, but also that of the public, more precisely the notion of who can become a curator has shifted and has grown more and more flexible. It started with a very clear and very definite notion of a person that has to have historical studies and work in a museum, moved on to include artists and lately it has opened up so much that it seems that almost everyone is a curator. A fast growing and obvious trend has appeared in the last years to call curating a broader collection of activities, including community curators, curator of software for managing iTunes collections, radio curators as well as the apparition of the term curated consumption.⁶⁴

Some would argue that verb “curate” has become such an overworked marketing element that it’s now in need of curation itself. For example, in an article of the fashion magazine *Vogue*, the word “selected” got replaced by “curated” when describing something as mundane as eye shadows. Or the musician and producer Tor Erik Hermansen⁶⁵ that believes, as expressed in a speech, that music today is an act of collaboration that approaches the curatorial; the resemblance is in the way he selects beats, instruments, and singers to put together a song just as a museum curator would choose works for an exhibition. But the end result is much different as his creativity is directed toward a much wider audience; therefore his taste has become the taste of millions. So it could be argued that it is much more effective than curating in the classical sense of the word, for it affects a much wider audience.

On the internet, both the word and the concept have taken particular hold. “The Web democratized the ability to spot things,” explains Josh Spear, who launched his influential design-and-culture blog after realizing “that curated consumption was a kind of a business,

⁶⁴ Schlatter, E. (2010) A new Spin, Are DJs, rappers and bloggers “curators”? *Museum*

⁶⁵ Chayka, K. (2012) From Pop Music to Blogging, Everyone’s a Curator, *Hyperallergic*

because of the sheer quantity of decisions people have to make around buying things.”⁶⁶ Steven Rosenbaum argues that huge opportunities exist for businesses able to offer unique curated goods, services and experiences for customers.⁶⁷ With everything becoming increasingly digitized the definition of the term has evolved to include the collectors, aggregators, organizers and bloggers, as well as the mostly self-proclaimed digital curators on Tumblr, WordPress, Pinterest. The curatorial role described in the Digital Humanities is one where the curator operates with a skill set so as to handle the flood of information available through the internet; sorting, organizing, and prioritizing for the sake of others. However, it does maintain a very hierarchical structure: there is the curator, and there are the people who are not the curator.⁶⁸ All this is possible because on the Internet, curators are able to work solo. They don’t need a staff, or financial backing, and they don’t even have to be good analyzers or critics of culture. They simply present items for consumption.

This popularization of the word and practice of curating started with the contemporary art’s understanding of curation as an authorial act. The famous company Apple known for its innovative products was also one of the first used in an article written by Steven Johnson in 2003 as an example of “curatorial culture” regarding its iTunes celebrity playlist, where he talked about professional filtering for “people with great taste in music.”⁶⁹ Another promoter of the curatorial taken out of the museum was Jeff Jarvis that coaxed journalists to curate information rather than generate content.⁷⁰

Even the art world seems to accept this expansion of the notion not only to artists, but to everyone that considers themselves curators too. A biennale in New York made an open call that invited curators, defined as “artists, writers, or anyone so inclined,” to submit two works by two different artists for an exhibition that would aim to address a certain issue. Now anyone could participate in that rarified form of art fair.

⁶⁶ Spear J. (2011) in Dumenco S. Why Calling Yourself a Curator Is the New Power Move, *Details*.

⁶⁷ Rosenbaum, S. (2011) *Curation Nation: How to Win in a World Where Consumers are Creators*, McGraw Hill: New York

⁶⁸ *The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0*, (2009) UCLA: Los Angeles.

⁶⁹ Johnson, S. (2003) Judging 2003’s ideas: The most overrated and underrated, *The New York Times*.

⁷⁰ Jarvis, J. (2009) Death of the curator. Long live the curator, *BuzzMachine*.

But one of the main reasons curating everything and anything has become so popular is because “Nobody revels in being overwhelmed and so we start looking for people who say, 'This thing you're interested in? I will curate it for you.' We're like, 'Okay, you're my new best friend.'”⁷¹ With the evolution of the internet, all that insane quantity on information that is thrown at people everyday and at every hour need to be organized and sorted out, so people started doing it themselves and called it curating because it “addresses two parallel trends: the explosive growth in data, and our need to be able to find information in coherent, reasonably contextual groupings”⁷²

Still, the traditional curators have reacted, mainly, with irritation and negativity to this appropriation of their title. Some of those who value curating as an actual practice detest seeing it used by commercial culture. A well-curated exhibit in the opinion of Kelvin Browne, vice-president, exhibitions and marketing at the Royal Ontario Museum is one where “the sum of the parts is far more than the individual pieces.” The element that lacks in the pop culture curating: “The concept of ‘curating’ your life is just an excuse for high-end consumption,” adding that “It’s pretending that buying stuff and putting it together is meaningful, but it’s not.”⁷³ And this is an opinion shared by the biggest part of the cast of curators, although some take it more lightly, seeing it like rejuvenation and loosening of the rigid definition that once was the curator.

2.5.1 Curated Content

Our daily world has been transformed into one with an abundance of content, information is being generated and thrown at us every second and it feels like this enormous noise that has us overwhelmed. Over 150 million blogs are written and published daily, around 20 hours of video are uploaded on YouTube every minute, there is this increasing number of online classes, a single university offers over 1600 and counting, websites add significant content every second and news are being streamed from all over the world constantly. Many experts estimate that all of the information on the Internet is doubling every 72 hours. We are shifting from an era of content scarcity to one of content abundance and we are feeling overpowered by it. This is why the need for content curation has appeared and is constantly evolving. It is important to understand that this new concept is not collecting

⁷¹ Rosenbaum, S. (2011) *Curation Nation: How to Win in a World Where Consumers are Creators*, McGraw Hill: New York

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Kingstone, A. (2011) Everyone’s a curator now, *Macleans*.

links or information, but it is more about putting them into a context with organization, annotation, and presentation. Content curators provide a customized, reviewed selection of the best and most relevant resources on a very specific topic or theme.

Unlike content marketing, content curation does not include generating content, instead representing a highly proactive and selective approach to finding, collecting, presenting and displaying digital content around predefined sets of criteria and subject matter. For instance, a content curator is not necessarily responsible for creating new content, but to offer a consistent update regarding what's interesting, happening, and cool in their focus. Curators tend to have a unique and consistent point of view, providing a reliable context for the content that they discover and organize. It can take many forms: feeds, channels (such as on YouTube), it can appear on blogs, or even be the links that are uploaded to social media sites such as Facebook. It can be an online newsroom, a collection of links, an assortment of RSS feeds, or a Twitter list. So content curation includes almost all of the online activities that are done on a daily basis by the internet users.

Content curation has become essential to marketing, branding, journalism, reporting and social media – often, to mash-ups of all these different and disparate channels.

"Many are turning to content curation tools that help find, organize and share content online to ensure that their site is constantly delivering updated, highly topical, keyword-rich content - making it a natural winner in the battle of Search Engine Optimization."

writes Savitz, so sites that use content curation usually update rather frequently, and search engines tend to reward these up-to-date sites by indexing them more often. In addition, "The content you curate for your chosen topic will automatically include the most popular search terms within your area of interest,"⁷⁴ which can improve search result rankings.

Unlike physical gallery space, the web is a far less constrained space which offers access to multiple dimensions of content at once. Whether the content is timely (headlines and new content) or timeless (archival content that maintains relevance by retaining encyclopedic qualities), content curation is about selectively and effectively balancing these space-time factors to create context in order for the site to feel alive, relevant, and worth returning to.

⁷⁴ Savitz, E. (2011) Winning the SEO Battle through Content Curation, Forbes.

There have been identified 5 models of Content Curation⁷⁵:

- Aggregation - curating the most relevant information about a particular topic into a single location;
- Distillation - curating information into a more simplistic format where only the most important or relevant ideas are shared;
- Elevation - curating with a mission of identifying a larger trend or insight from smaller daily musings posted online;
- Mashups - unique curated juxtapositions where merging existing content is used to create a new point of view;
- Chronology - curation that brings together historical information organized based on time to show an evolving understanding of a particular topic.

Initially, the term is attributed to Rohit Bhargava, who wrote that the detached analysis of an algorithm will no longer be enough to find what we are looking for on the internet, due to the fast multiplying online content. To offer online users great content on any topic imaginable, there appeared the need of a new category of individual working online. Someone whose job it is not to create more content, but to make sense of all the content that others are creating. To find the best and most relevant content and bring it forward. In short, the need was for content curators, who take it upon themselves to collect and share the best content online for others to consume and take on the role of citizen editors, publishing highly valuable compilations of content created by others. The author believed that in time, these curators will bring more utility and order to the social web, helping to add a voice and point of view to organizations and companies that can connect them with customers – creating an entirely new dialogue based on valued content rather than just brand created marketing messages.⁷⁶

This fast growing new category of curators have taking over the internet, and a sure sign that a new development in society is here to stay is the creation of the Curators Code, promoted by a group of curators led by blogger Maria Popova. Although this new collection of attribution symbols is getting early mixed reviews. It is important to understand that when society is trying to institutionalize a new phenomenon, as well as

⁷⁵ Bhargava, R. (2011) The 5 Models Of Content Curation, *Influential Marketing Blog*

⁷⁶ Bhargava, R. (2009) Manifesto For The Content Curator: The Next Big Social Media Job Of The Future ? *Influential Marketing Blog*

impose some moral rules to its activity, such as the Curators Code, then this is a sign of acceptance.

CHAPTER THREE. Case study of Harald Szeemann and Hans Ulrich Obrist and their work

3.1. Harald Szeemann

It is only natural that the first person on the list of important contemporary curators is given to Harald Szeemann, probably the single figure most responsible for the image we have of the curator today: the curator-as-artist, a roaming, freelance designer of exhibitions, or as he liked to call himself, a spiritual guest worker. He was the most celebrated and influential curator of the late 20th century. With a career of almost 50 years, he experimented with non-museum spaces, invented the modern idea of exhibition making with the first exhibitions of mixed genres and generations, sometimes including historical documents and scientific innovations, and the display of conceptual art and performance. As the curator declared "It is now widely accepted that the art history of the second half of the 20th century is no longer a history of artworks, but a history of exhibitions,"⁷⁷ This is the man that change the art world, and transformed it into what we see today. His life and activity was art history in the making, being the first curator to have complete control over the now famous Documenta exhibitions, which are held every five years in Kassel, Germany and made each one of his exhibitions a bridge between past and present, seducing the spectators into a different world and reality as he wanted each exhibition of his to be "not just a group show, but a temporary world."⁷⁸

The curatorial work of Harald Szeemann cannot be seen as having just a single aspect as it was highly complex. He would comment on his method as one of structured chaos, every one of his exhibitions being a highly varied collection of paintings, sculptures, advertisements, films, books, archival materials and installations without any discernible organizing principle. He liked to have a close relationship with the artists he was working with, always being in close contact with them and their work, and becoming a kind of co-creator. Szeemann was also the curator that opened the doors into the art world and offered the chance to get famous for a lot of lesser-known artists from places that were at that time, relatively speaking, off the art world's grid, favoring the outsiders and visionaries, as he related to them on the grounds of being one himself.

⁷⁷ Szeemann, H. (2008) in Derieux, F. (ed.) *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology*, JRP|Ringier: Zurich

⁷⁸ Szeemann, H. (2001) in Thea, C. Here Time Becomes Space: A Conversation with Harald Szeemann, *Sculpture Magazine*

Born in Switzerland in 1933, Harald Szeemann studied art history, archaeology and journalism at the University of Berne. He grew up in a time when many artists found themselves in a world in which their vocation and their aspirations no longer fit happily within a traditional definition of art or culture. And all this disquietude and unrest in the art world showed the need for a change. The globalized world was forming and artists felt that there were many ideas and places to explore, a new way of thinking and acting, not only on the local, but on the international level. Szeemann felt this too, entering the art world with his first exhibition "Poetic Painter, Painterly Poet", devoted to Hugo Ball, the First World War Dadaist, while still a student in 1957, in St Gallen. This showed his interest in early 20th-century modernism such as Dada and surrealism, and artists such as Duchamp, Malevich, and Kandinsky, with the art of which he would later curate shows and exhibitions. He would spend his life researching and bringing to light artistic developments, constantly exploring new ways of exhibiting all types of art, from paintings to poetry and exhibitions, and finding chaotic connections between them all.

In 1961, at the age of 28, he was named Director of the Kunsthalle in Berne, where during eight years he organized twelve to fifteen exhibitions a year, turning this provincial institution, dominated by local artists into a platform for emerging European and American artists. One of the most famous events organized there was the wrapping of the Kunsthalle building by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in 1968, the first one for Christo in a long and successful career of object wrapping. Thanks to Szeemann's work there and the fame he brought to the institution, The Berne museum held this prominent position throughout the 1970s and beyond, well after he had left.

But Harald's work in Berne culminated in 1969 with "When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head" the first exhibition to bring together post-Minimalist and Conceptual artists in a European institution and to found a platform for conceptual art, in this case, the art taking place primarily in the mind, representing a vital moment in the history of art. This show was also the turning point for Szeemann's career, irrevocably changing the public role of the curator, from that mixture of bureaucrat and cultural impresario to the creative agent responsible for the exhibition's very staging as an event, which creates large-scale exhibitions with a single vision and site-specific works executed especially for the show.

This show created a lot of controversy that escalated into public protest and negative media, leading to pressure to adjust his programming from the Kunsthalle's board of

directors and Bern's municipal government, so Harald Szeemann resigned and became something that had never previously existed: an independent curator. The figure of the curator would no longer be seen as the person in charge of collecting, restoring or keeping board members and trustees happy but the person that has become almost an artist himself, creating exhibitions and taking care of all the aspect involved in putting on a show, such as exhibition architecture, transportation, bookkeeping and all other practical matters.

After leaving the Bern museum, he continued to put on shows on his own, his creativity and exhibition grandeur escalating. He was appointed the sole curator of the fifth Documenta, a role he took on gladly, since it is said that “When Attitudes Become Form” was his response to the Documenta 4 which he found too conservative and lacking in international artists and diversity in art. So this was his chance to put on a good show for the public and the artists. And he managed to do exactly that, Documenta 5 quickly becoming a legend and an example, introducing installation and performance-oriented art to even broader audiences. In our days it is considered one of the biggest art events, and the mention of Szeemanns Documenta is still a hot topic and it has been transformed into almost a canon of how an exhibition should be curated.

It is interesting that after such a big event like Documenta, his next projects were a series of small scale exhibitions named “Museum of Obsessions”, one of them was dedicated to his grandfather, “Grand Father: A Pioneer Like Us” displaying his belongings as a hairdresser in a private apartment in Bern in 1974. This represents another particularity of Szeemann, that of oscillating between large and small, private and public and showing the public that art can appear where one is least expecting it.

He continued on to creating and impersonating that definition of the first independent curator, globe-trotting around the world, creating shows and becoming this star of the art world. The curator created the Agentur fur Geistige Gastarbeit translated as the Agency for Spiritual Guest Work, a one-person business with a team of devoted collaborators taking care of all other practical matters. The objective of this agency was to communicate his vision. Every show he did from the early '70s until the very end was defined as "spiritual guest work," made in the service of "a possible visualization of a museum of obsessions." This imaginary museum existed only in his head, and gave him all the ideas

and inspiration for his work, all of them fueled on his obsessions, for “where no obsessions are to be discerned, I have no reason to linger.”⁷⁹

He organized “The Bachelor Machines” for the Kunsthalle Bern, which he also presented at the 1975 Venice Biennale, and that has later traveled to the museums and galleries around the world. He went on to be named co-commissioner of the biennale, together with Achille Bonito Oliva, with which he created Aperto ’80 translated as Open, set up in the Magazzini del Sale in Dorsoduro, a gigantic former rope factory, therefore ignoring the national divisions of the biennale's pavilions and using non-museum space for an exhibition. This was a special section for younger and emerging artists and was repeated in many successive editions. This is also the section that Szeemann has adjusted and changed throughout the years the most, altering it to mirror his current moods and convictions. For example, in 1985 he felt the need for what he called “forgotten quality of silence”⁸⁰ that led to the mounting of “Traces, sculptures and monuments of their precise voyage”. While in 1999 the super curator declared that that the problem of the Aperto is the tension between making an inventory of the best global art and providing any sort of useful supplement to the pavilions, so the show named “d’APERTutto” or “Aperto over all” - broke into new areas of the dockyard opening the space to monster installations that were showcased.⁸¹

In 1981 he took on the paradoxical position of permanent independent collaborator at the Kunsthhaus, Zurich, where he mounted shows in his characteristic eclectic and chaotic style, including Richard Serra, Victor Hugo and Eugene Delacroix. That is also where he implemented his new approach of “great exhibition”, which consists in tying artworks to a central cross-disciplinary theme and reconfiguring them into an often non-chronological juxtaposition. The most representative for this was the largely misunderstood exhibition “The Tendency towards the Total Work of Art” in 1983.

Yet, he continued to be in great demand internationally, mounting solo exhibitions, discovering new or underrated art scenes, such as Eastern Europe’s emerging contemporary artists and organizing the Lyon Biennale and the Kwangju Biennial in Korea in 1997 and serving as commissioner of the Venice Biennale in 1999 and 2001.

⁷⁹ Szeemann, H. (2005) in Birnbaum, D. When Attitude Becomes Form, *Artforum*

⁸⁰ Szeemann, H. (1996) in Obrist, H. U. Mind over matter, *Artforum International*

⁸¹ Gellatly, A. (1999) Just Add Water, *frieze*, issue 48

The last exhibition he curated was "Visionary Belgium" in 2005, the third installation that was preceded by "Visionary Switzerland" in 1991 and "Austria im Rosennetz" in 1996. This triad was part of his "pataphysical anthropology", the examination of a regions most extraordinary cultural artifacts in order to discern its "spiritual contours". The exhibition was dedicated to the 175th anniversary of Belgium, reproducing the stereotype of Belgians as a darkly quirky, self-deprecating people. One room is dedicated to the late 19th century erotic drawings of Félicien Rops, which mock the social and religious establishment of his time. And in others we find such works as Sébastien Delire, Punishment (2004) or Jan Fabre's sperm drawings. And yet, this last exhibition by Szeemann, who died on the day of its opening, has raised some concerns regarding its retrospective approach, instead of concentrating on the new and exciting.

Harald Szeemann died in 2005, leaving behind a world that he changed. He was the original independent curator, the star of the art world, the inventor of "great exhibition", new styles of curating and understanding art, and the promoter of artists. He used his position of authority to change the conversation about art and invented the idea of the exhibition as an art form in itself, emerging as a kind of artist himself. The collapsing definitions of curator into artist and vice versa, and therefore the state that contemporary art is in at the moment, happened because of him. He was the changing point for the art world that we know today.

3.1.1. When Attitudes Become Form

As mentioned above, the culmination of Harald Szeemanns activity at the Kunsthalle Bern was the exhibition, by its full name, "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information)" that took place between March 22 and April 27 1969, and that was conceivable the most famous exhibition of new art in modern art history. It represented an important shift as a method and model for exhibition practice, in that all works of art were mixed together, instead of being carefully arranged by a determined set of rules such as chronology, movement or artists nationality. It blended both European and American artists and movements, such as Arte Povera, Post-minimalism, Conceptualism, and Land Art.

The starting point of the exhibition came from the outside of the art world, the people from Philip Morris and the PR firm Rudder and Finn proposed the idea of his own show to

Szeemann, offering money and total freedom. It was an opportunity that could not be passed, almost a dream come true, since the financial part is always a big factor in the work of a curator. Until that point, Harald had to mount exhibitions with the constraint that of money, or lack of them. The financial freedom offered him the possibility of including an international cast of artists, one of the things that made this event so revolutionary. The other reason behind this mixture of artists nationalities is Szeemanns opinion that Documenta 4 was on overly cautious show, that missed out in not showing new artists of that time. So he invited them to participate in “Attitudes”.

The idea behind the show, as well as the title came to the curator while visiting an artist’s studio, which greeted him from behind two tables - one with neon coming out of the surface, the other one with grass, which he watered. Szeemann was so impressed by this gesture that he decided to do an exhibition that focuses on behaviors and gestures like the one he saw.⁸² And so, “When Attitudes become form” was born, the title transmitting the engagement with the process of making as much as the result. Even the subtitle to the exhibition, “Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information,” is a further introduction into its contents. The art presented asked spectators to join the artist in stepping outside their comfort zone and to allow their consciousness to accept and embrace the new order of things. Just as Szeemann wrote in his introduction to the catalogue, “In order to entertain certain ideas we may be obliged to abandon others upon which we have come to depend.”⁸³

For “Attitudes”, the spaces of the Kunsthalle got occupied by a generation of young revolutionary artists, that were mostly free to contribute any work that they felt would be relevant. The 69 artists “took over the institution”⁸⁴ trying to redefine the physical conditions for the show: Jan Dibbets excavated a corner of the building to expose the foundation; Lawrence Weiner removed three square feet of wall space; Michael Heizer demolished the sidewalk outside of the museum with a metal ball; Richard Serra contributed one of his Splash pieces, splashing molted lead inside the Kunsthalle foyer. Richard Artschwager’s blps (a term devised by the artists to describe black elongated shaped marks) dispersed over the walls, establishing a constant game of hide and seek.

⁸² Szeemann, H. (2008) in Obrist, H. U. *A brief history of curating*, JRP|Ringier: Zurich

⁸³ Szeemann, H. (1969) *When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information) Catalogue*, Kunsthalle: Bern

⁸⁴ Szeemann, H. (2008) in Obrist, H. U. *A brief history of curating*, JRP|Ringier: Zurich

Daniel Buren pasted his signature stripes around the town and got arrested for this, while Richard Long went as far as to leave the institutional framework behind altogether, going on a three-day hike in the Swiss mountains. This was that part of the show that explored the absence of the object, creating a sense of extraordinary and haunting at the same time. Bruce Nauman's "Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten Inch Intervals" that is a self-portrait in absentia and Alighiero Boetti's "Lo che prendo il sole a Torino il 19 gennaio" that represents a silhouette from several hand molded lumps of clay in the space where the artists sun-bathing body had been are great examples of absent presence.

Szeemann turned the Kunsthalle Bern into a giant artist's studio, treating the idea of the exhibition as workshop and place of discussion. The installation ran contrary to the rational rules most art viewers were used to. Some artworks were positioned extremely close to one another, providing little room for visitors on the narrow strips of floor between fragile artworks. It was a mix of all the objects presented, an almost chaotic view for that time, designed to change human perception of contemporary art as it was then understood.

Even if it featured little art from outside the Western Hemisphere, it was the first big show to acknowledge a broad range of mixed-media work by artists as Richard Tuttle, Mario Merz, Eva Hesse, Alighiero Boetti, Bruce Nauman and Barry Flanagan that worked in Post-Minimalist, Arte Povera and Land Art and Conceptualism but nonetheless remaining concerned with materiality. The exhibition did not attempt to assimilate the varying artworks into a singular narrative, allowing the differences to tell a story of their own, to engage the public in a new reality. The activity and process of the artist was now put above that of the medium. This was the first show where the curator responded to the work of contemporary artists, letting the artists provide the initiative rather than the curator imposing their own.

The majority of the artists that Szeemann invited to this exhibition were unknown to the public and art world. And it worked as a launching pad for most of them, the critical and market status that most of the "Attitudes" artists achieved in the following years after the show was enormous. Their works are now considered museum collection classics and they are internationally renowned artists. And yet, at the time, the exhibition was not received well. The conservative Swiss public did not react well to the show. The public reacted with dumping manure and burning uniforms at the entrance of the museum. Even Szeemann's

own mother was against the show, asking him to curate Swiss artist instead and warning against being fired. Her cautioning was right, despite positive reviews the museum cancelled Szeemann's planned Joseph Beuys show and he followed by resigning, becoming the first independent exhibition maker and founding a career path that would be followed by generations of curators, leaving behind a that exhibition has since been discussed, researched and examined in a wide range of essays, books and conferences for being one of the turning points for conceptual art.

This exhibition has become one of the most legendary shows of the recent past. It changed the way people perceive art, ignoring the customary chronological or thematic order for a concept that placed the works in dialogue with one another and introducing the context of a work of art, which could be said to carry at least fifty percent of its meaning. The show represented

“the obvious opposition to form; the high degree of personal and emotional engagement; the pronouncement that certain objects are art, although they have not previously been defined as such; the shift of interest away from the result towards the artistic process; the use of mundane objects; the interaction of work and material; Mother Earth as medium, workplace, the desert as concept.”⁸⁵

“Live in your head: when attitudes become form” was also the beginning of a new model of curator, in the person of Szeemann, one that is partner of the artist, a creative actor who generates original ideas and structures. It was the exhibition that brought international acclaim to Harald Szeemann and obtained an almost mythological position in the art world.

3.1.2. Documenta 5

Another great exhibition that made history is the fifth edition of Documenta, the first one curated by Harald Szeemann, an early example of exhibition as spectacle. It is remembered as one of the most controversial shows, being both widely acclaimed and extensively hated by the art world. Described as “unending and unendurable ... bizarre ... vulgar ... sadistic ...”⁸⁶ and “... painful ... crazy ... very little art ...”⁸⁷, the exhibition is considered to be the

⁸⁵ Szeemann, H. (1969) *When Attitudes Become Form (Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information) Catalogue*, Kunsthalle: Bern

⁸⁶ Kramer, H. (1972) Art: German Documenta, *The New York Times*

largest, most expensive and most diverse of any exhibition done until that moment in art history. It was the first of the kind, to be taken as example for generations of curators in the future, who will try to outshine it with large-scale, collaboratively curated, comprehensive mega-shows.

The Documenta series is one of the biggest art events in the world, taking place every 5 years in Germany. Its popularity and success was mainly gained after Szeeman took over the fifth Documenta that was covered extensively by the press, therefore reaching audiences beyond the professional art circles. It was the one that set the pace for all the other shows that have been put on since then, one bigger and more grandiose than the other.

Because of the internal organizational limits that kept creating complications that culminated in the problems at badly organized Documenta 4, Harald Szeemann was appointed General Secretary with sole responsibility of Documenta 5, which took place in Kassel between June 30 and October 8 of 1972, inaugurating the organization of the show under the aegis of a single artistic director. The curator named it “Questioning reality – pictorial worlds today “, setting out to trace the relationship between visual forms of expression and reality, jumping outside the sphere of contemporary art into an expanded realm of activity and establishing the new avant-garde as a phenomenon that was here to stay.

What the Swiss curator did was discard the practice of selecting artworks according to their potential individual quality or novelty, being mainly interested the ways of seeing, including those of nonprofessional artists instead of individual artworks per se, transforming the exhibition into a vast and dynamic survey of young international artists. During the course of the exhibition, that was conceived as a 100-day event, the visitors could check out, besides the usual art objects, performances and happenings, installations, outsider art, videos, kitsch, advertising, political iconography, religious-ethnological images, science fiction and even non-art. It included images from fashion and cinema alongside the artwork associated with most radical new art movements of the time. It resembled “something between a supermarket and a wunderkammer.”⁸⁸ And was

⁸⁷ Gibson, M. (1972) Art in Germany: A Theoretical Undertaking, *International Herald Tribune*

⁸⁸ Alloway, L. (1972) “REALITY”: IDEOLOGY AT D5, *Artforum*

comprised by only two museum spaces, resulting in a balance between static work and movement, between huge installations and small, delicate works.

Almost 200 artists were represented there, among which Richard Serra, Paul Thek, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, and Rebecca Horn. A lot of focus was put on performance and action art with the scope of showcasing that art acts in immediately tangible space, like Joseph Beuys performances under the auspices of his Organization for Direct Democracy that lasted the whole period of the event, during which he debated art, social problems and daily life with the public. A large section was devoted to the work of Adolf Wolfli and to paintings and sculptures of European and American photorealism served to document how a new reference to reality had invaded art. Curiously, “The Artist’s Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement”, meant to protect artists’ ongoing intellectual and financial rights with regard to their production was intensely promoted, even though a number of artists, between them Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt, condemned the exhibition in an issue of *Artforum*, even before it opened.

But even in all this chaos, Szeemann had a clear plan in his mind of how this event had to be organized.

“You began with "Images That Lie" (such as publicity, propaganda, and kitsch), passed through utopian architecture, religious imagery and art brut, moved on to Beuys' office, and then to gorgeous installations like Serra's *Circuit*, 1972. You could lie down under the roof and dream to a continuous sound by La Monte Young. All the emerging artists of the late '60s were present.”⁸⁹

He knew what he wanted to transmit to the public and how he was going to do it. An overall thematic frame was created, within which the individual works had the role of representing it. The exhibition offered to guide viewers in their ways of seeing in order to provide a better understanding of contemporary pictorial worlds.

The reception of this Documenta, like with everything groundbreaking and innovative, was mainly negative by both the press and public. And yet, it is considered not only one of the biggest events in Harald Szeemann's life, but in the history of contemporary art as well. Known as the starting point for all the extravaganza shows that followed, giving a new

⁸⁹ Szeemann, H. (2008) in Obrist, H. U. *A brief history of curating*, JRP|Ringier: Zurich

perspective on the curators' vision, allowing him to reflect social and cultural realities through contemporary art, it presented the idea of exhibition as spectacle or even as art in itself. It was a pioneering approach to art and art events, with atypical inclusions and radically different ways of showcasing art and communicating with the public. Documenta 5 under the artistic directing of Harald Szeemann was a trend setter and a game changer that offered a new vision on curating and contemporary art. It shook the art world and changed its direction.

3.1.3. Archive and Library

One of the biggest curators of the 20th century had managed, in all his career of almost five decades, from 1975 to his death in 2005, to leave give the world not only incredible exhibition but also a large amount of information documenting all his work, as well as his extensive library. The latter encompasses approximately 28,000 volumes of specialized collections on topics ranging from anarchism, science fiction, and pataphysics to other lesser-known artistic movements, as well as rare monographs, artists' books, limited edition publications.

The archive, which was initially divided between Bern and Ticino, where Szeemann lived, had moved permanently the “pink factory” in the 80'. The two leveled former watch factory in Maggia, Switzerland was also used as the office for his ever-growing exhibition-making enterprise. It was as much of a personal space, as it was a business one, curating representing Szeemanns passion first of all, from which he managed to make a successful career. This is why the archive consists not only of work documents, such as preliminary notes for many projects, installation sketches, research files, and around 40,500 photographic prints, negatives, slides, and transparencies, but also a comprehensive record of Szeemann's correspondence with major artists, curators, and scholars, in all more than 1,000 boxes.

The curator started his documentation early with high school research and documents on his early theatrical career, and also include material related to other projects such as films, books, texts, seminars, lectures, awards ceremonies, exhibitions Szeemann co-curated or in which he was consultant, as well as unrealized projects.

He continued with all the materials for his more than 200 exhibitions including floor plans, catalog drafts, shipping documents, press clippings, invitation cards, press releases, posters

and even parking tickets and telephone doodles. This largest single archival collection on contemporary art offers an insight into the work of one of the most distinguished curators of the last decades, who has constantly questioned and reshaped the scope and meaning of exhibition-making within contemporary culture.

But studying this archive will not be an easy action, because, like everything in his life, Szeeman had his own filing system, one that is neither chronological nor thematic and that follows his own inside logic. Like all his exhibitions, it seems chaotic, just to prove it has structure afterwards. As he says it himself:

“My archive is a function of my own history. I know that I do not have to look for Wagner under the letter W, but under Gesamtkunstwerk. I also sort museum collection catalogues by location, in order to have a mental portrait of the institutions.”⁹⁰

An incursion into this creative labyrinth was made by the team that prepared the remake of “Attitudes” by the Prada Foundation in 2013. The research they did revealed that the material was in 300 different locations within an archive that stretches a kilometer long. It took the curator along with a research assistant, five cataloguers, three conservators and four photographers a year to complete their research in the archive. And yet, the perfect reconstruction of the exhibition after 40 years would not have been possible without this extensive archive.

Since 2011, the archive was acquired by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, which took on the mammoth task of organizing it, since it is estimated that a team of 20, will still take four to five years to process everything. When completed, they will open to the public the curator files along with smaller sections such as topical files and business papers. At that time, researchers will be able to study the archive itself not only as a historical record, but as one of the main projects and the outstanding cultural legacy of an art professional who changed the face of 20th century art. Just as Harald Szeemann said it: “My archive is my memoir, that's how I look at it.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Szeemann, H. (2008) in Obrist, H. U. *A brief history of curating*, JRP|Ringier: Zurich

⁹¹ Ibid

3.2 Hans Ulrich Obrist

Hans Ulrich Obrist is the top curator of contemporary art of our days. Named the number-one most influential and powerful person in the international art world by Art Review, he represents the super-curator, being the best example of the incorporation of the legacy of Harald Szeemann. Obrist has done it all from curating small exhibitions to big international art events around the globe, he has written books, done interviews, documented all his work while interacting with the artists on a friendly and intimate tone in an offbeat multi-disciplinary approach, that has become his own easily recognizable brand. The Swiss curator embodies the very image of the modern cultural mediator, not just a designer of exhibitions but an influential impresario.

His biggest advantage is his amazing ability to befriend and charm people - and to network, that he has used from his first exhibition to create this incredible curatorial career that includes more than 200 solo and group exhibitions and biennials, such as the first Berlin Biennale and the first Manifesta. Nowadays he surely has the biggest and most diverse set of artist-friends in the world, managing to establish and maintain relationships with a natural ease that many people in the art world lack. "I have many intense friendships with artists," he says. "I don't mean we have intense one-day conversations but ongoing conversations that last in some cases for years."⁹² This is Obrist's style of doing business, and it is the feature he is known for in his work circle.

Besides his long list of curatorial accomplishments, the world's favourite and busiest curator occupies at the moment the function of co-director of exhibitions and programs and director of international programs at the Serpentine Gallery in London, where he co-curated events like Jonas Mekas; Hans-Peter Feldmann; Yoko Ono TO THE LIGHT and Thomas Schütte Faces & Figures. He has also recorded over 2,000 hours of interviews with artists, writers, philosophers and scientists for his ongoing interview project, is a contributing editor to a number of newspaper and magazines, including Artforum and Abitare Magazine and is the founder of one of the most popular ongoing conceptual projects, "do it" - a show built around artist-given instructions. Obrist has also embraced the rise of the internet and the new media, having one of the most popular Instagram feeds

⁹² Roberts, A. (2009) Hans Ulrich Obrist - the God of planet art, *London Evening Standard*.

in the art world, where he is currently carrying out another one of his projects, the posting of photos of hand-written messages by artists.

Hans Ulrich Obrist grew up in Zurich, being highly interested in art from a very young age, one of his favorite pastimes being the visiting of the Giacometti sculptures in the Kunsthallen and the library at the St Gallen monastery near his home town where he was fascinated with the codices, hand-written books of knowledge. As he grew, so did his interest in art, as a teenager having an entourage composed of artists, he visited Eric Fischli and David Weiss, at the age of 17, while they were working on their movie “The Way Things Go”, a carefully calibrated series of chain reactions. This was when he decided what his future career will be and what he will dedicate his life to: “I had known since I was 17 that I would be a curator.”⁹³ And it was after the discussion he has with the Swiss duo that Obrist designed the “Kitchen Show,” his very first group exhibition curated in his own unused kitchen. He spent the next 6 years travelling through Europe visiting gallery and museum exhibitions. In Cologne he met Gerhard Richter, in Paris, he snuck away from a school trip to see Christian Boltanski, repeating the move in Rome where he visited Alighiero Boetti. The older artists were amused by his ambition and vast knowledge. He wanted to “listen to artists’ ideas and try to make them happen.”⁹⁴ It was also during these trips across Europe that, the then unknown curator, convinced seven internationally acclaimed artists, including the above mentioned Christian Boltanski from Rome, Richard Wentworth from London and Hans-Peter Feldmann from Germany to come to his student kitchen in Switzerland and contribute site-specific installations. It happened in 1991, and it was the show that launched him into the art world. “My most famous show is the Kitchen Show. More famous than any gallery show or museum show I curated.”⁹⁵ With 19 visitors during its three months of exhibition, it is the event that managed to gain fame that took on full force, marking the beginning of an incredible career.

After that first exhibition in 1991 followed a completely nomadic work and life style that lasted about ten years. They were his learning and migrating years, travelling around 300 days a year, discovering his style, learning and constantly researching. “It is obviously impossible to know everything but still I feel as though I want to. I have this rather extreme

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Miller, M. H. (2013) *Marathon Man: On the Run With Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the World’s Greatest Curator*, *Gallerist*

⁹⁵ Ibid

curiosity”⁹⁶ declares Obrist, almost like trying to explain this constant need for research and study.

In 1993 he founded the Museum Robert Walser and began work as a curator at the Museums in Progress, Vienna. During the same year he came with idea for Do It, conceived with Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier during one of their conversations at Café Select in Paris, it consisted of sets of artists instructions that could be carried out by other artists, allowing for those directives to be interpreted differently at each venue that it visited. The project inaugurated in 1997 and is still ongoing, representing a model of curation that encourages diversity and freedom.

In 1996 Obrist co-curated the first Manifesta, the respected art biennial that takes places in a different European city each time. It was the same year that he published for the first time his series of interviews with personalities from art principally, afterwards expanding to all kinds of disciplines, featuring everyone from famous musicians to scientists and robotic engineers. It happened in the magazine Artforum, and the conversations, in the meantime, have been named The Interview Project and resulted in the publication of 26 books and innumerable articles and is continuously growing.

After 2000 Hans Ulrich Obrist started what he calls his second professional decade. He felt that while cruising from one exhibition to the next all around the globe he was missing out on a lot of things, mainly feedback. The need for a place that was more grounded and with regular exhibition activity lead him to join, in 2006, the Serpentine Gallery in London, as co-director of exhibitions and programmes with Julia Peyton-Jones. This is where he organized the inaugural Serpentine series, the Interview Marathon, the outdoor pavilion projects collaborating with world-famous artists and architects such as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Ai Weiwei with Herzog and de Meuron.

He continued to curate independently and internationally, in 2009 being named by Artreview as the most powerful person in the art world, a barometer of influence and importance compiled by 20 anonymous experts from around the world. Only to name a few of the co-curated international projects: 12 Rooms at Museum Folkwang, Essen; To the Moon via the Beach, LUMA Foundation, Arles; Lina Bo Bardi, Casa de Vidro, Sao

⁹⁶ Roberts, A. (2009) Hans Ulrich Obrist - the God of planet art, *London Evening Standard*.

Paulo and A call for unrealized projects, DAAD, Berlin. He discovered and fell in love with the global art world, since when he began working the art world was still mostly limited to art centers in the West. He felt that he cannot just sit in one place with the fear of missing out on the extraordinary historical circumstances with so many new art centers.

It is also during this period that the Brutally Early Club, a 21st century breakfast salon-style discussion of art and architecture and generally other quasi-philosophical ideas. The meetings happen at 6.30am in different cafés, the early hour being motivated by the fact that at that hour mostly everyone is free to spontaneously meet up, without a schedule or an in advance plan. Obrists Club is a fight for improvisation and improvisation, things that he believes are lacking in this organized and technological world. Everybody has a complex schedule and it becomes difficult to decide from one day to the next to gather for a meeting. This is his way of introducing creativity and improvisation into people's life. "I'm interested in the idea of salons. I see curating ideas, creating junctions between people, as an important part of my work."⁹⁷

Although Hans Ulrich Obrist has edited and published an enormous number of books and catalogs, it is for the first time in 2013 that full-color book that contains an exclusive collection of his drawings, notes and diagrams has seen the light of day. "Think Like Clouds" takes us on a journey right back to the drawing board, where all of his ideas about exhibition and creative work began, offering a unique insight into one of the most inquisitive minds in contemporary art. His doodles are a kind of art that started with a nervous tick during public speaking, and has evolved into interesting visual prospect as well as a possibility of understanding life and work from the curators point of view.

Obrists latest long-term, international, multi-platform research project, to be inaugurated in 2014, in "89plus", is a show dedicated to the generation born after 1989, one that has grown up with internet and new technologies, people of the digital age. Through events, residencies, grants and a database of more than 1000 artists so far, the project will last for at least ten years in order to support the work of the group of a new generation of artists and develop a long-term research platform for them.

It is quite clear after a quick review of his CV that Obrist also lives for his job, getting on a plane and visits a different city every weekend to meet artists, research local art scenes,

⁹⁷ Roberts, A. (2009) Hans Ulrich Obrist - the God of planet art, *London Evening Standard*.

have dinner with gallerists and generally forge an understanding of a truly global art world that he finds so fascinating. It almost seems that he is in a constant fear of missing something, living in this frantic and constant movement. It is this incredibly fast pace that has made him legendary. He speaks incredibly quickly, dropping academic and art historical references at every pace. As journalist Miller states in her article about him

“Over the course of a single cigarette, I once witnessed him roll up to an art fair in a car, run inside, come back out murmuring to his companion about what impressed him, then get back in the car and head to the next event, like some kind of highbrow European Roadrunner”⁹⁸, this globally famous curator seems to be in a race against time to create, communicate and research. It was inbred to him in his youth by Boetti when he instructed him not to become a curator who’s boring, adding “Oh you’re so slow, you need to get faster.”⁹⁹

He did, and never stopped since.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is the most groundbreaking curators in the world today, representing the face of contemporary curatorship. He travels around the world, setting up shows, interviewing, researching and editing books, managing to maintain a friendly relationship with the artists, all at his famous fast paced style of being everywhere and managing to do everything. He is seemingly omnipresent at all the gallery shows, studio visits, meetings and parties in the art world. Named as close to a rock star as a curator can be by journalists, he is the one that can conceive and pull off an exhibition in the most unorthodox and unconventional places, promoting participation and flexibility and stretching the science of exhibiting and art more and more with every new project. He has made art his lifestyle, dedicating his life to it: "Art is my home base."¹⁰⁰

3.2.1 Do It

“do it” is an open exhibition model, an exhibition in progress that works on the role of individual instruction that have the job of creating a space for interpretation and rephrasing

⁹⁸ Miller, M. H. (2013) *Marathon Man: On the Run With Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the World’s Greatest Curator*, *Gallerist*

⁹⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁰ Roberts, A. (2009) Hans Ulrich Obrist - the God of planet art, *London Evening Standard*.

of artworks in a totally free manner. It is a mobile and international structure, where locations are used to construct the artwork context and endow it with their individual marks or distinctions. The local color and context matter as much as the artwork itself. The show has taken the concept of exhibition in progress far beyond its usual notion, becoming the longest-running and most far-reaching exhibition to ever take place.

As with all of Hans Ulrich Obrists projects, the idea for this one also came during one of his conversations, in this particular case with two of the artists that he had met as a teenager travelling through Europe and having constant conversations with international artist mainly regarding exhibition formats. The discussion was between Obrist, Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier at Café Le Select, in Montparnasse, Paris in 1993. It was a mixture of ideas between the possibility of more flexible and open-ended exhibition formats and the idea about the fact that exhibitions travel.

The first idea was supported by Lavier who has made many works that contain written instructions in order to observe the effects of translation on an artwork and Boltanski, who compares his instructions for installations to musical scores which, like an opera or symphony, go through countless realizations as they are carried out and interpreted by others. So the conversation went towards exhibitions that invent new rules of the game, a concept shaped by Marcel Duchamp, as well as the 1960s Conceptual and Minimalist art and the 1970s Fluxus practices, following with the idea of an exhibition of do-it-yourself descriptions or procedural instructions which, until a venue is found, exists in a static condition. An exhibition that exists only in theory and on documents and sketches, based on written instructions by artists, as a point of departure, each of which could be interpreted anew every time they were enacted.

The other innovative element introduced to this project was the exhibition that not only could be put on anywhere, but the local elements and color would be actual elements of its artistic discourse. It started from the concept that exhibitions have a limited life span, visiting two or three places, before being dismantled while the text of other types of art like opera, theater or music can be re-interpreted infinitely for centuries to come. So “do it” was conceived as a show that could go to more places, learning from the local context with the help of instructions from local artists.

So, to test it all, Obrist invited 12 artists to send instructions, which were then translated into 9 different languages and circulated internationally as a book. Twenty years later after the initial conversation took place, “do it” has become a success, being featured in at least 50 different locations worldwide, including Australia, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Mexico, Costa Rica, Slovenia and Uruguay.

“do it” is all about human interpretation, and less about the reproduction or materiality of the artworks. Each realization of “do it” occurs as an imprecise activity in time and space accompanied by repetition and difference, no two interpretations of the same instructions are ever identical. Everyday actions and materials serve as the starting point for the artworks to be recreated according to the artists' written instructions, engaging the local community in a dialogue that responds to and adds a new set of instructions, while remaining global in the scope of its ever-expanding repertoire.

In the meantime, “do it” has grown not only internationally, having taken place all over the world, but also but also by means of exhibiting. In 2004, Obrist has created in conjunction with e-flux a production of an on-line version of “do it”, being soon followed by “do it (museum)”, “do it (home)”, “do it (TV)”, where about 15 artists like Damien Hirst, Nancy Spero, Ilya Kabakov and Lawrence Weiner were involved in creating instructions for it, “do it (seminar)”, “do it (outside)”, an initiative from the Socrates Sculpture Park in New York, “do it (party)”, as well as some anti-do it, a movement of demonstrations to refuse to do it by Leon Golub, a philosophy “do it” and most recently a UNESCO children’s “do it.” You could say that the project has taken on wings, expanding not only due to the curators initiatives but as a reaction from the people and artists to it.

In the meantime, Obrist continue with his “do it” epopee, publishing a book about the history of the show that offers a detailed account of all the different learning experiences, that Obrist got during 20 years of curating this open exhibition. As well as carrying on the exhibitions in themselves, the last show from the series being “do it 20 13”, at the Manchester International Festival, the most comprehensive “do it” exhibition to date, involving 250 of the top artists that created a set of instructions for other artists to realize their work.

3.2.2. The Interview Project

The Interview Project, perhaps Hans Ulrich Obrists most original work, represents an extensive ongoing anthology of more than 2,000 hours of interviews with artists, architects, scientists, writers, engineers and any other person he finds interesting. The driving force behind this is his innate curiosity, followed by his desire to preserve testimonies, to make sure conversations with important and interesting people, icons of our time, are not forgotten or lost forever. It is a way of recording genius for future generation. It includes personages from all professions and specialties, but he always comes back to artists, his first true love, compiling a list of artists' dreams, ideas and failures. This interviews have been published in over 28 books, starting with two volumes, Interviews: Volume 1 and Volume 2, followed by the ongoing series of books entitled The Conversation Series dedicated to the longer conversations with personages such as Robert Crumb, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and John Baldessari.

This interest in interviews was greatly influenced by Vasari, Warhol, Jonas Mekas, who pushed him into filming the conversations and Studs Terkel, who told him to embrace the art of imperfection in an interview. But the real trigger, the first time that the idea of an interview with an artist as a medium became a possibility, came from two readings from his student days. The first one is the conversation between David Sylvester and Francis Bacon, one of his favorite interviews books, the ones that opened up the possibility of interviews recorded over long periods of time, contrary to the usual idea of a single interview during one short stretch of time. Thanks to this interviews that happened over and over again throughout Bacons life the book offers a very rare in-depth view and understanding of the interviewed. That is the biggest advantage of a long term ongoing interview, it offers the possibility for the subject to relax and open up, a thing especially important with artists in Obrists opinion, since artists are usually uncomfortable giving interview and talking about their art and their life. The other big influences were the conversations between Pierre Cabanne and Marcel Duchamp.

Obrist started interviewing people because of his encyclopedic drive, his yearning to continuously learn that transformed him into an eternal student that learns something every day. And an interview is a great way for doing that, since it allows to find out things directly from the source, to find out different points of view and to see into the most interesting minds of our time. Also because whenever he would interview someone, he would study the subject thoroughly, diving into their books. With hundred of books at

home, before an interview he uses the night before to prepare for it, the same way it is for students before an exam.

The other reason why he is so fond of his interview is because it offers some quite time in his hectic lifestyle. They offer moments of total concentration, when one is completely detached from everything else but the person in front of him. Obrist looks at them as his quiet garden, a trick taught to him by Thomas Bayle, German artist and teacher, which told him to create places where he can find inspiration and nurture his thoughts and emotions. The advice came at the right time, when he became well known for his curatorial work at a young age, and he was feeling lost in the art world where he had become a star.

But he truly started interviewing at the young age of 17, while travelling through Europe and talking to famous artists. These conversations that took place between 1986 and 1991 were not recorded, the idea coming to him only after 1991. Afterwards he expanded his circle to include curators like Pontus Hultén, that he interviewed systematically being pushed by the need to know where curating comes from. And he kept expanding to include science, music, literature, architecture and many other fields, all having the starting point in art, because “if you want to understand the forces in art you need to understand what is happening in other fields” adding that “gradually it is like a concentric circle, it goes from the art world to all these other worlds, and then, from there, it goes into the multitude.”¹⁰¹ But even if scientists and architects were his interview subjects, for some time at the beginning they didn’t appear in his curatorial world. But little by little they entered my work, making it even more original and rule breaking.

After thousands of hours of tapes and more than 300 interviews, the first set of 75 interviews was published in the book Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Interviews, Volume 1, released in 2003. It was followed by Volume 2 that comprises 70 fascinating interviews with great minds from inside and outside the art world. 21 volumes were released as a series by Walther König Books called Conversations Series and representing novella-length interviews with artists including John Baldessari, Robert Crumb, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Rosemarie Trockel. His modality of ordering the interview inside the books is as his curated exhibitions, always different but never dull. One is according to cities, for example we have the “Beijing Marathon” and the “London Marathon”, another is according to professions like all the curators’ interviews in “A Brief History of Curating”, or according

¹⁰¹ Simonini, R. (2013) *The Art of the Artist Interview*, Random House of Canada

to one artist like the Gerhard Richter or Olafur Eliasson books. Like any other of his projects, it is a creative task that he takes on in an effort to offer the world a documentation of this time and its bright minds.

CHAPTER FOUR. Conclusion

I have started this thesis with a question in mind, trying to understand how all the changes and evolution in art have influenced the role of the curator. At the beginning of this research, the model of the curator that I had in my mind was one of a stiff collared, bureaucratic personage that spends his time in dusty museum rooms following a linear and well established rule of exhibiting. And this person could not be reconciled with contemporary art, with all its out of the box thinking and acting, with installations, happening and digital art. They were two poles that had nothing in common with each other. So I set out to understand where the curator stands in the context of contemporary art: is it a dead profession? Has it adapted to the changes in the art world? Are curators still necessary in this digitalized world where everyone has access to everything, including art and education?

The answers I got offered a picture of a profession that not only survived the changes in the art world, but managed to get ahead and succeed. The curator took advantage of the fact that the public still needed a mediator that would be the link with art, and became so much more than that. The role became a creative one, the curator becoming the author of the construction of an exhibition and an opinionated individual with his own agenda and ideas to create and transmit to the public. He is no longer the administrator or manager, but the person that sets up shows based on his own ideas and sentiments, instead of those of the artists, his work becoming a brand by which he is recognized, the job evolving into a full scale phenomenon and becoming as famous and important as that of the artist. It is also the job that serves in the making of art history, the gatekeeper and cannon maker of what are considered valuable art objects. His advantage is that he does it not only verbally as historians or scholars do, but visually, deciding what art to exhibit and how to do it, what to transmit to the public with it and what impact to make on the art world. This is the person that keeps trying to think out of the box and offer innovative ways of experiencing art.

The first conclusions that I came to was regarding the different types of curators that have formed in recent history. The type of curator that worked in institutions has evolved into a personage that has a lot more freedom to exhibit and communicate with the public, interaction becoming one of the main ideas when presenting art. If in the past he was subjected to certain rules of exhibiting and control over what is shown by the museums management, now he has embraced the creative side of the job, putting on events that have

his imprint on it and represent a concept that he thought out. Another improvement in institutional curatorship is making the public one of the most important parts of exhibiting, opening the museums doors to everyone, and abolishing the idea of an elitist institution.

The other important development that I noticed was the emergence of independent curators, a concept that didn't exist before 1970s but that is an essential part of the art world in our days. Independent curators are the professionals working outside of an institution to put on shows. They have the advantage of freedom in choices of artists and art objects, as well as all the other elements when organizing exhibitions. They are also the ones that travel around the world for their work, not having the constriction of using the same venue, such as the walls of a museum, all the time. The concept is becoming increasingly popular, thanks to its flexibility and also to the fact that the people doing it don't have to have specialized studies on the subject to practice it, a mandatory element for working in an institution.

This activity of freelance curating is particularly practiced by artists that double as curators. A curious development that came out of the decision of artists to take control over what happens to their work of art after they complete it. This way they can exhibit their works on their own terms, communicating their own ideas to the public, instead that of the curators, as it usually happens. It is also an answer to the fact that curators made exhibiting an artistic activity, where they have become the main actors of the show, taking the place that is usually reserved for artists. This dethronement happened when curators took on the place of artists, the exhibition being their work of art, with the objects shown as elements of it. I believe that this battle between artists and curators for the role of the main creation agent in the art world has gained amplitude, taking art to a new dimension. There are no clear lines, both parts having their supporters and opponents, but it is my opinion that the public is the one that is at win, since they are offered more cutting edge art.

It is interesting to note that curation has not been confined only to the art world. With the fast growing use of technologies and internet, the amount of information thrown at the world every day is enormous, so much that it overwhelms. This is how curation content appeared, the notion of sorting through all the information and organizing it, offering only the most important and of best quality for view and consumption. The idea has expanded afterwards from the internet to everyday life, people using the verb "to curate" for actions as mundane as making a playlist or choosing outfits. Curation has been transformed into a popular activity. The art world professionals have reacted negatively to this, believing that

it makes their job look insignificant and meaningless if everybody is doing it. Yet, it is a phenomenon that is continually spreading and that cannot be stopped.

One of my main discoveries when researching the subjects was that all this changes in the curatorial practice in particular, and in the art world in general have been due to one person, the curator Harald Szeemann. He was the one that had the courage and the inspiration to create the first exhibition that broke out of the usual rules, “When Attitudes become Form” becoming a revolutionary event in the art world. The Swiss curator put on this show where he offered artists freedom to exhibit how and where they want, going out of the walls of the gallery, and at the same time having a clear idea in his mind of what should be displayed and how it was going to happen. He was the first curator that also took on the role of artist, opening the world to the idea of exhibition as a place of feeling and meditation through the objects of art. He threw out convention out of the window, and continued doing so with all his work that followed, putting on the base for grand exhibitions that are the norm today, creating the independent curator, offering it artistic and creative attributes and opening up a new world for exhibiting art.

The other curator that I felt was important to research was Hans Ulrich Obrist, the person that followed up on Szeemanns footsteps, representing perfectly the star curator, the international traveler, the one that continues to go out of the norms to offer innovations and creativity with his projects and shows. He is the one that created the longest standing exhibition in the world, over 20 years and ongoing, the idea of art through instruction and every time in a new place around the globe, incorporating the local element in the art. I find it fascinating that Obrist is more important than any artist in our days, his name being the attraction for all the visitors and art fans at an exhibition.

The role of the curator in the context of contemporary art has experienced a definite shift from what it used to be before the 1960s. He is now one of the main actors of the art world, and being in a continuous evolution, since we are nowhere near the moment where we could describe perfectly what this profession consists of in nowadays. Contemporary art has created this situation where all the areas and elements that it consists of are intertwined, interfering with each other and taking each other’s jobs. The curator has also experienced this, people trampling on its territory, as well as him taking over duties that normally had nothing to do with him. It could be said that the art world looks like one of Szeemanns exhibitions, one of structured chaos, which is an appropriate way of looking at

the contemporary art world and the curatorial role in it, since it had such a big aspect in forming it.

It is, of course, important to remember and understand that the role of the curator in the art world is only one of its elements, and that its existence and activity wouldn't be possible without the other actors. Critics, theoreticians and artists, among others, play a crucial role in the formation and development of contemporary art. And the curator's evolution has happened with, and in part, thanks to their activity. The art world, more than any other, is based on interdependency, and all the people involved in it do their work and exist tightly bound to each other and depending on each other, as all of their work is interconnected. And although this thesis has been focused on the role of the curator, I acknowledge that his role is no more and no less important than that of the other participants that create, study or criticize art.

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